

BILLY BUNTER the Hiker

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BOB FLUNG HIMSELF AT THE RUNAWAY'S HEAD

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CHAPTER 1 SMITHY ASKS FOR IT

‘BUNTER!’

‘Oh!’

‘You will go on, Bunter.’

‘Oh!’

Billy Bunter’s fat face registered dismay.

Really, there should have been nothing either surprising or dismaying in being called upon to continue, in the Remove form-room, when Virgil was the order of the day.

But William George Bunter—not for the first time—had been inattentive. He had in fact been more inattentive than usual.

Vernon-Smith had been on ‘con’: and every fellow in the form-room should have been following every word, ready to take up the tale if called upon. But Billy Bunter was not the only fellow whose thoughts wandered a little that sunny morning. It was close on break-up at Greyfriars School: the summer holidays were just ahead: and the ‘hols’ were in many minds. Even Harry Wharton and Co., generally quite well-behaved in class, had been whispering, and Mr. Quelch had caught the word ‘hike’ from their direction: a word that certainly did not occur in the works of P. Vergilius Maro: and he had frowned them into silence. Now he suddenly rapped at Bunter, whose thoughts were far, far away.

There were excuses for Bunter. His plans for the ‘hols’ were still in a fluid state. It was a problem. Harry Wharton and Co. might have been a resource, but those strenuous youths were planning a summer hike. Hiking was a form of exertion: and no form of exertion had any appeal for the fattest and laziest member of the Greyfriars Remove. Sadly Bunter had washed them out. Now he was thinking of Smithy. Smithy, who rolled in money, had tremendously expensive holidays: which were attractive, if Smithy himself was not. The snag was that Smithy wouldn’t have been found dead in the ‘hols’ with Bunter. Such a snag was not easy to get round.

So, instead of following the deathless verse of Virgil as Smithy translated, Bunter was pondering on that problem: and Quelch’s sudden rap startled him out of a brown study. He clutched his book, and blinked at it through his big spectacles. But that hurried blink served no useful purpose, as he had not the remotest idea where Vernon-Smith had left off.

Quelch’s gimlet eyes fixed on him.

‘Did you hear me tell you to go on, Bunter?’ inquired Mr. Quelch.

‘Oh! Yes, sir! Certainly, sir!’ stammered Bunter.

‘Then go on at once.’

‘I—I—I——’

‘I am waiting, Bunter.’ Quelch’s voice had an ominous note. Perhaps he was a little tired of slackness in his form that morning.

‘I—I—I’ve lost the place, sir.’

‘You should not have lost the place, Bunter.’

‘Oh! Yes, sir! No, sir!’

‘You will go on from “condere gentem”, Bunter.’ Another hurried blink discovered

‘condere gentem’.

But what followed was a mystery to Billy Bunter. He had had no time for prep the previous evening. He had been too busy sitting in an armchair. Prepared Latin did not come easily to the Owl of the Remove. Unprepared Latin might as well have been Dutch, or double-Dutch.

‘Vix e conspectu Siculae telluris in altum—!’ bleated Bunter.

He paused. He had to pause.

Another rap from Quelch was due. But at that moment, Bob Cherry dropped a book, which landed with rather a bang on hard ancient oak. The gimlet eyes swerved round to Bob. Luckily, Quelch did not guess that Bob had dropped that book with malice aforethought, as it were, to give Bunter a chance. But he did not approve of dropping books in class.

‘Cherry!’

‘Oh! Yes, sir!’

‘You should not be so clumsy with your books, Cherry!’

‘Yes, sir—I mean, no, sir!’

‘You will take fifty lines, Cherry! Now pick up that book, and take care that you do not let it fall again.’

It was a brief respite: but it enabled Billy Bunter to whisper to Frank Nugent: ‘Will you tell me what “vix” means?’

‘Hardly!’ whispered back Nugent.

‘Oh, you beast!’ hissed Bunter. Bunter was not quick on the uptake. It did not occur to him that Nugent was giving him the translation he wanted. He took it for an answer in the negative.

There was no time for more. Through with Bob Cherry, Quelch swivelled back to Bunter.

‘Now, Bunter—’

‘Oh, lor’!’ gasped Bunter.

‘What? What did you say, Bunter?’

‘Oh! Nothing, sir! I—I mean, I—I was just going to—to begin, sir! Vix e conspectu Siculae telluris in altum—’ moaned Bunter.

He had to pause again. It was possible, indeed probable, that that line in the *Æneid* meant something. But what it meant was deeply veiled from Billy Bunter.

‘I am waiting, Bunter!’ Quelch’s tone was still more ominous.

‘Oh! Yes, sir! I—I think I’ve got it, sir,’ moaned Bunter. ‘Vix e conspectu Siculae telluris in altum, vela dabant—oh, lor’! I—I mean—’

‘You have not prepared this lesson, Bunter.’

‘Oh! Yes, sir! I—I—’

‘Unless you translate that line immediately, Bunter, I shall cane you.’ Quelch, evidently, was growing wrathful!

‘Oh, crikey!’

The Remove master turned to his desk, and reached out his hand for the cane that lay thereon.

At that moment—the psychological moment, as it were—Vernon-Smith passed a slip of paper along under the desks. It reached Bunter, and he almost gasped with relief. A dozen fellows saw Smithy’s action, and they fairly held their breath. To give a fellow the translation, right under Quelch’s gimlet eyes, required more nerve than most of the

juniors possessed. But it was like Smithy. The Bounder of Greyfriars liked to make fellows wonder at his nerve.

A moment more, and the gimlet eyes were on Bunter again.

‘Bunter! Proceed, or—’

Billy Bunter proceeded. With that slip of paper in his book, and the translation written thereon, even Billy Bunter had no difficulty in proceeding. He rattled it off quite fluently.

‘Vix e conspectu Siculae telluris in altum vela dabant—Hardly out of sight of Sicilian land, they spread their sails seaward—’

Perhaps that unusual fluency of Bunter’s made Quelch suspicious. Or perhaps he read something in the faces of some of the juniors. Or perhaps both! At all events, he made a stride to Bunter, and took the book from a fat hand. A slip of paper fluttered to the floor. Quelch picked it up—and looked at it. The Remove hardly breathed. For the look that came over Quelch’s expressive face rivalled that of Rhadamanthus in his most rhadamanthine mood.

There was a moment of silence—awful silence. Then came Quelch’s voice: not loud, but deep.

‘Vernon-Smith!’

The Bounder drew a hard breath. He had displayed his nerve once too often: and the thunder was about to roll. But he was quite cool. His voice was even as he answered, ‘Yes, sir!’

‘You passed the translation to Bunter, Vernon-Smith! This is written in your hand. You will stand out before the form, Vernon-Smith.’

‘Very well, sir.’

Herbert Vernon-Smith lounged out before the form. His manner was as impertinent as he dared make it. Quelch’s cane was in his hand now. The gimlet eyes glinted at Smithy.

‘Bend over that form, Vernon-Smith.’

With set lips, the Bounder bent over. Up went the cane, and down it came: and a report rather like a pistol-shot echoed through the Remove form-room. It was only a single swipe: but there was quite a lot of beef in it, and the Bounder, with all his nerve, could hardly keep back a yell.

‘Go back to your place, Vernon-Smith.’

Smithy, in silence, with smouldering eyes, went back to his place.

‘Hard luck, old chap!’ whispered Harry Wharton, as he passed.

‘The hardfulness of the luck is terrific, esteemed Smithy!’ breathed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

The whispers were very faint. But Quelch seemed to have unusually sharp ears that morning. There was a sudden bark.

‘Wharton! Hurree Singh! Are you talking in class?’

‘Oh! Yes, sir!’

‘Yes, sir!’

‘Take fifty lines each.’

After that, there were no more whispers.

CHAPTER 2 BOOT FOR BUNTER!

‘TROT in, Smithy.’

Five voices joined in that cordial invitation, as Herbert Vernon-Smith looked in at the door of No. 1 Study in the Remove.

In that celebrated apartment, the Famous Five were at tea.

Harry Wharton and Co. were not always, as a matter of fact, on the most cordial terms with Smithy. His temper was a little too unreliable for that. But at the end of the term, with the holidays and a glorious summer hike in prospect, all little differences were forgotten. Moreover the chums of the Remove felt that Smithy had had rather hard measure in form that morning. True, he had broken a strict rule: but it was upon a good-natured impulse. He had been looking glum and sulky since. So five cheery faces gave Smithy a smiling welcome as he looked in.

‘Just in time for tea, old bean,’ said Bob Cherry.

‘Here’s a chair!’ said Frank Nugent.

‘Squat down, old chap,’ said Harry Wharton.

‘What are you doing in the “hols”, Smithy?’

‘We’re hiking.’

‘Like to join up, Smithy?’ asked Bob Cherry, with a grin. ‘Do you more good than rolling in a Rolls.’

‘Glad to have you, Smithy, if you feel like foot-slogging!’ said Harry Wharton, with a smile. ‘Like to make it six?’

‘The pleasurefulness of your execrable company would be terrific, my esteemed Smithy!’ said Hurree Janset Ram Singh, solemnly.

Johnny Bull did not speak, but he gave a nod and a grin. Nothing, in fact, could have been more cheery and cordial than Smithy’s greeting in No. 1 Study. But it did not cause his set face to relax. His brow was dark, and his eyes smouldering. Evidently, Smithy had not forgotten that swipe in form.

‘Thanks—I haven’t come to tea,’ he said, abruptly. ‘You’ve got a pea-shooter in your study, Cherry.’

‘Eh! Yes,’ answered Bob, in surprise.

‘Will you lend it to me?’

‘Of course, if you want it. You’ll find it on the bookshelf, and a bag of peas, if you want them. Who’s going to be the happy victim?’

Vernon-Smith did not answer that question. He crossed to the study window, which was wide open to admit the summer breeze, and leaned out.

The Famous Five watched him, in surprise. Why the view from the study window interested Smithy, was a puzzle. His own study window gave the same view: with one exception: from No. 1 Study, a portion of the Head’s garden could be seen. But they could not suppose that Smithy was specially interested in the Head’s garden. They stared at his back, as he leaned from the window: and then resumed their tea.

‘I say, you fellows.’

Another figure appeared in the doorway: a figure that almost filled it! It was that of William George Bunter.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo! Fixed up for: the “hols” yet, Bunter?’ roared Bob Cherry.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, really, Cherry!' Billy Bunter blinked at the five through his big spectacles. Those spectacles did not turn towards the window, and he did not observe the Bounder there, leaning out. 'I say, you fellows, seen Smithy?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at,' said Bunter, peevishly. 'I say, I want to speak to Smithy, about the "hols", you know. He isn't in his study. Know where he is?'

'O where and O where can he be?' sang Bob Cherry.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Mooching off by himself somewhere, I expect,' grunted Bunter. 'He's been sulking ever since Quelch gave him that whop this morning. I say, have you seen him lately?'

'The latefulness is terrific, esteemed fat Bunter,' chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Did he look good-tempered?' asked Bunter. 'You know what a beastly temper Smithy's got—'

'Shut up, you ass,' said Harry Wharton, hastily. The Bounder, leaning out of the window, could not see Bunter, but there was no doubt that he could hear him. His temper, beastly or not, was not likely to be improved by hearing Bunter's description of it.

'Shan't!' retorted Bunter. 'You know Smithy's got a beastly temper just as well as I do. You've had rows enough with him yourself, Wharton. I want to speak to him about the "hols"—but not if he's still grouching over that whop Quelch gave him. Know what he's doing these "hols"?''

'Better ask him.'

'Well, I know his pal Redwing ain't going with him,' said Bunter. 'Redwing's going on a sea-trip with his father, as I happen to know—'

'What a lot of things you happen to know that don't concern you!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'Well, I keep my ears open,' said Bunter, complacently.

'Precious little goes on in the Remove that I don't know, I can tell you. Not that I was anywhere near Smithy's study when they were talking it over. I'm not the chap to listen at a keyhole, I hope!'

'Hopeful chap, Bunter,' said Bob.

'Well, as he will be on his own, he might like a chap to join up,' went on Bunter. 'I'd rather come with you fellows, really, if you were going to have decent "hols"—'

'Thanks,' said Harry Wharton, laughing.

'The thankfulness is terrific.'

'Look here, if you like to chuck up that silly idea of hiking, and have a jolly holiday at Margate, I'll come!' said Bunter, temptingly.

Bunter paused, like Brutus, for a reply. But he had no more luck than Brutus. There was no reply. That tempting offer did not seem to tempt the Famous Five.

'Well, if you're going hiking, you can count me out,' said Bunter. 'I wouldn't be found dead on a hike.'

'Your mistake,' said Bob Cherry. 'You'd be found dead after the first half-mile, old fat man.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Slogging in the sun and dust,' said Bunter, contemptuously. 'Hardly good enough for me. I'd rather go with Smithy, with all his beastly temper. Smithy's a good bit of a bounder, and the way he splashes his money about is pretty sickening, and I can't say that

I should be proud to be seen with him in the “hols”, but—’

Bunter was interrupted at that point.

Up to that point, the junior leaning from the window had taken no heed of him. But at that point, he drew in his head, and looked round. And the expression on his face was rather alarming. He made a stride towards the fat Owl. Then Bunter became aware of him.

‘Oh, crikey!’ ejaculated Bunter, his little round eyes almost popping through his big round spectacles at the Bounder. ‘I—I say, Smithy, old chap—I didn’t see you— I never knew you were here—oh, crikey—’

‘Cut, you fat ass!’ roared Bob Cherry.

That advice was too good not to be taken. Billy Bunter was not a bright youth: but he was bright enough to see that this was not a propitious moment to speak to Smithy about the ‘hols’! As Smithy came across the study, Bunter revolved on his axis, and jumped through the doorway. Bunter, as a rule, moved to slow motion: now his motion was rapid. But it was not quite rapid enough. Smithy’s foot shot out as he jumped, and it landed with a crash on the tightest trousers at Greyfriars School.

‘Yaroooooh!’

Bump!

Billy Bunter fairly flew through that doorway. He landed in the Remove passage with a bump and a roar.

But he did not linger there. The Bounder’s angry face glaring out stirred him to unwonted activity. He bounded up and ran, and disappeared up the passage like a fat rabbit, in terror of pursuit.

But there was no pursuit. The Bounder, scowling, went back to the window, and stared out again. Harry Wharton and Co. went on with their tea, every now and then glancing at Vernon-Smith’s back, at the window, and wondering what fixed his attention outside. Suddenly Smithy uttered an exclamation.

‘There he is.’

‘Who’s where?’ asked Bob Cherry.

Vernon-Smith turned from the window, a sour grin on his face. The chums of the Remove eyed him rather uneasily. They knew that look on Smithy’s face, and what it meant—mischievous!

‘I’ve just spotted Quelch,’ drawled the Bounder. ‘He’s walking in the Head’s garden. He often does, after class, you know.’

‘What about it?’ asked Bob, mystified.

The Bounder laughed.

‘Oh, nothing,’ he answered. ‘But I’ll go along to your study and borrow that pea-shooter! Thanks.’

He quitted No. 1 Study as he spoke. The five juniors at the table exchanged rather startled glances.

‘Oh, gum!’ said Bob. ‘That mad ass can’t be thinking of pea-shooting Quelch, surely! Why, he might be sacked for it.’

‘Even Smithy wouldn’t be mad enough,’ said Nugent.

A moment or two later, the Bounder passed the open doorway. Nothing was to be seen of a pea-shooter. Probably it was up his sleeve.

‘Smithy, old man—!’ called out Bob. Vernon-Smith passed on unheeding.

CHAPTER 3 SHARP SHOOTING!

'BEAST!' breathed Billy Bunter.

He breathed that remark very softly. Bunter did not want to be heard—or seen! A short while ago, Bunter had been looking for Smithy. Now he dreaded that Smithy was looking for him!

Bunter was seated on the wall of the Head's garden, at a spot where drooping branches from within formed a shady screen. Bunter had three good reasons for selecting that quiet and shady spot to repose his plump limbs. Firstly, it was cool and shady and comfortable, screened from the blaze of the summer sun. Secondly, he was out of sight there, if Smithy looked for him with further booting in mind. Thirdly, he had a bag of toffee to dispose of, and sagely desired to dispose of it before Squiff missed it from his study. Here and there, through the thick foliage drooping over the wall, he had a glimpse of the open, bright with sunshine: and he had just caught a momentary glimpse of a hard set face. Much to his relief, the Bounder of Greyfriars passed on without a glance in his direction.

'Beast!' repeated Bunter, sotto voce.

After that unfortunate episode in No. 1 Study, it was borne in on Billy Bunter's fat mind that any chance of joining up with Smithy for the "hols" had gone down to zero. It had been a faint hope at the best. Often had the pertinacious fat Owl succeeded in hooking on to Harry Wharton and Co. or to tolerant fellows like Lord Mauleverer: but Smithy was a harder nut to crack. Still, hope springs eternal in the human breast: and Smithy's holidays were undoubtedly attractive: Smithy's father was a millionaire, who indulged his son at Greyfriars with much more cash than was good for him: and Smithy spent it right and left. While Harry Wharton and Co. were content with the humble hike, Smithy was more likely to board a plane for Switzerland or the Tyrol. That would have suited Bunter admirably. But he had to realize sadly and sorrowfully that that hope, such as it was, had been well and truly washed out by his remarks in No. 1 Study.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter, for the third time: and he proceeded to console himself with Squiff's toffee.

Then he pricked up his fat ears.

There was a rustle quite near at hand. It sounded like some fellow clambering on the wall, brushing against the overhanging branches. Billy Bunter's fat heart gave an unpleasant jump. If that beast, Smithy, had spotted him there, and was coming along the wall—
The rustling ceased.

Billy Bunter blinked in surprise. Some fellow had clambered on the wall, not two or three yards from him: though thick foliage hid him from sight, as it hid Bunter. He heard a quick panting breath. Then, through an interstice of the foliage, he had a glimpse of a profile—Smithy's. But Smithy was not looking towards him. Smithy was staring down into the Head's garden, on the further side of the wall. Bunter could see only part of his face, but he could read the black look on it. Smithy, evidently, was 'up' to something: though what, the astonished Owl could not guess.

Then he discerned that Smithy's hand, with something in it, went to his mouth. Whatever was in his hand, passed into his mouth. And then Bunter understood, as a pea-shooter came into his view.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter, inaudibly.

His eyes opened wide behind his spectacles. He knew now why Smithy was there, in that screened spot concealed from all eyes. He was watching for somebody in the Head's garden—with the pea-shooter ready. Bunter's fat brain almost swam at the thought that it might be the Head—the majestic Dr. Locke himself. But even Smithy couldn't be mad enough for that. Then Bunter remembered that Quelch often walked in that garden after class. Quelch, of course—this was going to be Smithy's retaliation for that whop in the form-room!

There was a sound of footsteps on a gravel path in the garden.

Billy Bunter blinked and peered through the foliage in that direction. He glimpsed a tall head with a mortarboard on it. It was Quelch. And Smithy was taking aim with the pea-shooter.

Bunter watched, breathless.

The Remove master was pacing sedately, his hands folded behind him, his brow thoughtful. A murmur of his voice reached Bunter's fat ears. Quelch was thinking aloud! 'Qua! Undoubtedly qua!'

What that might possibly mean, Billy Bunter did not know, and did not want to know. He was not aware, and wouldn't have been interested to be aware, that Quelch was meditating on the third ode in the second book of Horace. To Henry Samuel Quelch it was a matter of deep import whether the third stanza in the third ode of the second book began with 'quo', as is generally believed, or whether it began with 'qua', as some bold thinkers allege. Just one little letter altered the whole sense of the thing. Most commentators stood for 'quo'. But Quelch had an independent mind. He favoured 'qua'. Meditating on so important a matter, Quelch was not likely to be on his guard: and certainly it was never likely to occur to him that a disgruntled member of his form, hidden in cover on the wall, was watching him with a pea-shooter ready for action! He paced on, deep in reflection. His deep reflections were undisturbed, till his sedate pacing brought him within easy range of Smithy's pea-shooter. Then they were suddenly interrupted.

Pop! He felt a sudden sting on the cheek. It was so sudden, and so unexpected, that it made Quelch jump almost clear of the gravel. His hand shot to his stung cheek.

'What—what—!' ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

Billy Bunter, peering through thick foliage, suppressed a fat chuckle. Bunter was amused. Mr. Quelch did not seem amused. He rubbed his cheek, and stared round him in surprise and annoyance. As he stared, another sudden sharp sting came right on his majestic nose, and he jumped again.

'Bless my soul!' gasped Mr. Quelch. He ceased to rub his cheek, and rubbed his nose instead. 'What—what is that? A—a wasp? I see no wasp, but—Oh!'

No wasp, certainly, was to be seen: but a third sharp sting came in Quelch's ear. His hand left his nose, and shot to his ear!

'What—what—what—!' gasped Mr. Quelch.

Pop, pop, pop, pop! Smithy was a good marksman with a pea-shooter and he put plenty of force into his shots. Quelch's astonished face was plastered with peas. One whizzed into his mouth, open for an exclamation. There was a gurgling sound from Quelch.

'Urrrrggh!'

Quelch gurgled, and coughed, and choked. Billy Bunter could hardly suppress his

merriment. This was distinctly funny, from Bunter's point of view. Quelch, gurgling frantically with a pea lodged inside his neck, was more than amusing—he was a real shriek!

Bunter heard a rustle near at hand. Smithy was dropping from the wall. No doubt the Bounder thought that he had gone far enough—perhaps a little too far: and was retreating while the going was good. It was not likely to take Quelch long to discover that he was attacked, not by invisible wasps, but by some reckless young rascal with a pea-shooter. Smithy vanished, leaving Bunter grinning on the wall.

'Urrrrggh! Gurrrrggh! Oooogh!' came from Quelch. He gurgled and gurgled, absolutely forgetful of Horace and of 'quo' and 'qua'; concentrated on something that was tickling the inside of his neck. 'Urrrrggh! Ooooh! What— what—' His hand went to his mouth, and Bunter saw him stare blankly at something in the palm. 'What—why—what—a pea! It is a pea! How—why—what— Upon my word! A pea-shooter—some young rascal—' Billy Bunter ceased to grin. Quelch, in the form-room that morning, had looked rather like Rhadamanthus. Now he looked like Rhadamanthus and Æacus rolled into one! It dawned on Billy Bunter that Smithy's example was a good one to follow. The fat Owl dropped from the wall, and vanished into space in his turn. Quelch was still gurgling in the garden when a grinning fat Owl rolled into the House and burst into No. 1 Study in the Remove with an exciting spot of news.

CHAPTER 4 PROBLEM SOLVED

'I SAY, you fellows—Smithy, you know—I saw him—peppering Quelch with a pea-shooter—he, he, he—'

Herbert Vernon-Smith came to a sudden halt.

He was strolling down the Remove passage, with his hands in his pockets, and his usual air of cool self-assurance. Undoubtedly, the Bounder of Greyfriars had plenty of nerve. He certainly did not look like a fellow who had 'peppered' his form-master with peas from a shooter, and over whose head impended awful consequences if discovery accrued. But Smithy was feeling quite at his ease.

He had been very cautious and very wary. Nobody, he was sure, had seen him anywhere near the Head's garden. No doubt Harry Wharton and Co. might guess who the sharp-shooter was, but that mattered nothing: they would not give him away. He had had the satisfaction of 'peppering' Quelch, as a reprisal for that 'whop' in the form-room: and the added satisfaction of getting away with it. There was a grin on his face. But that grin vanished suddenly, as if wiped away by a duster, as he came past the open door of No. 1 Study, and heard the fat squeak from within. He caught his breath.

'Smithy, you know.' Bunter had rolled into No. 1 Study full of news. 'I say, you fellows, Smithy! Peppering Quelch—he, he, he! Did he dance? You should have seen him! He, he, he!'

Billy Bunter chuckled, loud and long.

But there was no answering chuckle from the five fellows in No. 1 Study. They stared at the fat Owl in something like consternation.

The Famous Five had finished tea. Now they were discussing hiking plans for the 'hols'.

Bob Cherry was describing a wonderful tent he had at home, which by his description folded up so small as to be almost invisible, and weighed next to nothing: with a plastic pole in sections which weighed, if possible, less than nothing: quite a desideratum on a hiking trip! He was interrupted by the sudden irruption of an excited Owl. Billy Bunter was bursting with the news.

‘Did he dance?’ chortled Bunter. ‘Quelch, you know —hopping, with Smithy peppering him over the wall! He, he, he! One went into his mouth! Did he gurgle? He, he, he! I say, you fellows, Smithy will be sacked! Serve him jolly well right—kicking a fellow! He, he, he!’

‘You saw him!’ exclaimed Harry Wharton.

‘Didn’t I just?’ chuckled Bunter. ‘Smithy didn’t know I was there—he couldn’t see me through the branches. But I jolly well saw him! He, he, he! I say, did Quelch look wild? He, he, he!’

‘The mad ass!’ muttered Nugent.

‘There’ll be a fearful row, if he’s peppered Quelch!’ said Johnny Bull.

‘The rowfulness will be terrific and preposterous!’ concurred the Nabob of Bhanipur, with a shake of his dusky head.

‘For goodness sake, keep this dark, Bunter!’ exclaimed Wharton.

‘Eh?’ Billy Bunter blinked at him. ‘Think I’d tell Quelch? I’m not a sneak, I hope. Of course, I shall tell the fellows! Won’t they laugh? If you’d seen Quelch dancing—he, he, he!’

‘You fat ass—’

‘Oh, really, Wharton—’

‘If you spread it up and down the Remove, it will get out sooner or later. All the prefects will be on the prowl,’ explained the captain of the Remove. ‘It might be the sack for Smithy just before the “hols”.’

‘He, he, he!’ chuckled Bunter. The possibility of the ‘sack’ for Smithy did not seem to alarm the fat Owl.

‘Look here, Bunter—!’ growled Johnny Bull.

‘Rats!’ retorted Bunter, independently. ‘It’s too jolly good to keep! If you’d seen Quelch dance—he, he, he!’

‘Speech is silvery, my esteemed Bunter,’ said Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh. ‘But silence is the cracked pitcher that goes longest to the well, as the English proverb remarks.’

‘Catch Bunter keeping anything dark,’ grunted Johnny Bull. ‘He couldn’t if he tried!’

‘Yah!’ was Bunter’s elegant rejoinder to that.

Outside the study, Herbert Vernon-Smith stood quite still. With all his nerve, he was feeling his heart beat unpleasantly. It mattered nothing if the Famous Five knew: but it mattered a very great deal if Billy Bunter knew. Billy Bunter could hardly keep his plump tongue from tattling, if he wanted to—and he never wanted to!

What Bunter knew, all the Remove would know before long. And once the Bounder’s reckless exploit was the talk of the Lower School, it could hardly be doubted that it would go further. The prefects, as Wharton had said, would be on the prowl, and sooner or later something would reach official ears.

If it came out—

‘Peppering’ Quelch would be translated, in official language, into an outrageous act of disrespect to a member of the Staff—as indeed it was. If it came out, the offender would

have to go up to the Head.

With all his nerve, Smithy felt his heart sink at that thought. If it happened, it was only too likely that he would hear from Dr. Locke that his presence was not desired at Greyfriars the following term.

He stood still, breathing quickly.

This was the security he had banked on! Bunter knew, and Bunter was going to tattle it all over the school! Smithy was tempted to hurtle into No. 1 Study and boot the fat Owl all round that apartment. But, little accustomed as he was to restraining his temper, he restrained it now. Bunter had to be kept quiet somehow. Booting him was not the way to keep him quiet—rather the reverse!

But Smithy was quick on the uptake. Booting Bunter was not a resource. But there were other ways. He was already thinking of other ways, as the fat Owl rattled on in No. 1 Study.

‘I say, you fellows, if you’d seen Quelch—he, he, he! I say, he thought it was wasps at first—he, he, he! Did he look wild? He, he, he!’ Bunter, evidently was immensely amused. ‘Mad as a hatter! He, he, he!’

‘The madfulness must have been terrific,’ remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, ‘but the jawfulness is not the proper caper, my esteemed idiotic Bunter. Keep it dark-fully.’

‘Keep it dark, Bunter,’ said Frank Nugent. ‘Smithy did you a good turn in form this morning—that was why he got the whop from Quelch.’

That remark passed Billy Bunter by like the idle wind which he regarded not. Bunter had no long memory for such trifles.

‘I’m going down to the Rag now,’ chuckled Bunter. ‘I say, you fellows, Smithy thinks nobody knows—fancy his face when he finds that every chap in the form knows! He, he, he!’

‘Oh, kick him!’ growled Johnny Bull.

‘Beast!’

Billy Bunter backed promptly out of the study. He backed into Herbert Vernon-Smith in the passage outside. He blinked round, and uttered a gasp of alarm as he saw the Bounder.

‘Here, you keep off!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I—I say, I—I never saw you peppering Quelch, Smithy, and I—I ain’t going to tell anybody I saw you, either—you jolly well keep off—’ Harry Wharton and Co., staring through the doorway at the two, expected something in the nature of an earthquake. To their astonishment, Smithy showed no sign of an outbreak of temper.

‘Oh, here you are, Bunter,’ he said. His manner was unexpectedly—very unexpectedly—amiable. ‘Come along to my study, will you?’

‘Eh?’

‘I’ve got rather a spread for tea—’

‘What?’

‘And I’d like to have a talk to you about the “hols”.’

‘The—the “hols”?’

‘Yes: come on.’

Billy Bunter blinked at him quite blankly. That was about the last thing he had expected to hear from Smithy. He had had a faint, faint hope of hooking on to the wealthy Bounder for one of his tremendous holidays. That faint hope had been quite washed out. So far

from asking him for the ‘hols’, Smithy had kicked him! Billy Bunter had often been kicked: but he had never grown to like it! His feelings towards Herbert Vernon-Smith were distinctly inimical. Still, he was prepared to change those inimical feelings, at a moment’s notice, for the most cordial friendship, if Smithy asked him for the ‘hols’! ‘Might fix up something for the “hols”, if you’re not fixed up already,’ said Smithy. ‘Let’s talk it over in my study, what?’

Billy Bunter beamed.

‘Let’s, old chap!’ he bleated. And he rolled up the passage with Smithy to No. 4 Study. In No. 1, Harry Wharton and Co. exchanged glances. They knew, if Billy Bunter did not, exactly how much the Bounder wanted the fat Owl’s fascinating society in the ‘hols’. Bunter could not be booted into keeping quiet. But he could be bribed: and the ‘hols’ with Smithy was nothing more or less than a bribe! Probably the fact dawned on Bunter’s obtuse brain also. But so trifling a circumstance did not worry Bunter. Bunter, when he butted in, did not require a hearty welcome: anything short of being kicked out was good enough for Bunter. Billy Bunter rolled into the Bounder’s study beaming: his pressing problem, unsolved up to that moment, solved at last!

CHAPTER 5 OFF FOR THE HOLIDAYS

‘HALLO, hallo, hallo!’

‘Good “hols”, Smithy.’

‘Sure you won’t come hiking?’

‘Think of us foot-slogging while you’re rolling in your Rolls!’

‘Have a good time with Bunter.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

The Famous Five seemed in great spirits that sunny morning!

They had reason to be. Greyfriars School was breaking up for the summer holidays, and long happy weeks stretched ahead. Harry Wharton and Co. enjoyed life at Greyfriars: such cheery youths would have enjoyed life anywhere. Nevertheless, there was no doubt that the open road was going to be a pleasant change from Latin, and maths, and Quelch! Five faces looked as merry and bright as the summer sunshine that streamed down on the old quad.

A crowd of fellows were already gone. Others were going. The Famous Five were sitting on the bench outside the tuckshop, refreshing themselves with a final ginger-pop before boarding the school bus for the station—one for the road, as Bob Cherry called it—when Herbert Vernon-Smith sauntered up. They greeted him cheerily, and he gave them a cheery nod.

Smithy, too, seemed in good spirits that morning. And he, too, had reason to be: for the term had ended, without anything transpiring about the episode in the Head’s garden. Quelch, undoubtedly, had been very keen to discover the sharp-shooter: the prefects had ‘prowled’: but it was still a mystery who had ‘peppered’ Quelch. Fellows who knew had kept it very carefully under their hats: not a whisper had escaped the Famous Five, nor—amazing to relate—Billy Bunter. Certainly, Billy Bunter did not find it easy to keep his plump tongue inactive. But the glorious prospect of ‘hols’ with Smithy worked the oracle. Bunter was not going to utter a word that might have washed out that glorious

prospect.

'I'm just off,' said Vernon-Smith.

'Next bus doesn't go for fourteen minutes,' said Harry Wharton.

Bob Cherry chuckled.

'Smithy isn't going in a common-or-garden bus,' he said. 'Smithy's got a gilt-edged Rolls calling for him. Haven't you, Smithy?'

The Bounder laughed.

'A car, at any rate,' he said. 'But I had something to say to you fellows before I left.'

'Carry on, old bean.'

'You asked me the other day if I'd like to join up for a hike. If that still holds good—!'

'Of course,' said Harry, at once.

'Glad to have you,' said Bob Cherry, cordially.

'Do you lots more good than rolling in a Rolls!' remarked Johnny Bull.

'The pleasurefulness of your execrable company would be terrific, my esteemed Smithy!' said Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

'Good man,' said Frank Nugent.

It was a very cordial response. But the Famous Five eyed the Bounder rather curiously. Smithy was welcome, more than welcome, to join the hiking party. With all his flamboyant tastes, he had a sturdier side to his nature: he was fit as a fiddle, hard as nails: just the fellow to take the rough with the smooth on a hike. But they could not quite see how it would fit in with his arrangements with William George Bunter.

'Then it's a go!' said Smithy. 'I suppose you've fixed a meeting-place for the start. Where and when?'

'All cut and dried,' answered Bob. 'Tuesday next week, at the Dragon at Greengates in Sussex—that's the jolly old rendezvous. We all turn up there—at exactly what time depends on British Railways.'

Smithy nodded.

'Okay,' he said. 'I'll turn up at the Dragon on Tuesday, and walk you all off your legs!'

'I don't think!' chuckled Bob.

'But—!' said Harry Wharton, slowly.

'But what?' asked Smithy, looking at him.

'Well, it's no business of ours, I suppose,' said Harry, 'but—'

'Cough it up!' said Smithy.

'Well, didn't you ask Bunter for the "hols"!'.

'Oh, quite,' asserted Smithy. 'He had to be bottled somehow. That was how.'

Snort, from Johnny Bull.

'Look here, Smithy—!' he began.

'Well?'

'That's all very well,' said Johnny. 'We know that you let Bunter glue on to keep him quiet. But—'

'Well?' repeated the Bounder.

'Well, a fellow doesn't let a fellow down, after asking him for the "hols", whatever the reason,' said Johnny Bull, bluntly. 'That's not Greyfriars style, Smithy.'

The Bounder raised his eyebrows.

'I hope,' he drawled, 'that no fellow here thinks I would let a fellow down, after asking him for the "hols".'

‘No, no, of course not,’ said Harry Wharton, hastily. ‘But I don’t quite see—’

‘I asked Bunter for the “hols”, and I certainly wouldn’t dream of letting him down,’ drawled Smithy. ‘Bunter can come hiking, if he likes.’

‘Oh!’ gasped Wharton.

‘Bunter—hiking——!’ ejaculated Bob.

‘Why not?’ said Smithy. ‘Do him lots of good! Thin him down, perhaps, and he will only weigh half a ton next term.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Bunter—hiking!’ Johnny Bull grinned. ‘Does he know?’

‘I haven’t mentioned it,’ drawled the Bounder. ‘But I suppose I can make any arrangements I like for my own holidays. Any fellow I ask to join up will have to fit in, naturally.’

‘Oh, quite!’ chuckled Bob.

‘If you fellows object to Bunter—’

‘Not at all!’ grinned Bob. ‘I’ve told him already that he can come, and that we’ll roll him along like a barrel.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Then that’s all right,’ said Vernon-Smith. ‘I’m bound to stick to Bunter, after asking him—noblesse oblige, and all that. I hope he’ll be pleased when he learns that it’s a hike.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘I’m phoning him in a day or two, to tell him the arrangements for the “hols”,’ went on Smithy. ‘I’ll tell him then that it’s a hike. I wish I could see his face when I tell him.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Cheerio till Tuesday, then,’ said Smithy, and with a nod, he walked away to the gates, grinning as he went, stepped into his car, and departed.

The Famous Five were grinning too, as they finished their ginger-pop. A fat figure rolled up as they rose to head for the school bus.

‘I say, you fellows—!’

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’

‘Seen Smithy?’ asked Billy Bunter, blinking at the grinning juniors, ‘I want him to give me a lift to the station, as he’s going in a car—’

‘Wrong participle!’ said Bob, shaking his head.

‘Eh! Wharrer you mean?’

‘Smithy isn’t going in a car—he’s gone in one. Not going—gone!’

‘Well, of all the rotters!’ said Bunter. ‘Might have given a fellow a lift, when he’s asked him for the “hols”—’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! Smithy all over—rotten manners,’ said Bunter. ‘I hardly know how I shall stand him, in the “hols”. Still, I’ve promised him now, and I shall stick to him. A fellow could hardly refuse, he was so jolly pressing—!’

‘The pressfulness must have been terrific,’ grinned the Nabob of Bhanipur.

‘Well, of course he was jolly glad,’ said Bunter. ‘Smithy’s a bit of a bounder, you know—not quite my social standing—’

‘Oh, my hat!’

‘Bit of a leg-up for him, really,’ said the fat Owl. ‘Chance for him to show off to his

people, you know, and make out that he's in the best set here—'

'Oh, crikey!'

'Still, he has jolly good "hols",' said Bunter. 'Plenty of money, at any rate—you know how Smithy splashes it about. A fellow can have a good time with Smithy, and after all, I'm no snob!'

'Sure you wouldn't rather come hiking?' grinned Bob.

Billy Bunter's fat lip curled.

'Catch me hiking!' he said. 'Slogging in the dust— caught in the rain—ordered off by farmers—he, he, he! All very well for you fellows, I dare say—hardly my style! You can think of me having a tremendous time with Smithy, while you're ducking under a hedge out of the rain! He, he, he!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' roared the Famous Five.

And they trooped off to the school bus, laughing, followed by a disdainful blink from the fat Owl.

CHAPTER 6 BLOW FOR BUNTER

'WILLIAM!'

'Oh, lor'!' murmured Billy Bunter.

'William!'

Bunter decided to be deaf.

Bunter did not want to be disturbed. Bunter was reclining, comfortably if not gracefully, in a deep garden-chair in the garden at Bunter Villa. His little fat legs were stretched out at ease, and his fat head reposed on a cushion. He looked a picture of complete and absolute laziness.

Laziness agreed with Billy Bunter. It was, in fact, his long suit. He did not want to lift his extensive weight from that comfortable chair. Moreover, it was after lunch: and after lunch, Bunter weighed considerably more than before lunch! In addition, Bunter was dwelling, in his fat mind, on the enticing prospect before him of 'hols' with the Bounder.

Bunter, with his mind's eye, beheld an enchanting vista of Rolls-Royces, grand hotels, and money splashing right and left: and it did not occur to his fat brain that he might not, perhaps, behold it with any other eye! The parental voice calling from a back window of the house, was not music to his fat ears. Bunter did not want to be asked to go anywhere or to do anything: or to hear that the cook had complained about a missing cake. He sat tight: and Mr. Bunter's voice passed him by.

'William!'

Bunter did not stir. He hoped that Mr. Bunter would conclude that he had gone for a walk, and leave it at that.



'WILLIAM!' BUNTER DECIDED TO BE DEAF

The back of the garden-chair hid him from the window. Bunter, like that sage animal Brer Fox, lay low and said 'nuffin'.

'William!'

Not a sound from William!

'Dear me!' came Mr. Bunter's voice again. 'If William has gone out, he cannot take the call.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

He realized that he was not wanted to go anywhere, or to do anything: neither was it a complaint from the cook! It was a telephone-call! Smithy was to phone him about the 'hols'. If that call was from Smithy, Bunter certainly did not want to miss it. Even laziness came second to that. He bounded out of the garden-chair!

Mr. Bunter, at the window, stared at him. He seemed surprised to see his missing son and heir materialize so suddenly.

'Did—did——did you call me, father?' gasped Bunter.

'I called you several times, William!' said Mr. Bunter, severely. 'One of your schoolfellows, Vernon-Smith, is calling you on the telephone—'

Billy Bunter did not wait for more. He rolled into the house, and like Iser in the poem, he rolled rapidly. In a matter of seconds, he was in the little hall of Bunter Villa, at the telephone.

'Hallo! Is that you, Smithy?' he squeaked.

'Is that Bunter?' came the Bounder's voice, over the wires.

'Yes, old chap! Sorry to keep you waiting, but we've got rather a crowd here—garden-party, you know—crowds of people—'

There was a chuckle on the telephone.

'Too bad to drag you away from the dukes and marquises, Bunter! I'll ring off—!'

'No, don't!' gasped Bunter. 'Hang on, Smithy! That's all right, old chap! Carry on.'

‘Okay! About the “hols”—!’

‘Yes?’ chirruped Bunter, eagerly.

‘Feel like joining up to-morrow, Tuesday?’

‘Yes, rather. I mean, let’s see!’ added Bunter, on second thoughts. ‘I’m asked out to lunch to-morrow— rather distinguished people—and a show in the evening— rather a big fashionable affair—but never mind, I’ll put them off, Smithy. It’s all right, Smithy—I’ll be seeing you to-morrow.’

Another chuckle on the telephone.

‘Don’t put them off for me, Bunter! If you’d rather turn me down, I wouldn’t mind in the least.’

‘I—I—I don’t mind putting them off, Smithy! I wouldn’t turn you down for anything,’ said Bunter, affectionately.

‘I thought you wouldn’t,’ agreed the Bounder.

‘Oh, really, Smithy—’

‘To-morrow, then,’ said Smithy. ‘Turn up at the Dragon Inn, at Greengates—’

‘Greengates!’ repeated Bunter. ‘Where’s that?’

‘It’s a village in Sussex.’

‘Never heard of it. What the dickens are we going to a village in Sussex for?’ asked Bunter, puzzled. Villages in Sussex certainly were not featured in the gorgeous programme Bunter had seen in his mind’s eye.

‘That’s where we meet the rest of the party.’

‘Oh! It’s a party?’ asked Bunter.

‘Yes, quite a jolly party. We all meet at Greengates on Tuesday. Look it out in the timetable—you can get a train to Waddon, and then it’s only a quarter of a mile to walk.’

‘Walk!’ repeated Bunter.

‘Lunch at the Dragon before we start. Don’t be late for lunch, will you?’

‘Oh! No! But—I say—’

‘You’ll find us all there—quite a jolly crowd. You know the fellows.’

‘Do I? Who—?’

‘Wharton, Cherry, Nugent, Bull, and Inky—’

‘Eh?’ Billy Bunter blinked blankly at the telephone. ‘Did—did you say Wharton, Nugent, Cherry, Bull, and Inky?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I—I thought they were going hiking!’

‘So they are.’

‘Then what the dickens are we meeting them for?’ demanded Bunter.

‘We’re going hiking too.’

Billy Bunter almost dropped the receiver.

‘Hiking!’ he howled.

‘Exactly! Don’t forget your hiking kit.’

‘Why, you beast—’

‘Eh?’

‘Mean to say that you’re going hiking, and that that’s what you’ve asked me to!’ yelled Bunter.

‘Don’t you like the idea?’

‘Beast!’ roared Bunter: a reply which seemed to indicate that he liked the idea very little

indeed.

There was another chuckle over the wires. The Bounder of Greyfriars seemed amused. Billy Bunter was not amused. He glared at the telephone with a glare that might almost have shattered it.

‘Well, that’s the lot,’ drawled Smithy, from the other end. ‘I’ll be seeing you to-morrow, old fat man.’

‘I’m not going hiking!’ yelled Bunter.

‘Not turning me down, are you?’

‘Beast!’

Billy Bunter jammed the receiver back on the hooks, with a jam that made the instrument rock. It was an infuriated fat Owl that rolled back to the chair in the garden. ‘Hols’ with Smithy did not mean, after all, Rolls-Royces and grand hotels: it meant foot-slogging in the dust, and ducking under hedges out of the rain! It meant carrying his share of the baggage, and taking his turn at washing-up! Billy Bunter fairly breathed wrath. Achilles’ wrath, to Greece the direful spring of woes unnumbered, hadn’t a thing on Billy Bunter’s, at that moment.

But—!

It was hiking, or home sweet home! The charms of home sweet home had already palled on Bunter. It was hiking, or nothing: and slowly, sadly, and sorrowfully, Billy Bunter made up his fat mind that even hiking was better than nothing! And the following day, Billy Bunter was in the train for Sussex, en-route for the meeting-place of the Greyfriars hikers.

CHAPTER 7 THE HIKERS

‘JOLLY’ said Bob Cherry.

If it had been raining cats and dogs, Bob would probably have thought it rather jolly all the same. But it wasn’t—it was a glorious summer’s day. The sun could not have been brighter, the sky could not have been bluer, the woods and meadows of Sussex could not have been greener. It was a morning to gladden a hiker’s heart. Six fellows, in a group outside the Dragon Inn at Greengates, looked as bright as the sunny morning. Every one of them looked fit as a fiddle in his hiking kit. Every one of them agreed with Bob that it was jolly, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh added that the jolliffulness was terrific.

There was a big ancient oak tree outside the inn, which was itself an attractive picture, with its gabled windows, red tiles, and clambering wisteria. Under the shady branches were several little tables, at one of which a plump old waiter, with plump cheeks like ripe apples, was setting out ginger-beer and glasses. But the six schoolboys, at the moment, were watching the road, like six Sister Annes, for the expected, or half-expected, seventh member of the hiking party. That member had not yet put in an appearance.

Harry Wharton and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh had arrived first at the rendezvous. Bob Cherry arrived next, and then Nugent and Johnny Bull. Last came Herbert Vernon-Smith: who came in a whacking car, whizzing into the sleepy little village street. That whacking car had long since whizzed away in a cloud of dust. Now the Greyfriars hikers were waiting for Bunter—and lunch! Bunter, if he came, was fairly certain to arrive in time for lunch. Unpunctual in most other matters, Bunter could always be relied upon to turn up

for a meal—if he was coming! But was he?

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here comes somebody on a bike!’ exclaimed Bob Cherry, as a cyclist appeared on the road.

‘Not Bunter!’ said Harry. ‘He wouldn’t be on a bike.’

‘Or moving at that speed, if he was!’ remarked Nugent.

It was certainly not Billy Bunter on the bicycle. The cyclist, as he came nearer, looked like a schoolboy on holiday: but he was a slim, rather handsome fellow, and he was moving at a rate that Billy Bunter would never have dreamed of in his wildest dreams. He was, in fact, riding very recklessly, to the peril of several fowls and a duck, who cackled and quacked and fluttered frantically out of his way as he whizzed into the village street. ‘Silly ass!’ remarked Johnny Bull, sententiously.

‘I’ve seen that chap before somewhere,’ said Bob Cherry, his eyes curiously on the handsome face under a Panama hat.

Harry Wharton nodded.

‘St. Jim’s chap,’ he said. ‘He was in Tom Merry’s team that came over for cricket last term. I forget his name—’

‘Cardew!’ said Nugent.

‘That’s it—Cardew!’ assented Harry. ‘Good at cricket, but—’ He paused.

Vernon-Smith’s lip curled.

‘I remember him!’ he said. ‘Chap who fancied that the cricket-field belonged to him, and that he had the game in his pocket.’

Harry Wharton laughed.

‘A bit that way,’ he assented.

‘Well, if he’s a St. Jim’s chap, give him a wave as he passes,’ said the cheery Bob, and as the cyclist came whizzing past the inn, he waved his hat.

If the cyclist observed it, he did not heed it. In another moment he was past, and whizzing on down the street at the same reckless pace. An ancient villager, slowly crossing the street, gave quite a convulsive jump, as Cardew of St. Jim’s flashed by hardly a foot from him.

Johnny Bull gave an expressive grunt.

‘That chap wants kicking!’ he remarked.

The cyclist vanished in dusty distance, and the six Sister Annes resumed watching the road. Another figure appeared, this time a walker. But again it was not Bunter. It was a very dusty-looking person, with an unshaven chin, a large red nose, and an untidy head surmounted by an extremely ancient and battered bowler hat.

‘Not Bunter!’ grinned Bob. ‘Jolly old tramp! Come and mop up the ginger-pop: Bunter will roll in for lunch, if he’s coming at all.’

‘Think he’s coming, Smithy?’ asked Nugent.

The Bounder chuckled.

‘Couldn’t say,’ he answered. ‘As he accepted my invitation for the “hols”, he oughtn’t to turn a fellow down— but he might! I thought that he didn’t sound fearfully keen, when I phoned him.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

The juniors sat down round the table under the shady branches, to dispose of the refreshing ginger-pop. A few minutes later the dusty gentleman in the battered bowler arrived, and he stopped at the inn, and sat down at one of the little tables under the oak.

The plump waiter served him with refreshment of a more potent nature than ginger-pop, and as he sat over his tankard, he eyed the Greyfriars party, not with a friendly eye. The Bounder glanced across at him, and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Nice chap to meet on a lonely road, after dark!’ he remarked.

‘Don’t tell him so, old chap!’ murmured Bob Cherry. Smithy did not take the trouble to subdue his voice, apparently not caring whether the tramp heard his remark or not.

Luckily, the man in the battered bowler did not seem to hear. Truly, he did not look an agreeable character to meet on a lonely road after dark: but nobody wanted to begin the hike with a row. If the Bounder did not care, the Famous Five did.

There was a sound of wheels on the road.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo! That might be Bunter!’ exclaimed Bob Cherry. ‘Bet you he will come on wheels, if he comes at all. He could get a taxi at Waddon.’

A taxi drew up to the Dragon, and stopped.

All eyes were fixed on it.

A fat face looked out, and a pair of big round spectacles caught the gleam of the summer sunshine, as a pair of little round eyes blinked round. It was Bunter at last! Evidently, the Owl of the Remove had decided to join up. A fat squeak was heard.

‘Is that the Dragon, driver?’

‘That’s the Dragon, sir.’

A fat figure rolled out of the taxi. Billy Bunter blinked round him, apparently not discerning the party under the shady branches of the oak.

‘Beasts!’ was his next remark.

The juniors grinned under the tree.

‘Lazy lot!’ grunted Bunter. ‘I wonder if any of them have turned up yet! I expect I’m the first! Well, I jolly well shan’t wait lunch for them—I know that.’

And the fat Owl started towards the inn. The driver stared after him.

‘Your fare, sir!’ he called out.

‘Eh?’ Billy Bunter blinked round at him.

‘Four-and-six, sir.’

‘Oh! Wait a minute.’

Billy Bunter ran his hands through his pockets, the juniors under the tree watching him with grinning faces. The fat Owl groped in one pocket after another. He did not seem to find what he sought.

‘Oh, lor’! I believe I’ve left my wallet at home!’ ejaculated Bunter.

The taxi-driver eyed him quite unpleasantly.

‘The fare from Waddon’s four-and-six, sir,’ he said, very distinctly. ‘I’m waiting!’

‘You’ll be paid!’ said Bunter, haughtily.

‘I will that!’ assented the taxi-driver, emphatically.

‘I’m expecting to meet some friends here—just hold on!’ said Bunter, and he re-started for the inn, the taxi-driver eyeing his fat back, as he went, with a quite grim expression. Billy Bunter’s vision, even with the aid of his big spectacles, was far from that of an eagle. He was rolling past the shady oak, unconscious of the grinning schoolboys there, when he was suddenly apprised of their proximity, by a voice that bore a strong resemblance to Stentor’s of old.

‘Halo, hallo, hallo!’ roared Bob Cherry. ‘This way, old fat man.’

Bunter jumped, and blinked round.

‘Oh!’ he ejaculated. ‘You’re there!’

‘Sort of!’ agreed Bob.

Billy Bunter rolled under the shady branches. He blinked at five fellows who smiled, and one who shrugged his shoulders.

‘I say, you fellows, who’s going to lend me four-and-six?’ he asked. ‘I find that I’ve left my wallet at home—’

‘With all your currency notes in it?’ asked Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

‘Yes, and all my banknotes, too,’ said Bunter, calmly. ‘I say, Smithy—’

‘Rats!’ said Smithy.

‘If you can’t lend a fellow a taxi-fare, Smithy, after asking him for the “hols”—!’

‘Go and eat coke!’

‘Beast!’

Bob Cherry chuckled.

‘Dear old Bunter!’ he said. ‘He couldn’t walk a quarter of a mile, and if he’s left all his vast wealth at home, somebody will have to pay the taxi-man.’

‘Oh, really, Cherry—’

Evidently, William George Bunter had banked on the hikers for the taxi-fare. But four-and-six was not a large sum: and the driver certainly had to be paid.

‘Sort out your bobs and tanners, you chaps,’ said Bob, diving his hand into his pocket.

There was a growl from the Bounder.

‘You can keep your bobs and tanners in your pockets,’ he snapped. ‘It’s up to me. I asked the fat bilk here.’

‘Oh, really, Smithy—’

‘Shut up!’

‘Beast!’

Out came the Bounder’s well-filled wallet. Smithy had more cash than all the rest of the hikers put together: probably twice or thrice as much. Four-and-six was really nothing at all to the wealthy Bounder, and it was, as he had said, up to him. So he was going to pay, though not with a good grace.

An expensive wallet, with a gold clip that glimmered in the sun, came into view. Billy Bunter’s eyes popped, behind his big spectacles, as Smithy opened it. It had three compartments: five-pound notes in one, pound notes in another, and ten-shilling notes in the third. Smithy was not in the least reluctant to let that wallet be seen. He rather liked it to be seen. The Famous Five were not interested: but Billy Bunter gazed at that bulging wallet, as Ali Baba gazed at the treasure in the robbers’ cave.

Bunter was not the only one who gazed at it. The untidy gentleman in the battered bowler, at the next table, stared at it, over his tankard, with fixed eyes that gleamed with greed. Harry Wharton, with the corner of his eye, caught that greedy stare, and frowned.

‘Better keep that out of sight, Smithy,’ he said, in a low voice.

Smithy stared at him.

‘Eh? What? Why?’ he snapped.

Wharton made a gesture towards the tramp. Smithy glanced in that direction, and shrugged his shoulders. So far from keeping the wallet out of sight, he detached a ten-shilling note with deliberate leisureliness, and handed it to Bunter. Then, still in quite a leisurely manner, he returned the wallet to his pocket. Evidently, Smithy did not care if that tramp, or all the tramps in Sussex, beheld his ample supply of cash.

Billy Bunter rolled back to the taxi, with the ten-shilling note in his fat fingers. The taxi-man ceased to look grim. Possibly he had suspected a 'bilk': not a wholly unfounded suspicion!

'There you are, my man!' said Bunter, loftily. 'You can keep the change.'

'Thank you, sir!' said the taxi-man very civilly indeed. And he drove away, quite satisfied with that generous tip. Billy Bunter could be generous—in some circumstances! Bunter rolled back under the oak, 'I say, you fellows—'

'Where's Smithy's change?' asked Bob.

Bunter blinked at him.

'Eh? I tipped the 'driver—nothing mean about me, I hope! I say, you fellows, what about lunch? I'm ready for it.'

The fat Owl rolled off into the inn, without waiting for a reply. Six fellows followed him in: five of them looking amused, the sixth not looking amused at all.

CHAPTER 8 BUNTER HIKES

'I say, you fellows—'

'Come on, Bunter!'

'Do let a fellow speak!' hooted Billy Bunter. 'I say, I've been thinking, over lunch—'

'Gammon!'

'I tell you I've been thinking—'

'And I tell you it's gammon!' said Bob Cherry. 'You've got nothing to do it with, old fat man. March!'

All was ready for the start. The hikers were in a cheery bunch outside the Dragon; rucksacks on backs, ready for the road. Six of them, at all events, were ready: the fattest member of the party did not seem quite ready. Bunter, as a poet has already expressed it, cast a longing lingering look behind.

'Hold on a minute, Bob,' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'If Bunter's started thinking, lets hear the result. Cough it up, Bunter.'

'Well, look here,' said Bunter. 'This is a jolly good inn, and the grub's really good. Not like what I get at home at Bunter Court, of course: but jolly good. What about starting to-morrow? Good night's rest, you know— and start as fresh as daisies in the morning! Nothing like starting in the morning! See?'

'You've thought that out?' asked Frank Nugent.

'Yes! I think of things, you know,' said Bunter. 'You don't want to rush about, on a hike, as if you had a mad dog after you. Take it easy! We'll turn out at ten in the morning—!'

'Ten!' ejaculated Bob Cherry.

'Well, say eleven,' said Bunter. 'Then we can do a couple of miles before we halt somewhere for lunch—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! Don't you fellows think it a jolly good idea?' demanded Bunter.

'Oh, topping!' chuckled Bob. 'If you'd really rather start in the morning, old fat man—!'

'Rot!' growled Johnny Bull. 'We're starting now.'

'My dear chap,' said Bob. 'If Bunter would rather start to-morrow morning—'

‘I jolly well would!’ said Bunter, emphatically.

‘It’s a free country,’ said Bob. ‘Bunter can start any old time he jolly well likes. We’re starting now—good-bye, Bunter.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘March!’ chuckled Bob.

And the hikers marched. Billy Bunter stood and blinked after them, with an exasperated blink. It was true that the grub at the Dragon was good: and Billy Bunter had disposed of a quantity of it that had made the apple-cheeked waiter open his eyes wide. Having taken so considerable a cargo on board, Bunter was, so to speak, more inclined to remain at moorings than to put to sea. Indeed, had Billy Bunter been in command, that hike would probably not have extended beyond the length of the inn garden. Billy Bunter, certainly, did not believe in rushing about!

The rest of the party, however, evidently did! If they did not rush, at all events they started at a swinging pace—leaving Bunter blinking!

‘I say, you fellows!’ yelled Bunter.

‘Good-bye, Bunter!’

‘Beasts!’

And Billy Bunter started too. And he started at a trot, to overtake the hikers before they disappeared. The fat Owl did not want to march: but still less did he want to be left behind on his lonely own.

He was gasping for breath as he rejoined them. Bob Cherry glanced round at a fat perspiring face.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo! Starting to-day after all?’ he asked.

‘Yah!’ was all Bunter replied to that. He had no breath for more.

The hikers marched cheerily out of Greengates. The way lay westward, under the blazing sun, cooled by a balmy breeze. Leafy lanes and verdant meadows gladdened all eyes—except perhaps Bunter’s. As he lagged behind, puffing and blowing, the fat Owl wondered a little whether his seventh helping at lunch was, after all, a mistake! Half-a-mile out of the village, there was a wayside stile. Billy Bunter’s eyes and spectacles dwelt on it longingly. His dulcet tones were heard again.

‘I say, you fellows!’

‘Buck up, Bunter.’

‘I say, what about taking a rest—’

‘Nothing about taking a rest.’

‘I’m going to sit on that stile!’ yelled Bunter.

‘Sit on it, old fat man! Good-bye.’

‘Beast!’ groaned Bunter.

He plugged on, without sitting on the stile. He did not want to be left ‘sitting on a stile’, any more than he wanted to be left at ‘the Dragon’. Harry Wharton and Co. had started hiking: and with the selfishness to which Bunter was sadly accustomed, they were going on hiking, regardless of the fact that Billy Bunter had eaten enough for five or six fellows, and was loaded over the Plimsoll line.

‘I say, you fellows!’ came a breathless squeak a few minutes later.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’

‘I say, ain’t it time to camp?’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Camping, after a march of less than a mile, did not seem to be the idea. Indeed the suggestion seemed to entertain the hikers. Only a cheery sound of merriment came back to Bunter's fat ears. He shook a weary fat fist at six backs, and plugged on after them. A mile was covered. In a mile, there were one thousand seven hundred and sixty yard's, which was exactly one thousand seven hundred and fifty-nine more than Bunter really liked. His hopes rose, as another stile appeared in a hawthorn hedge ahead, and six fellows stopped at it. But, alas for Bunter—the pause was but momentary. Six fellows clambered over the stile one after another, to follow a footpath across a wide green meadow, in which cattle grazed. Bunter, arriving in his turn at the stile, leaned on it. 'I say, you fellows!' he squeaked.

Bunter was getting tired. But he was not so tired as he was lazy. Sitting on a stile seemed to him ever so much more attractive than the open road or the green meadows.

Bob Cherry looked back.

'Come on, Bunter,' he called out, encouragingly. 'We're making it only a short trip for the first day.'

'Oh, good,' gasped Bunter. 'How far?'

'Only another five miles.'

'Oh, crikey!'

'Like us to roll you along like a barrel?'

'Beast!'

Bunter clambered on the stile. Then he sat on it. He blinked after the hikers, with a faint hope that they would stop for him. But they did not stop. They hiked on regardless. With deep feelings, the fat Owl descended from the stile, and rolled after them. But there was a sly gleam in the little round eyes behind the big round spectacles. Bunter was going to get a rest—a prolonged rest—if he could! And he fancied that he could! Suddenly, there was a loud yell behind the hikers.

They all looked round. Bunter, apparently having stumbled over, was sitting in the grassy footpath. As he sat, he yelled.

'Ow! Wow! My leg! Ow!'

A cow, near at hand, lifted a head from the pasture, and gazed at him meditatively.

Bunter did not heed the cow. He sat and yelled. 'Ow! Oooh! Ow! Wow!'

At that, the hikers did halt. They all stared back at Bunter. Then they came back. Billy Bunter blinked up at them with his fat feature contorted in an expression of the greatest agony.

'What on earth's the trouble?' asked Harry Wharton.

'Ow! My leg!' moaned Bunter. 'I—I've broken my ankle, I think—'

'Think again!' suggested Johnny Bull.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, laugh!' said Bunter, bitterly. 'Funny ain't it, for a fellow to catch his foot and fall over and fracture his knee—I mean his ankle—'

'Well, if Bunter's crocked, he can't march, you fellows,' said Bob Cherry. 'He doesn't seem to know whether he's broken his ankle, or fractured his knee, but it sounds jolly serious. Can't you get up, Bunter?'

'Of course I can't!' yapped Bunter. 'I shall have to sit down till my knee—I mean my ankle—feels better. I—I daresay it will be all right in an hour or so. The pain's fearful now. Like burning daggers, and—and red-hot pokers! Ow!'

'Oh, come on!' grunted Johnny Bull. Johnny did not seem to believe in those burning daggers and red-hot pokers! Neither did any other member of the hiking party, for that matter.

'Kick him!' suggested Smithy.

'Beast!' moaned Bunter.

'Sure you can't get up, Bunter?' asked Bob.

'Quite sure,' said Bunter, promptly.

'Couldn't you walk?'

'Not a yard.'

'Well, if Bunter can't get up, he can't!' said Bob, gravely.

'Look here—!' growled Johnny Bull.

'Poor old Bunter!' said Bob. 'He's a fixture. We shall have to stop for him, if he can't get up. But it really ain't safe to hang about in a field where there's a bull—'

Bunter jumped.

'A bull!' he gasped. Bunter had not thought of bulls. He had only thought of lazing. But he thought of bulls now. He blinked round him hurriedly, and discerned the cow, still gazing at him meditatively. 'Oh, crikey! I—I say, you fellows, is that a bull?'

Bob Cherry winked at his comrades.

'Run for your lives!' he shouted.

And he started. The other hikers, for a moment, stared: then, taking their cue, they rushed after Bob. Six hikers, going strong, streamed along the footpath towards a distant gate.

'I say, you fellows—stop—help—! Keep that bull off!' roared Bunter.

He bounded to his feet. Broken ankles, fractured knees, burning daggers and red-hot pokers, were forgotten. If that cow was a bull, Bunter could not only get up—he could not only walk—but he could run! And he could run hard! He tore after the hikers.

Had he looked back, he would have observed that philosophic cow still regarding him with calm meditation. But he did not look back. He fairly flew. His feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground. Really he looked, at that moment, as if he would have had a good chance in the School hundred yards! Six fellows were running quite fast: but they did not beat Bunter. Bunter reached the gate as soon as they did. He was the first to clamber over it, and land gasping in the road beyond.

Bob Cherry, grinning, opened the gate. There was an alarmed yell from Bunter as he did so.

'Don't open that gate! Keep it shut! Get over it! Keep it shut, will you?'

'Eh, why?' asked Bob, as he swung the gate open.

'You silly idiot, the bull might get out after us!' yelled Bunter. 'Shut that gate—quick—!'

'What bull?' asked Bob.

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled the hikers.

'Did Bunter think that cow was a bull?' asked Bob. 'You want a new pair of specs, old fat man.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Why, you—you—you beast!' gasped Bunter, as it dawned on his fat brain. 'Wasn't there a bull? You said there was a bull—'

'Not at all! I said it wasn't safe to hang about in a field where there was a bull! And it isn't.'

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘You—you—you—you—!’ gasped Bunter. Words failed him.

‘Come on, you chaps,’ said Bob. ‘Bunter’s leg seems to be all right now. Never heard of such a quick cure for broken ankles and fractured knees! March!’

The hikers, chuckling, marched. And Billy Bunter, with feelings that could have been expressed in no known language, marched after them.

CHAPTER 9 NO THOROUGHFARE!

‘BOBBY!’

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’

‘Bobby! Bobby! Bobby!’

‘Somebody here seems to know you, Cherry,’ remarked Smithy, with a grin.

‘Bobby! Bobby!’

‘Fathead!’ said Bob. It was years since Bob Cherry, in the home circle, had been known as ‘Bobby’: and certainly he did not expect to be so addressed on a hike in Sussex.

The hikers had stopped at a stile. One member of the party had promptly plumped down on it. Stiles, in Billy Bunter’s opinion, were to be counted among the most useful and welcome institutions in rural England. The rest of the party stood looking over it.

Beyond the stile was a field of waving corn. Beyond that was a high hawthorn hedge, and beyond that, another field, where, through interstices in the hawthorns, a stream could be discerned, glimmering in the sun. Through the corn ran a narrow footpath. Harry Wharton had consulted his map, which indicated that on the further side of the second field, lay the village of Hooting, where the day’s march was scheduled to terminate. But alas! —on the stile was nailed a board with the inscription, familiar to all hikers, **TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED!**

The Famous Five, as law-abiding citizens, had to heed that forbidding board. The Bounder, who was not in the least law-abiding, was prepared, indeed keen, to pass it by unheeded. So there was a discussion—which Billy Bunter hoped would be prolonged. Bunter was prepared to sit on that stile for quite a long time, while the other fellows discussed pros and cons.

The discussion was interrupted by a loud voice in the cornfield. That voice called, or rather shouted, ‘Bobby! Bobby! Bobby!’ Apparently someone, as yet unseen, was in search of someone else who answered to the name of ‘Bobby’. The voice was followed by a sound of trampling feet along the edge of the cornfield.

‘Here comes somebody!’ said Bob Cherry. ‘If it’s the farmer, we can ask him for leave to walk across his field. We’ll tell him that we’ll be careful not to tread on his corns!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Look here, we’re going across anyhow,’ said Vernon-Smith. ‘It’s more than a mile if we go round by the lanes.’

‘Better ask politely,’ said Nugent.

‘The betterfulness is terrific, my esteemed Smithy,’ said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘Politefulness is the procrastination of princes, as the English proverb remarks.’

‘Good old English proverb!’ chuckled Bob. ‘Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here he comes! Now turn on your politest smiles and your very, very best manners.’

‘Bobby! Bobby! Bobby!’

A burly, sun-tanned man in gaiters appeared, still calling on ‘Bobby’. There was an anxious expression on his tanned face. It changed to a frown as he saw the bunch of hikers on the outer side of the stile. Apparently the sight of hikers did not lend enchantment to his view.

Having frowned at them, he turned his head, staring into the waving corn, and shouted again:

‘Bobby! Bobby! Bobby!’

‘Lost somebody, sir?’ called out Bob, cheerily.

The farmer glanced round again.

‘Yes! A little boy! Seen a little boy about?’

‘Sorry—no!’

The man in gaiters grunted and turned to the corn again, shouting ‘Bobby!’ He seemed to have the idea that ‘Bobby’, whoever ‘Bobby’ was, might have lost himself in the corn, which was more than high enough to hide a small boy from sight.

‘Bobby! Bobby! Can’t you hear your father calling? Bobby!’

Echo answered ‘Bobby!’ but there was no other answer.

‘Like us to help you look for him, sir?’ called out Bob.

‘No!’ came over the farmer’s shoulder.

‘We’d help with pleasure!’ said Harry Wharton, politely.

‘You’d trample down my corn, I dessay! Keep out of my field!’ It was not a polite reply.

But perhaps that farmer had had experience of thoughtless roamers trampling on his crops. There are hikers, and hikers! The Greyfriars party were very careful to leave no signs of damage where they passed—no apples filched from orchards, no paper bags littering the meadows, no gates left open for cattle to wander. Some other hikers were not so careful. Anyhow that farmer evidently did not want hikers on his side of the stile.

‘May we cross by the footpath, sir?’ asked Bob Cherry, still meticulously polite.

‘No!’ was the brief reply.

‘It wouldn’t take a few minutes—’

‘Keep off my land!’

‘That’s that!’ said Johnny Bull. ‘We shall have to go round.’

‘Rot!’ snapped the Bounder. ‘We’re going across, and he can go and eat coke.’

‘Shut up, you ass,’ muttered Bob

But the farmer had heard. He turned, and fixed an angry glare on the hikers.

‘You put a foot on my land!’ he bawled. ‘I’ve had enough of vagrants trampling down my crops and stealing my apples. You come over that stile, if you want a thrashing!

You’ll get it!’

‘Rats!’ retorted the Bounder.

The man in gaiters made a stride towards the stile, as if contemplating the administration of a thrashing there and then! But his anxiety for the missing ‘Bobby’ supervened: and he turned away, tramping along the fence by the edge of the cornfield, and shouting ‘Bobby! Bobby!’

‘Nice polite and polished sort of gent, what?’ said Nugent, laughing.

‘Well, if he’s had crops trampled and apples pinched, perhaps there’s some excuse for him,’ said Bob, tolerantly. ‘He doesn’t seem to see what a really nice party we are! Come on—we’d better go round.’

‘I’m not going round!’ said the Bounder, obstinately.

‘Look here, Smithy—’

‘I say, you fellows, Smithy’s right,’ squeaked Billy Bunter. ‘I’m jolly well not going to walk an extra mile! Let’s wait here till that beast’s gone. I don’t mind waiting!’

‘We could guess that one, old fat porpoise.’

‘We shall have to go round, Smithy,’ said Harry Wharton. ‘We can’t trespass on a man’s land, without leave.’

The Bounder shrugged his shoulders.

‘Go round if you like,’ he answered. ‘I’m waiting here till that old fool is out of sight—then I’m going across.’

The Famous Five exchanged glances. Only Billy Bunter shared the Bounder’s view. Bunter was extremely unwilling to detach himself from the stile—still more unwilling to put in an extra mile. For once, the Owl of the Remove and the Bounder were in accord: one from laziness, the other from obstinacy. The other fellows felt rather at a loss. If Smithy was going to risk crossing the forbidden territory, they did not feel like leaving him to it.

‘After all, why shouldn’t we walk across the dashed field?’ said Nugent, at last. ‘We can trot, too, and be across in a couple of minutes.’

‘Property’s property!’ said Johnny Bull, sententiously.

‘Oh, rot,’ said Vernon-Smith. ‘The old donkey will be out of sight in a few minutes, and we can cut across.’

‘He’s going!’ said Nugent.

All eyes were on the man in gaiters, getting further and further away along the inner side of the fence, still calling ‘Bobby’ as he went.

‘Chance it, what?’ said Bob. ‘He’ll be gone, in a minute

‘I’ll soon see,’ answered Bob. ‘I can see over that hedge, standing on this stile.’

Bob balancing himself with care, stood on the top bar of the stile. That gave him a view over the distant hawthorn hedge, into the second field. There, the stream, crossed by a single plank bridge, rippled and glimmered in the setting sun. Bob grinned as he looked: for close by the plank bridge on the stream, he spotted a diminutive figure: that of a small boy of six or seven. He could guess that that was the ‘Bobby’ of whom the farmer was in search. ‘Bobby’ was not lost in the high corn: evidently he had wandered into the adjoining field, by a gap in the hawthorns: out of hearing of the calling voice, but visible to the eyes of the schoolboy standing on the stile. Nobody else was to be seen in the second field: ‘Bobby’ had it to himself.

‘All serene,’ said Bob Cherry. ‘Nobody in that field, except a little kid—oh, crumbs!’ He broke off, suddenly.

The grin died suddenly off his face. For, as he stared across at the second field, the ‘little kid’ there stepped on the plank to cross the stream—slipped on the plank, and tipped over. The distance was too great for the splash to be heard, but Bob, his sunburnt face suddenly white, saw two tiny hands clutching the plank, and a child’s terrified face in the water.

‘Oh!’ gasped Bob.

He leaped from the stile—into the cornfield. His feet had barely touched the ground, when he was racing away, by the narrow path through the corn, running as he had never run on the cinder-track. The hikers stared after him blankly.

'Bob!' shouted Harry Wharton.

'Bob, you ass—!' roared Johnny Bull.

'Esteemed and idiotic Bob—!' gasped Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Come back, you ass!' shouted Nugent. 'The man's after you.'

'Is he crackers?' said the Bounder, in wonder.

Utterly unaware of what was happening in the further field, the hikers could only wonder what possessed Bob Cherry. The farmer had seen him, and with quite a deadly expression on his face, was rushing in pursuit. That settled the question for the hikers. If Bob fell into those angry hands, obviously he was going to need some help!

'Come on!' said Harry Wharton.

He leaped over the stile and ran, and the rest of the party followed his example. Bob was well ahead—the farmer hot on his track—and behind the farmer, came five hikers running hard. Only one member of the party did not follow on. Billy Bunter did not like running, neither did he like angry farmers at close quarters. Billy Bunter sagely sat it out, on the stile, while Harry Wharton and Co. disappeared at breathless speed across the cornfield.

CHAPTER 10 TOUCH AND GO.

'STOP!' came an angry roar behind Bob Cherry. The man in gaiters, red with wrath, was after the Greyfriars junior rather like an angry bull: forgetful for the moment of the missing 'Bobby'.

Bob did not heed that angry roar. Indeed he hardly heard it. He was running as if for his life. On the ground, he could not see beyond the hawthorns: neither could the farmer, or the other hikers. But Bob knew, if the others did not, that a life was in danger in the further field, and he had a terrible dread that the child's hands might not hold on till he reached the spot, though he ran like the wind. A split second might make all the difference: and he ran as he had never run on the football field, or between the wickets.

'Stop, you young rascal!' came another bull-like bellow behind. To the farmer, that sudden rush across his cornfield, under his very eyes, seemed an act of unexampled insolence and defiance. He breathed wrath as he charged in pursuit.

'Stop!' he roared.

Bob Cherry raced on.

He was across the cornfield in a matter of seconds. He reached the hawthorn hedge, and plunged headlong through, regardless of thorns, and disappeared from the sight of the farmer and his comrades. Heedless of scratches, of which he collected a good many, Bob tore through the hawthorns and ran on into the next field. His heart was almost in his mouth as he stared ahead, at the plank bridge over the rippling stream. He could have sobbed with relief, as he saw that the child was still there, still clinging to the plank over the water, and crying out faintly. Any moment that feeble grasp might have failed: the child could not have held on for minutes.

It was twenty yards from the hawthorn hedge to the stream. Bob seemed to cover them in a bound. Then he was on his knees on the plank, catching at 'Bobby', catching his hands in the very moment that they were slipping.

'Hold on, kid!' gasped Bob. 'All right now!'

'Bobby' could not have held on. But Bob Cherry's strong grasp on his hands held him fast.

'All right now—I'll have you out in two ticks!' gasped Bob. And he gripped the child's wrists to pull him on the plank.

There was a crash in the hawthorns, as a burly figure came plunging through the gap Bob had left. The hawthorns swayed and rustled, as the farmer came charging into the field.

'You young rascal! You—oh!' The angry man, charging across towards the plank bridge, came to a sudden stop. His eyes popped, at the scene on the plank. In fact they seemed almost to pop out of his ruddy face.

'Bobby!' he panted.

He rushed on again. Bob was lifting the child from the water, landing him safely on the plank, as he arrived. But there was no wrath in his face now. His expression had quite changed.

'Bobby!' he gasped. 'Bobby!'

Bob Cherry looked round, with a grin. He picked the little boy up in his strong arms, and walked off the plank. Bobby stretched out his little hands.



BOB WAS LIFTING THE CHILD FROM THE WATER

'Daddy! I fell in the water—'

The big, burly man gulped.

'Give him to me!'

Bob handed over the child. The expression on the farmer's face was quite extraordinary. He hugged the little drenched and dripping figure, and blinked at Bob. He had chased that trespasser across the field, with the full intention of giving him the thrashing of his life. Evidently, he had abandoned that intention now.

'I—I—I thought—!' he stammered.

'Of course you did,' agreed Bob. 'You see, I saw the kid fall into the water, from the stile, and I couldn't stop to explain, could I? Jolly glad I was in time to pull him out.'

'Thank heaven for that!' said the farmer. 'I—I—I'm sorry—'

'That's all right,' said Bob, cheerily. 'I'll cut back now—'

There was another crash in the hawthorn hedge. Five hikers came plunging through,

headlong.

‘Come on!’ panted Harry Wharton.

They rushed on. Then they, like the farmer before them, came to an astonished halt, and stared. They had expected to find Bob sorely in need of help. They blinked at the sight of the burly man with the drenched child in his arms, and Bob with a cheery grin on his face.

‘What the thump—?’ gasped Nugent.

‘What’s happened, Bob?’

‘What the dickens—?’

Bob Cherry chuckled.

‘All serene, you chaps,’ he said. ‘You didn’t see what I saw from the stile—’

‘I thought you were crackers when you rushed off like that,’ said Vernon-Smith. ‘What the deuce—?’

‘Thanks,’ said Bob. ‘But I couldn’t stop for a chat, you see—it was rather touch and go, as it was.’

‘But what—?’

‘I’ll tell you what, young gentlemen,’ said the farmer, with a shake in his voice. ‘This lad has saved my Bobby’s life, when I was after him to tan his hide, and I’m more sorry than I can say. Bobby fell in the water, and if—if—’ His voice trailed off, and he gave the drenched Bobby another hug.

‘Oh, my hat!’ said Nugent.

‘Bob, old chap—!’

‘So that was why—!’

‘Just that,’ said Bob. ‘And now let’s clear off—we’re trespassing here— Unless,’ he added, with a grin, ‘you wouldn’t mind us walking the rest, sir, as we’ve come half-way.’

‘You’ll walk wherever you like over my land, after what you’ve done,’ said the farmer.

‘And if you’re looking for a camp, you can camp in my barn, and more than welcome!

And if one of you will come up to the house, there’s all the milk and eggs and butter you want, and anything else I can do for you.’

With that, the farmer strode away, with Bobby in his arms. Evidently, the gentleman in gaiters was quite placated. The hikers watched him as he went, and then looked at one another with smiling faces.

‘Not a bad old bean, after all!’ said Nugent.

‘The barkfulness is worse than the bitefulness,’ agreed Hurree Janset Ram Singh. ‘Let us accept his hospitable and ridiculous offer and camp in the absurd barn, my esteemed chums.’

‘Let’s!’ agreed Harry.

That was soon settled: and Nugent cut back across the cornfield to collect the fat Owl, who was still resting weary fat limbs on the stile. And the gladdest member of the party to camp in the barn was William George Bunter. It was only a quarter of a mile further on to Hooting; but a quarter of a furlong was enough for Billy Bunter.

CHAPTER 11 BUNTER KNOWS HOW

‘SEVEN!’ said Bob Cherry.

‘Six!’ suggested Johnny Bull.

‘I say, you fellows—’

‘Let’s leave it to Bunter!’ grinned Bob. ‘Six or seven, Bunter?’

It was a cheery party camping in the barn. Through the wide doorway, left wide open, the sunset glowed in. Supper had been plentiful. The hospitable farmer, whom the incident of ‘Bobby’ seemed to have changed from a lion into a lamb, had insisted upon supplying milk, eggs, butter, cream, ham, preserves, and other good things: it really seemed that, little as he liked hikers in general, he could not do too much for this party of hikers in particular. Having supped, the hikers were discussing the morrow’s march before turning in. Billy Bunter, having supped not wisely but too well, was seated on a sack of straw, leaning back against the wall of the barn, breathing rather hard after his exertions. He did not look as if he approved of either six or seven o’clock for the start in the morning!

‘What about ten?’ asked Bunter.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘What are you cackling at, I’d like to know?’ demanded the fat Owl.

‘Your little joke, old fat man,’ said Bob.

‘I’m not joking—!’

‘You are!’ assured Bob. ‘Six or seven, old porpoise! Take your choice.’

‘Now, look here, you fellows,’ he said. ‘If you think I’m going to turn out at six or seven in the morning and tramp, you’re jolly well mistaken, see? I’ll make it nine if you like! There!’

‘We don’t like!’ said Harry Wharton, mildly.

‘The earliness to bed and the earliness to rise, are the way to make the cracked pitcher go longest to the well, as the English proverb remarks, my esteemed fat Bunter,’ said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘We’d better have this clear,’ snorted Bunter. ‘I’m not turning out before nine. I shan’t open my eyes before nine. That’s that.’

‘Then we’d better say good-bye over-night, as you won’t be awake when we start in the morning,’ remarked Vernon-Smith.

Six hikers chuckled. The fattest hiker in the party did not chuckle. He fixed his eyes and spectacles on the Bounder with a devastating blink.

‘That’s what I get, after turning down a crowd of invitations for the “hols”, to join up with you, Smithy!’ he said, with withering scorn. ‘I wish now I’d accepted Mauly’s pressing invitation to Mauleverer Towers. He begged me almost with tears in his eyes. He didn’t say he’d boot me if he saw me in the “hols”, or anything like it. If he did, it was only his little joke. Besides, he didn’t! I don’t expect much in the way of manners from you. Smithy, but after asking a fellow for the “hols”—’

‘Time we turned in,’ yawned Smithy.

‘I’m speaking!’ hooted Bunter.

‘You generally are!’ agreed Smithy. ‘Carry on, if you like—I’m going to turn in.’

‘Beast!’

‘Roll into the straw, and go to sleep, old fat man!’ said Bob. ‘I’ll call you at seven.’

‘I’ve told you I’m not starting before nine, Bob Cherry. I shall be fast asleep at seven.’

‘That’s all right—we’ll roll you along, and you can wake up when you like.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Billy Bunter disdained to reply to that. Neither did he roll into the straw and go to sleep, as Bob advised. Six other hikers turned in, and, tired from the day's march, were soon deep in healthy slumber. But Billy Bunter, who really might have been expected to be the first to seek the embrace of Morpheus, remained where he was, a furrow of thought in his plump brow, and a sly gleam in his little round eyes behind his big spectacles.

Bunter was thinking! Thinking was not Bunter's long suit: but the case was urgent. With no rival attraction for the 'hols', Bunter was going to hike with Smithy and the Famous Five: but he was going to keep his exertions down to the lowest possible minimum. Certainly he was not going to start at seven in the morning, if he could help it. And he rather thought that he could help it.

Quite unaware that Bunter's lazy comfort was the most important consideration in the wide universe, the hikers were going to start at seven. Smithy—after asking him for the 'hols', too!—was prepared to leave him asleep in the barn. Bob Cherry was ready to roll him out if necessary. Neither prospect appealed to Bunter. He did not want to be left asleep in the barn while the hiking party pushed on to parts unknown: and he did not want to be rolled like a barrel. But suppose something happened to delay the start, while the lazy fat Owl had his sleep out!

Bunter was obtuse: but like many obtuse persons, he had a vein of slyness in him. The grin that overspread his fat face showed that his deep thinking had produced results. The sun sank deeper in the glowing west: dusk spread over the meadows and cornfields. It was growing very dim in the barn. Bunter stirred at last.

'I say, you fellows!' he whispered.

Only the regular breathing of six sleepers replied.

'I say, you fellows!' said Bunter, more loudly.

Still no reply! Half-a-dozen hikers were deep in slumber.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter.

He rose from the sack of straw. He blinked round him very cautiously. It was dark in the barn now: he could barely discern his way about. Outside, the shades of night were falling fast. But that suited the surreptitious fat Owl. He did not want to be detected, if an eye opened.

With great caution, he crept towards the rucksacks packed by the wall. With one fat paw he picked up Harry Wharton's: with the other, Johnny Bull's. They were half-unpacked, and not too heavy even for the lazy fat Owl. Grinning, Billy Bunter tiptoed out of the barn, with a rucksack in either fat paw.

'He, he, he!' he chuckled again, outside under the shadowy sky. It was a fine summer's night, but growing darker and darker. Stars gleamed like diamonds in a sky of dark blue velvet. There was enough light for the fat junior to make his way round to the back of the barn.

Behind the barn was a stack of straw, stacked there till wanted. The grinning fat Owl reached it, and shoved the two rucksacks deep into it, carefully covering them from sight with straw.

'He, he, he!' gurgled Bunter.

Billy Bunter could not help feeling that this was really a master-stroke of strategy. In the morning, when the hikers turned out, two rucksacks would be missing; What had become of them would be a mystery: but obviously, the hikers could not march without them.

There would be a search for the missing rucksacks: and the hikers could search as long as

they liked: that was all right, so long as they did not disturb Bunter! The morning's march was not going to begin at seven! Indeed, probably it would not even begin at nine! About ten, or perhaps eleven, Billy Bunter would lend aid in the search, and discover those rucksacks! Certainly they were not going to be discovered till it suited Bunter.

Satisfied that that master-stroke of strategy could not fail, Billy Bunter crept back round the barn. It was very dark now, and he had to grope his way by the wall. He reached the wide-open doorway, and blinked in. Within, all was black as a hat. He listened: and a faint sound of regular breathing reached his fat ears. He suppressed a chuckle. Those silly asses were still fast asleep, as he had left them. He rolled in.

Bump!

'Oh!'

'Strike me pink!'

Billy Bunter jumped, almost clear of the brick floor.

The hikers were asleep: but if one of them had been awake, he would not have been moving about in the dark: he would have turned on a torch. Who—what—was the dim, scarcely seen figure into which Bunter had suddenly bumped as he rolled into the barn? It was not one of the hikers. Who—what———?

Bunter had no time to think. He caught a glitter of startled eyes in the gloom: then a fierce grasp was laid on him, and he whirled in it. Somebody—certainly not one of the hikers—had grasped him, and in that grasp he sagged like a sack, scared almost out of his fat wits.

'Yaroo! Leggo! I say, you fellows, help!' yelled Bunter, frantically, and, hardly knowing what he was doing, he kicked out at the unseen grasper.



THAT FIGURE WAS MAKING FOR THE DOOR

That kick landed on a shin, and it seemed to have hurt, for a loud howl responded. 'Ooooh! Strike me pink! Wooh!' echoed through the barn. The next moment Bunter was flung over, and he rolled on the floor, roaring.

Voices mingled with his roar. All the hikers were wide awake.

'Who's that?'

'What's the row?'

'Is that Bunter—?'

'What the thump—?'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

Bob Cherry was the first to leap up. He flashed on the light of an electric torch. The bright light streamed through the gloom. It revealed Billy Bunter, rolling on his back on the bricks, yelling at the top of his voice—and a dusty figure with an unshaven chin, a bulbous red nose, with a battered bowler hat on an untidy head. That figure was making for the door—and the next moment it had hurtled through the doorway and vanished into the night.

CHAPTER 12 NO LUCK!

'HELP!' yelled Bunter.

'That tramp—!' exclaimed Bob.

'I say, you fellows, help—'

'Shut up, Bunter!'

'Beast! Keep him off!' roared Bunter.

'You fat ass, he's gone!' roared Bob.

'Oh!' Billy Bunter sat up, jammed his spectacles straight on his fat little nose, and blinked round him. 'I say, are you sure he's gone? I say, he collared me in the dark—I—I say—I ran into him, and he collared me—oh, lor!'

'The gonefulness is terrific, esteemed fat Bunter.'

'That tramp at the Dragon!' said Harry Wharton. 'I saw him in the light—'

'So did I,' grunted Johnny Bull. 'Still got your wallet, Smithy?'

'Oh!' exclaimed the Bounder, startled.

All the hikers had seen, and recognized, the dusty man, as he escaped. It was the tramp in the battered bowler, whose greedy eyes had seen the Bounder's bulging wallet at the Dragon. Evidently he had followed the party, though they had not seen him 'tailing' them, and never given him a thought. His object was not difficult to guess. But for Billy Bunter, it was only too probable that thievish hands would have been going through the hikers' belongings, and that Herbert Vernon-Smith's over-plentiful supply of cash would have been missing in the morning. The Bounder whistled.

'All serene,' he said. 'My wallet's safe enough. I suppose that frowsy specimen was after it.'

'No supposing about it!' said Johnny Bull. 'Better not put it on view at inns, after this, if you ask me.'

'I don't remember asking you.'

'Look here—!'

'Well, he never got it,' said Harry Wharton, hastily interrupting. 'Might have, if Bunter

hadn't been up. But what on earth was Bunter up for?'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I—I wasn't up, you know—' Bunter's cue had been strategic silence: nobody was to know that he had been up in the night. That 'sudden and unexpected alarm had quite upset his strategy. In the grasp of the tramp, Bunter had concentrated on yelling, and forgotten everything else. Now he remembered! 'I—I wasn't exactly up—I—I—I——'

'You said you ran into him and he collared you—'

'Oh! Did I? I—I—I mean, I—I—I haven't been out of the barn, you know,' stammered Bunter. 'I—I never went out! Why should I?'

'What is that fat chump fibbing for now?' asked Bob Cherry, in wonder. That Bunter had been up, and that he had been out of the barn, was clear. Why he was fibbing about it was not clear.

'Oh, really, Cherry! I tell you I never went out—I—I mean, I—I only went out to—to look at the moon—'

'Oh, my hat! Did you see it?'

'Of course I did,' yapped Bunter.

'Jolly odd, as there doesn't happen to be a moon to-night.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I—I mean the—the stars! It's such a lovely night, I thought I'd stroll out and look at the moon—I mean the stars—I never went round the barn, you know—'

'Why did you go round the barn?'

'Haven't I just said that I didn't—?'

'Yes: that means that you did.'

'Beast!'

'I suppose Bunter can't help telling crammers,' said Bob, thoughtfully. 'But why he's telling them now is a giddy mystery. Force of habit, I suppose.'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'Well, it's lucky he was up, as it turns out,' said Harry Wharton. 'That tramp would have gone through a good many pockets. We'd better keep the door shut, after this—we don't want any more visitors.'

The barn door was closed, and Bob Cherry drove a bolt home.

'That will put paid to Dusty, if he's still around,' he remarked. And all having been made secure, the hikers went back to bed. Why Billy Bunter had been up, remained a mystery: but nobody was specially interested, and all were sleepy.

In a few minutes, slumber reigned again: and this time Billy Bunter was among the slumberers: a fact attested by a deep snore, which was wont to wake the echoes in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars, and now awakened them in the farmer's barn.

Billy Bunter slept soundly. If eating came first in his list of the joys of existence, sleeping came a good second: it was a thing that Bunter could do really well. He slept and snored through the summer night, and was still sleeping and snoring when dawn brightened the cornfields, and the hikers turned out, and the door was thrown open, to let in the sunshine and the morning breeze. It seemed to Bunter that he had only just closed his eyes, when a foot jamming into fat ribs awakened him.

'Oooogh!' gurgled Bunter. 'Lemme alone, you beast.'

'Wake up!' roared Bob Cherry.

'Beast! Tain't rising-bell—'

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Oh!’ Bunter sat up and blinked. He realized that he was not in the dormitory at Greyfriars. ‘I say, what’s the time?’

‘Quarter to seven.’

‘I told you I wasn’t going to start till nine!’ howled Bunter. ‘I ain’t going to get up, so yah!’

‘Don’t be an ass, Bunter,’ said Harry Wharton. ‘Turn out—just time for brekker before we start.’

‘You haven’t packed yet.’

‘That won’t take long.’

‘Won’t it?’ jeered Bunter. ‘Perhaps it will take longer than you think. You leave me alone till you’ve packed your rucksacks.’

And Bunter settled down again, with a sleepy grin on a fat face. Packing the rucksacks was certainly likely to take longer than the hikers expected, as two of them were hidden under the stack of straw at the back of the barn!

But alas for Bunter and his strategy! Even as he settled back on soft straw, a burly figure appeared in the open doorway of the barn, and the farmer’s ruddy face looked in. To the astonishment of the hikers, he had a rucksack in either hand!

‘Morning, young gentlemen!’ he said, cordially.

‘Good-morning, sir!’ chorused the hikers.

‘These belong to you, I take it?’ said the farmer, holding up the rucksacks. ‘My man George ran his pitchfork into one of them, shifting the straw. How you come to leave them in the straw outside I dunno: but there they were. George found them, pitch-forking the straw. Here they are!’

‘Oh, my hat!’ gasped Bob.

‘How the dickens—?’ exclaimed Nugent.

‘The howfulness is terrific.’

The farmer deposited the rucksacks, gave the hikers a cheery nod, and departed. The hikers stared at the rucksacks, and stared at one another. From a fat Owl settling down in straw came a startled ejaculation: ‘Oh, crikey!’

Bunter blinked at those rucksacks. They had been well and truly hidden, in the stack of straw behind the barn. It had not occurred to the fat Owl’s fat brain that a stack of straw behind a barn was not a permanent institution, but might be shifted at any moment.

Evidently, ‘George’ had shifted it, revealing the hidden rucksacks.

For a long moment, the Greyfriars hikers were quite amazed. Then came an emphatic snort from Johnny Bull.

‘Bunter, of course—!’

‘Bunter!’ repeated Nugent.

‘That’s why he was up in the night!’ snorted Johnny.

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Harry Wharton. ‘Bunter, you fat villain—’

‘Bunter, you blethering bloater—’

‘Bunter, you preposterous porpoise—’

‘I—I—I say, you fellows, it wasn’t me!’ gasped Bunter, in alarm. ‘I never hid those rucksacks under the straw—never thought of it—I—I say, perhaps that tramp put them there—’

‘You fat fraud!’ roared Bob Cherry. ‘So that was a dodge to keep us hanging about while

you snored it out, was it? Boot him!’

‘Yarooooh!’ roared Bunter. ‘I say, you fellows, I keep on telling you that I didn’t—wasn’t never—whooop! It— it must have been that tramp—I—I—I saw him—I saw him hiding those rucksacks under the straw—yarooooh!’

Billy Bunter had banked on a prolonged snooze till nine at least. But there was no more sleep for Bunter.

Half-a-dozen boots, planted on the fat Owl, rolled him out. Like Macbeth, they murdered sleep! A quite active Bunter scrambled and hopped and dodged. And when, soon after seven, the hikers marched, an infuriated fat Owl marched too.

CHAPTER 13 CARDEW IS HOSPITABLE

‘THAT ass!’ grunted Johnny Bull.

It was evening.

A glorious summer’s day was drawing to a close. The western sky was flamed in a gorgeous sunset. The woods and meadows of Sussex were attractive to the eye. If the Greyfriars hikers wanted charming scenery, they had it. But at the moment, they were feeling rather as if they had ‘had it’ in another sense. For once, Billy Bunter was not the only member of the party who wanted a rest. They had been following a deep lane for quite a long time. It was a dusty lane. An occasional car, and an occasional farm-cart, churned up the dust. They were almost as dusty as the man in the battered bowler had been. Bunter’s fat face streamed with perspiration, mingled with dust. He puffed and blew as he rolled. The other fellows did not puff and blow: but they had had enough, and were looking rather anxiously for a suitable spot to camp. But that deep Sussex lane seemed to have no end: and it was bordered on either side by hedges and fences. So they hiked on hopefully.

Bunter, lagging in the rear as usual, did not hear a bicycle coming on behind. He was unaware of a cyclist, till a loud, sudden, startling ring on a bell, just behind him, made him jump. He jumped, and spluttered, and a bicycle whizzed past him.

The other fellows had to jump, too. They were rather spread out in the lane, and they jumped to one side or the other quite quickly. Some of them cast expressive looks at the cyclist, as he whizzed through their ranks.

He glanced at them, as he whizzed, and a sarcastic grin came over his handsome face under the Panama hat. Apparently their dusty aspect amused him. He was himself as spick and span as a new pin. He was gone the next moment, but they had all recognized him as he flew past. It was the St. Jim’s junior they had seen at Greengates a few days before—Cardew, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim’s. Whether he also recognized them, as Greyfriars fellows with whom he had played cricket, was hard to say. Only that fleeting sarcastic grin testified that he had noticed their existence at all.

‘That ass!’ repeated Johnny Bull. And the look he cast after the disappearing cyclist was reminiscent of a ‘tyke’ of his native county.

Vernon-Smith knitted his brows.

‘That swanking ass!’ he said. ‘I’d like to punch his head.’

‘Do him good!’ agreed Bob Cherry.

Even the good-natured and tolerant Bob had been a little irritated by that sarcastic grin.

‘Beast!’ mumbled Bunter.

‘Come on!’ said Harry. The tired and dusty hikers marched on, scanning the lane on either side for a spot for camping.

‘I say, you fellows!’ came an expiring squeak from the rear.

‘Buck up, Bunter!’ called back Bob, encouragingly.

‘I say, when are we going to camp?’ moaned Bunter.

‘As soon as we find a spot,’ answered Harry.

‘Can’t camp in the middle of a lane, old fat man,’ said Nugent.

‘I’m tired!’ hooted Bunter.

‘What a coincidence!’ exclaimed Bob. ‘So am I!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Snort, from Bunter. Everybody was a little tired. Hikers have to take the rough with the smooth: and at the moment Harry Wharton and Co. were getting a little of the rough. But Billy Bunter was not deeply concerned about the rest of the party. It was the fatigue of his own little fat legs that worried Bunter.

‘Is this dashed lane ever going to end?’ sighed Nugent.

‘It is a long lane that has no turntable, as the English proverb remarks,’ observed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘I say, you fellows—!’

‘Save your breath for walking, old fat man,’ said Bob.

‘I’m tired!’ howled Bunter.

‘We’ve heard that one.’

‘Beast!’ moaned Bunter.

Bunter, really, had the least to grouse about. His load was the lightest in the party. Bob’s was the weightiest. That wonderful tent, which he had described in No. 1 Study at Greyfriars, had turned out, after all, not to weigh less than nothing, or even next to nothing! Certainly it folded up into a really remarkably small compass: certainly it weighed remarkably little—for a tent. But towards the end of a day’s march, the Law of Gravitation, so ably expounded by Sir Isaac Newton, seemed to tell on Bob’s back. Nevertheless, nobody ever heard a whisper of grouching from Bob. Billy Bunter, however, supplied enough for the whole party. Mumbles and grumbles from the fat Owl lagging in the rear accompanied the hikers, like the ‘unending melody’ in Wagnerian music, though considerably less musical.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’ exclaimed Bob, suddenly. ‘There’s a gate, and somebody sitting on it! Might get a tip from him about a camp, what?’

It was a break, at last, in a long high fence. There was a wooden gate, beyond which they had a glimpse of a garden bright with flowers, a summer-house shaded by leafy beeches, and a fountain that leaped and sparkled in the setting sun. It was such a spot as might have delighted the eyes of any hiker looking for a camping-ground—a delectable spot of which a hiker might dream. But it was evidently a private garden, belonging to some mansion out of sight beyond the tall beeches, extremely unlikely to be available for camping. The hikers’ hopes did not rise to that extent. Bob’s idea was to get a ‘tip’ about a possible camping-ground, from the fellow sitting on the gate, if he was a native of the locality.

‘Might ask him,’ agreed Harry Wharton. ‘Come on, Bunter.’

The march had been slowing down. Now it accelerated. Even Billy Bunter accelerated a little. They swung onward up the dusty lane. The fellow sitting on the gate had his face turned from them: but as they drew nearer, something familiar about him occurred to them. They were quite near, when he glanced round in their direction, and they recognized Cardew of St. Jim’s. A bicycle leaned on the gate on which he sat.

Johnny Bull gave a grunt.

‘Keep on!’ he said. ‘That’s Cardew.’

‘Rot!’ said Bob, cheerily. ‘We can speak to him, I suppose. Looks as if he lives there, and if he knows this locality, he can tip us where to look for a camp.’

‘Swanking ass!’ muttered Vernon-Smith.

Bob grinned. The Bounder himself was not exactly minus ‘swank’.

‘That’s all right,’ said Bob. ‘He can swank his head off, so long as he tips us where to find a camp. Isn’t anybody tired?’

‘Sort of!’ sighed Frank Nugent.

‘Oh, lor’! My legs are dropping off!’ moaned Bunter. ‘I say, you fellows, if that chap Cardew lives there, let’s ask him to let us camp there.’

‘Shut up, Bunter! You speak to the fellow, Bob, if you want to—I’m not going to,’ said Johnny Bull.

‘Leave it to me, then,’ said Bob, and he marched ahead, Cardew eyeing him as he came up, with a glimmer in his eyes, and a hint of the sarcastic grin that had already caused irritation.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’ greeted Bob.

Cardew raised his eyebrows slightly. It was possible that he did not recognize the dusty hiker as a fellow he had seen in flannels when St. Jim’s met Greyfriars on the cricket ground. At any rate he did not seem to. He gave him only a look of faintly mocking inquiry.

‘We’re looking for a camp,’ went on Bob. ‘If you live hereabouts, Cardew, I expect you could put us on to a spot?’

‘You seem to know my name,’ said Cardew.

‘Eh! Of course I do,’ answered Bob, puzzled. Honest, unsuspecting Bob had little understanding of a supercilious, mocking nature like that of Ralph Reckness Cardew of the St. Jim’s Fourth.

‘Do I know you?’ asked Cardew, blandly.

‘Oh! Don’t you?’ asked Bob, rather warmly. ‘It’s not many weeks since you were playing cricket at my school, Cardew.’

‘And since Inky here bowled you for a duck!’ growled Johnny Bull. ‘Perhaps you remember that, Cardew.’

‘My esteemed Johnny—!’ murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘Shut up, old chap,’ whispered Nugent.

‘Oh, come on,’ said Johnny. ‘What are we stopping for?’

Cardew’s cool, supercilious face changed its expression, for a moment. All the hikers could see that he did remember the incident to which Johnny Bull alluded—and did not remember it pleasantly. To them, it was rather an amusing recollection. On that occasion, Cardew had gone to his wicket with the air of monarch of all he surveyed: only to see his

bails scattered by a deadly ball from the Nabob of Bhanipur, and to retire ingloriously for a duck's egg. But if that recollection amused Harry Wharton and Co., very plainly it did not amuse Cardew.

For a moment, his look was quite unpleasant. But it was only for a moment. Then he smiled.

'I remember,' he said, gracefully. 'Did you say you were looking for a camp? Hiking, what?'

'That's it,' said Bob, placated at once by Cardew's change of manner. 'Know the country about these parts?'

'Like a book,' answered Cardew.

'Then perhaps you could tell us where to hit a likely spot for a camp?'

'I say, you fellows—'

'Shut up, Bunter!'

'Shan't!' hooted Bunter. 'If that's Cardew's place, why not—yaroooooh!' Billy Bunter wound up with a howl, as his foot was trodden on—hard! Whether it was Cardew's place or not, nobody but Bunter felt like asking favours of him.

But though Bunter's remark remained, like Schubert's celebrated symphony, unfinished, Cardew caught its drift. He smiled again—quite a pleasant smile—and gave a nod.

'No need to look further,' he said. He waved his hand towards the attractive garden inside the gateway. 'Like to camp here?'

'Could we?' said Bob, doubtfully.

'Why not?' said Cardew. 'I'll speak to my uncle. I'm having the "hols" with my uncle,' he added, by way of explanation. 'I'd be jolly glad if you'd camp here, if you feel like it: and you can rely on it that my uncle won't mind. He's quite a jolly old boy.'

The hikers exchanged glances. Their impression of Cardew of St. Jim's had not been favourable. Smithy, in fact, had been considering whether to tip him off the gate! But this hospitable offer quite changed that impression. They were tired, they were dusty, they longed for camp: and that enticing garden was the most delectable spot they could have wished for. And if Cardew's uncle was a 'jolly old boy' who wouldn't mind, there was no reason at all for not jumping at the St. Jim's fellow's offer.

'Well, that's jolly good of you, Cardew,' said Nugent.

'Not at all.'

'Sure your uncle won't mind?' asked Harry.

'Absolutely certain.'

'Then we'll jolly well camp, and jolly glad to,' said Bob: and even Johnny Bull contrived to grin amicably.

'The gladfulness will be terrific,' remarked Hurree Janset Ram Singh, with a nod of his dusky head.

'Done, then!' said Cardew. He slipped from the gate, and put a hand to his bicycle.

'Make yourselves at home. I'll mention it to my uncle, of course, as soon as I see him. Cheerio!'

'Cheerio—and many thanks!'

Cardew put an elegant leg over his machine, and rode on. He waved a hand as he went, and the hikers, quite amicable now, waved back. Then the St. Jim's junior disappeared, at his usual reckless speed.

‘Gentlemen, chaps, and fatheads,’ said Bob Cherry. ‘An hour ago I was feeling like punching that chap’s head— now I feel more like kissing him on his baby brow!’ Harry Wharton laughed.

‘Just as well you never punched his head—he wouldn’t have asked us to camp on his uncle’s estate, if you had! By gum, this is a jolly spot for a camp. We can sleep in the summer-house instead of rigging ‘up the tent.’

‘And water laid on, all ready!’ said Bob, with a gesture towards the dancing fountain. ‘Couldn’t be better,’ said Nugent.

‘The betterfulness could not be more terrific,’ agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. ‘This is an esteemed and execrable boonful blessing.’

Bob Cherry swung the gate open.

‘March in!’ he said.

And they marched in, and the gate swung shut behind them. And Billy Bunter made a direct line for the summerhouse, where he plumped down to rest his weary fat limbs, and to watch the other fellows unpack for camping.

CHAPTER 14

EXIT DUSTY!

‘Dusty’ ejaculated Bob Cherry.

“What—?”

‘Look!’ Bob nodded towards the gate.

It was quite a happy party camping in that attractive garden. The sun was sinking over the Sussex downs, in a blaze of purple and gold. A balmy breeze stirred the foliage of the beeches. The fountain danced and bubbled. Supper was over: and the whole party had enjoyed supper almost as much as the fattest member. Now they were taking their ease, pleasantly tired after the day’s march, luxuriating in a well-earned ‘laze’. Even Billy Bunter’s fat face was contented. Bunter had found a deck-chair in the summer-house: and now his plump limbs were stretched in it. Other fellows sat in the grass, or on the baggage. Bob Cherry, with long legs stretched in green grass, rested his shoulders on his rucksack. Everyone was feeling happy and comfortable, and undoubtedly glad that they had fallen in with that St. Jim’s junior, and obtained leave to camp in that delightful spot. Somewhere beyond the beeches was the mansion to which it belonged, and of which they had had a glimpse of red chimney-pots. But they had seen nothing of the inhabitants, so far. They had half expected Cardew’s uncle to give them the once-over: but nobody had come along. Once or twice a car passed in the dusty lane outside the gate, several times a bicycle whizzed by, and occasionally a pedestrian passed. It was a pedestrian who stopped and looked over the gate, who drew Bob Cherry’s attention, and evoked his ejaculation.

‘Know that johnny?’ grinned Bob.

They all knew that ‘johnny’ at once, as soon as they looked at him. They knew the red bulbous nose, the shifty eyes, the unshaven chin, and the battered bowler hat on the untidy head. It was the gentleman of the road whom Bob had named ‘Dusty’.

The man leaned on the top bar of the gate, and stared over it, with a surly stare.

Obviously he was interested in the camping hikers.

Since the nocturnal episode in the barn, the hikers had kept wary eyes open for Dusty, for

a time. But they had seen nothing more of him—till now. Their routes lay rather by byeways than by highways, and Dusty, if he had followed, had doubtless lost their track. Now, it seemed, he had found it again: for there could be little doubt that he was trailing them—it was many a long mile from the hospitable farmer's barn, yet here he was, staring at their camp over the gate. Apparently Dusty still nourished hopes of fingering the Bounder's expensive wallet.

'After us!' said Nugent.

'Not much doubt about that,' said Harry.

'The doubtfulness is not terrific,' agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

The Bounder knitted his brows.

'What about collaring him, and sticking his head in that fountain, as a tip to keep his distance?' he suggested.

'Not a bad idea!' said Johnny Bull. 'Only—we don't want a shindy here—Cardew's uncle mightn't like it.'

'Leave him to me!' said Bob.

Bob sat up, and groped in his rucksack. His hand came out with an article in it which caused the Bounder to grin, and Bunter to emit a fat chuckle, when they saw it. It was the pea-shooter that had seen service on the wall of the Head's garden at Greyfriars School, at the end of the term. Bob crammed peas into his mouth.

'Now watch!' he said.

Dusty was within easy range, and Bob was a good shot. The tramp, after staring into the garden, was turning away, when something suddenly stung his ear, and he gave quite a convulsive jump. He clapped a horny hand to his ear, and stared round blankly.

'He, he, he!' chortled Bunter, happily reminded of Quelch's performance at Greyfriars.

'Give him some more—he, he, he!'

Bob was already giving him some more. As Dusty clasped his ear and stared, peas plastered his unwashed face right and left.

'Strike me pink!' howled Dusty.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'You young limb!' Dusty glared over the gate. 'Pea-shooting a covey! My eye! If I don't limb yer—!'

He hurled open the gate and rushed in.

'All hands on deck!' chuckled Bob.

The hikers were all on their feet, at once. Only Billy Bunter remained in his deck-chair. The man in the battered bowler looked quite ferocious: and Bunter preferred the role of a 'looker-on in Vienna'. But Bunter's aid was not needed. Six hikers met the tramp halfway as he rushed in: and the next moment Dusty was probably sorry that he had rushed. Six pairs of hands were altogether too many for Dusty.

All those hands grasped Dusty, wherever they could get a hold. In fact, there was hardly enough of Dusty to go round. Wriggling and struggling, his battered bowler falling off, the tramp was rushed back to the gate, with arms and legs wildly flying.



The gate had swung shut. But nobody troubled to reopen it.

‘Heave ahead, my hearties,’ gasped Bob.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Dusty was not a light-weight. But six sturdy hikers were more than equal to the heave. Dusty went over the gate whirling, and landed in the lane with a terrific bump.

He roared as he landed.

‘Oh! Oooogh! Strike me pink and blue! Woooogh!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Dusty sat up in a cloud of dust. He glared at six faces lining the gate, grinning at him cheerfully.

‘Come in and have some more!’ said Bob, invitingly.

‘Do!’ chuckled Nugent.

‘Lots more if you want it!’ grinned Johnny Bull.

‘The lotfulness is terrific!’ chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Dusty gasped for breath. He did not seem disposed to accept the invitation to come in again. He scrambled to his feet at last, dustier than ever. But he did not approach the gate.

‘Give a bloke his ’at!’ he gasped.

Bob picked up the battered bowler.

‘Catch!’ he called out.

Dusty caught it with his bulbous nose. He grabbed the bowler with one hand, and his nose with the other. The glare he bestowed on the hikers rivalled that of the fabled basilisk.

‘Anything more we can do for you?’ asked Bob, politely. ‘I’ve got some more peas, if you’ll wait a tick—’

Dusty, apparently, did not want any more peas. He shook a gnarled fist at six grinning faces, and departed, disappearing down the lane at quite a good pace.

‘I say, you fellows,’ squeaked Billy Bunter, as the hikers, after that exciting interlude, resumed their laze in the soft grass. ‘I say, one of us had better keep watch to-night. That tramp may come back, and I don’t want him going through my pockets.’

‘Why not?’ asked Bob.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Oh, really, Cherry—!’

‘All the same, it’s a good idea,’ said Bob. ‘Dusty wouldn’t get rich quick by going through Bunter’s pockets, but Smithy’s—’

‘The esteemed Smithy’s wallet is a boot on the other leg,’ remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘Exactly!’ assented Bob. ‘One of us had better sit up and keep watch—’

‘Rot!’ yawned Johnny Bull.

‘I should jolly well think so!’ said Bunter, warmly.

‘—and as it’s Bunter’s idea, he’s the man!’ continued Bob. ‘Mind you don’t go to sleep, Bunter. Don’t close an eye till morning.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ yelled the hikers, quite entertained by the expression on Billy Bunter’s fat face.

‘You—you silly idiot!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I don’t mean me —’

‘I do!’ said Bob.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Beast!’

Bunter, evidently, was not looking for a job as night-watchman! Neither, in fact, was any other member of the party. They were going to sleep—or, at all events, that was the programme. But the happenings of that golden summer evening were not yet over.

CHAPTER 15 QUICK MARCH!

‘JENKINS!’

‘Sir!’

‘Take care with that hose, Jenkins.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You have sprayed my foot, Jenkins.’

‘Have I, sir? Sorry, sir.’

‘That will not dry my shoe, Jenkins. You are clumsy. Jenkins.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You are a fool, Jenkins.’

‘Very good, sir!’

Snort!

That interesting colloquy reached the ears of the Greyfriars hikers, borne on the balmy evening breeze.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’ murmured Bob Cherry. ‘Somebody’s coming.’

‘Cardew’s uncle, I expect,’ said Nugent.

‘Doesn’t sound such a jolly old boy as Cardew described!’ remarked Vernon-Smith.

‘Sounds a bit of a Tartar.’

All the hikers sat up and looked round. Billy Bunter blinked round the deck-chair through

his big spectacles.

So far, the hikers had seen nothing and heard nothing of the proprietor of that pleasant garden. Now they both saw and heard something. Two figures emerged into view from a path under the thick beeches. One was a gentleman with a circumference that rivalled Billy Bunter's, and a bald head, which, as he was hatless, as seen to great advantage, shining in the setting sun. The other, clearly, was a gardener: trundling a long garden hose, from the nozzle of which water dripped. By accident, no doubt, or possibly not by accident, Jenkins had allowed a spray of water to escape: hence the remarks of the plump gentleman: who certainly looked, as he sounded, a 'bit of a Tartar': not in the least a 'jolly old boy'.

Obviously, he was the proprietor of the place, and the hikers could only conclude that he was the uncle Cardew had mentioned.

His snapping voice, his snort, and the frown on his podgy brow, were not reassuring, and they could not help wondering a little uneasily whether Cardew had over-rated his uncle's hospitality. On his looks, they certainly would not have thought of asking leave to camp in his garden. Still, it did not occur to them to doubt that Cardew had made matters right for them.

They rose to their feet, looking towards the two new arrivals, prepared to turn on their best manners and politest smiles. But for the moment, the bald gentleman did not observe them. He was giving Jenkins directions. The garden, apparently, was to be watered at sunset, the hose handled by Jenkins under the superintendence of his master.

'Take care, Jenkins.'

'Yes, sir.'

'If you spray my foot with that hose again, Jenkins, I shall discharge you.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You are a blockhead, Jenkins.'

'Very good, sir.'

The hikers could not help smiling. If that was the bald gentleman's usual mode of address to his gardener, they thought it not surprising that Jenkins had accidentally sprayed him with the hose.

'Don't swamp the flower-beds, Jenkins.'

'No, sir.'

'Have a little sense, Jenkins.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And now—' The bald gentleman broke off, suddenly, as his eyes fell on the group of hikers.

He stared at them. His eyes seemed to pop at them. He stared at them in such amazement, as if he could hardly credit his vision. Evidently they were a surprise to him. For some moments he seemed unable to speak. Then he uttered, in a gasping voice:

'Tramps!'

Jenkins, ceasing to spray the flower-beds, stared round. He too seemed surprised at the sight of the hikers.

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'Something's wrong, you fellows. If that's Cardew's uncle, the silly ass must have forgotten to tell him we're here.'

'Looks like it,' muttered Harry Wharton.

'The lookfulness is terrific.'

‘Tramps!’ This time the bald gentleman did not gasp he roared, ‘Tramps! Tramps in my garden!’

Really, the Greyfriars party did not look like tramps. They had arrived at that pleasant camp dusty from the road: but they had dusted their garments, and brushed their shoes, and washed in the fountain: and really they looked quite a nice party. Evidently, however, they did not impress that podgy gentleman favourably. His face was almost purple with wrath, as he came stamping towards them.

‘Tramps! What are you doing here? Vagrants!’ he roared. ‘Vagabonds! Tramps! Trespassers! Good gad!’ He seemed to choke.

‘Oh, draw it mild,’ snapped the Bounder.

‘What? What?’

‘We’re not tramps or trespassers. We were given leave to camp here by your nephew,’ hooted Smithy.

‘What! What? My nephew! I have no nephew. And if I had, I would not allow tramps in my garden—’

‘What!’ gasped Harry Wharton.

The hikers stared blankly. They had, naturally, taken it for granted that this was the uncle the St. Jim’s junior had mentioned. Apparently they had taken too much for granted.

‘Look here!’ exclaimed Bob Cherry. ‘Are you the boss of this show—I mean are you the proprietor of this place?’

‘What? Certainly I am the proprietor of this place, and you are trespassing in my garden!’ bawled the plump gentleman.

‘Haven’t you a nephew named Cardew?’ gasped Johnny Bull.

‘I have never heard the name! How dare you pretend that my nephew gave you leave to camp in my garden, when I have no nephew? Jenkins!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Turn the hose on them, Jenkins! Turn the hose on these tramps immediately. Drive them off my property. Do you hear me, Jenkins? Are you deaf, Jenkins? Will you turn the hose on these tramps, Jenkins, or will you not turn the hose on these tramps?’

‘Oh! Yes, sir!’ gasped Jenkins.

‘Oh, crikey!’ gasped Billy Bunter. The fat Owl made a bound out of the deck-chair, as the hose sprayed.

‘Oh, crumbs!’ gasped Nugent.

‘Stop that!’ yelled the Bounder, quite as angry as the bald gentleman. ‘You old ass—!’

‘What? Drench them, Jenkins. Drive them out, Jenkins—if they are not gone in one minute, Jenkins, I will discharge you.’

Only too evidently, the bald gentleman was not a ‘jolly old boy’, or anything like it! Equally evidently, he was not Cardew’s uncle! It was hard for the hikers to realize that that young rascal had been pulling their leg, and had airily given them leave to camp in a place with which he had no connection whatever. But they had to realize it.

‘Oh, scissors!’ gasped Bob Cherry. He dodged a shower. ‘Stop that! We’ll go—turn off that hose, you fathead, or you’ll get hurt.’

‘Stop it!’ yelled Johnny Bull.

‘I say, you fellows, I’m wet—!’ howled Billy Bunter.

‘Will you turn that hose off?’ roared the Bounder, as drenching spray caught him under the chin.

Jenkins grinned over the hose.

‘Mr. Bunce’s orders!’ he said. ‘You better ’op it.’

Billy Bunter was already ‘hopping’ it. He was running for the gate. But the hikers had their baggage to think of. Obviously they had to go—that pleasant garden was not, after all, going to be their camping-ground for the night. But they could not ‘hop’ it without their paraphernalia.

Jenkins, grinning, sprayed them. Jenkins seemed to find it rather amusing. He was quite free with that hose. There was a howl from the bald gentleman, as well as from the hikers.

‘Take care, Jenkins! You have sprayed me, Jenkins.’

‘Oh! Sorry, sir.’

‘You are a fool, Jenkins! You are a blockhead, Jenkins. Keep the hose on those tramps, Jenkins.’

‘Yes, sir!’

The Bounder, setting his teeth, made a rush at Jenkins. Water swamped him as he rushed: but he did not heed it.

Dripping from head to foot, he reached the gardener, and grabbed the hose.

‘Back up, you men!’ shouted Bob Cherry. And he rushed after Smithy, and the rest rushed after him. The hikers were ready to go: in fact by this time they were quite eager to go, but they had to collect their belongings, and they were not going under a stream of water.

Smithy and Jenkins struggled for the hose. Water streamed from it, as they struggled, and poured equally over both of them. Jenkins was as drenched as Smithy, and—judging by his looks and his remarks—he no longer found it amusing. Then the rush of the Famous Five sent Jenkins spinning, and he sprawled on his back, releasing the hose which remained in the Bounder’s possession.

He proceeded at once to make use of it. He jerked the ‘rose’ free from the nozzle, changing the spray into a torrent. That torrent was turned on the sprawling gardener, flooding him fore and aft, so to speak. He almost swam in it.

‘Oh, my hat!’ gasped Bob. ‘That’ll do, Smithy—’

‘Rats!’ snapped Smithy. And he whirled round on Mr. Bunce, who was almost dancing with wrath.

‘Jenkins! Get up, Jenkins! Why are you sprawling there, Jenkins? Take that hose from that young ruffian immediately, Jenkins, and—gurrgrh!’ The bald gentleman broke off, with a gasp and a gurgle, as the torrent smote him. It bowled him over, and he sat down suddenly in wet grass.

‘Stop it, Smithy—’

‘Chuck it, you ass—’

Harry Wharton grasped the Bounder’s arm, and dragged it down. A flood of water over his legs was his reward.

‘Stop it, you mad ass,’ he gasped.

‘Rats! Let him have it—’

‘Stop it, I tell you! We’re trespassing here—let’s get out of it! Get the things together, you fellows. Chuck it, Smithy.’

‘Jenkins!’ The bald gentleman sat in a swamp, and roared. ‘Jenkins! Run to the house, Jenkins, and phone the police-station! Do you hear me, Jenkins? Are you deaf, Jenkins?’

Will you run to the house and phone the police, Jenkins, or will you not run to the house and phone the police, Jenkins?’

‘Urrrrgh!’ was the only reply from the half-drowned gardener. But he scrambled up, and disappeared at a run through the beeches.

‘For goodness sake, let’s get out!’ gasped Frank Nugent.

‘Hurry up!’

‘Hurry up terrifically!’

Smithy, at last, threw down the hose, leaving it to stream. Jenkins was gone—the bald gentleman, sitting and spluttering in a swamp, was hors de combat: the hikers had a respite. They did not lose a moment of it. Goods and chattels were packed together anyhow, and they marched—a quick march! The gate of that pleasant garden banged shut after them.

‘Oh, crumbs!’ gasped Bob Cherry, mopping a streaming face. ‘What a life!’

‘I say, you fellows—’

‘By gum, if we meet that cad Cardew again—!’ said Vernon-Smith, between his teeth.

‘Pulling our leg all the time!’ said Nugent. ‘Rotten trick—’

‘The rottenfulness was terrific.’

‘I say, you fellows, I’m wet—’

‘Are we dry?’ hooted Johnny Bull.

‘Oh, really, Bull—’

‘Quick march!’ said Harry Wharton. ‘The sooner we cover a few miles the better.’

There was no doubt about that. The hikers, quite innocently and unintentionally, had been trespassing. Obviously, it was their cue to put the widest possible distance, in the shortest possible time, between themselves and Mr. Bunce. Only from Billy Bunter came a howl of protest.

‘I say, you fellows, we can’t go further to-night,’ bowled Bunter.

‘Why can’t we, fathead?’

‘I’m tired.’

‘What?’

‘Tired!’

‘Kick him!’

‘Yaroooh!’

The hikers marched—at the double. They left a wet trail in the dust as they marched. Billy Bunter’s little fat legs twinkled as he trotted to keep pace. And not until sunset had given place to dark, and two or three miles of winding lanes lay behind them, was the fat Owl allowed to sink upon a grassy bank, and repose those little fat legs.

CHAPTER 16 BRIEF ENCOUNTER

‘I’LL go!’ said Billy Bunter, unexpectedly

‘You!’ ejaculated Bob Cherry.

‘Yes, me! Don’t I do all the work?’ inquired Bunter, sarcastically.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

It was several days later. The Greyfriars hikers had crossed the county border into Hampshire. It was yet early in the afternoon when they left a dusty high road, thickly

populated by cars, to follow a leafy lane which led, according to Wharton's map, to the village of Hedges. Shady branches were very welcome: the 'open road' had its drawbacks, under the blaze of an August sun. They halted where a rustic bridge spanned a rippling stream: firstly to admire the scenery, secondly because it was an ideal spot for a camp. It was an early hour for camping: though no hour could have been too early for the fattest member of the party. But a hike was a leisurely affair: it was a quite solitary spot, the surroundings were charming, and, as Bob had remarked in Mr. Bunce's garden, way back in Sussex, there was water laid on! So, sitting in a cheery row on the wooden parapet of the rustic bridge, they decided on camping, much to the satisfaction of William George Bunter.

But there was one snag. Supplies had run out, to be renewed at Hedges. A roadside lunch had finished the last of the provisions in the rucksacks. If they camped at that pleasant shady spot, someone had to go on to the village for supplies, and return with the same, before supper accrued. For the last couple of hours, Billy Bunter had mentioned, again and again, and with increasing emphasis, that he was hungry. Glad as he was to halt, Bunter was, naturally, thinking of food. That was an item that was seldom out of his thoughts.

But his offer to go for supplies was quite unexpected. It was a good half-mile to Hedges. When they debated which fellow should go on to the village, the hikers did not even think of Bunter. Bunter was sitting down. When Bunter was sitting down, he was always extremely reluctant to resume the perpendicular. Bunter was naturally expected to sit where he was, watch the other fellows fixing up the camp, and not to stir till a meal was ready. Which, probably, Bunter would have done, but for the urge of the inner Bunter. 'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!' said the fat Owl, peevishly. 'I do jolly nearly all the work, and chance it. Didn't I wash up this morning?'

'Not till Bob kicked you,' said Harry Wharton, laughing.

'Yah! Look here, I'll cut on to the village, while you fellows are lolling about,' said Bunter. He slipped quite briskly off the parapet, while the hikers stared at him. Bunter, evidently, was in earnest. 'Better club up some money, though,' added Bunter, apparently as an afterthought. 'I told you I'd left all mine at home at Bunter Court—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, cackle,' said Bunter. 'Look here, am I going or not? You fellows can laze about while I'm gone. That will suit you. Never saw such a lazy lot.'

'You fat, footling, foozling frump—!' began Johnny Bull, in a voice resembling that of the Great Huge Bear.

'Oh, let him go,' said Bob Cherry. 'We've got to fix up the camp, and he's too thumping lazy to lend a hand. Shell out the cash, you fellows—as Bunter's left all his wads of banknotes at home.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Cash was duly shelled out, and Billy Bunter rolled across the bridge, and disappeared at quite a good pace up the leafy lane beyond. For once, the fattest and laziest member of the hiking party was quite active. Bob stared after the fat figure as it disappeared.

'Fancy Bunter taking on a job!' he remarked.

'I fancy he will stop to sample the grub, before he starts back,' grunted Johnny Bull.

'Oh! That's why, I suppose!' said Bob. 'Well, it's early for supper, and we've got the camp to fix up, and even Bunter won't take more than an hour to crawl half a mile and

back. All hands on deck.'

There was an attractive spot just off the lane, near the bridge, which was selected as a site. There the packs were unpacked, and Bob Cherry's wonderful tent set up. That tent was not exactly roomy, for seven fellows, one of whom was double-width. But it was at any rate cover from the rain, if rain came on: which in the uncertain British climate was not improbable. And if a fellow couldn't stand upright in it, there was, as Bob had pointed out, no need for any fellow to stand upright in it! The tent up, and utensils sorted out, and water fetched from the stream, and the cooking-stove prepared for action, more than an hour had elapsed, and the hikers were ready for supper. But there was no sign yet of a returning fat Owl.

So they sat once more in a cheery row on the parapet of the little bridge, to wait for Bunter and supplies.

'Jolly spot!' said Bob Cherry. 'And we've got it all to ourselves. Not a soul passed since we stopped here.'

'Here comes somebody!' said Nugent.

From the direction of the high road they had left behind, a cyclist came in sight under the shady branches over the lane. The hikers glanced towards him carelessly, as he came. Apparently he was on his way to Hedges, and his way lay across the bridge where the hikers sat in a row.

The Bounder's look became suddenly fixed.

'By gum!' he breathed. His eyes glinted at the still distant cyclist. 'By gum! Know that chap?'

'Eh? No—who—?'

'It's Cardew.'

'Cardew!' repeated the hikers, all at once. And they all stared at the rider under the shady branches.

'That tricky swob—!' growled Johnny Bull.

It was Cardew! He was riding at his usual reckless speed, and rapidly coming nearer. They all knew the handsome, supercilious face under the Panama hat. But they were surprised to see him. They were at least fifty miles from Mr. Bunce's, where Cardew had played that scurvy trick on them, and in a different county. It looked as if Cardew, like themselves, was on a summer wander in the 'hols', and in the same direction, though he preferred wheels, and no doubt inns and hotels rather than camping out. He looked, as usual, like a new pin.

The Bounder's brows knitted.

None of the party remembered Cardew, and his malicious trickery, with cordial feelings. But the Famous Five were little given to nursing grudges or grievances, and they had almost forgotten him. It was different with the Bounder. Smithy's was not a forgiving nature, and he had a long memory for offences. That drenching in Mr. Bunce's garden was as fresh in his mind as if it had happened only the day before.

'That rotter!' he said. 'He'll be on this bridge in another minute or two! He won't get past it in a hurry.'

'Um!' said Bob, doubtfully. 'I suppose he ought to be jolly well kicked, Smithy—but—'

'Let him rip!' said Nugent, always pacific and placable. 'I expect it was the silly ass's idea of a joke.'

The Bounder sneered.

‘You fellows can steer clear, if you like,’ he retorted. ‘I’m going to have him off that bike, and give him what he’s asked for.’

‘We don’t want a shindy,’ said Harry.

‘I do!’ said Smithy.

‘Why not?’ said Johnny Bull. Johnny did not always see eye to eye with the Bounder, but for once he agreed with Smithy. ‘I don’t see letting him rip, after the rotten trick he played on us.’

There was a division of opinion. Four members of the Co. would have been willing to let the St. Jim’s junior pass in peace. Johnny Bull would doubtless have yielded to the majority, and contented himself with a glare as Cardew whizzed by. But Herbert Vernon-Smith was quite indifferent to the opinion of the rest of the party. He slipped from the parapet, and stood ready to rush.

Cardew was whizzing on. If he had noticed the fellows on the bridge, his glance was careless. But as he came quite near, he was seen to give a little start, and they knew that he had recognized them. He ceased to pedal, and the bicycle free-wheeled on. A few moments more, and he would have been within reach of a rush.

But the St. Jim’s fellow no doubt realized what was in store for him on the bridge: the Bounder’s look was not to be mistaken. Almost at the bridge, he braked, and the bicycle slowed down.

The Bounder rushed.

At the same moment, Cardew whirled the bike round, to ride back to the high road: the way he had come. Evidently, he did not intend to cross that bridge: now that he knew what awaited him there. The bike whirled round in a circle, and Cardew drove at the pedals.

Vernon-Smith tore off the bridge.

So rapid was his rush, that he was almost within reach of the rear wheel as it turned towards him. He made a desperate bound, and clutched at Cardew.

But the bike, by a hair’s breadth, shot away in time: and Smithy, overbalancing himself as he clutched empty space, toppled over and fell on his face in the dust.

‘Oh, my hat!’ ejaculated Bob Cherry.

‘Man down!’ murmured Nugent.

‘The downfulness is terrific.’

The cyclist shot away like an arrow, leaving Vernon-Smith sprawling. He dragged himself up panting, with a furious face, smothered with dust. If Cardew had been within reach, his good looks would assuredly have been altered, much for the worse.

But Cardew was far out of reach. Already fifty yards away, he turned his head and looked back—and smiled. Then he waved a mocking hand, whizzed on, and vanished.

The Bounder stood, for some moments, panting, his face as black as thunder. Then he came slowly back to the bridge.

Harry Wharton and Co. were careful not to smile, as he rejoined them. Smithy did not look in the mood to be greeted by smiles. He was dusty, he was jarred by his fall, and, only too clearly, was in the worst temper ever. He scowled as he sat down again: sullen and silent, while the other hikers chatted as they awaited the arrival of Bunter and supplies.

CHAPTER 17

BAD LUCK FOR BUNTER

'OH, crikey!' breathed Billy Bunter.

His little round eyes blinked, with a startled blink, through his big round spectacles. Up to that moment, Billy Bunter had been happy and comfortable. He was sitting down under a shady tree. Sitting down always agreed with Bunter: and shade was grateful and comforting on a day in August when the sun blazed down with almost tropical fervour. Also, he was eating, which gave the final touch to his felicity.

Bunter had lost no time in getting to Hedges, and the village store there. It was not Bunter's custom to hurry: but an aching void in his extensive inside urged him on, as the fabled gadfly urged on Io of old. But once at the village shop, there was no need for further haste. Bunter proceeded to purchase eatables, and to dispose of some of them on the spot. Having packed away what any other member of the hiking party would have considered a substantial supper, and thus taken the keen edge off his appetite, the fat Owl rolled out of Hedges on his homeward way, with a packed rucksack on his plump back. His load, like Æsop's, grew lighter as he went: for every now and then a fat paw dipped into the rucksack, and transferred a sausage-roll, or a biscuit, or an apple, to a capacious mouth. But if the rucksack grew lighter, Bunter did not. His lagging pace lagged more and more, till, half-way back to camp, he decided that he needed a rest.

It was hot, and Bunter was tired, or at least lazy: and the shady trees beside the lane were inviting. There was, so far as Bunter could see, no occasion for hurry. True, there would be no supper at the camp till he reached it with supplies. But that did not worry Bunter. A meticulous consideration for others had never been one of his weaknesses.

In fact, he almost forgot the existence of the others. Sitting in the shade, leaning back on the trunk of an oak, dipping sticky fingers into the rucksack, and happily munching, Billy Bunter felt that a hike, after all, was not a bad way of spending the 'hols'. The little Hampshire lane was solitary: only the twittering of birds in the boughs came to his fat ears: till, at length, he heard a footstep coming from the direction of the village he had left an hour ago. It was then that he breathed 'Oh, crikey!' and blinked a startled blink, at the sight of a red nose, an unshaven chin, and a battered bowler hat.

The untidy man who came slouching up the lane was quite familiar to his eyes. It was the gentleman of the road whom Bob Cherry had named 'Dusty': last seen in Sussex, but evidently still on the trail of the hikers, or looking for that trail.

Billy Bunter gazed at him in deep alarm.

From the bottom of his fat heart he wished that he hadn't stopped for a rest under that shady tree. It was not that he feared that Dusty would go through his pockets.

Whether Bunter had left his banknotes at home or not, undoubtedly he had omitted to carry any of those useful articles on the hike. His shopping-money had been expended at Hedges to the last penny, and there was not a single coin of the realm anywhere about Bunter. Nevertheless, he blinked at Dusty in deep uneasiness. Dusty was not the kind of man any fellow wanted to meet in a lonely spot, far from help.

To his relief, Dusty did not glance in his direction, as he came slouching up the lane. Bunter hoped that the tramp might pass him by unseen, in the shade of the oak. A huge branch of the oak extended right across the little lane, meeting branches on the other side, and the spot was quite dusky.

Bunter sat silent. He even ceased to munch. To jump up and run was useless: Dusty, if he wanted him, would have had him in three strides. As silent as the stone statue of a fat Owl, Billy Bunter sat, and blinked, and hardly breathed, as the tramp came nearer. Dusty, as he came, was sucking at an empty pipe. His look was disconsolate. Dusty was, in fact, in hard luck.

His career as a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles had not, of late, proved profitable. He had lost the trail of the Greyfriars hikers: but the glimpse he had had of the Bounder's bulging wallet still drew him on like a magnet. Dusty was reflecting sadly and longingly on the immense quantities of beer and 'baccy' that could have been acquired, if only that bulging wallet had changed hands. Bunter stilled his breathing, as the slouching tramp came under that wide-extending branch, just opposite the fat Owl. A few more steps, and Dusty's back would be to him.

But alas for Bunter! A ray of the sun, filtering through the foliage, caught his big spectacles, that flashed it back. That flash seemed to catch Dusty's eye: for he turned his head—and stared at Bunter!

'Ho!' ejaculated Dusty.

He turned towards the fat Owl. Bunter blinked at him dismally, as the shifty eyes scanned his fat face.

'You're one on 'em!' said Dusty, evidently alluding to the hiking party. Clearly, he remembered Bunter. Bunter could have wished that he was not such a distinguished-looking chap, and more easily forgotten! But his circumference, at least, was too distinguished to be forgotten:

Dusty knew him at a glance.

'I—I—I say—!' stammered Bunter.

'Pea-shooting a covey!' said Dusty. 'Chucking a covey over a gate! Now wot's to stop me knocking your fat 'ead orf?'

'I—I—I say, it wasn't me!' gasped Bunter.

'No more it wasn't!' agreed Dusty. 'If it 'ad been, I'd jest 'it you in the middle of that bread-basket of yourn, and bust you all over this 'ere wood. Where's the other coveys?'

'Oh! They—they're just coming!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I'm waiting for them—they—they may be here any minute.' Billy Bunter and the tramp had long been strangers: and not likely to strike up an acquaintance at such a moment as this! He hoped fervently that that unvarnished statement would cause the tramp to depart.

But it did not have that effect. Dusty cast a swift glance up the lane, and into the trees that bordered it. There was no sign of anyone approaching, from any direction. Then he grinned at Bunter.

'Jest coming, are they?' he inquired.

'Yes—any minute—!'

Smack!

'Yaroooh!' roared Bunter. Dusty had a heavy hand.

Its contact with Billy Bunter's fat head was quite painful. Bunter roared.

'Ave another?' asked Dusty.

'Ow! Wow! You keep off!' yelled Bunter.

'If you want another, you only got to ask for it!' grinned Dusty. 'Now praps you'll tell me where the other coveys are, and 'ow fur off?'

'They—they're in camp, about a quarter of a mile!' gasped Bunter. Dusty's method of

extracting the facts was unpleasant, but efficacious. ‘They—they’re waiting for me to bring in the grub—’

‘Git up!’

Bunter got up.

‘Praps you wouldn’t mind turning out your pockets!’ suggested Dusty. ‘Jest as you like, of course: but I’m going to smack your ’ead ’ard, if you don’t.’

Bunter did not mind turning out his pockets, as there was nothing in them. Dusty surveyed the result with disgust.

‘Ook it!’ he snapped.

The fat Owl was only too willing to ‘hook it’. He was indeed eager to hook it—longing to hook it! He grabbed up the rucksack, preparatory to hooking it.

Smack!

‘Yoo—hoop!’ yelled Bunter.

‘You can leave that alone,’ said Dusty. ‘Praps you won’t mind leaving that for a bloke what’s ’ard up, and can do with a supper. Wot?’

This time Bunter did mind. He minded quite a lot. But he did not tell Dusty so. He dropped the rucksack, and backed away from the tramp: turned, and ran. Dusty made a step after him, and let out a foot. There was a bang as it contacted Bunter, followed by a yell: and then Billy Bunter, his little fat legs going like machinery, disappeared up the lane.

Dusty, grinning, sat down under the oak, and turned out the contents of the rucksack.

Quite an ample supply of provender met his greedy eyes. Once more there was a sound of munching under the shady oak. That unexpected encounter had been beastly for Bunter: but it was a windfall for Dusty! Dusty had a healthy appetite: and he quite enjoyed Harry Wharton and Co.’s supper.

CHAPTER 18 A RIFT IN THE LUTE

‘WHERE’S that fat frog?’

‘Where’s that footling fathead?’

‘Where’s that blithering bloater?’

‘The wherefulness is terrific.’

The hikers seemed to be getting impatient. It was quite pleasant, sitting on the low parapet of the rustic bridge, over the stream that rippled and gleamed, with the sweeping green woods around them. Smithy, still sore from his brief encounter with the St. Jim’s fellow, sat and scowled: and occasionally rubbed his nose, which had hit the earth rather hard when he tumbled behind the bike. The Famous Five, certainly, did not scowl—but they were getting a little exasperated, and feeling rather like booting Bunter when he did, at length, put in an appearance. But he had not put in an appearance yet.

‘The fat villain!’ said Bob Cherry. ‘He’s had time to crawl to Hedges and back on his hands and knees.’

‘Sticking at the village shop, guzzling!’ growled Johnny Bull.

‘Not all this while,’ said Bob. ‘The shops will be closed before this. He can’t be there now.’

‘Then where the dickens is he?’ asked Nugent.

Smithy gave a jeering laugh.

‘Sitting under a tree, eating our supper, I expect,’ he said. ‘You know Bunter! You were fools to give him the chance.’

Johnny Bull grunted: but otherwise there was no reply to the Bounder’s remark. Smithy, only too evidently, was in a mood to quarrel with friend or foe: and nobody wanted a row.

‘He will come crawling in like a snail, presently,’ went on Smithy. ‘Perhaps there will be something left for us. Perhaps not. I know I’m jolly well going to boot him, when he does come in.’

Again there was no reply. Bob Cherry winked at his friends, who smiled. That was the only effect Smithy’s ill-humour had on his fellow-hikers. The Bounder, catching both the wink and the smile, scowled more darkly than before.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’ exclaimed Bob Cherry, suddenly. ‘Here he comes! That’s either Bunter, or a barrage balloon got loose.’

It was not a barrage balloon! It was Bunter. And he was not crawling like a snail, as the Bounder had predicted. He was charging up the lane at breathless speed.

The hikers watched him in wonder.

Bunter had been absent for hours. He had had time, as Bob said, to crawl to the village and back on his hands and knees. He had been expected to come in, when he did come, at the pace of a tortoise. Often and often did Billy Bunter’s locomotion resemble that of a very old and very tired tortoise.

But there was nothing tortoise-like about him now. For once he seemed to have taken the hare instead of the tortoise as a model. Streaming with perspiration, puffing and blowing, the fat Owl came charging up to the bridge. He could hardly have put on more speed if there had been a mad dog behind him.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’ roared Bob Cherry. ‘What’s up, Bunter?’ Something, evidently, was ‘up’.

Bunter did not answer. He had no breath for speech. He rolled on the bridge, and leaned on the parapet, gasping for wind.

‘Urrrrgh!’ was all Bunter had to say, for the moment.

‘You fat ass—!’

‘Urrrrgh!’

‘What’s happened?’

‘Urrrrgh!’

‘Where’s the grub?’ sneered Vernon-Smith.

‘Urrrrgh!’

There were signs of ‘grub’ about Bunter, in the shape of smears of jam mingling with the perspiration on his fat face. But there were no other signs. He was not carrying his rucksack. He had returned without the provender for which he had been despatched.

‘You fat chump,’ said Bob. ‘Where’s our supper?’

‘Urrrrgh!’

‘What did I tell you?’ jeered Smithy.

‘Oh, rot,’ said Harry. ‘Even Bunter can’t have bolted the lot.’

‘Where is it, then?’

‘Urrrrgh!’ Bunter found his voice, at last. ‘I say, you fellows—urrrrrgh—I say—wurrrrgh—I’m all out of breath—gurrrrgh—’

‘Where’s the grub?’ hooted Johnny Bull.

‘Urrrrgh! That tramp’s got it!’ gasped Bunter.

‘What tramp?’

‘That—that tramp with the red boko—he’s got it!’ gasped the fat Owl. ‘That tramp who was after Smithy’s wallet—urrrrrgh—’

‘Dusty!’ exclaimed Bob.

‘Urrrrgh! Yes! He—he came up while I was sitting under the tree—’

‘Sitting under a tree, while we were waiting for our supper?’

‘I—I mean, I—I wasn’t sitting under a tree!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I was—was hurrying like—like anything—’

‘It’s taken you two or three hours to hurry like anything?’ asked Nugent.

‘I—I—I mean—I—I—’

‘Looks like supper!’ sneered Smithy. ‘The shops are closed long ago—no good anybody else going. I’m going to boot him.’ He slipped off the parapet.

‘Here, you keep off!’ gasped Bunter. ‘If you can’t be civil to a chap, Smithy, after asking him for the “hols”, I can jolly well say—yaroooooh! Stoppit!’

Bob Cherry jumped down, and caught Smithy by the shoulder. So far from thinking of civility to a chap he had asked for the ‘hols’, Smithy had already landed a good one: and only Bob’s grasp stopped him from landing another. But Bob Cherry jerked him back in time.

‘Hold on, Smithy,’ said Bob, soothingly, as the Bounder’s eye’s flashed at him. ‘Bunter says he’s been robbed by a tramp—’

‘Oh, don’t be a fool!’ snarled Smithy. ‘Think that tramp’s followed us fifty miles, from one county into another?’

‘Well, it doesn’t seem likely: but—’

‘Smithy as good as asked him to, shoving that wallet under his nose!’ grunted Johnny Bull.

‘Oh, shut up, you!’ snapped Smithy.

Johnny’s eyes gleamed. Nugent laid a restraining hand on his arm, and Johnny, breathing hard, was silent.

‘Let Bunter tell us what’s happened, at any rate,’ said Harry Wharton. ‘Cough it up, Bunter. Is that tramp about or not?’

‘Oh, really, Wharton—’

‘Cough it up, you fat ass!’ hooted Bob. ‘Keep your temper, Smithy, old man, and let him speak.’

‘Oh, listen to his crammers if you like: I’m going to boot him all the same,’ snarled Smithy.

‘I tell you that tramp’s got it!’ howled Bunter. ‘I—I was hurrying back—I—I mean I’d just sat down to rest for a minute—not more than a minute—hardly a minute—and he rushed at me, and—and collared the rucksack with the grub in it—’

‘And you let him—?’ asked Nugent.

‘I—I fought like a—a—a—’

‘Rabbit?’

‘Beast! Like a—a—a lion!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I—I gave him some jolly good ones, too—I—I think both his eyes were blacked—but—but—but—’

‘Yes, I can see you doing it!’ said Bob. ‘Was there really a tramp at all, you fat Ananias?’

‘Oh, really, Cherry—’

Five fellows were very doubtful. Vernon-Smith was not doubtful at all. The speed with which Bunter had returned to camp certainly looked as if there was, or he fancied there was, danger behind him. Five fellows were, at least, willing to give Bunter the benefit of the doubt. Smithy was not in the least inclined to do so. He did not believe, for one moment, that Dusty had followed the hikers’ trail so far: and he did believe that Bunter, having scoffed the provender had turned up in camp with an improbable yarn to account for it: which certainly was very like William George Bunter. Smithy was not in a placable mood. The encounter with Cardew had left him sore and savage, and, though he did not realize it himself, he was in need of an object on which to wreak his wrath. It was not very reasonable: but it was like the Bounder of Greyfriars.

‘Well that’s that!’ said Bob Cherry, at last. ‘I fancy there must have been a tramp, whether it was Dusty or not —the pace that fat chump was putting on looks like it! Anyhow there’s no supper.’

‘Only for Bunter!’ sneered the Bounder.

‘Oh, really, Smithy—’

‘Will you get out of the way, Cherry?’

Bob was standing between the Bounder and Bunter. He did not get out of the way. He made soothing gestures.

‘Take it easy, Smithy, old man,’ he said, amicably. ‘If Bunter’s telling the truth—’

‘Does he ever?’

‘Well, not often,’ admitted Bob. ‘But—’

‘You may like turning in without supper, because that fat spoofer’s scoffed the lot. I don’t! I’m going to boot him all over the shop.’

‘Look here, Smithy—!’ interposed Harry Wharton.

‘You can pack it up, Wharton!’

‘You cheeky tick—!’ roared Johnny Bull.

‘Oh, shut up!’

‘By gum! I’ll—’ Johnny scrambled off the parapet. Frank Nugent caught his arm again.

‘Hold on, Johnny—!’

‘My esteemed and ridiculous Smithy—!’ murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

The Bounder did not heed any of them. His eyes glinted at Bob.

‘Will you get out of the way?’ he breathed.

‘No, I won’t!’ said Bob, his own temper beginning to rise. ‘Have a little sense, Vernon-Smith. You’re not going to boot Bunter because that St. Jim’s man gave you a fall!’

The Bounder’s eyes blazed. ‘You won’t get out of the way?’ ‘No, I won’t!’

‘Then I’ll jolly soon shift you!’

And the Bounder leaped at Bob, with clenched fists. But he did not reach him. Four hikers, as if moved by the same spring, jumped at Smithy at the same moment, grasped him, and whirled him back.

‘Stop that!’ snapped Harry Wharton.

And as the Bounder, instead of stopping it, struggled fiercely, he was whipped off his feet, and sat down, with a bump that almost shook the rustic bridge.

CHAPTER 19 PARTING OF THE WAYS

HERBERT VERNON-SMITH sat panting for breath. Five fellows stood looking at him, grimly. Billy Bunter, keeping carefully behind those five fellows, blinked at him through his big spectacles. Slowly, the Bounder picked himself up. His face had been crimson with rage. But the flush died out of it, leaving him almost pale. His eyes glinted, and his lips set in a tight line. Seldom, or never, had the Bounder of Greyfriars been in so savage a temper: all the more savage because he was suppressing it. He did not make another movement towards Bob: and he did not even glance at Bunter. He stood looking at the Famous Five, with a black and bitter look. Then, without a word, he turned and walked off the bridge, and went into the tent under the trees, only a dozen yards away. He disappeared into it, and the chums of the Remove exchanged uncomfortable glances. It was a rift in the lute—with a vengeance. Once or twice already, in that hiking trip, Smithy's uncertain temper had put a strain on the tact and patience of his fellow-hikers. But there had been nothing like a row. Now, indubitably, there was a row! 'This is pretty rotten, you fellows,' said Bob Cherry, breaking a rather dismal silence. 'The rottenfulness is terrific!' sighed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'The esteemed Smithy has his ridiculous back upfully.' 'Oh, he'll come round,' said Nugent. Snort, from Johnny Bull. 'Who cares whether he comes round or not?' he rapped. 'Why can't Smithy keep his temper like any other fellow?' 'The whyfulness is preposterous.' 'Well, he doesn't, and he won't!' said Bob. 'But he's not going to take it out of that fat frump because Cardew gave him a tumble—and that's what it amounts to.' 'Just that!' said Harry. 'But—' Another snort, from Johnny. 'Are we going to sit around, watching Smithy to see whether he's in a temper or not?' he inquired, sarcastically. 'I'm not, for one! If he wants to sulk, let him get on with it.' 'Oh! Yes! But—' 'He was jolly nearly sacked, at the end of the term, letting his temper rip!' growled Johnny. 'He couldn't take a whop from Quelch like any other fellow. Who the dickens does he think he is—the Great Panjandrum, or the Lord High Everything-Else?' 'I say, you fellows—!' 'Oh, dry up, Bunter,' hooted Bob Cherry. 'It's all your fault, you fat octopus. You could have been back hours ago, and you wouldn't have met that tramp—if you did meet one.' 'Oh, really, Cherry—' 'No supper to-night!' sighed Nugent. 'One of us will have to cut into Hedges as soon as the shops open in the morning, and get something for brekker. That fat fraud ought to be booted, really.' 'Oh, really, Nugent—' 'Hallo, hallo, hallo, here comes Smithy,' murmured Bob, as the Bounder emerged from the tent. 'Don't let's have any more rowing, if we can help it. Put on your sweetest smiles.' 'Br-r-r-r-r!' growled Johnny Bull. Johnny, at all events, was not disposed to put on a sweet smile. His expression was rather more like that of a bulldog, as Vernon-Smith

came back to the bridge.

But the other fellows, if they did not exactly put on sweet smiles, looked as amicable as they could. Hiking, or camping, with one member of the party in a sulky and resentful temper, was altogether too uncomfortable all round. They wanted peace at almost any price. They noticed that the Bounder had slung on his rucksack—that, apparently, was why he had gone into the tent: but it did not occur to them for the moment why.

‘Nothing for supper, Smithy,’ said Bob, chiefly for the sake of saying something and breaking the ice. ‘We shall have to tighten our belts.’

The Bounder stared at him, and did not answer. He walked past the group, to cross the bridge.

They stared after him.

‘Where are you going, Smithy?’ called out Harry Wharton. ‘Not much use going to Hedges—not a place will be open now.’

The Bounder paused, and glanced back, with a sneer on his face.

‘The railway station’s still open, I expect,’ he answered.

‘The railway station!’ repeated Harry.

‘I’m taking a train.’

‘What the dickens are you taking a train for?’ asked Bob.

‘Guess!’ sneered the Bounder.

Harry Wharton knitted his brows.

‘Do you mean that you are chucking the hike, Vernon-Smith?’ he asked, very quietly.

‘I mean exactly that.’

‘Look here, Smithy—!’ said Bob, his good-natured face quite distressed. ‘Don’t be an ass! You—’

‘Sorry to lose your company!’ said the Bounder, sardonically. ‘Just about as sorry as you will be to lose mine.’

‘The sorrowfulness will be terrific, my esteemed Smithy!’ said Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh, solemnly.

‘Think again, old chap,’ said Nugent, amicably. ‘It’s been jolly up to now, and it will be jolly again to-morrow.’

‘The jolliffulness will be—’

‘Terrific and preposterous!’ said Bob. ‘What’s the good of rowing, Smithy? Come back, old man, and chuck down that rucksack.’

Perhaps if all the hikers had joined in that remonstrance, the Bounder might have thought better of it. But Harry Wharton was silent: and Johnny Bull not silent—Johnny gave a very expressive grunt, indicating that he did not care two straws, or one, whether the Bounder stayed or went. Smithy’s set face hardened, and he turned and walked on without another word.

They watched him disappear down the leafy lane, in the direction of Hedges. A turn of the winding lane soon hid him from sight. Then they looked at one another.

‘That’s that!’ said Bob, dismally.

‘I say, you fellows—!’

‘Oh, shut up, Bunter!’

‘Shan’t!’ hooted Bunter. ‘Good riddance to bad rubbish, if you ask me. Cheeky beast—asking a fellow for the “hols”, and kicking him—’

‘Bother that fellow Cardew!’ said Bob. ‘If he hadn’t turned up—’

‘If Smithy didn’t let his temper rip, you mean,’ said Johnny Bull. ‘Let him take his train, and his temper with him, and be blowed to him.’

‘Oh, rot,’ said Bob. ‘I just hate to see him go off like that. It’s been a jolly hike up to now. Smithy isn’t a bad chap—temper and all. I wish he’d come back.’

Harry Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

‘Not likely,’ he said.

‘No, I suppose not! But it’s rotten,’ said Bob. Bob Cherry’s sunny face was quite overcast. ‘I’ve a jolly good mind to go after him—’

‘And get your head punched?’ asked Johnny.

Bob did not reply to that. He had to realize that it was possible, if he went after Smithy, that the outcome might be head-punching, which certainly would not have improved matters. He sat on the parapet again, looking far from his usual sunny self.

‘I say, you fellows—!’

‘Is that fat Owl wound up?’ exclaimed Bob.

‘Beast! I say, if there isn’t any supper, I may as well turn in!’ said Bunter. The fat Owl, as a matter of fact, did not miss his supper, being already loaded up to the Plimsoll line, or a little over. ‘You fellows had better turn in, too. I don’t want you to come scrambling into the tent and waking me up.’

‘Oh, kick him!’ growled Bob.

‘Beast!’

Billy Bunter rolled off to the tent. As there was nothing more to eat, sleep, the second in his list of the joys of existence, attracted Bunter. The other fellows were not inclined to turn in so early, and they remained on the bridge—at the risk of waking Bunter by scrambling into the tent at a later hour! An unmelodious snore from the tent soon apprised them that slumber’s chain had bound the fat Owl. All the party were very thoughtful: even Johnny, perhaps, regretted the recent painful episode and would have been relieved to see Smithy coming back. But they all knew that there was no likelihood of that.

‘Look here—!’ said Bob, suddenly, after a long silence.

‘Well?’

Bob jumped down.

‘I’m going after Smithy,’ he said. ‘I just can’t let him go off like that! I’ll bring him back if I can.’

‘Do!’ said Harry.

And Bob Cherry tramped off down the lane: leaving the other fellows without the slightest expectation that the Bounder would return with him. It was the parting of the ways: and they did not expect to see the Bounder again till the next term at Greyfriars. But it is often the unexpected that happens!

CHAPTER 20 TREE’D!

‘IM!’ breathed Dusty.

His shifty eyes gleamed under the battered bowler.

‘Im! On his own! Asking for it! Wot luck!’

Dusty, indeed, could hardly believe his shifty eyes, or in his good luck. One windfall had

already come his way. Now another was coming!

Dusty was sitting under the wide-spreading oak, where, a short while since, Billy Bunter had been sitting. Like Bunter, he was helping himself to the provender from the rucksack. At the same time, he was keeping a very sharp eye open in the direction in which the fat hiker had bolted—prepared to disappear into the wood at a second's notice if the hiking party came along. It really seemed to Dusty almost too good to be true, when he sighted a single hiker—the only member of the party in whom he was interested—coming along on his own.

Dusty was enjoying his supper. He had already disposed of about half the supply, and was prepared to go on to the end. But he ceased to munch, as his eyes fixed on Herbert Vernon-Smith.

'Im!' repeated Dusty.

His keen glance searched the lane behind the Bounder, as he came. No one was with him, or following him. Smithy was quite alone. Dusty grinned. That bulging wallet, for which he had followed the hikers from one county to another, was about to fall into his greedy hands like a ripe apple! Certainly the Bounder, strong and sturdy, was likely to give him more trouble than Bunter had given. But he was no match for the tramp, if it came to blows. That wallet was as good as Dusty's.

Quietly, Dusty rose to his feet, under the big oak. It was very dusky there—the long thick branch that extended across the lane cast a deep shadow. And the solitary hiker was not looking about him. Smithy was tramping doggedly, his brows knitted, his eyes on the ground. He was in a black mood, indifferent to his surroundings. Dusty, under the oak, watched him, grinning, waiting for the unsuspecting hiker to walk right into his hands. Vernon-Smith was within nine or ten feet, when he suddenly became aware of him. He came to a sudden halt, staring at the tramp. Dusty slouched into the middle of the lane, grinning at him.

'Gotcher!' grinned Dusty.

'You!' muttered Smithy.

He knew now that Bunter's tale was not an invention of the fat Owl's. For there was Dusty: and there, under the oak, lay Bunter's rucksack, with the remainder of the provender in the grass. Smithy had not believed a word of it: neither had he been disposed, like the other fellows, to give Bunter the benefit of the doubt. He rather wished that he had, now—with Dusty grinning at him in the middle of the lonely lane.

'Praps you'll and over that wallet of yourn!' said Dusty. 'I been arter it long enough, strike me pink if I ain't. Praps you'll 'and it over before I knock your face through the back of your 'ead!'

The Bounder's teeth came together, hard.

He knew that he could not handle Dusty. Even Bob Cherry, the heftiest member of the hiking party, would have found Dusty rather too big a handful. But he did not hand over the wallet—he did not even think of doing so. If the tramp succeeded in robbing him, it would not be while he had a breath left. Smithy was the man to fight to a finish.

'Stand back, you rascal!' he breathed.

Dusty's grin changed into a threatening scowl.

'You 'anding it over?' he asked. 'Or—' He displayed a gnarled set of knuckles within six inches of Smithy's nose.

What happened next surprised Dusty. Almost over Smithy's head was the great oak

branch that stretched across the lane—a couple of feet over his head. With a sudden, active upward spring, Vernon-Smith caught that branch with his hands, and swung in the air—and, as he swung, he kicked.

The roar that came from Dusty, as a boot crashed on his bulbous nose, might have done credit to the Bull of Bashan.

He staggered back, both hands going to his nose—redder than ever, and with a red stream spurting from it.

For some moments, Dusty was wholly concentrated on his anguished nose. Vernon-Smith did not lose one of those moments. With the activity of a monkey, he scrambled up on the oak branch. He was standing on it, holding on to a higher branch, by the time Dusty got into action again.

The tramp glared up, with a glare that was absolutely tigerish, dabbing his streaming nose with a tattered sleeve. Then he made a spring, in his turn, and caught hold of the branch on which the Bounder stood, to grasp him and drag him down.

Then there was another roar, of mingled pain and fury, as the Bounder stamped on his fingers. Dusty let go that branch as if it had suddenly become red-hot, and dropped back to earth.

‘Oooogh!’ gasped Dusty, sucking his fingers frantically. ‘Oooogh! Strike me pink and blue! Oooogh!’

The Bounder looked down at him, with gleaming eyes.

‘Try again!’ he said, coolly.

‘Oooogh!’ Dusty’s gnarled knuckles seemed hurt. Smithy had stamped hard. ‘Oooogh! You jest wait a tick, you young limb! Oooogh! You jest see if I don’t make an ’orspital case of you! Oooogh!’

For several minutes, the tramp sucked and rubbed his suffering fingers. The Bounder watched him, his heart beating hard. For the moment, he was out of the ruffian’s reach. But he knew that there was more to come: and how it was going to end, he did not know. All he knew was that he was going to resist to the last gasp.

Dusty, at length, went into action again. He moved along towards the trunk of the oak, with the evident intention of making another spring, out of reach of a stamping Smithy, holding on to a higher branch, moved along also, with a foot ready to stamp. They arrived simultaneously close to the trunk. Dusty did not make the spring for which the Bounder was watching and waiting.

He grasped at the trunk, and clambered up.

Smithy moved closer to the trunk, watchful as a cat, placing himself just over the tramp’s head as it came up through the foliage. Up came the battered bowler, and down came Smithy’s foot, crashing on it.

That hat, already battered, was a wreck. And judging by the fearful yell that came from Dusty, the head in it was a wreck too. Yelling, Dusty slithered down the trunk and sprawled in the lane. He sat up in the dust, feeling his head with both hands, as if to ascertain whether it was still there.

Vernon-Smith laughed breathlessly. He was holding his own, so far at least, in that singular contest.

‘Try again, Dusty!’ he called out.

The fabled Gorgon’s gaze had nothing on the look Dusty gave him in reply.

‘You jest wait!’ gasped Dusty.

Slowly, Dusty picked himself up. He did not seem in a hurry to resume operations. The casualty-list, so far, was all on Dusty's side: his bulbous nose, his thievish fingers, and his rascally head, all had pains in them: and the Greyfriars junior, in the tree, had not had a scratch. Dusty had not expected all this trouble with a schoolboy on a hiking holiday. Only too clearly, the owner of the bulging wallet was a very different proposition from the fat hiker whose head he had smacked. It was not only of the wallet that Dusty was thinking now. Dusty wanted vengeance for all those casualties. He was going to 'beat up' that schoolboy—if he could.

He stood glaring up at Vernon-Smith, calculating his next move, the Bounder watching him. He moved away at last, and Smithy wondered, for a moment, whether he was giving it up, and going. But that was very far from Dusty's intention. He stopped under another jutting branch of the big oak, six or seven feet from Smithy's.

'Oh!' breathed Smithy.

Dusty, with a bound, caught his branch, and clambered on it. Smithy watching him, could do nothing to stop him. He could only watch the tramp clambering along the branch to the trunk, out of reach.

Smithy set his teeth. It was useless to drop from the tree and run: Dusty would have dropped at the same moment. He had to give in, or fight it out, and not for a moment did the Bounder of Greyfriars think of giving in. Dusty reached the trunk, and swung from his branch to Smithy's. Then he came clambering out on Smithy's branch.



HERBERT VERNON-SMITH STRUGGLED FIERCELY, BUT IN VAIN

'Gotcher!' hissed Dusty.

The long branch sagged and dipped, under the weight of the two of them. Dusty almost pitched off, as it swayed under him. But he held on, clambering nearer and nearer. He had almost reached Smithy, when the Bounder, holding on to the higher branch, swung his

feet free, and kicked out.

Dusty caught the kick with an unshaven chin. It elicited a howl from him, but it did not stop him. His grasp was on the Bounder the next moment, dragging him from his hold. A moment more, and both of them rolled from the swaying branch, and landed in the dust of the lane.

‘Now, then—!’ panted Dusty.

And Herbert Vernon-Smith, at the end of his tether, struggled fiercely, but in vain, in the muscular grasp of the tramp, while vicious blows rained on him.

CHAPTER 21 JUST IN TIME!

‘HALLO, hallo, hallo!’ gasped Bob Cherry.

For a second Bob stared at what he saw.

He was coming down the lane at a trot: hoping to overtake the Bounder before he reached Hedges. Half-way to the village, he came on him—suddenly and unexpectedly. Coming at a trot round a bend of the winding lane, the scene under the oak tree burst on his view—Vernon-Smith, in the grasp of the tramp, struggling desperately in a cloud of dust. For one second, Bob stared—and then his trot became a gallop! An arrow from a bow had nothing on him as he raced up.

Five or six times had Dusty’s knuckly fist landed on Smithy, with vicious force. That was only a beginning—if there had been no interruption. Often had Smithy’s arrogant temper led him into trouble—but never into such severe trouble as this, if no help had been at hand. But help came suddenly and effectively. It came in the shape of a clenched fist, with all Bob Cherry’s beef behind it, crashing under Dusty’s ear.

Dusty did not know, for a moment, what hit him. It felt like the kick of a mule. It bowled him over, and he released the Bounder, and rolled headlong in the dust.

Vernon-Smith reeled against the oak, panting. He was dazed and dizzy from Dusty’s vicious jabs, and he leaned on the tree, panting and panting for breath—and blinking dizzily at Bob, as surprised as Dusty by the sudden appearance of a third party on the scene.

Bob gave him hardly a glance. His eyes were on the tramp, who was scrambling up, with an expression on his face that was quite demoniac.

Dusty did not speak. He hurled himself at Bob.

Bob Cherry’s hands were up, his blue eyes gleaming over them. He met Dusty’s rush with left and right.

The tramp, in his fury, hardly heeded the jolts, forceful as they were. His own knuckly fists lashed out, and the Greyfriars junior reeled as they came crashing home.

But Bob recovered in a moment, backing away and giving ground, but still facing Dusty, and hitting out as he came on. The tramp followed him up savagely, the knuckly fists lashing. Bob barely held his own: but he held it, putting every ounce of strength and pluck into the unequal combat. But he must have gone down, under the muscular ruffian’s attack, had not the Bounder joined in.

It was only for moments that Smithy leaned on the oak, panting. He was still breathless, his head still reeling: but he was not long hors de combat. He flung himself at Dusty, his clenched right crashing into the tramp’s ribs, his left following it up with a crash in a

bull-neck. Dusty staggered, his knuckles sawing the air: and Bob, closing swiftly in, landed left and right in the unwashed face.

That did it, for Dusty. He went staggering across the lane, and would have fallen, had he not brought up against a tree-trunk. There he leaned, gasping, while the two Greyfriars juniors drew together, ready for him to come on again. One of Smithy's eye's was blinking, and his nose ran red, while Bob's face showed many signs of strife: both of them had had some hard knocks from the knuckly fists. But both of them were ready to stand up to Dusty if he wanted more: and together they were likely to prove rather too much for Dusty, for he did not come on again. Twice, and thrice, he made a move, as if to do so—but paused. It was hard for Dusty to say farewell to the bulging wallet that had so nearly been in his clutches: but Dusty had had enough hard hitting, and the outcome of further hostilities was too dubious. He gave the two Greyfriars juniors fearfully expressive looks, but he did not come on again.

Bob Cherry and Smithy stood under the oak, watching him across the lane, ready for action. But Dusty had had enough.

He detached himself from the tree, at last, shook a fist or two, and slouched away down the lane, rubbing damaged spots as he slouched. Dusty had collected almost innumerable aches and pains, instead of the wallet he had hoped to collect. The way of the transgressor was hard!

Both Smithy and Bob were glad to see him go. Both of them were prepared to carry on, if Dusty wanted more: but undoubtedly they had had all they wanted of those gnarled knuckles.

They watched Dusty out of sight, in the direction of Hedges. The slouching figure and the battered bowler disappeared. Then they looked at one another, Bob with a grin, Vernon-Smith with a very curious expression on his face.

'You came up just in time,' said Smithy.

'Lucky I did, old boy.'

'Yes! Thanks,' muttered the Bounder.

'Oh, don't mench.'

Bob dabbed his nose with his handkerchief. It came away spotted with crimson. The Bounder watched him, in silence for a time.

'You're going to have a prize nose,' he said, at last.

'Feels like it,' agreed Bob.

'Looks like a black eye coming, too.'

Bob made a grimace.

'Feels like that too!' he admitted. Having dabbed his nose, he rubbed his eye. 'You've had a few knocks yourself, Smithy.'

'Nothing like what I should have had, if you hadn't come up,' said Vernon-Smith, quietly. 'How on earth did you happen to drop in like that?'

'Guess!' grinned Bob.

'You came after me?'

'That's it.'

'What for?'

'Can't you guess that one too?' asked Bob. 'I came after you to ask you to think again, Smithy, and come back and join up again. Do, old chap! What's the good of rowing, in the "hols", and breaking up a jolly party?'

Vernon-Smith looked at him in silence.

He had left the hiking-party full of angry resentment, nursing his wrath. But he was not feeling either angry or resentful now.

At the camp, he had been barely restrained from punching the cheery Bob, and Bob's friendly impulse in following him to call him back had saved him from being beaten up by the enraged tramp. Only too well he knew in what state Dusty would have left him, but for Bob Cherry's timely arrival on the scene. For once, the arrogant and aggressive Bounder was feeling ashamed of himself.

'You're a good chap, Cherry,' he said, at last.

'Same to you, Smithy,' said Bob, with a grin.

'I've been a sulky brute—'

'Oh, rot,' said Bob.

'And—' The Bounder made an effort, 'I'm sorry.'

'That's all right,' said Bob. 'We're all sorry there's been a row. Wash it out and forget all about it'

'I'll come back if you like.'

'Good man!' said Bob. 'Everybody will be glad to see you back, Smithy—open arms all round.'

The Bounder nodded.

'That fat ass Bunter did meet the tramp, after all,' he said. 'There's his rucksack—that ruffian had it—'

'And a lot of the grub left too,' said Bob. 'There's going to be a spot of supper after all. Let's get back, Smithy.'

What was left of the provender was packed into Bunter's rucksack, and Bob picked it up and slung it over his shoulder. Then they walked back up the lane together. Herbert Vernon-Smith was not going to catch that train after all. It was in a contrite and very subdued mood that the Bounder of Greyfriars walked back to camp with Bob Cherry.

CHAPTER 22

LEFT BEHIND

'IT'S hot!' said Billy Bunter.

The Greyfriars hikers did not really need to be told that.

It was getting towards noon, on a blazing August morning. The summer sun shone in a sky of cloudless blue. Lightly clad as they were, all the hikers were feeling the temperature. Even Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, accustomed to hotter suns in his native land, admitted that it was warm.

Warm as it was, six members of the Greyfriars party looked merry and bright. True, Bob Cherry's nose glowed in the sun, and occasionally he winked an eye under which was a dusky shade. But those casualties did not seem to affect his cheery spirits. The Bounder also showed very visible signs of the spot of trouble with Dusty: but Smithy was as hard as nails, and did not seem to care. He looked as cheerful as the rest: his manner perhaps a little more subdued than usual.

The lost sheep, so to speak, had been welcomed back into the fold: the recent rift in the lute dismissed from mind. So all, as the poet has already remarked, was calm and bright! In all the party of seven, only one face—a fat one—indicated that there was a fly in the

ointment. The universe, it appeared, was not run quite to Billy Bunter's satisfaction that sunny morning.

The hikers had broken camp early, and breakfasted at Hedges. The fattest member would gladly have lunched there also, and stayed on for supper. But the other fellows had not really started on that hike in order to watch Billy Bunter alternately sit in the shade and dispose of extensive meals. If that was Bunter's idea of a hike, he had it all to himself. A country road stretched before the hikers: and after a mile of it, Billy Bunter was beginning to wonder whether home, sweet home, might not be preferable to the kind of holiday in which the Bounder's invitation had landed him.

'It's hot!' repeated Bunter.

It was undoubtedly hot. Perhaps Billy Bunter felt it more than the other hikers. He had a wider expanse for the sun's rays to fall upon. Likewise, he had more weight to carry: not in his pack, but in his own plump person. He mopped a perspiring brow, and dabbed quite ferociously at flies. Flies seemed to like Bunter, attracted perhaps by spots of stickiness.

'It's hot!' said Bunter, for the third time. As nobody seemed particularly interested in his first and second remarks, he elaborated: 'I say, you fellows, it's hot!'

'Fancy that!' said Bob Cherry. 'You fellows ever known it to be hot in August before?'

'Oh, really, Cherry—!'

'It's doing you good, old fat man,' said Bob, encouragingly. 'You're melting in the sun. You'll weigh hardly a ton, next term.'

'Beast!'

Billy Bunter plugged on.

'Only four miles to Tipping, Bunter,' said Harry Wharton. 'We're stopping there for lunch, at the inn. Think of lunch at the Barley Mow. Lunch!'

But Billy Bunter's fat face did not brighten at the mention of that magic word. He gave a gasp.

'Four miles! Did you say four miles?'

'Just about that! We're taking it easy, you know.'

Billy Bunter did not seem to regard four miles as taking it easy. He gave the captain of the Remove a glare that almost cracked his spectacles.

'Slow down a bit, you men,' said the good-natured Bob. 'Bunter's got his circumference to carry, you know.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Billy Bunter came to a halt. By the roadside lay a pile of logs, cut from the adjoining wood, and left there for subsequent transport. Billy Bunter sat down on the nearest log. Six hikers paused, and looked at him. Bunter, it seemed, wanted a rest, and was going to take one.

'Come on!' growled Johnny Bull.

'Shan't!' said Bunter.

It was not polite. It was not elegant. But it was emphatic. Billy Bunter meant what he said.

'My esteemed idiotic Bunter—!' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Yah!'

'You fat ass,' said Nugent. 'Do you want us to leave you behind?'

'Beast!'

'Get a move on, Bunter,' said Harry.

'Shan't!'

'Oh, give the fat slacker a few minutes,' said Vernon-Smith, rather unexpectedly. 'We can wait a bit.' The Bounder was in a chastened mood, that morning!

'Oh, all right,' said Harry. 'Five minutes, Bunter.'

'Yah!'

Bunter sat, mopped a fat brow, and swatted flies, while the five minutes elapsed. Then he showed no signs of stirring.

'Time's up, Bunter,' said Bob. 'Come on.'

'Shan't!'

'Look here, you fat ditherer!' exclaimed Johnny Bull, impatiently. 'Are you coming or not? Get moving.'

'Shan't!'

'Well, I'm going on,' said Johnny. And he went. Johnny was prepared to leave the fat Owl alone in his glory, so to speak. If Bunter fancied a sit-down hike, he was welcome to it, so far as Johnny was concerned.

'Look here, Bunter, get a move on,' said Harry.

'Shan't!'

'Stir your stumps, old fat man,' urged Bob.

'Shan't!'

There was a lack of variety in Bunter's replies. But they were all emphatic. Bunter was not going to stir. Bunter was sitting down, and Bunter was going to stay sitting down. That was that!

Often and often, on that hike, had Bunter been stirred to action by the peril of being left behind if he did not march. Now, it seemed, he was going to chance it. Perhaps he doubted whether these fellows, beasts as they undoubtedly were, would really march on and leave him to his own devices. Anyhow he sat on that log as if glued there.

'Last time of asking!' said Bob. 'Coming?'

'Shan't!'

'We're going on, Bunter,' said Harry,

'Oh, do!' said Bunter, sardonically. 'Go on, and leave a fellow on his own, after all I've done for you. It's like you.'

'You howling ass—!'

'Beast!'

'You lazy fat chump!' roared Bob. 'Yah!'

The hikers looked at one another, looked at Bunter, and then at one another again. Then the Bounder, with a shrug of the shoulders, marched on after Johnny Bull. The others lingered.

'Look here, Bunter—!' said Harry, at last.

'Shan't!'

'We're taking short cuts, across the fields, further on. You'd better follow on by the road—'

'Shan't!'

'We're stopping at Tipping for lunch. You'll find us there, if you follow on—'

'Shan't!'

Harry Wharton breathed rather hard.

‘Come on!’ he said. And the hikers marched on. If Billy Bunter chose to sit it out, it was, after all, his own affair. They were hiking, not sitting on wayside logs: but the fat Owl was free to do as he liked.

Billy Bunter’s little round eyes and big round spectacles gleamed after them as they went. Possibly, or probably, he expected them to turn back. Perhaps he found it hard to believe that any fellows could really be willing to lose such fascinating company.

But they did not turn back. They marched on, regardless, and a turn of the road hid them from Bunter’s eyes and spectacles.

‘Beasts!’ breathed Bunter.

He sat dismayed.

The dusty distance swallowed up the hikers. Bunter, if he followed on, had to run for it, to catch them up. He did not feel like running. He sat blinking after the vanished hikers. He had chanced it, and the chance had come home to roost, as it were. Bunter was left behind!

‘Mind shifting, sir?’

It was a voice at his fat elbow. Bunter blinked round irritably. A cart had stopped, and the driver had descended from his seat. Bunter blinked at a red-faced man in a smock, with a whip under his arm.

‘What do you want?’ he snapped. Bunter did not feel like shifting: neither was he in a mood to be annoyed by common persons.

‘Them logs,’ said the carter. ‘Got to get them into Tipping this morning! Shift, please.’

‘Oh!’ grunted Bunter. Apparently the red-faced man had come along with his horse and cart to collect that pile of logs. Bunter had to shift. He shifted unwillingly, frowning.

But the frown faded off his fat face, as he watched the carter piling the logs into the open cart. Bunter’s fat brain was working!

‘I say, you’re going to Tipping?’ he asked.

‘That’s it!’ answered the carter, over the shoulder of his smock.

‘I’m going that way,’ said Bunter. ‘Could you give me a lift?’

An open cart, piled with logs, was not the conveyance Bunter would have chosen, had he had a wider choice. But anything was better than miles of road under his little fat legs. It was a case of any port in a storm.

The carter looked at him. He eyed him dubiously. Perhaps he doubted whether the plump hiker’s weight might prove too much for his horse. Bunter could see a shake of the head coming.

‘I’ll give you half-a-crown,’ he said, in haste.

Perhaps Bunter did not remember, at the moment, that he had left his wealth—if any—at home at Bunter Court! Perhaps he was thinking only of a lift into Tipping, and lunch at the Barley Mow. Or perhaps he was not thinking at all—thinking was not his long suit, anyway. How he was to tip the carter half-a-crown, when he had not a single coin of the realm in any of his pockets, was a problem that did not, for the moment, occupy his fat intellect.

The carter, instead of shaking his head, nodded.

‘Orlright!’ he said.

The logs, piled into the cart, left plenty of room for Bunter. The fat Owl clambered in, and sat down. The carter mounted to his seat in front, leaving Bunter only a view of the back of his head, cracked his whip, and drove on, at a trot. The fat Owl saw nothing of

the hikers, as the cart rolled on. No doubt they had taken to field-paths or woodland lanes. The cart rumbled on and on, and a village spire rose into view in the distance. Billy Bunter blinked round stealthily at the back of the carter's head. They would soon be in Tipping. Then the carter, naturally, would expect that half-crown. Willingly Bunter would have handed him a half-crown, if he had possessed one! But he did not possess one! In such circumstances, it was absolutely impossible for Bunter to hand over a half-crown. Bunter could foresee that there was going to be a sordid argument about money! But Billy Bunter had thought out that problem, which might have baffled many brighter fellows. Bunter knew how!

Sad to relate, Bunter was going to 'bilk' that carter.

It was quite easy! The man had not looked round once. He had, naturally, no eyes in the back of his head. Carefully and cautiously, Billy Bunter slipped out at the back of the cart, and dropped into the road. The cart rumbled on, the carter happily unaware that he had lost his passenger. Billy Bunter clambered over a stile into a field-path. Sagaciously he decided to avoid the open road, until that carter had had plenty of time to get clear. It was quite a cheerful Owl who, half-an-hour later, rolled into the Barley Mow for lunch. And it was quite a surprise that awaited Harry Wharton and Co. when they arrived.

CHAPTER 23 BUNTER ALL OVER

'I SAY, you fellows!'

Six hikers jumped.

They had trailed into Tipping, a little tired, a little dusty, and quite ready for lunch. They had washed and brushed: and now a plump waiter was showing them into a long low-ceilinged room, with a window round which roses clustered, and where the table was laid. That room, when they came in, had one occupant: and from that occupant, came a familiar fat squeak.

They gazed at Billy Bunter. They almost goggled at him. The ghost of a fat Owl could hardly have surprised them more. Where Bunter was, they did not know—up to that moment. They did not even know whether he had restarted after the interval, and followed on. If he had, they had no doubt that he was still crawling at a snail's pace, and would roll in late—very late! And, exasperating as the fat slacker was, they had decided to hang on at Tipping for a while after lunch, to give him a chance to join up if he wanted to. And here he was! Here he was, lunching at the Barley Mow!

It was not the ghost of a fat Owl! It was Bunter! He was seated at the table with a knife in one fat paw, a fork in the other, and his plump jaws in active operation. He was in Tipping ahead of the hikers—some time ahead, evidently, for he was well on with an extensive meal. Neither did he show any signs of fatigue. Bunter had, apparently, covered the miles without turning a hair. He grinned at the astonished hikers.

'Bunter!' ejaculated six voices, in unison.

'So you've got in at last!' said Bunter, with a disparaging blink. 'I'd have waited lunch for you, only I couldn't guess what time you'd come crawling in, you know.'

'Who's crawling?' hooted Johnny Bull.

'Crawling on your hands and knees, I should think, from the time you've taken,' said Bunter, cheerfully. 'I've been in an hour, and I came by the road—you fellows took short cuts. What on earth have you been doing all the time?'

They gazed at him.

'You look a tired lot,' went on the fat Owl. 'You'll have to pull up your socks a bit, you know, if you're going to hike.'

'You fat frump—!'

Billy Bunter's lip curled.

'You're a pretty feeble crowd,' he said. 'I don't believe in rushing about, on a hike, but there's a limit. No need to crawl like a lot of snails.'

Six expressive glares were cast at the fat Owl. The hikers had taken it easy, over those miles by field and footpath: but certainly they had not 'crawled'. And assuredly they had never dreamed that Bunter would be in Tipping ahead of them. Yet there he was, half through lunch, when they arrived. It was the first time that Billy Bunter had beaten them to it on the march: and he seemed disposed to rub it in.

'How did you get in ahead of us?' demanded Bob.

'Walked! Think I flew?' asked Bunter, sarcastically.

'You must have put it on!' said Nugent.

'Hardly!' said Bunter. 'I just strolled, really. Nothing to hurry for, when I jolly well knew that I should have to wait for you fellows to crawl in. I'm glad you got in alive.'

'What?'

'I was beginning to think that some of you must have perished on the road! He, he, he!'

'You fat, footling, frumptious fathead—'

'Oh, chuck it,' said Bunter, disdainfully. 'The fact is that I can walk, and you fellows can't! That's all there is to it. What are a few miles to me? Nothing at all. Here I am, as fresh as paint, when you fellows come tottering in—'

'Who's tottering?' hissed Johnny Bull.

'You are!' said Bunter. 'You look as if you'd drop. So do you, Cherry! You're not very strong, poor old chap. You look as if you're going to fold up, Nugent. You're rather a weed, old fellow, if you don't mind me saying so. For goodness sake, sit down, the lot of you—you make a fellow tired, standing there looking as if you'd fall down any minute.'

Bunter, undoubtedly, was rubbing it in!

'Well, this beats Banagher!' said Bob Cherry.

The Bounder shrugged his shoulders.

'Did you get a lift on the road, Bunter?' he asked.

'Oh, really, Smithy—!'

'Oh! That's it!' exclaimed Bob. 'Did you thumb a car, you fat spoofer?'

'Haven't seen a car to-day,' answered Bunter. 'You can ask the waiter if you like, whether I came in a car. He saw me walk in.'

'Then it does beat Banagher!' said Bob.

'My dear chap,' said Bunter, patronizingly. 'There's nothing in it—I'm not a tottering crock like you fellows: that's all. Do sit down, before you fall down! He, he, he!'

Six hikers, with rather deep feelings, sat down to lunch, while Billy Bunter resumed operations on a well-filled plate. Unless Bunter had had a lift on the road, they really could not account for this. But if that was so, Bunter was certainly not going to admit it. For once, if for once only, Bunter had beaten them on the march, and Bunter was going to make the most—the very most—of it. That was Bunter, all over!

Bunter had started lunch considerably earlier than the others: and for once, he was

finished first. Having decided, regretfully, that there was no more available space within his wide circumference for another item, Bunter rose, and rolled to the window. He blinked out through clustering roses into the village street. It was probable that that carter was a dweller in Tipping: and Bunter was rather anxious not to see that carter again. However, there was no sign of a carter in the street of Tipping.

Lunch over, the bill was paid, and the hikers went out to pick up their packs. Billy Bunter rolled after them. Outside the Barley Mow, he gave another anxious blink up and down the street. The coast was still clear, and Bunter was eager to shake the dust of Tipping from his feet while it was still clear. Bob Cherry had stopped to adjust the buckle of a strap, and the fat Owl blinked at him impatiently. For once Billy Bunter did not want to linger.

‘I say, you fellows, come on!’ exclaimed Bunter.

‘In a hurry?’ asked Johnny Bull, with a snort.

‘It makes me tired to see you fellows loafing about,’ said Bunter. ‘If you’re going to hike, for goodness sake hike. Blessed if I ever saw such a lazy lot.’

The hikers could only stare. Bunter, as a rule, wanted a rest after a meal—now, so far from claiming a rest, he was anxious to get going. Unaware that he was in momentary dread of seeing a man in a smock, they simply could not understand this remarkable change in Bunter.

‘You fat chump!’ said Vernon-Smith. ‘What’s come over you?’

‘Do I sleep, do I dream, do I wonder and doubt? Are things what they seem, or is visions about?’ quoted Bob Cherry.

‘Are you coming?’ hooted Bunter.

‘Wait till I’ve buckled this strap, you fat ass—’

‘Shan’t! I’m going,’ said Bunter. ‘You can crawl after me, like you did this morning. I can jolly well tell you that you make me tired. I’m not hanging about all the afternoon because you’re too jolly lazy to get a move on.’

And Bunter started.

Six hikers stared blankly after the fat figure as it rolled up the village street. What had come over Bunter really was a mystery.

‘Well, this beats me!’ said Bob.

‘The beatfulness is terrific.’

Bunter rolled on, well ahead, as the other fellows started. But suddenly he came to a halt. From one of the cottages, a rod-faced man in a smock, with a whip under his arm, had emerged. His eyes were fixed on Bunter. He stepped into the fat Owl’s path, with quite a grim expression on his face.

‘Oh, crikey!’ gasped Bunter.

It was that carter!

‘Where’s that ’arf-crown?’ he asked. ‘You young bilk, where’s that ’arf-crown?’

Without waiting for an answer he slipped the cart-whip from under his arm, into his hand, and the lash curled round a pair of little fat legs.

The yell that came from Bunter awoke most of the echoes of the village of Tipping.

‘Yaroooooh!’

‘What on earth—!’ exclaimed Harry Wharton, in blank amazement. The hikers ran up hurriedly. The man in the smock was a complete stranger to them, though not to Bunter. Why that unknown inhabitant of Tipping was laying a cart-whip round Bunter’s fat legs

was quite mystifying. Before they could reach the spot and intervene, the cart-whip lashed round those fat legs again.

'Yaroooh!' roared Bunter. 'Wow! I say, you fellows—yoo—hooop! I say, keep him off! Oh, crikey!'

Six hikers rushed between. The red-faced man seemed disposed to go on with the good work. But three or four pairs of hands pushed him back.

'Stop that!' exclaimed Harry. 'What the dickens do you think you're doing?'

'Where's that 'arf-crown?' demanded the red-faced man, truculently. 'Did that young bilk say 'arf -a-crown for giving him a lift in my cart, or didn't he?'

'What?' yelled Bob Cherry.

'Arf-a-crown, he says, for a lift, and cheap too, four or five miles into Tipping! And when I got in, where was he? Slipped out of my cart be'ind my back! Bilk!'

'Oh!' gasped Harry. 'Bunter, you fat villain—'

'You pernicious porpoise—'

'You bilking bandersnatch—'

'I—I—I say, you fellows, I—I—I never!' stuttered Bunter. 'I—I—I mean, I—I wasn't! You—you see, I—I—I—'

'You got a lift on the road, and never paid the man—'

'How could I, when I'd left all my money at home!' gasped Bunter. 'Besides, I—I didn't—'

'Better let that chap get on with it,' said Johnny Bull.

'Yaroooh! Keep him off!'

'Here's your half-crown, my man,' said Harry, hastily extracting a coin from his pocket. And the red-faced man, placated by the receipt of his just due, gave Billy Bunter a final glare, and retired into his cottage.

'So that's how Bunter got in ahead this morning!' said Bob. 'He got a lift on the road, and bilked the driver. Sorry I stopped you booting him yesterday, Smithy. Bunter wants a lot of booting! Now, then, all together!'

'Yaroooh!'

Billy Bunter flew.

Six hikers followed, dribbling him like a fat football. Billy Bunter had wanted to get out of Tipping quickly, without meeting that carter. He had met that carter. But he got out of Tipping very quickly, all the same.

CHAPTER 24 CARDEW AGAIN!

'OASIS in the desert!' remarked Bob Cherry.

'I say, you fellows—'

'Like to sit down, Bunter?'

Billy Bunter did not reply. But there was no need for him to reply. Bunter always wanted to sit down. And he sat down, promptly.

It was not exactly a desert, and it was not exactly an oasis. It was a very pleasant country road in Hampshire: and it was a wayside cafe. But the hikers had covered some miles under a glowing sun, and they were all dry. So the sight of that wayside cafe, with little

tables set out under the shady branches of a big chestnut-tree, was as welcome to them as an oasis to an Arab in the desert.

So they unslung their packs, and sat down at one of the tables under the spreading chestnut-tree. And ginger-beer being forthcoming, they quenched their thirst, and rested in the shade, and were happy and comfortable. Even Billy Bunter's fat face indicated that, for the moment at least, he found life worth living, even on a hike. A plate of sticky cakes, and a dish of ripe red apples, added to the ginger-pop, brightened existence for Bunter, and it was a sticky and contented Owl.

The hikers chatted as they rested, to a steady, unceasing accompaniment from Bunter, munching apples. Cyclists whizzed by on the road, unregarded. But the hikers sat up and took notice, as it were, as a cyclist in a Panama hat stopped, and dismounted. They had seen that hat before.

The Bounder's eyes glittered. He half-rose, but Harry Wharton caught his arm, and he sat down again.

'No rows here, Smithy,' said Harry, quietly.

'That cad—!' muttered Smithy.

'Let him rip, for goodness sake,' muttered Bob Cherry.

All the Famous Five looked uneasy. They liked Cardew, of St. Jim's, no more than Smithy did. But they liked a row ever so much less than Smithy did! There were five or six other voyagers seated at the tables under the chestnut-tree: a waitress moving about: the cafe-keeper looking out at the door: it was altogether too numerous an audience for a row.

Fortunately, the Bounder acquiesced. The recent rift in the lute had had its effect on Smithy. He was enjoying the hike with the Famous Five, and he did not want another dispute—especially with Bob. He breathed hard, and his eyes glittered at Cardew: but he sat where he was.

'Okay!' he muttered. 'He will keep!'

Which was a great relief to the Famous Five.

Cardew, wheeling his machine in from the road, glanced at them, and started a little, as he recognized them. He came to a stop, his hand on the handlebars, perhaps expecting trouble. The Famous Five looked another way—the Bounder met his glance with a grim stare. There was a squeak from Billy Bunter, as he blinked at the new arrival through his big spectacles.

'I say, you fellows, that's that St. Jim's cad who diddled us in Sussex. I say, you jolly well punch his head, Bob.'

'Fathead!' was Bob's reply.

Cardew smiled. Evidently, there was going to be peace: though no doubt he could guess what might have happened in a less public spot. The Bounder's look could have left him in little doubt about that.

'Fancy meeting you fellows again,' he drawled. 'Still on the hike? How did you get on at that camp back in Sussex?'

Harry Wharton looked at him.

'That's enough from you, Cardew,' he said, quietly. 'You're lucky not to be kicked for the rotten trick you played on us. I suppose it was your idea of a joke—'

'Sort of!' admitted Cardew, with a nod.

Wharton's lip curled.

‘You told us a string of lies,’ he said, ‘or you couldn’t have taken us in as you did. If that’s your idea of a joke—’

Cardew raised his eyebrows.

‘Did I?’ he asked. ‘I don’t remember departing from the straight and narrow path of strict veracity. Perhaps you misunderstood me.’

Cardew’s manner was bland, but there was a mocking glimmer in his eyes. The Famous Five’s idea had been to ignore him, and steer clear of a row. Apparently Cardew did not choose to be ignored. Probably he found some amusement in bantering them, at the risk of a row.

Harry Wharton breathed rather hard.

‘You told us that that was your uncle’s place, and gave us leave to camp there,’ he said.

‘A joke’s a joke—but a lie’s a lie, Cardew.’

‘But I never told you anything of the kind,’ remonstrated Cardew.

‘You didn’t!’ exclaimed Bob Cherry, staring at him.

‘Not the least little bit in the world. How could I give you leave to camp in a place I’d never seen before I stopped for a rest on the gate?’ Cardew shook his head: ‘I asked you if you’d like to camp there—which is quite different matter.’

‘You said your uncle was a jolly old boy, and wouldn’t mind!’ hooted Johnny Bull.

‘Oh, quite,’ assented Cardew. ‘Perfectly true, too—my uncle is a jolly old boy, one of the best: and he certainly wouldn’t mind your camping there—why should he, when the place doesn’t belong to him, and he’s never seen it even.’

‘Oh!’ gasped Bob.

‘You said you were having the holidays with your uncle,’ said Nugent.

‘So I am,’ answered Cardew. ‘I’m on my way to his place at this very minute as ever was—taking it rather easy on the road, as I’m not in a hurry to arrive at the avuncular abode. May not get there till next week. But I’m certainly having the holidays with my uncle, as I told you.’

‘You said you’d mention it to him that we were camping there!’ said Bob.

‘So I will—when I see him. I think it may amuse him.’

The hikers looked at him in silence.

Cardew’s eyes glimmered with amusement. Evidently, it entertained him to explain how he had taken them in, without, as he said, departing from the straight and narrow path of strict veracity! Certainly, at the gate of Mr. Bunce’s garden back in Sussex, he had given them a wholly false impression: yet it could not be said that he had uttered an untrue word.

The Bounder had not spoken. But his brow was growing blacker and blacker. Cardew had a wary eye on him.

‘Did you have any trouble at that camp?’ he asked. ‘I fancied that you might—camping in a private garden without asking the owner—’

‘I say, you fellows, you jolly well punch his head!’ squeaked Billy Bunter, ceasing for a moment to munch a ripe apple. ‘He jolly well took us in, and got us all drenched with water from that beastly hose, and—’

‘Oh, gad!’ ejaculated Cardew. ‘Did they turn the hose on you?’

‘They did, and soaked us to the skin!’ growled Johnny Bull, with a glare at the St. Jim’s junior.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Think that’s funny?’ roared Johnny. He half-rose: and Wharton hastily pushed him back again.

The Bounder made a movement at the same moment and Bob Cherry caught his arm. Smithy gave him a fierce look: then he remembered, and sat back quietly. But he was breathing very hard.

Cardew turned his bicycle back towards the road. He seemed to have changed his mind about stopping at that cafe for refreshments. He chose to indulge his whimsical propensity for mockery: but probably he did not want a shindy at a crowded cafe, any more than Harry Wharton and Co. did. And the atmosphere was getting electric.

‘I’ll be pushin’ on,’ he remarked. ‘Glad to hear that you all got a wash back in Sussex—I’ve heard that Greyfriars men never wash! Cheerio!’

He pushed his machine into the road.

His last remark was too much for the Bounder. Smithy reached out to Bunter’s dish, and snatched up an apple. It whizzed from his hand, straight at Cardew’s head, only a few yards distant.

A split second, and that missile would have crashed, and the dandy of St. Jim’s would certainly have had a hard and quite unpleasant knock. But, careless as he looked, Cardew was as watchful as a cat. His hand went up and caught the apple, smack in his palm. It was as neat and swift a catch as had ever been seen on the cricket field.

Apple in hand, Cardew looked back and smiled.

‘Thanks!’ he said. And he slipped the apple into his pocket, and put a leg over his machine.

The Famous Five grinned. Smithy scowled. They expected to see Cardew whizz away on his bike with the apple in his pocket. But that was not the young rascal’s intention.

With a leg over his machine, his foot on a pedal, he suddenly whipped the apple out of his pocket again, and it came back at Smithy, taking him completely off his guard.

Bang!

‘Oh!’ roared the Bounder, as the apple crashed on his rather prominent nose.

‘Oh, my hat!’ gasped Bob.

Cardew was whizzing away the next second. He vanished in a cloud of dust, leaving the Bounder clapping his nose with both hands, and in a state of fury that was absolutely ferocious.

CHAPTER 25 ASTUTE!

‘BOB, old chap!’

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’

‘You look tired, old fellow.’

‘Eh?’

‘Tired!’ said Bunter, compassionately.

Bob Cherry stared at the fat Owl. So did the other hikers.

Frequently, very frequently, did Billy Bunter draw the general attention to the fact that he, William George Bunter, was tired. But never before had he seemed to notice that anyone else was. It was quite a new departure for Bunter. For once, it appeared, W. G. Bunter was not thinking wholly of W. G. Bunter!

Bob, as a matter of fact, was not tired. His sinewy legs seemed tireless. Neither was anyone else tired, at the moment—not even Bunter, though no doubt he was disinclined to exertion, that being his accustomed state.

Several days had passed, the hikers hiking cheerily on their way. Now they had pushed on into Berkshire. Many times, during those days, had Billy Bunter debated in his fat mind whether home, sweet home, was not after all preferable to dusty roads, blazing suns, and perpetual motion. The other fellows were enjoying it to the full. They revelled in fresh air, they seemed to like exertion for its own sake: they were brown, and healthy, and cheery, and full of beans. They were very tolerant with the fat Owl: often and often they slowed down to accommodate their pace to his: almost always they allowed him to dodge his share of the work—seldom or never did Billy Bunter lend a hand in rigging the tent, or fetching water, or washing up. Bunter, as a hiker, was really having a very easy time. But there was one irreconcilable difference of opinion. When they marched, Bunter always wanted to stop: and when they stopped, Bunter always wanted to stay stopped. Which was not quite good enough for the more strenuous members of the party.

The road they were following now was hilly. The more Billy Bunter blinked at it, the less he liked it. Nobody would have been surprised had Bunter plumped down on a knoll by the roadside, and refused to move. But Billy Bunter did not want to be left behind again. He did not plump down to repose his lazy limbs. He blinked at Bob Cherry, and remarked, in compassionate and indeed affectionate tones, that Bob looked tired. Which did surprise his fellow-hikers.

He proceeded to surprise them further.

‘You’ve got the heaviest pack of the lot, old chap!’ he said. ‘Tain’t fair for you to be always carrying the heaviest pack!’

‘Rot!’ said Bob.

‘Especially after being knocked about by that tramp the other day,’ said Bunter. ‘You’re not really fit, old fellow.’

‘Fit as a fiddle, old fat man!’ said Bob.

‘Well, you don’t look it!’ said Bunter. ‘I think you ought to have a rest.’

Bob Cherry chuckled.

‘Which, being interpreted, means that you’d like to sit under a tree and laze away the rest of the afternoon, what?’ he asked.

‘I’m not thinking of myself,’ said Bunter, with dignity. ‘Some fellows think of other fellows.’

‘Some fellows do!’ agreed Bob. ‘But you’re not one of them.’

‘Oh, really, Cherry—’

‘Potter on, you fat ass,’ said Vernon-Smith. ‘We’re going to camp on the other side of this hill.’

‘What I mean is—!’ hooted Bunter.

‘We know what you mean,’ interrupted Johnny Bull, ‘and you can forget it. If you stop here, you fat slacker, you’ll get left behind.’

‘The left-behindfulness will be terrific, my esteemed lazy fat Bunter,’ said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘What I mean is—!’ repeated Bunter.

‘Roll on, thou fat and lazy Bunter, roll!’ said Frank Nugent, parodying Byron.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘What I mean is,’ roared Bunter, ‘that that pack’s too much for Bob. I’ve noticed that he’s tired, if you fellows haven’t. Poor old Bob’s tottering under that pack.’

Bob Cherry chuckled again.

‘Don’t worry about poor old Bob,’ he said. ‘Poor old Bob’s all right! Poor old Bob’s going to walk you off your poor old legs.’

‘Fair play’s a jewel,’ said Bunter. ‘Let me carry that pack for a bit.’

‘Wha-a-a-t?’

‘It’s too much for you,’ said Bunter. ‘Tain’t fair to load you up like that. Let me take a turn with it.’

Bob Cherry gazed at him. This was not only surprising. It was not only astonishing. It was amazing—indeed, dumbfounding. Really, it was not easy for the Greyfriars hikers to believe their ears.

‘Gammon!’ grunted Johnny Bull.

‘The gammonfulness is terrific.’

The Bounder laughed.

‘Let him have it!’ he said. ‘He doesn’t mean it—but let him have it all the same!’

‘I’ve a jolly good mind to,’ said Bob.

‘But I do mean it,’ hooted Bunter. ‘You’re tired, old fellow—’

‘I’m not tired, you fat ass.’

‘You are!’ declared Bunter. ‘I can tell you I’m sick of seeing you totter under that pack. I’d rather carry it myself. For goodness sake, hand it over. You look as if you’re going to collapse.’

Bob Cherry breathed hard. Bob was undoubtedly the most athletic member of that party: Bunter, certainly, the least so. Bob carried that pack as if pounds were ounces. Bunter would have carried it as if ounces were pounds. In such circumstances, the fat Owl’s remarks were a little exasperating.

‘By gum!’ said Bob. ‘I don’t know what that fat ass is getting at, but I’ll jolly well take him at his word. You can jolly well carry this pack to the next halt, Bunter.’

‘That’s what I want.’

‘Well, whether you want it or not that’s what you’re going to get,’ said Bob, grimly. He halted and unslung his pack. ‘Here you are! I’ll take yours.’

‘You needn’t trouble about that,’ answered Bunter, calmly. ‘I can manage the two all right. I’m not a tottering crock!’ he added, disdainfully.

The hikers could only stare, as Billy Bunter slung on Bob’s pack in addition to his own. If the fat Owl carried that double load very far, it was fairly certain that there would soon be a tottering crock in the party.

But Bunter seemed quite in earnest. Under that double load, he stepped out quite briskly.

‘Come on!’ he snapped.

‘We’re coming on, fathead,’ said Harry.

‘Well, step out a bit,’ said Bunter. ‘A fellow can take it easy on a hike, but there’s no need to crawl. Put a spot of pep into it.’

For the first time on that hike, Billy Bunter marched on ahead, up the hilly road. Six astonished hikers stared at his fat back as they followed. What this sudden change in Bunter meant, they could not fathom.

However, they stepped out, and Bunter remained ahead for about one minute. Then he lagged behind.

He lagged more and more. Six grinning faces looked back, from further up the hill, at a fat perspiring face, as Bunter toiled onward and upward. Billy Bunter had asked for it, and he was getting it: but he did not look as if he was enjoying it.

Then they swung over the crest of the hill, and the toiling fat Owl was lost to sight behind, as they descended the further slope.

‘Better slow down a bit, and give that fat chump a chance!’ suggested Bob Cherry.

So they slowed down, glancing back occasionally for Bunter, toiling under his load. But they did not see Bunter.

The astute fat Owl was no longer toiling under that load. The moment he was secure from a backward glance, Billy Bunter had halted. He mopped a perspiring brow, and chuckled. ‘He, he, he!’

Then he turned off the road, circumnavigated a big shady tree, and sat down on the other side of the trunk.

Billy Bunter wanted a rest. He was going to have the rest he wanted. On a previous occasion, the hikers had marched on, leaving a lazy fat Owl to his own devices. On this occasion the astute Owl had put paid to that in advance. They might have marched on and left Bunter behind: but they couldn’t march on and leave Bob Cherry’s pack behind!

They required that pack if they did not require Bunter.

Billy Bunter leaned on the tree, mopped a fat brow, swatted flies, and rested in the shade. The other hikers could wait for him, or come back for him, just as they liked—Bunter really didn’t mind which. He rested luxuriously in the shade, and left them to take their choice.

CHAPTER 26 HOP IT!

‘THAT fat villain!’

‘That pernicious porpoise!’

‘That terrific toad!’

‘That spoofing octopus!’

‘Bother him!’

‘Blow him!’

Those remarks, and more to the same effect, were made by half-a-dozen hikers, in a sort of chorus. It had dawned on them, at last.

They had strolled down the hill. They had given Billy Bunter ample time to surmount the crest, and roll down after them. But they looked back in vain for a sign of the fat Owl.

They had reached the bottom of the hill. But Billy Bunter, from the other side, had not reached the top. So they came, at last, to a halt. Johnny Bull added an expressive snort to the remarks of his comrades. Johnny would have marched on regardless, leaving the fat slacker to slack. But a considerable proportion of the camping outfit was in Bob’s pack, so artfully annexed by the lazy fat Owl. So Johnny had to content himself with snorting.

The sun was sinking, in a blaze of purple and gold, over the Berkshire hills. But there were hours of daylight yet. Once over the hill, the hikers had intended to turn off the road, and follow the lanes, looking for a suitable spot for a camp. But it was clear that if they turned off the road, Bunter, when he followed on, would miss them. That, certainly, in itself, they could have borne with fortitude. It was Bob’s pack that mattered.

Bob Cherry stared back frowning along the long white road. He could have kicked himself, for having fallen so easily to the fat Owl's stratagem. Still more willingly could he have kicked Bunter.

'No sign of him,' said Bob. 'Bet you he squatted down as soon as we were out of sight over the hill. That's why he wanted to carry my pack.'

'That's why,' said Harry.

'That was the absurd whyfulness,' agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'We can't go on without it,' said Smithy. He laughed. 'That artful dodger has done us! We've got to wait for him.'

'Or go back and boot him!' growled Bob.

'Who wants to climb that hill again?' asked Nugent, with a grin.

Nobody did! The alternative was to wait for Bunter. How long they would have to wait they did not know. But they could guess that the fat Owl would not hurry himself.

'Better camp on the road,' Harry Wharton decided, at last. 'That fat villain may not roll up before dark—if by then! Look for a likely spot.'

'That's that, I suppose,' assented Bob.

So they moved on, looking for a favourable spot by the roadside. Bob Cherry glanced in at a wide, open gateway, beyond which was a tree-shaded drive, green lawns, and a mansion in the distance.

'That looks jolly!' he remarked. 'I wonder if the johnny who owns that place would like a party of hikers camping on his lawn!'

'Probably not!' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'Push on.'

They pushed on, leaving that inviting gateway behind. But a few minutes later, Bob came to a halt.

'This looks all right!' he said.

It was quite an attractive spot. Well back from the road was a high fence, enclosing the grounds of the mansion they had passed. Branches of trees from within overtopped the fence, giving a pleasant shade. Between the road and the fence was quite a wide expanse of grass, dotted with hawthorn bushes. This, evidently, was common land, where any wayfarer was entitled to repose, if the spirit moved him so to do.

It was as good a spot for a camp as the hikers could expect to find along the road, and they decided on it at once.

'Best we can do,' said Harry. 'We can't leave the road and leave that fat ass to wander off into space when he does come along. Camp here.'

'Somebody here already!' remarked Nugent.

'Lots of room for everybody,' said Bob.

One other wayfarer had already sought repose in that pleasant spot. In the shade of a bush lay a recumbent figure, at which they glanced. The man seemed to be asleep in the grass: he lay stretched out, his head resting on his arm, his face shaded by an extremely battered bowler hat. One glance was enough to tell the hikers that the man was a tramp. However, there was, as Bob said, room for everybody: and the tramp was welcome to his share, so far as they were concerned. Having glanced at him casually, they moved further off from the road, and dumped down their packs by the fence.

Bob gave another stare back along the road, red in the sunset.

'No Bunter yet!' he said.

'And won't be, for a good while,' said Smithy. 'Bunter's got a lot to carry, for once.'

‘We can’t rig the tent till he comes up. Most of the things are in my pack.’

‘Well, he can’t miss us, here,’ said Harry. ‘Who says supper? Lucky the grub isn’t in your pack, too!’

‘The luckfulness is terrific.’

The hikers proceeded to unpack. Sounds of movements and voices no doubt disturbed the slumbers of the tramp in the grass, at a little distance, for he stirred, and they heard a grunt. Then he sat up, rubbed his eyes, set the battered bowler straight on his tousled head, and stared at them, surlily. Then, in a startled voice, he ejaculated:

‘Strike me pink!’

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’ roared Bob Cherry, staring at him. Look, you chaps—’

‘What—?’

‘Dusty!’ roared Bob.

‘Oh, my hat! Dusty again!’ exclaimed Harry Wharton

‘That footpad!’ Vernon-Smith’s eyes gleamed. ‘Collar him!’

It was their old acquaintance, Dusty! The hikers had seen nothing of him, since the spot of trouble at Hedges in Hampshire. They had wondered occasionally whether Dusty was still on the trail of Smithy’s wallet: but if so, he had kept himself invisible. Now he was visible to all eyes, sitting up in the grass and staring at them.

But he did not waste much time staring. He scrambled to his feet. Dusty was, no doubt, still eager to meet Smithy—in some quiet and lonely spot favourable for the redistribution of wealth! But he was not at all eager to meet him with five other sturdy hikers at hand. Dusty, at that moment, would have been glad to follow the example of the guests in Macbeth: to stand not upon the order of his going, but go at once!

But Dusty was not given a chance.

The meeting was unexpected on both sides: but the hikers could have no doubt that Dusty was still on the trail of that wallet, and looking for them. He had trailed them from Sussex into Hampshire, and now he was again in the offing, in Berkshire. If he was looking for them, he had found them—and they had found him. And the whole party agreed, nem. con., that what Dusty wanted was a warning to steer clear of that hiking party. The Bouncer rushed straight at him as he scrambled up, grasped him, and tipped him over in the grass again. The rest of the party were only seconds behind.

‘Lea’ go!’ howled Dusty, struggling frantically, but vainly, in the grasp of six pairs of hands. ‘Strike me pink and blue!’ ‘Ands orf, I says.’

‘Got him!’ said Smithy, grimly. ‘Keep quiet, you rascal, if you don’t want your frowsy head banged.’ He fastened a grip on the tramp’s collar.

Dusty did not keep quiet: he struggled and heaved and kicked. Nobody was disposed to stand upon ceremony with the footpad: Smithy least of all. Smithy had a very keen recollection of Dusty’s gnarled knuckles, and his narrow escape from a beating-up.

Gripping the tramp’s frowsy collar, he banged his head on the hard, unsympathetic earth, eliciting a bull-like roar from Dusty.

‘Whooooo!’

‘Have another?’ asked Smithy.

‘Ooooh! Strike me pink and blue and crimson!’ gasped Dusty, and he ceased to struggle. The hikers were too many for him: and he did not want ‘another’. He was allowed to get on his feet, hands grasping him on all sides,

‘Look ’ere, you let a bloke go!’ he gasped. ‘I ain’t arter you—strike me pink if I am!’

Lorst you long ago.’

‘And now you’ve found us again,’ said Harry.

‘I tell you, I’d forgot all about you!’ protested Dusty.

‘You can pack that up!’ said Smithy. ‘You’re going to have a lesson to keep clear of this party, you rascal. Hold him, you fellows.’

‘We’ve got him all right,’ said Bob. ‘But what—?’

‘Leave him to me.’

Vernon-Smith cut back to his rucksack. From it he drew a cord. As he came back with the cord in his hand, Dusty eyed him apprehensively. He did not know what was coming: but he could guess that it was going to be something that he was quite unlikely to enjoy. But he did not resist, as Smithy knotted the end of the cord round his left wrist. He did not want any more bangs of his frowsy head. Harry Wharton and Co. held him fast, leaving it to Smithy, wondering, like Dusty, what was coming next. They soon discovered. Having knotted the end of the cord securely to the tramp’s left wrist, Smithy grasped his left ankle and dragged it up, bending Dusty’s leg at the knee. Dusty, standing on one leg, tottered in the grasp of the Famous Five. Then Smithy wound the cord round that ankle, knotting it to the wrist. He used the whole length of the cord, with an almost innumerable multiplicity of knots. The Famous Five were grinning now, as they understood. Dusty understood also: but he did not grin! Dusty did not feel like grinning. ‘You can let him go now!’ said Smithy.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

The hikers released Dusty, leaving him standing stork-like on one leg. He hopped wildly to keep his balance. The expression on his unwashed face was quite indescribable.

‘That’s all!’ said the Bounder. ‘You can travel, Dusty.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ yelled the hikers.

Dusty gasped, and almost foamed.

‘You let a covey loose!’ he howled. ‘You fancy you can tie up a covey like a blinking turkey?’

‘Sort of!’ assented Smithy.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Hop it, Dusty!’ chuckled Bob. ‘We’re tired of your company! Hop it!’

‘Get going!’ said Harry, laughing.

‘Ow’s a bloke to get going, ’opping on one blinking leg?’ yelled Dusty.

‘That’s your problem!’ said Johnny Bull. ‘You’re getting off cheap, you rascal—you ought to be run in. Hop it!’

‘I ain’t going like this ’ere,’ yelled Dusty. ‘Strike me pink! I tell you I ain’t going ’opping like a blinking frog.’

‘Suit yourself,’ said Smithy. ‘I’m going to boot you till you start. Take your time!’

‘Whooooop!’ roared Dusty.

He started. Hopping on one leg, he made a quick hop out into the road. Six laughing faces watched him as he hopped.

In the road, he stood stork-like, glaring back. Then, as the Bounder made a step towards him, he hopped again. There was nothing for Dusty to do but to hop it, and he hopped it. A roar of laughter followed him as he went hopping down the road. Lurching, stumbling, and hopping, Dusty disappeared into the sunset.

CHAPTER 27 QUICK WORK

CLATTER! clatter! clatter!

Half-a-dozen hikers looked up, at the sound of clattering hoof-beats on the road. It was an hour since Dusty had hopped on his way. They had no doubt that he had 'hopped it' for good this time. It was probable that, at a safe distance, he was busily occupied in striving to disentangle the innumerable knots that Smithy had multiplied upon him. Which was likely to be a long and arduous task. After that experience at their hands, it seemed likely that Dusty would give up his nefarious designs on Smithy's wallet, and steer clear. The hikers cheerfully dismissed him from mind, and gave their attention to supper, sitting by the park fence under the overhanging branches. There was still no sign of Bunter. Occasional pedestrians passed on the road, and bicycles whizzed by, and once or twice a car: but no familiar fat face appeared in the offing. The fat Owl, evidently, was taking it by easy stages over that hill.

Clatter! clatter!

'That gee looks jolly fresh!' said Johnny Bull.

'And that old boy looks as if he wants glueing on!' remarked the Bounder.

All the hikers gazed at the horseman coming up the road. He was a little old gentleman with a plump pink face and white eyebrows. The horse he was riding was a very handsome animal: but did undoubtedly look rather 'fresh', as Johnny remarked, and the rider seemed to have some difficulty in managing him. Possibly some rushing, honking car had startled the horse. He was prancing along the road when he came in sight of the hikers, with clattering hoofs stirring up little clouds of dust.

'Jolly good gee!' said Johnny Bull, eyeing the prancing steed with an appraising eye. Johnny came from Yorkshire, where they know all about horses! 'But if that old boy doesn't look out, he's going to take a tumble.'

Bob Cherry rose to his feet.

'We'll render first-aid, if he does!' he remarked.

'Oh, my hat!' exclaimed Vernon-Smith. 'Here comes a car! That old johnny had better mind his eye.'

Down the hilly road a car came rushing. All the juniors were on their feet now, with anxious faces. The car rushed by the rider in a swirl of dust, and roared on into the distance, leaving the horse, evidently unused to cars, prancing frantically.

'He's off!' gasped Nugent.

But the little old gentleman was not quite off! He rocked in the saddle, but somehow kept his seat. But the reins had escaped his hands and the horse was now utterly out of control.

Clatter! clatter! clatter!

'He's bolted!' breathed Bob.

The horse came up the road at a wild gallop. How the little old pink-faced gentleman clung to his back was rather a mystery. The horse's head was tossing, the reins tossing with it, the rider clinging to the saddle, in danger every moment of crashing down into the road. The result of such a crash could only have been broken bones: and the Greyfriars fellows watched breathlessly, as the runaway swept towards them. It was only a matter of moments before the steed, with its helpless rider, was sweeping by.

But as it came abreast of the group, Bob Cherry shot out of that group like an arrow from

a bow. Bob did not stop to think—there was no time to think. He flung himself headlong at the runaway's head and grasped at the tossing reins.

'Bob!' panted Harry Wharton.

'Bob, old chap!' shrieked Nugent.

For one dreadful instant, the chums of Greyfriars feared to see Bob Cherry go down under the crashing hoofs. Then they saw that he had the reins, and was holding on to them, the horse dragging him on its wild career, his feet dragging in the dust.

'Oh, Bob!' gasped Johnny Bull.

'He's got him!' muttered Smithy. 'Good man!'

Bob had 'got' him. The tossing head was dragged down, and the wild gallop slowed. Bob Cherry felt as if his arms were being wrenched out of their sockets. But he held on, and the runaway at last slowed to a halt, and stood shaking and trembling. Bob, covered with dust, panting for breath, gripped the bridle with a strong hand, and looked dizzily at the pink-faced gentleman, still clinging somehow to his saddle.

'All right now, sir!' he gasped.

'Oh, gad!' came in a gasping gurgle. 'Oh, gad! Urrrggh! Gad! Urrrggh.' The pink gentleman seemed to have no breath for more.

Five hikers came up with a rush.

'Bob, old chap—!'

'You're all right?'

'My esteemed Bob—'

'Right as rain!' said Bob, cheerily. 'You can hold him, if you like, Johnny—my arms ache a bit!' He relinquished the bridle to Johnny Bull. But the horse was quite quiet now, its wild excitement over.

'By gad!' The little old gentleman found his voice again. 'You're a brave lad, my boy—a very brave lad.'

'Not at all, sir.'

'What? What? Don't contradict me.' The pink gentleman's white eyebrows came together in a frown. 'I say you are a brave lad—a very brave lad—I might have been killed, by Jove—I say you are a very brave lad—do you hear?'

Bob Cherry grinned.

'Just as you like, sir!' he answered.

'Who are you—what's your name?' barked the pink gentleman.

'Cherry, sir.'

'What? What? Did you say Sherry?'

'Cherry!' said Bob.

'Cherry! Cherry! I shall remember that name, my boy. I am very much obliged to you, Sherry,' went on the pink gentleman, apparently forgetting it on the spot. 'You are a brave lad, Sherry! You have saved me from a fall. My mount was startled by a car—vile things—there were none on the roads in my young days. Noisy, nasty things—what? What? Parker warned me that he is not broke to cars—Parker was right! Give me my reins, boy.'

'I'll hold him as long as you like, sir,' said Johnny.

'What? What? How can I ride him in to the stables if you hold him?' barked the pink gentleman. 'Give me those reins.'

Johnny obediently handed over the reins: the juniors glancing rather anxiously up and

down the road to see whether any more cars were coming. That ‘gee’ plainly was not ‘broke’ to cars: neither did it seem to them that the pink gentleman was quite ‘broke’ to mettlesome mounts! However, there were no more cars in sight, and the horse was now very subdued, and the pink gentleman settled himself in the saddle, still gasping a little. While he gasped, he eyed the party.

‘Hikers?’ he asked.

‘That’s it, sir!’ answered Bob. ‘Hiking in the “hols”.’

‘Broken bottles—scraps of paper—litter all over the place, what, what?’ barked the pink gentleman. ‘Gates left open—cattle wandering—haystacks set on fire with cigarette-ends—what? What?’

‘Oh, my hat! No, sir!’ grinned Bob, ‘We’re not that sort of hikers, sir!’

‘Not at all,’ said Harry, smiling.

‘The not-at-allfulness is terrific, honoured sahib,’ said Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh. ‘There is no scrapfulness or litterfulness, and the shutfulness of the gates is a sine qua non, and there is no smokefulness of the absurd cigarettes.’

‘Good gad!’ said the pink gentleman, staring at him. Hurree Singh’s flow of English seemed to come as a surprise.

‘If you live about here, sir, you won’t see a sign of us, when we march in the morning,’ said Bob, reassuringly.

‘What? What? Are you camping here?’

‘Just yonder, sir, under that park fence.’

‘My park fence!’ barked the pink gentleman. ‘Well, well, well, perhaps it is fortunate that you were camping there, in the circumstances. Camp there by all means. I will send Parker to see that you have anything you need. Thank you once more, Kerry! I am much obliged to you, Kerry! You are a brave lad, Kerry. I think you said your name was Kerry?’

‘Cherry, sir.’

‘What? What? If your name is Cherry, why did you say that it was Kerry? Don’t you know whether your name is Cherry or Kerry? But never mind—never mind! You are a brave lad, Sherry, and I am much obliged to you.’

With that the pink gentleman rode on, the hikers carefully and politely refraining from grinning till his back was towards them. They watched him trot up the road, and turn in at the wide gateway they had passed some distance back: and it was rather a relief to see him disappear in at that gateway, safe from the cars that had multiplied on the roads since his young days!

‘Jolly old boy!’ said Bob.

‘Quite!’ said Harry, laughing.

‘The jolliffulness of the old boy is terrific,’ agreed Hurree Jamsset Rain Singh, ‘and the gladfulness is also great that he has gone home in one esteemed piece!’

‘Thanks to Bob,’ said Johnny. ‘Good for you, Sherry —I mean Kerry!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

The hikers walked back to their camp, Bob rubbing his arms as he went. There was an ache in those arms that was likely to linger for a good while: but the cheery Bob made little or nothing of it: and certainly all the hikers were glad that the pink gentleman, after his wild adventure, had got home in one piece!

CHAPTER 28 BUMPS FOR BUNTER

'I SAY, YOU fellows——'

'You fat villain!'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'Where's my pack?'

It was Bunter, at last! After a long, long rest, the fat Owl had surmounted that hill. He came down it at a pace slightly exceeding that of an old and tired tortoise. His spectacles flashed back the sunset, as he blinked to and fro for the hiking party. Even Bunter could not miss the camp by the roadside, under the park fence: and he rolled in, perspiring, dumped down his rucksack, and sat on it. But he did not dump down Bob Cherry's pack. No sign of that pack was visible anywhere about Bunter.

'You haven't left Bob's pack behind?' exclaimed Harry Wharton, as the fat Owl sat and mopped his brow.

'Oh! No! You—you see—'

'Where is it, then?' demanded Johnny Bull.

'The wherefulness is terrific,' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Six grim looks were fixed on the perspiring Owl. They all knew now why Bunter had volunteered to carry that pack. They expected him to follow on by very easy stages. But they really had not expected him to turn up without the pack. That was the limit, even for Bunter.

'Boot him!' suggested Johnny Bull.

'Oh, really, Bull—'

'Where's my pack?' roared Bob.

'You see—I—you—you see—!' stammered Bunter.

'I see that you've rolled in without it, you fat fraud. You bagged it because you knew we should have to wait for it, you spoofing octopus. Well, we've camped here to wait for you to crawl in with it. Now where is it?'

'Did you leave it on the road for some tramp to pick up?' asked Smithy.

'Oh, my hat!' exclaimed Bob. 'If it's gone—'

'Tain't!' gasped Bunter. 'It's quite safe under that tree. Nobody will spot it under that tree. Safe as houses for one of you fellows to fetch in the morning. I say, I'm hungry—What about supper?'

Supper, to Billy Bunter's fat mind, was the chief consideration, at the moment. Bob's pack he was prepared to dismiss as a trifle light as air. But the other hikers were not disposed to dismiss it so airily.

'Nothing about supper!' hooted Bob. 'You're going back for that pack—'

'What?' yelled Bunter.

'Get a move on.'

'You—you silly idiot!' gasped Bunter. 'Think I'm going over that hill again, with my legs nearly dropping off this minute?'

'You'd better, if you want any supper.'

'Beast!' groaned Bunter.

'Get gofully, my esteemed fat Bunter,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'Procrastination is the long lane that has no turntable, as the English proverb remarks.'

‘I—I—I say, you fellows—!’

‘Scram, you fat villain!’

‘I—I—I say, it—it’s no good my going back’ gasped Bunter. ‘I—I didn’t leave that pack under a tree. It— it’s gone!’

‘Gone!’ repeated Bob. ‘Where has it gone?’

‘That—that tramp had it!’ gasped Bunter. ‘That tramp, Dusty, you know—just—just like it happened before, you know, back in Hampshire. He—he rushed at me, and— and collared it—and—and walked off with it under his arm—’

‘Dusty did!’ shrieked Bob.

‘Yes, old chap—that tramp, you know. I—I ran after him for—for miles, but—but he dodged me, and—and got away with it— So it’s no good my going back for it, you know, as—as that tramp’s got it!’

‘Oh, crumbs!’ gasped Bob.

On the occasion of Bunter’s encounter with Dusty, in the wood at Hedges, he had been given the benefit of the doubt. But on this occasion there really was no doubt of which to give him the benefit. Certainly Dusty couldn’t have collared that pack, on the other side of the hill, when the hikers had found him asleep on the site of their camp under the pink gentleman’s park fence! Bunter, as yet unaware of that circumstance, rattled on: ‘I—I say, you fellows, I—I did all I could—I—I chased him for miles and miles and miles—but—but he got away with Bob’s pack, so—so it wouldn’t be any good if I—I went back for it, you see—’

‘You chased Dusty for miles and miles, on the other side of that hill—’ articulated Bob Cherry.

‘Yes, old fellow—miles and miles and miles—’

‘You burbling bandersnatch, Dusty was here when we got here!’ roared Bob, ‘and we buzzed him off with his leg tied up, and he hasn’t got it loose yet, wherever he is—’

‘Oh!’ gasped Bunter.

‘Any more crammers, you fat villain?’

‘Oh! Yes! No! I—I mean, I—I—I mean, it—it wasn’t Dusty!’ stuttered Bunter. ‘Now I come to think of it, it—it wasn’t Dusty collared that pack—it—it—it was a great big dog—’

‘A great big dog!’ gurgled Bob.

‘Yes, old chap—one of those Alsatians, you know. He—he rushed at it, and seized it in his teeth, and dashed off with it. I—I ran after him for—for miles and miles—’

‘Bump him!’

‘I say, you fellows—yaroooooh! Leggo!’ roared Bunter. But the hikers did not ‘leggo’.

They grasped the fat Owl on all sides, and heaved him up. Evidently they did not believe in that great big dog! Billy Bunter was not a light-weight: but many hands made light work! Up he went, and down he came, on Berkshire.

Bump!

‘Whoop! Leggo!’ yelled Bunter. ‘I say, you fellows, I tell you that tramp rushed at Bob’s pack and seized it in his teeth—I—I mean, that great big dog walked off with it under his arm—I mean—yaroooooh!’

Bump!

‘Oh, crikey! Leggo! I—I’ll go back for that pack if you like,’ shrieked Bunter. ‘It’s quite safe under that tree—’

Bump!

‘Ooooh!’

‘Give him another!’

‘Give him a dozen!’

‘Bump him terrifically!’

‘Hem!’ It was the sound of an apologetic cough. ‘If you young gentlemen are busy—!’

The young gentlemen were quite busy, bumping Billy Bunter: so busy that they had not noticed a man emerge by a wicket gate in the park fence, and come along to the camp.

However, at the sound of his voice, they dropped the fat Owl, and looked round.

They beheld a ruddy-cheeked man, with a faint grin on his ruddy face, and remembered that the pink gentleman had told them that he would send ‘Parker’ along. So they

guessed that this was Parker.

It was rather a hectic moment for Parker to arrive: but Billy Bunter, at least, was glad of the interruption. A breathless Owl sat in the grass and spluttered for wind, as the hikers gave their attention to Parker.

Parker had a large basket in his hand, at which they glanced.

‘From Sir George, gentlemen,’ said Parker.

‘Sir George?’ repeated Harry.

‘Sir George Hode, sir! One of you young gentlemen stopped his horse, I understand—a young gentleman named Berry.’

‘Cherry!’ said Nugent.

‘Cherry, sir! Yes, sir! Sir George is not very strong on names, sir—a little forgetful at times, sir,’ said Parker. ‘He did not seem quite sure whether the name was Berry or Kerry. Sir George is very grateful to the young gentleman who stopped his horse, sir, and he sent me along with this, and hopes you will accept it, for supper in your camp.’

Parker dumped down the basket.

‘Jolly old boy!’ said Bob.

Parker grinned.

‘Quite, sir,’ he said. ‘A little peppery at times, and doesn’t like contradiction, sir, but, as you say, ahem— jolly old boy! Sir George sent a message also, sir. He will be glad if you will all come to tea on the lawn at Hode Lodge to-morrow afternoon, sir, say about four o’clock. His nephew, sir, a schoolboy like yourselves, is expected to-morrow, and Sir George would like you to meet him, sir.’

The hikers exchanged glances. Evidently the pink gentleman was mindful of Bob Cherry’s service, if not of his name, and was disposed to be hospitable. His hospitality was quite acceptable to the Greyfriars hikers. Tea on the lawn at Hode Lodge was quite attractive. There was a general nodding of heads.

‘Please tell Sir George that we’ll come, with pleasure,’ said Harry Wharton, ‘and give him our thanks for sending us this.’

‘The thankfulness is terrific, esteemed Parker!’ said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh: a remark that made Parker blink for a moment.

‘Topping!’ said Bob. ‘We’ll all put on our best bibs and tuckers, you fellows, and we’ll make Bunter wash—’

‘Beast!’ came a breathless squeak from a fat Owl.

‘And Sir George says, sir, that the Lodge grounds are open to you, and if you’d like a dip in the swimming-pool in the morning, it’s at your service,’ said Parker.

‘Good man!’ said Bob. ‘Tell Sir George that he’s a broth of a boy, and that we’ll jump at it with both feet.’

‘Very good, sir!’ said Parker grinning. And he went in again at the wicket gate, leaving the Greyfriars hikers quite pleased with him, with Sir George, and with things generally. ‘Jolly old boy, and no mistake,’ said Bob, ‘and he can jolly well call me Sherry, or Berry, or Jerry, or Kerry, or anything he jolly well likes. Bit of luck we camped here after all.’ ‘The luckfulness was preposterous.’

‘By gum! That basket’s stacked!’ said Frank Nugent. ‘We can all do with a spot more supper—and there’s lots and lots—’

‘I say, you fellows!’

‘You fat villain!’ Billy Bunter had been disregarded, for the moment: now the hikers gave him their attention again. ‘You pernicious porpoise—’

‘Well, I like that!’ said Bunter, with an indignant blink. ‘I think you might thank a chap—’

‘What?’

‘Here you’ve got a whopping supper, for nothing,’ said Bunter, warmly, ‘and we’re all asked to tea at a jolly good show, and you wouldn’t have stopped here at all if it hadn’t been for me—’

‘Boot him!’ said Johnny Bull.

Bob Cherry laughed.

‘Well, something in that,’ he said. ‘We shouldn’t have stopped here, if that fat villain hadn’t diddled us over my pack. And we’ve struck lucky here. Look here, you podgy piffler, if you’ve left my pack in a safe place—’

‘Safe as houses!’ gasped Bunter.

‘After the tramp walked off with it under his arm, and that great big dog seized it in his teeth—’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Safe as houses, I tell you, behind that tree—nobody could spot it there. It’s all right—right as rain! I say, you fellows, what about supper? I say, I’ll unpack that basket, if you like.’

‘We can manage without the tent,’ said Bob. ‘We’ll take a walk in the morning and collect that pack. Now for an extra spot of supper, what?’

Billy Bunter almost forgot that he had been bumped, as two plump paws explored the pink gentleman’s hospitable basket. And that hospitable basket having been unpacked, there was an extra ‘spot’ of supper for six hikers, and a Gargantuan feed for one.

CHAPTER 29

BEASTLY FOR BUNTER!

‘I’LL mind the camp!’ said Billy Bunter.

‘And look here, I’ll wash up while you’re gone! There!’

‘You will?’ grinned Bob Cherry.

‘Yes, old chap! Nothing new for me to do most of the work, if you come to that!’ added Bunter.

It was a fresh bright morning.

Six hikers were up with the lark, while the seventh slept and snored. But for once Billy Bunter had been allowed to have his sleep and snore out, without a foot jamming into his fat ribs to murder sleep! The fat Owl was left to snore, while the other fellows, with towels over their arms, repaired to the swimming-pool in the grounds of Hode Lodge, which the pink gentleman had so hospitably placed at their disposal. They came back fresh and cheery and ready for breakfast: and then a scent of sausages frying over the cooking-stove drew Billy Bunter from the embrace of Morpheus. Bunter was not bothering about swimming-pools! Billy Bunter proceeded at once to the far more urgent and important business of packing foodstuffs within the capacious circle of his circumference. He was still going strong when breakfast was over for the rest of the party.

Bunter, while not neglecting to add to the cargo he had already taken aboard, blinked rather uneasily at the hikers as they debated the day's programme. As they had accepted the pink gentleman's invitation to tea on the lawn that afternoon, they would not be breaking camp till late in the day, and so had time to kill. First of all, Bob Cherry's pack had to be collected from the spot where Bunter had left it: after which, it was decided to take a saunter round the countryside, a look at the Thames, lunch at a riverside inn, and return to camp in the afternoon, in time to don their best bibs and tuckers, as Bob had expressed it, for tea with Sir George. That programme had been mapped out, and the hikers were ready to get a move on, when Billy Bunter weighed in. Bunter, it appeared, was not only willing to stay behind and mind the camp while they were gone, but actually to wash up during their absence: which would have surprised them, if they had not guessed that what Billy Bunter really wanted was to indulge in a prolonged laze. Which Bunter would have been very welcome to do, had not his guidance been required to spot the spot where he had left Bob's pack.

'Can't leave you behind, old fat man, said Bob, shaking his head. 'Jolly glad to, if we could—'

'The gladfulness would be truly terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'But the findfulness of the pack is a sine qua non.'

'Stir your stumps!' grunted Johnny Bull. 'You've got to show us where you left that pack, you fat fraud.'

'After that, you can sit down where you like, and as long as you like,' said Frank Nugent. 'Just now you're wanted.'

'Shift!' said Vernon-Smith.

Billy Bunter did not shift. He was always disinclined to shift, and several breakfasts, piled one on another, made him more disinclined than ever.

'Look here, you'll find that pack all right!' he said. 'I'll tell you exactly where I left it. Besides, who's going to mind the camp! Suppose that tramp came back—'

'That tramp won't come back,' said Bob. 'Dusty's hopped it for good. And if he did, you fat footling fraud, what use would you be?'

'Beast!'

'The camp doesn't want minding, Bunter,' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'We're going to dump the baggage inside that wicket gate, where it will be safe enough. Now get up and come on.'

Billy Bunter blinked at the hilly road. He disliked that hill. Half a mile uphill, and half a mile down to the spot where he had parked that pack, did not attract him in the very least.

When the hikers were on the march, the fat Owl had to march or be left on his own. But he was not going to exert himself in an extra morning's walk, if he could help it.

'Moving?' asked Smithy. He drew back his foot.

'Look here, you can find that pack without me,' howled Bunter. 'I tell you I can tell you exactly where it is. You keep off, Smithy, you beast! Nice way to treat a fellow you asked for the "hols"—'

'Well, where is it, exactly?' asked Bob. 'If we can find it without you, old fat man, you can sit it out, and welcome. Where did you leave it?'

'It's on the other side of the hill—'

'Somewhere between the Thames and the sea?' asked Bob. 'That's not quite precise enough.'

'It's under a tree, off the road—'

'There's a few thousand trees off the road. Which?'

Billy Bunter cogitated. He was very anxious to elude that hill. Certainly he could have found the spot again: but describing it was not too easy.

'It's under a beech tree—!' he said at last.

'Sure it's a beech?'

'Well, it might have been an oak—'

'You fat ass, was it a beech or an oak?'

'Well, it might have been an elm,' said Bunter thoughtfully.

'Which side of the road?'

'I forget—I—I—I mean, the left side—no, the right side—yes, I think it was the right side. I know it was one or the other,' added Bunter, apparently glad to be able to make that clear, at least.

Bob Cherry chuckled.

'That pack's under a beech, or an oak, or an elm, on one side of the road or the other!' he said. 'You fellows feel like hunting for a needle in a haystack?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Come on, Bunter.'

'Shan't!' hooted Bunter. 'I've told you exactly where to find that pack, and I can jolly well say—yaroooooh! Ow! Stoppit! Leggo my neck! Leggo my ear! I'm coming, ain't I?' And Bunter came!

There was no help for it—no rest for the wicked Bunter had to guide the hikers to that pack: after which, he was welcome to sit down where he liked and as long as he liked, while his more strenuous comrades explored the beauties of Berkshire. And the baggage having been dumped within the wicket gate for security during their absence, they started.

Six cheery hikers trailed over the hill: one un-cheery hiker lagging in the rear. Billy Bunter had disliked that hill. Now he hated it. However, he found a little comfort when they were over the top, and trailing downhill on the further side. Then commenced the search for the spot where he had taken his rest the day before. Billy Bunter, as he plugged on, blinking to and fro through his big spectacles, rather wished that he had noted more particularly on which side of the road that tree was, and whether it was a beech, an oak, or an elm. Indeed, by that time, he wished that he hadn't thought of that astute idea of getting a rest by annexing Bob's pack. It was a weary and perspiring fat Owl who halted, at last, under a shady tree, which after all turned out to be an ash.

‘Here!’ gasped Bunter.

There it was—behind the tree, where Bunter had reposed his fat limbs the previous afternoon. Luckily, no gentleman of Dusty’s species had chanced on it. There it was, where the fat Owl had left it: and Bob swung it up to his shoulders.

‘Good!’ said Bob. ‘If it hadn’t been found, you fat villain, I was going to boot you all over Berkshire, Oxfordshire, and Bucks.’

‘Beast!’ gasped Bunter.

He sat down under the tree.

‘Coming on?’ asked Bob. Bunter did not look as if he was coming on.

‘Shan’t!’

‘We’re going to do ten or twelve miles—’

‘Shan’t!’

‘Lovely country, and a walk by the Thames—’

‘Shan’t!’

‘Gentlemen, chaps, and fatheads,’ said Bob, ‘Think we could bear up, if we didn’t see Bunter again till we got back to Hode Lodge this afternoon?’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Apparently the hikers thought that they could bear up under such a parting. Certainly they looked very merry and bright as they swung on their cheery way, leaving the fat Owl to sit it out under the shady ash. Which the fat Owl duly did: till, later in the morning, he negotiated that hill again, like the weary ploughman in the poem homeward plodding his way, back to camp, where he found comfort and consolation in what remained in Sir George’s basket—in which he did not leave so much as a crumb.

CHAPTER 30 BROUGHT TO BOOK!

‘CARDEW!’

‘By gad!’ breathed the Bounder, a glitter in his eyes.

It was quite an unexpected meeting.

The hikers had not been much surprised to see Dusty in Berkshire, after having left him behind in Hampshire: aware that Dusty had followed the trail of Smithy’s wallet. But they were surprised to see Cardew. Certainly the St. Jim’s fellow was not trailing them: and he had good reasons, not for looking for them, but for keeping out of their way. What chance had led him to cross their path again, they could not guess. At all events, there he was!

Harry Wharton and Co. had had a long ramble, and lunch at an inn on the bank of the Thames: and in the early afternoon, they were on their way back to Hode Lodge. Now they were following a rather steep lane that led up to the road over the hill: a lane with many turnings winding among leafy trees. Just ahead of them, a cyclist came out of one of those turnings, and pushed on up the rise, not more than thirty yards in front of them. That cyclist, like themselves, was heading for the road on which Hode Lodge lay. He did not glance back, and did not see them: and in a moment his back was to them. But they had glimpsed his face as he came out of the side-lane: and they knew that white Panama hat and that gleaming, spotless bike. It was Cardew, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim’s.

‘By gad!’ repeated the Bounder, and he broke into a run.

The lane was steep: and Cardew had put his machine on its lowest gear. Then, still unconscious of peril behind, he stopped, dismounted, and wheeled his machine up the steep rise. The Bounder could have asked nothing better. The bicycle was not going to save Cardew this time!

Harry Wharton and Co. following on at a walk, exchanged rather glum glances. Only Johnny Bull gave a nod of approval, as Smithy cut after the cyclist at a rapid run. Johnny did not see why Cardew, having called the tune, should not pay the piper! It was time, in Johnny's opinion, for Cardew to be brought to book!

'No stopping Smithy now!' sighed Bob Cherry.

Harry Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

'We could hardly stop him at the cafe, with a crowd looking on,' he said. 'And now—!'

'We don't want a row,' said Nugent.

'Smithy does!' said Wharton, drily.

Snort, from Johnny Bull.

'Well, why not?' he demanded. 'Why shouldn't Smithy punch his cheeky head? Hasn't he asked for it, time and again?'

'Yes—but—'

'The askfulness was terrific,' agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'But the butfulness is also preposterous.'

'Let him have it!' said Johnny. 'I've had enough of his cheek, if you fellows haven't: and look here, if Smithy doesn't punch him, I jolly well will, so rats.' And Johnny gave emphasis to that statement, with a still more emphatic snort.

'He's got him!' said Bob.

Smithy had got him. He was close behind Cardew, when the St. Jim's fellow became aware of pattering footsteps, and glanced round. The next moment, Smithy had passed him, turned, and was standing in his way, blocking his path.

'Stop!' he said, grimly.

Cardew stared at him. The meeting was as much a surprise to him as to the Greyfriars juniors. He stared at Smithy, and then glanced round at the Famous Five, coming up. He breathed rather quickly.

On previous occasions, he had aired his careless, supercilious impertinence at their expense, and found it amusing. On each occasion, the discomfiture had been on their side. But the circumstances were altered now. This time there was no escape.

But he was perfectly cool. He had, at least, the courage of his faults: and he was not daunted.

'You fellows again!' he drawled. 'You keep on turnin' up like half-a-dozen bad pennies. Sorry I can't stay for a chat—I'm pushin' on to journey's end this afternoon. Mind gettin' out of the way, Smith?'

'You won't push on to journey's end just yet!' said the Bounder grimly. 'Stick that bike against a tree, and take off your jacket. You're going to put your hands up.'

'Six to one?' smiled Cardew. 'Is that Greyfriars style?'

Harry Wharton knitted his brows.

'You'll get fair play, Cardew!' he snapped. 'So far as I'm concerned, you could clear off, and good riddance to you.'

'Same here,' said Bob.

'The samefulness is terrific,' concurred Hurree Singh. 'But with the esteemed Smithy, the

boot is on the other leg.'

'We'll see fair play, Cardew!' said Nugent.

'He doesn't need telling that!' growled Johnny Bull.

'He knows he will get fair play—it's only his cheek. You can leave him to me, if you like, Smithy.'

'I don't like!' said Smithy. 'Are you ready, Cardew?'

'Not at all,' drawled Cardew. 'I don't choose to scrap with every tramp I meet on the road. If you don't get out of the way, Smith, I shall have to run this bike into you.'

'Will you?' said Smithy. He grasped the handlebars, and with a single powerful wrench, tore the machine away from Cardew's hands, and flung it crashing to the roadside. It curled up there in the grass.

Cardew panted.

'You ruffian—!' he breathed.

'That's enough from you!' said Vernon-Smith. 'You're going to use your hands, not your tongue, this time, you rat. Are you waiting for me to smack your face, to screw your courage up?'

Cardew's eyes gleamed at him like cold steel.

'No!' he said quietly. 'I'm going to thrash you till you can't crawl. I don't want to show up at my uncle's place looking like a prize-fighter—but I'll chance that. I'm going to thrash you.'

'Do—if you can!' said Smithy. 'Fair play, man to man—nobody else will lay a finger on you. If you beat me, I can take it—but if I don't knock some of the conceit and insolence out of you, I'll let them use my head for a football next term at Greyfriars.'

Cardew peeled off a well-fitting jacket. The supercilious nonchalance had vanished from his face now. It was savagely set. If he had desired to avoid a combat, it certainly was not from want of courage. Now that he was booked for it, he was as bitterly determined as the Bounder.

On the grass verge by the lane, they faced one another.

The Famous Five formed a ring, and Harry Wharton stood watch in hand to keep time.

'Two-minute rounds, one-minute rests,' he said.

'Any old thing!' drawled Cardew.

'Time!'

The Bounder, with gleaming eyes, came on to the attack. He was a little taller, and a little heavier, than his opponent, and undoubtedly the stronger of the two. But Cardew was more agile, with an elastic lightness of foot the Bounder lacked. They were, in fact, fairly well matched: and the outcome of the fight was on the knees of the gods. But it was probable that Smithy had more staying power, if the combat lasted long.

Cardew gave ground at first under the attack, contenting himself with defence: then, as the Bounder, angry and reckless, closed savagely in, he suddenly changed his tactics, and a swift upper-cut sent Smithy staggering back, to fall with a heavy thump in the grass. He sprawled there on his back, gasping.

Cardew rubbed his knuckles, and smiled. Smithy struggled up, but his head was singing, and he fell back again. Harry Wharton counted.

'One, two, three, four, five, six—'

The hikers looked on, rather anxiously. Four of them, if not five, would have been glad if that fight had not taken place at all, even after all the provocation the supercilious dandy

of St. Jim's had given. But now that it was on, their hopes and wishes were on Smithy's side. And there would have been something rather ridiculous in the Greyfriars champion getting knocked out in the first round, after forcing the fight. But fair play was the order of the day, and the captain of the Greyfriars Remove counted steadily.

'—seven—eight—'

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bob Cherry.

'Nine—!'

With a desperate effort, Smithy was on his feet again, flinging himself at his adversary. And it was hammer and tongs till Wharton called time.

CHAPTER 31 KNOCKED OUT!

'LOOK here, call it off!' muttered Bob Cherry.

'Call it off, for goodness sake,' murmured Nugent. And Hurree Jamset Ram Singh nodded his dusky head.

It was the seventh round.

Cardew, in the first round, had had luck. But that luck did not recur. The Bounder was not reckless now: he was as wary as he was fiercely determined. And as round succeeded round, his reserve of strength was telling. There was hard hitting on both sides, and both showed very visible signs of it. But in the seventh round, the Bounder's hitting was as hard as ever, while Cardew's was evidently beginning to lack weight. If the onlookers had had doubts at first, they had none now: for it was plain that Smithy was slowly but surely getting the upper hand.

Smithy, hard as nails, seemed to care nothing for the black bruise on his chin, a cut on his cheek, a stream of crimson from his nose. The slim and elegant dandy of St. Jim's was not made of such stern stuff. But there was no thought in Cardew's mind of giving in. He was, in fact, already licked, if he had chosen to know it. But nothing would have induced him to admit it, even to himself. He stood up unflinchingly to the fierce jab that came through his guard.

His good looks were sadly marred. His handsome Greek nose no longer looked Greek: it looked more like a beetroot. Both his eyes were darkening, and were evidently going to be very black. His strength, if not his courage, was failing: and the Famous Five looked on more and more uneasily. Very gladly they would have called it off. All were glad to hear the call of time again.

'Time!'

The Bounder dropped his hands and stepped back— steady on his pins. Cardew reeled away, and might have fallen, but Bob Cherry's strong arm caught him.

'Steady!' murmured Bob.

Cardew flung his helping arm aside, with a fierce gesture, and reeled against a tree, and leaned there, panting. Smithy, standing like a rock, looked at him with a sarcastic grin.

Harry Wharton stepped forward.

'That's enough!' he said, curtly. 'Call it a day!'

'For goodness sake, call it off!' exclaimed Nugent.

The Bounder shrugged his shoulders.

'Cardew can call it off, if he's licked!' he retorted. 'That's for him to say.'

Wharton compressed his lips.

‘Call it a draw!’ said Bob Cherry.

‘It’s not a draw!’ said the Bounder, coolly. ‘Cardew’s asked for this, begged and prayed for it, and he’s going to get what he’s asked for, till he owns up that he’s licked. I’ll leave it at that.’

Harry Wharton turned to the St. Jims junior, sagging against the tree, panting for breath.

‘Look here, Cardew—!’ he began.

‘You can save your breath,’ snarled Cardew.

‘You can’t go on—’ said Harry, sharply.

‘Pack it up!’

Cardew, evidently, meant to go on, at the call of time, whether he could or not. To admit defeat was intolerable to him. He was going on, at all events, so long as he could stand.

Wharton turned to the Bounder again.

‘Look here, Smithy, chuck it,’ he said. ‘You’ve got him licked, and that enough. You don’t want to rub it in.’

The Bounder hesitated for a moment. Perhaps he did want to rub it in. But his better nature prevailed, and he nodded.

‘Okay,’ he said, at last. ‘Call it a day, if you like. I’m done with him.’

‘That’s that!’ said Bob.

Cardew, with an effort, dragged himself from the tree-trunk.

‘You’re not done with me yet,’ he said, thickly. ‘Are you going to call time, Harry Wharton?’

‘No! You’re through—’

‘I’ll show you whether I’m through.’

And Cardew, without waiting for the call of time, rushed at the Bounder, his fists up, and his blackening eyes burning over them.

‘Look out, Smithy!’ exclaimed Johnny Bull.

But Smithy was looking out. He met Cardew’s rush with a left and right, and the St. Jim’s fellow’s blind jabs went anywhere. Left and right, right and left, the Bounder’s hard fists came home on his dizzy face, and he went with a crash to the ground.

‘Man down!’ murmured Bob.

Harry Wharton counted. He counted up to ten: but he might have counted to twenty or thirty, or a hundred. Cardew lay where he had gone down, unable to rise. Smithy gave him a look, and turned away. The fight was over.

‘May as well be pushing along,’ said Johnny Bull. He gave the Bounder a grin, as Smithy dabbed his face with his handkerchief. ‘By gum! You look a picture to go to tea with his Nibs this afternoon, Smithy.’

‘The picturefulness is preposterous!’ murmured Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh. ‘But what cannot be cured must lock the stable after the horse is stolen, as the English proverb remarks.’

‘Good old English proverb!’ chuckled Bob. ‘You’ll have to doctor your chivvy, Smithy, before we turn up to tea with the nobility and gentry. Better be pushing back to camp.’

They glanced back at Cardew. He was sitting up dizzily in the grass now. His aspect was striking. Both his eyes were black—his nose glowing crimson and swelling visibly. He was hardly recognizable as the cool, handsome, supercilious dandy of St. Jim’s. His half-closed eyes glittered at the Greyfriars fellows.

Harry Wharton, after a brief hesitation, went back to him. Cardew had asked for it, in fact begged and prayed for it as the Bounder had said: but never had a fellow looked so overwhelmed by what he had asked for and received—so utterly down and out.

‘Can I help you, Cardew?’ asked Harry, quietly.

‘No!’

‘You can’t ride your bike, in that state.’

‘That’s not your worry.’

Wharton breathed rather hard. But his tone was conciliatory, as he went on: ‘Look here, Cardew, you said something about being at journey’s end—is your uncle’s place anywhere near here?’

‘Find out!’

‘We’ll be glad to help you there, if you’ll let us.’

‘Mind your own business!’

Evidently Cardew did not want any help from the Greyfriars fellows. His defeat rankled too deeply for that.

‘That’s that!’ grunted Johnny Bull. ‘Come on!’

And the hikers resumed their way up the lane, heading for the camp at Hode Lodge. But it was long before Cardew stirred.

CHAPTER 32 UNEXPECTED!

BILLY BUNTER beamed.

‘Prime!’ he murmured.

Bunter’s fat face registered absolute satisfaction.

All the hikers looked very cheery. Tea on the lawn at Hode Lodge was undoubtedly attractive.

Promptly at four, they came up the drive from the gateway, and found all in readiness.

They were all in their best ‘bibs and tuckers’ for the occasion: even Bunter’s shirt was clean, and his fat face shone from an extra wash.

A trestle-table was laid under the shady branches of a great oak. Outside that circle of grateful shade, the August sun blazed down on smooth green grass, glowing flower-beds, and shone back from the many-windowed façade of Sir George’s mansion. And what was laid on that table caused Billy Bunter’s little round eyes to shine behind his big round spectacles. If Sir George was a forgetful gentleman, he had not forgotten that schoolboys have healthy appetites. There were ham sandwiches, and cheese sandwiches, and egg sandwiches, and jam sandwiches. There were cakes, and scones, and tarts, and biscuits. There were candied fruits, and ice-cream: and strawberries and cream—lots of strawberries and lots of cream! There were other good things, too numerous to enumerate. The pink gentleman’s gratitude to Bob Cherry was taking a form that was absolutely beatific to Billy Bunter, and quite pleasant and agreeable to the rest of the party.

Sir George welcomed his guests with a pink face beaming hospitality. He shook hands with them all, one after another, and learned all their names, which he appeared to forget the moment after he had heard them. But if he was a little vague, he undoubtedly was, in the opinion of all the hikers, a ‘jolly old boy’.

As Sir George had mentioned that he was expecting his nephew, a schoolboy like themselves, that afternoon, and desired them to meet, they rather expected to see him there. But there was no schoolboy to be seen. Only a butler hovered, to wait on the youthful guests.

‘None the worse, what, what?’ barked the pink gentleman, as he shook hands with Bob.

‘None the worse, I hope, Berry.’

‘Eh?’ Bob had almost forgotten the ache in his arms of the day before. ‘Oh! No! Right as rain, sir.’

‘You look fit,’ said the pink gentleman, approvingly. ‘Mens sana in what-do-you-call-it thingummy—you see I haven’t quite forgotten my Latin! You look very fit, Kerry!’

‘Thank you, sir—fit as a fiddle.’

‘Very good, very good, Sherry. And you—did you say your name was Mornington or Warrington?’

‘Wharton, sir,’ said Harry, striving not to smile.

‘Well, I know you all now,’ said the pink gentleman. ‘Let me see—Sherry, Warrington, Bullock, Nougat, Jampot Bang, Grunter, and Varney-Jones.’ His eye fixed on Vernon-Smith. ‘You’ve been fighting!’ he barked.

The Bounder coloured a little. He had ‘doctored’ his visage to the best of his ability: but it revealed unmistakeable signs of recent conflict. Certainly, it was nothing like Cardew’s: but it really was not the visage a fellow would have selected for a tea-party at a country mansion.

‘Only a spot of scrapping, sir!’ said Smithy. ‘Couldn’t really be helped—the other fellow asked for it.’

‘Well, well, Varney-Green, boys will be boys!’ said Sir George. ‘Never mind, never mind. Judson!’ He barked at the butler.

‘Yes, Sir George.’

‘You’ve seen nothing of my nephew yet?’

‘No, Sir George.’

‘Well, well, let us sit down,’ said the pink gentleman. ‘The boy is a rather thoughtless young rascal, but he may be here any minute—any minute! I should like him to meet you—especially Sherry. I want him to meet the brave lad who saved me from a fall. You are a very brave lad, Sherry. I might have had a bad fall—broken bones—what? What? I want you to meet my nephew! Unreliable young rascal—he phoned from Reading that he would be here this afternoon in time for tea—but where is he? What? What? Where is he?’

The pink gentleman stared at Bob, as he barked that question, as if he expected Bob to know. However, he went on without waiting for a reply.

‘Sit down, sit down, boys! Make yourselves at home!

We shall certainly not wait for that unreliable young rascal!

What? What? Here, Warrington—here, Sherry—here, Bullock—here, Grunter—did you say your name was Grunter or Shunter?’

‘Bunter!’ yapped the fat Owl.

‘Good gad, if your name is Bunter, why was I told it was Shunter—or Grunter? However, never mind, never mind! Sit down, Hunter.’

Bunter was glad, at any rate, to sit down. They all sat down in comfortable garden-chairs round the table, and Judson ministered to them. Billy Bunter did not require any

ministering. Bunter started at once, and continued without pause. Seldom had the fat Owl sat at so well-supplied a table: and he was not losing time. Bunter's fat face shone. For once the fat Owl was a picture of complete contentment. If this was hiking, Bunter was glad, after all, that Smithy had asked him for the 'hols', even though it had turned out to be only a hike! Billy Bunter could have hiked, on these lines, for the rest of his natural life.

There was a cheery hum of conversation, in which Bunter was too busy to take part. The pink gentleman did most of the talking, though not often waiting for replies. Every now and then he glanced down the drive towards the gateway, obviously in expectation of an arrival: and several times he muttered 'Unreliable young rascal!' apparently in allusion to the expected nephew. It was clear that the pink gentleman was attached to that schoolboy nephew, and looked forward to his arrival: and the juniors could not help thinking that that unknown nephew was lucky to have such a 'jolly old boy' for an uncle. They rather hoped that he would arrive before they left. But as yet there was no sign of him.

'Let me see—what did you say was the name of your school?' asked Sir George, after one of his glances down the drive. 'Did you say Blackfriars or Whitefriars, Partington?' 'Greyfriars, sir!' said Harry.

'Oh! Yes! Greyfriars!' The pink gentleman nodded. 'Good show—turns out fine young fellows, what? What? You are a credit to your school, Kerry.'

'Not at all, sir,' murmured Bob.

'What? What? Don't contradict me, Berry. I remember my nephew has mentioned Greyfriars, in his letters from school. Yes, by Jove, I am sure I remember. He has played cricket there, I think. Does your school play St. Jim's, Mornington?'

The hikers all sat up and took notice, as it were, at once. They were quite interested to learn that Sir George's nephew was a St. Jim's man.

'Oh, yes, sir,' answered Harry. 'We played St. Jim's at cricket only a few weeks ago—the junior team: Tom Merry's crowd—'

'By Jove! Very likely you have met my nephew already, then!' exclaimed the pink gentleman, evidently pleased by the idea. 'Old acquaintances, what? What? He will be glad to meet you here! The young rascal is late—he is very often late—I——'

Sir George was interrupted.

Smash!

Judson dropped a plate.

The pink gentleman jumped, and stared at him.

'Judson! What—what—what—?'

The butler did not answer. He did not even look at Sir George. He stood staring at the drive, blankly, as if petrified by something he saw there. Sir George's white eyebrows contracted over his pink face.

'Judson! What is the matter with you? What—what—what—?' Then he turned his head, and stared in the direction in which the startled Judson was staring. All the tea-party looked in that direction excepting Billy Bunter. Bunter did not look up from the foodstuffs.

'Good gad!' gasped Sir George.

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bob Cherry.

'Cardew—!' breathed Nugent.

'That chap—'

‘What is he doing here?’

The hikers could only stare in amazement. From the gateway, coming slowly up the drive, was a startling figure. It was that of a schoolboy with a swollen crimson nose and two black eyes. The hikers had almost forgotten Cardew. They had not expected to see him again. Now they saw him, coming up the drive at Hode Lodge.

Sir George jumped up so hurriedly that his chair flew over backwards. He gazed at the approaching figure with bulging eyes, gasping.

‘What—what—what——?’ His voice was quite faint.

‘Judson! Is—is—is—is that—is that—?’ His voice seemed to fail.

Judson gasped too.

‘That is Master Ralph, sir!’

‘Good gad! My nephew—in such a state—what has happened? What can have happened?’

Ralph! My nephew! My dear boy! My poor boy! Ralph!’

Forgetful of his guests, the pink gentleman rushed towards the drive. He tore down the drive to meet the dilapidated St. Jim’s junior as he came. Judson followed him more slowly. Harry Wharton and Co., all on their feet now, looked at one another with utterly dismayed looks. The awful truth dawned on them!

‘Cardew—!’ breathed Bob.

‘That jolly old boy’s nephew—’ stuttered Nugent.

‘Cardew—the nephew he was expecting!’ gasped Harry Wharton. ‘That—that—that old boy is the uncle he mentioned—’

‘Oh, holy smoke!’ said Johnny Bull.

‘Oh, great pip!’ muttered the Bounder.

‘The great pipfulness is terrific!’

Billy Bunter blinked up.

‘I say, you fellows? Anything the matter?’ he asked. ‘I say, shove the ice-cream this way, Bob.’

Nobody heeded Bunter. Six hikers stood overwhelmed with dismay. In the midst of their enjoyment of Sir George’s unbounded hospitality, Sir George’s expected nephew arrived—and his nephew was Cardew, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim’s—and he came tottering with a swollen crimson nose and two black eyes, looking like a prize-fighter who had gone through a particularly tough time. It was just overwhelming!

‘You ass, Smithy!’ muttered Bob.

‘How was a fellow to know—?’

‘Never mind that now.’ Harry Wharton was the first to grasp the situation. ‘We’ve got to get out of this— Cut!’

At a distance, on the drive, the pink gentleman had reached Cardew. He had forgotten his guests, and they were glad to be forgotten. He was fluttering over Cardew like a distressed hen over a chick. It was not in accordance with the best traditions of good manners for guests to depart, suddenly and hurriedly, without a word to their host. But clearly the hikers’ best bet was to get going, and to get going at once. One of them had hammered Sir George’s favourite nephew black and blue: and the sooner they disappeared from the scene, the better.

‘Come on!’ said Bob. ‘Get a move on, Bunter.’

‘Eh?’

‘Quick—we’ve got to go—’

‘What?’

‘Shift, you fat ass,’ hissed Johnny Bull.

‘Oh, don’t be a silly goat!’ yapped Bunter. ‘I’m not half-finished yet. I say, shove the ice-cream this way, will you?’

Billy Bunter never tasted that ice-cream. Bob Cherry grasped his collar, and heaved him up. Bunter uttered a yell of protest: but his yell was not heeded: Bob started at a run, and Billy Bunter had to accompany him. The grip on his collar was not to be denied. He spluttered with indignation as he went.

‘Beast! Leggo! I say, I haven’t had any of the strawberries yet—groooogh! I—wait, wait a minute—will you leggo—groooogh!’

It was a swift retreat. Indeed it was a rapid flight. In a matter of moments, the hikers reached the little wicket gate in the park fence, and in a matter of a few moments more, grabbed up their packs. The pink gentleman, fluttering over Cardew on the drive, had no eyes for them: and they surged breathlessly through the wicket to the road, Billy Bunter spluttering frantically as he surged along with them.

‘March!’ gasped Bob.

‘I say, you fellows—!’ yelled Bunter.

‘Yank him along!’

‘Yaroooh!’

It was as quick a march as the hikers had put up at Mr. Bunce’s place in Sussex. Hode Lodge, and Sir George, and Cardew, were left behind—rapidly. What transpired at Hode Lodge, after their hurried departure, they did not know, and did not want to know. All they wanted was to fade out of the picture without delay—and they did: to an accompaniment of exasperated and indignant splutters from the fattest member of the party.

CHAPTER 33 THE LAST STRAW

‘JOLLY!’ said Bob Cherry.

How often the cheery Bob had pronounced it ‘jolly’, during that hike, his comrades could hardly have computed.

But it really was ‘jolly’.

It was the following day, and a glorious summer’s morning.

Bright sunshine streamed down on dusky woods, green meadows, blue hills, and the shining waters of the Kennet, rolling on its way to join Father Thames at Reading.

The Greyfriars hikers had camped—at a considerable distance from Hode Lodge—in quite a delightful spot. Now they sat at breakfast, under shady branches, by a path that followed the bank of the river.

At a little distance was a little thatched cottage, with a long garden bright with tall hollyhocks, and a board on the gate which read BOAT FOR HIRE. Bob’s eyes lingered on that board.

‘I say, you fellows—’

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo! Enjoying life, old fat man?’

‘I say, isn’t there any more?’ demanded Bunter. He blinked round anxiously and peevishly through his big spectacles.

‘There’s the sardines—’ said Harry.

‘I’ve had the sardines.’

‘Well, there’s the ham—’ said Nugent.

‘I’ve finished the ham.’

‘You’ll have to fill up on jam, then. Nothing else,’ said Bob.

‘I’ve had the jam.’

‘Nothing more till lunch then, you fat cormorant.’

‘Oh, crikey!’

Billy Bunter leaned back against a tree, frowning. This, in Bunter’s opinion, was the limit. Breakfast had eliminated all the provender in the rucksacks. Supplies had to be renewed, en route, for lunch later. But Bunter was not thinking of lunch later. He was thinking of breakfast in the present tense. He had disposed of only as much as any other three fellows in the party. And there was nothing more.

He sat and frowned.

With the selfishness to which he was only too sorrowfully accustomed, the other hikers did not seem to worry because there was no fourth and fifth breakfast to follow the three Bunter had already packed away. Bob Cherry pointed to the board on the cottage gate.

‘What about putting in the morning here, and having a boat out?’ he asked. ‘A change from foot-slogging, what?’

‘Jolly good idea!’ agreed Nugent.

‘The goodfulness of the idea is terrific.’

‘I say, you fellows—’

‘Like to come on the water, Bunter?’ asked Harry.

‘No, I jolly well wouldn’t! If you fellows like to slog about in the sun, you can. I’m not going to.’

‘Okay! Sit it out, old fat man, while we slog about in the sun,’ said Bob, cheerily. ‘Come on, you chaps, and let’s see about the boat.’

‘I say, you fellows!’ yelled Bunter. ‘What about grub?’



Harry Wharton laughed.

‘Trust Bunter to think of that,’ he said. ‘Like to cut off and do some shopping while we’re out in the boat, Bunter?’

Billy Bunter’s fat lip curled.

‘That’s right!’ he said, sarcastically. ‘Put it all on me, as usual.’

‘Well, if we’re putting in the morning here, we shall want something for lunch,’ said Vernon-Smith. ‘Bunter can cut off—’

‘Beast!’

‘It’s only half a mile to the high road,’ said Bob. ‘You can pick up a bus into Reading—’
‘Shan’t!’

‘Look here, it’s time that fat slacker did a turn!’ grunted Johnny Bull. ‘How often has he done a turn, on this hike?’

‘Not often!’ agreed Bob. ‘He washed up once—’

‘Not till he was kicked.’

‘He fetched the grub once, back in Hampshire—’

‘And now he can jolly well fetch it again!’ growled Johnny. ‘Look here, lazybones, it’s only half a mile to pick up a bus—’

‘Shan’t!’

‘Oh, boot him!’ growled Johnny.

‘Beast!’

Really, there seemed no adequate reason why Bunter, since he did not want to join in the boating, shouldn’t do the shopping while the other fellows boated. It was quite a brief

walk by a pleasant woodland path to the high road, where buses rolled to and from Reading. On the other hand, Bunter was sitting down! When Bunter was sitting down, Bunter liked to stay sitting down. Sitting down was, in fact, his long suit. He gave the hikers a morose blink through his big spectacles. That bright morning, Billy Bunter was not only lazy, which was his perpetual state: he was indignant. Bunter had a grievance, added to all the other grievances that had accumulated during that hike. He had been snatched away from that feast of the gods at Hode Lodge—before he had even tasted the strawberries, too! He had been walked off his little fat legs. Now he had not even had enough for breakfast! And they wanted him to do the shopping while they messed about in boats! Words could hardly have done justice to the fat Owl's indignation.

And there was worse to come! Billy Bunter really could hardly believe his fat ears as Bob Cherry went on:

'Never mind lunch! Cut lunch, and have a high tea somewhere on the road afterwards, what?'

Bunter gazed at him! The other fellows nodded assent. How any fellow in his sane senses could assent to such a proposition, was beyond Billy Bunter's comprehension. But they all assented quite readily and cheerfully, just as if a meal was a trifle light as air, and not a matter of which the importance could hardly be exaggerated!

'You silly idiot!' gasped Bunter. 'Did—did——did you say cut lunch?'

'Just that, old fat man.'

'Mad?' gasped Bunter. 'Look here, if you think I'm going to cut lunch, you're jolly well mistaken, see? I've had hardly anything for brekker, and I shall want my lunch! If this is the way you treat a fellow, Smithy, after asking him for the "hols"—'

'Aren't you enjoying the hike?' asked the Bounder.

'Beast! You ask a fellow for the "hols", and this is the sort of "hols" you land him in—walking a fellow off his legs, landing everything on him, and keeping him short of grub! I can tell you that I'm jolly well fed up with you. And if you think I'm going to cut lunch—'

'Cheerio, Bunter!'

Six fellows moved off in the direction of the boatman's cottage. Billy Bunter glared after them with a glare that might almost have cracked his spectacles. Hiking had already palled on Bunter. Even home, sweet home, had its attractions in comparison. And this was the last straw! At that moment, Billy Bunter's fat mind was made up!

'I say, you fellows!' he yelled. 'Stop a minute!'

They looked back.

'Coming in the boat?' asked Bob.

'No!' hooted Bunter. 'If you're all too jolly lazy to do the shopping, and want to put everything on me as usual, I'll go.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Apparently the awful prospect of cutting lunch stirred the fat Owl to action. He heaved himself to his feet. As Bunter had—or hadn't!—left all his wealth at home, shopping-money was contributed, in equal proportions, by the six other hikers, with a list of supplies required. Then they re-started for the boatman's cottage: leaving the fat Owl at the camp, with the cash in one fat hand, and the shopping-list in the other. He had only one remark to make as they went: 'Beasts!'

That was the last they heard from Bunter.

After which, sad to relate, they quite forgot his fat existence! It was undoubtedly 'jolly', as Bob Cherry declared, in a boat on the Kennet, and the Greyfriars hikers thoroughly enjoyed that bright summer's morning on the river. Certainly, they did not guess how long it was going to be, before they saw Billy Bunter again. But even if they had guessed, it was just possible that they might have enjoyed that sunny morning on the Kennet none the less!

CHAPTER 34

BILLY BUNTER'S FAREWELL!

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!'

'Where's Bunter?'

'The wherefulness is terrific!'

'Not back yet, by gum!'

'That lazy fat slacker—!'

Six happy hikers had returned to camp. They had had an enjoyable morning in the boat on the river. And they had come back with quite healthy appetites: rather glad that, after all, Billy Bunter had decided to do the shopping, and that there would be lunch.

But—!

Billy Bunter was not visible.

It was three or four hours since they had left him. They had expected Bunter to move to slow motion. They had expected him to linger in Reading for a feed before he started back. They had expected him to take a series of rests, with a fat paw dipping into the shopping-bag at each of them. All this, knowing their Bunter, they had expected. But they had not expected to find him still absent when they came back to camp after three or four hours. Absent, however, he was! The camp was there: the baggage was there: but no Bunter was there.

'Bunter!' roared Bob Cherry. 'Bunter! Bunt! Bunt!'

Echo answered 'Bunt'. But there was no other answer. Bunter was not in sight, and he was not in hearing! There was no Bunter!

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' exclaimed Bob, suddenly. 'What's this?'

'This' was a leaf torn from a pocket-book, on which the shopping-list had been written. Bunter had not taken it with him. It was pinned to the trunk of the tree under which the hikers had breakfasted, by the simple method of jamming a fork through it into the bark. Evidently, it had been pinned there to catch the eyes of the hikers when they returned. It was the back of the shopping-list that met the eye. On it was pencilled a message in a scrawling, sprawling hand, easily recognizable as Bunter's, and in a variety of orthography still more easily recognizable as Bunter's.

The hikers gathered round it, and gazed at it. It ran:

Beests!

I'm not kumming back! I'm phed up with the lot of you! Smithy diddled me over the hols, and you can tell him from me that I despize him. Wawking a fellow off his leggs, putting evverything on him, and keping him short of grubb.

I'm borrowing the munny to pay my tran fair. Of corse I shall settle up next term at

Greyfriars, as soon as I receive a postal-order I'm expecting. I'm nearly borrowing it for a tyme, as I had left all my munny at Bunter Court. I'm turning you down, the lot of you, and you can jolly well get on the best you can without me. And you needn't think I shall cum back like Smithy did if you kum after me, either. I'm taking the trane home from Redding, and you can go and eat coak.
Yores with skorn,

PS. Yore a lot of beests. PPS. Kads!

W. G. Bunter.

Such was the epistle that Billy Bunter had left behind, to greet the eyes of the hikers. Billy Bunter was gone! He had turned them down! He had shaken the dust of that hike from his feet, so to speak, and he had paid his train fare home with the cash allocated for shopping! There was not going to be any lunch! And there was not going to be any Bunter! Not till the next term at Greyfriars School were they to have the pleasure—or otherwise—of beholding that fat face again!

The hikers gazed at that epistle. Then they gazed at one another. Then there was a roar:

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, my hat!' gasped Bob Cherry. 'Bunter's turned us down—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'No more Bunter—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Somebody lend me a hanky to weep into—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

If Billy Bunter had anticipated that that scornful farewell would be a blow, it was a blow that the hikers bore with great fortitude. The banks of the Kennet echoed to their merriment.

'No lunch,' said Bob. 'No Bunter! Pack up and march!'

There was no lunch! There had to be a march before there was meal. But the hikers did not seem to mind. Six faces were merry and bright as they packed and marched, really as if they were going to enjoy that hike all the more after losing the fascinating company of Bunter the Hiker.

THE END