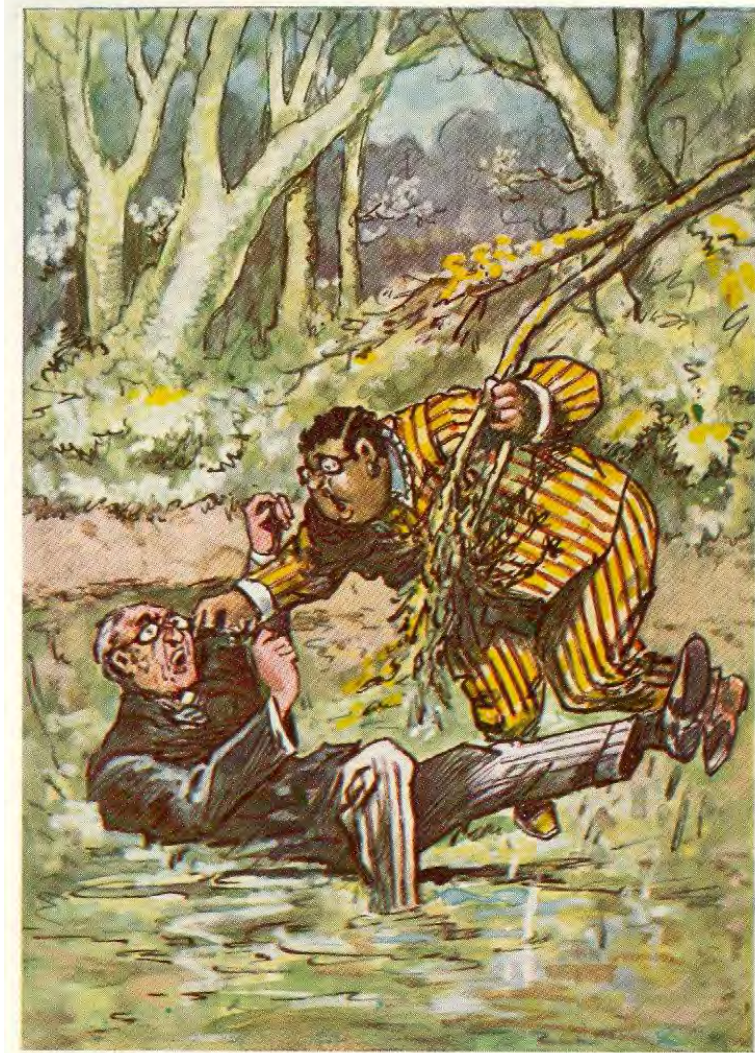


BUNTER KEEPS IT DARK

By

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WITH HIS RIGHT HAND HE REACHED DOWN TO DR. LOCKE

CHAPTER 1

BAD LUCK FOR BUNTER

'BOB, old chap—'

'Shush! '

'But I say—'

'Quiet! '

'Oh, really, Cherry! I——'

'BUNTER!'

A voice, not loud but deep, interrupted Billy Bunter's whisper.

Whispering in class was not encouraged in the Greyfriars Remove. Fellows were expected to listen in attentive silence to their form-master's words of wisdom. And sometimes Mr. Quelch's ears seemed as keen as his gimlet-eyes. Those gimlet-eyes fixed sharply on William George Bunter.

'Bunter! Are you talking in class?'

'Oh! No, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'I never opened my mouth, sir! I only said to Cherry—I—I mean I didn't said—'

'Silence! '

Billy Bunter breathed hard.

Silence did not really agree with Bunter. His fat voice was music to his own plump ears, if to no others. But after that bark from Quelch, even Billy Bunter would have remembered that silence was golden, in normal circumstances.

But the circumstances were not quite normal.

Bunter had had bad luck in second school that morning. He had 'skewed' in con even more egregiously than was his happy wont. As a result, he had been kept in during morning break. While the rest of the Remove crowded out into summer sunshine, Bunter had had to sit it out in the dusky form-room, with a Latin grammar for company.

Not that Bunter was, like Harry Wharton and Co. and most of the other fellows, keen on the fresh air and the open spaces. Even on a summer's morning he would have preferred to stretch lazy fat limbs in an armchair in the Rag.

But the juniors had their letters in break. Billy Bunter was always one of the first to scan the letter-rack. He was expecting a postal-order. But on this particular morning the rack had had to be left unscanned. Naturally, Bunter wanted to know whether there was one for him.

Almost any fellow could have told him, when the Remove came in for third school. It needed only an exchange of whispers. But Bunter's first whisper had been nipped in the bud, as it were.

It was very irritating to Bunter. If there was a letter for him in the rack, it might contain the postal-order he had long been expecting. That possibility far out-weighed, in importance, anything that was going on in the Remove form-room: or indeed in the whole universe.

Latin grammar was the order of the day in third school.

Quelch was expounding to his form the mysteries of deponent verbs, which Bunter specially loathed. Any Latin verb was beastly: but a wretched verb which was passive in form but active in meaning was doubly so. With the thought of a possible postal-order in his fat mind, Bunter simply couldn't concentrate on deponent verbs. Quelch's voice passed him by like a drone in the distance.

However, in dread of the gimlet-eye, the fat Owl of the Remove contrived to keep silent for several minutes. Then he was whispering again. This time he whispered very low:

'I say, Wharton—'

That whisper was very low, and did not reach Mr. Quelch's keen ears. Neither did it reach Harry Wharton's. The captain of the Remove gave no sign.

'Inky, old man—!' breathed Bunter, a little more loudly.

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh heard, but like the ancient gladiator, he did not heed. Probably he did not want to draw a gimlet-eye in his direction.

'Bull, old chap—'

No sign from Johnny Bull. 'Wibley, old fellow—'

Wibley, old fellow, seemed deaf or dumb. 'Nugent! I say, Franky, old man—'

'Quiet, you fat ass!' whispered Frank Nugent.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter. 'I—I—I mean—I say, Franky, old chap—did you notice whether there was one for me—?'

'BUNTER!'

'Oh, crikey!'

'You are whispering again, Bunter.' Quelch's voice was louder and deeper. He gave the verb 'hortor' a momentary rest, while he transferred his attention to the fattest member of his form. 'You are not listening to me, Bunter.'

'Oh, yes, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I heard every word you were saying, sir! Every sus—sus—syllable, sir.' He wondered dizzily what Quelch might have been saying!

'Indeed,' said Mr. Quelch, grimly. 'Tell me the meaning of the verb "hortor", Bunter.'

'Oh, lor!'

He blinked dismally at Quelch through his big spectacles. As 'hortor' was the deponent verb on which Quelch had been expounding, the fat Owl should not really have been at a loss for an answer. But as he had not listened to a single word, he was quite in the dark. And if Bunter had ever known what 'hortor' meant, he had forgotten. Bunter had quite a remarkable gift of forgetting anything he learned in the form-room, a minute or so after he was outside its door.

'Did you hear me, Bunter?' Quelch's voice deepened still more.

'Oh! Yes, sir! Certainly, sir.'

'Then answer me.'

Faintly, from Bob Cherry, came a whisper. It was risky, but Bob, always good-natured, ventured to give the hapless Owl first-aid.

'Exhort!' he breathed.

'Oh!' Billy Bunter brightened, as that faint whisper reached a fat ear. 'I know, sir! It means exhort, sir.'

'Cherry!' rapped Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' stammered Bob.

'Did you whisper to Bunter?' Undoubtedly Quelch's ears were very keen that morning.

'Yes, sir!' mumbled Bob, with a crimson face.

'You will take fifty lines, Cherry, for whispering in class. Now, Bunter, you will give me the meaning of "hortabar".'

This time Billy Bunter was not dismayed. Having assimilated 'hortor', he could deal with this. He knew the passive form. Unfortunately he did not remember, at the moment, that 'hortor', being a deponent, took the passive form when it was really on the active list.

'Yes, sir—"hortabar". I was exhorted!' said Bunter, quite cheerfully.

'What?' hooted Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Is—is—isn't that right, sir?' stuttered Bunter.

'It is not right, Bunter, as you would be aware if you had given attention to the lesson. "Hortor" is a deponent, Bunter, taking the passive form while active in meaning. If you had been listening to me—'

'Oh! Yes, sir! I—I—I forgot——'

'You forgot, Bunter?' thundered Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! No! I—I don't mean that I forgot, sir—I—I—I only meant that I—I didn't remember, sir!' babbled Bunter.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Silence in the class! Bunter, I warn you to give me your attention. If you whisper again in class, I shall cane you.'

Billy Bunter sat silent, but with deep feelings. Quelch's voice droned on, tracking that wretched verb 'hortor' through all its windings and twistings. Bunter, really and truly, didn't want to know about deponent verbs: he wanted to know whether there was a letter for him, which might happily contain that long-expected postal-order.

But for quite a long time, Bunter remained mum. Then, as Quelch turned to the blackboard, and picked up the chalk, to illustrate the subjunctive of 'hortor', the fat Owl seized the opportunity to whisper again.

'Bob, old fellow—'

Bob Cherry gave him a glare. He did not know what Bunter was whispering about, and did not want to know. Neither did he want to draw a gimlet-eye. But a glare did not deter Bunter.

'Was there one for me, old chap?' he breathed.

Bob Cherry nearly asked, 'One what?' But he checked in time. However, Billy Bunter proceeded to elucidate.

'I told you I was expecting a postal-order, old chap! I say, was there a letter for me in the rack?'

Then Bob understood: and he shook his head. He was able to give an answer to that question without speaking. The answer was in the negative. A shake of the head was enough—or should have been enough. But Billy Hunter never could let well alone.

'I say, sure?' he breathed. 'I say, Cherry, you sure there ain't one for me? I was jolly well expecting—'

'BUNTER!'

'Oh, lor!'

Mr. Quelch had turned from the blackboard. He laid down the chalk, and picked up his cane. The pluperfect subjunctive, like Schubert's celebrated symphony, remained unfinished. Bunter had been warned that if he whispered again the cane would come into action. Now he had it coming.

'You are whispering again, Bunter. It seems that you will not attend to the lesson. Bunter. Stand out before the form. Bunter!'

'I—I—I—I never—'

'At once.'

An apprehensive fat Owl rolled out of his place. 'Bend over that desk, Bunter.'

Whop!

'Ow! wow! wow! wow!'

Latin verbs resumed the even tenor of their way in the Remove form-room. The juniors continued to absorb valuable knowledge of subjunctives: imperfect, perfect, and pluperfect. Billy Bunter sat and wriggled. And the looks he gave Mr. Quelch, when that gentleman's majestic head was turned, might almost have cracked his spectacles.

CHAPTER 2

A NEW USE FOR A DICTIONARY

TAP!

Mr. Quelch frowned.

A tap at the form-room door interrupted the lesson.

Quelch frowned: but almost every other face in the form-room brightened. Quelch did not like interruptions in class. In that he differed from most of his form. Even studious fellows like Harry Wharton or Mark Linley did not object to a brief respite from Latin verbs. With most of the juniors, a few subjunctives went quite a long way.

The Remove master glanced impatiently at the door as it opened. A chubby face appeared there: that of Trotter, the House page. Before he could speak, Quelch rapped out like a bullet:

'Well?'

'If you please, sir—!' began Trotter.

'Be brief!'

'Oh! Yes, sir! Head-master would like to see you for a few minutes, sir, in the Sixth Form room, sir.'

'Very good!' snapped Mr. Quelch.

Although Quelch said that it was very good, his look did not indicate that it was good at all. But a request from Dr. Locke had to be respectfully regarded, even in the middle of a lesson, disconcerting as it was. The Remove master glanced over his form, and his frown deepened as he did not fail to note signs of general relaxation.

'I shall leave you for a few minutes,' he said. 'You will write out the pluperfect tense, subjunctive mood, of "hortor" while I am absent.'

The door snapped shut after Mr. Quelch.

There was an immediate buzz of voices. A minute ago, not a fellow had ventured to whisper. Now they nearly all talked at once, and there was quite a hubbub.

'Beast!' was Billy Bunter's first remark: and he shook a fat fist at the door—after it had closed.

Bob Cherry stretched his long legs with a sigh of relief. 'Anybody glad of a rest?' he asked.

'The gladfulness is terrific!' grinned Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

'Let's hope the Head will keep him till the hour's up!' said Frank Nugent.

Harry Wharton laughed.

'Not a hope!' he answered. 'The old boy will be back in a few minutes. Better keep your places you fellows—Quelch isn't in the best of tempers this morning.'

Some of the juniors jumped up, and sat on their desks—on the alert, however, to slip back in haste, if the door-handle turned. Quelch was not at his bonniest that morning: and the afternoon was a half-holiday, and nobody wanted to risk a detention. But if Mr. Quelch really expected his form to devote their attention to the pluperfect tense of that attractive verb 'hortor' during his absence, he had another guess coming. Conversation was quite brisk in the Remove room: but not a syllable of it referred to subjunctive moods or pluperfect tenses.

Harry Wharton and Co. were looking forward to cricket that afternoon: Skinner and Co. to a trip out of bounds complete with smokes: Wibley to a rehearsal of Uncle Tom's Cabin by the members of the Remove Dramatic Society: Lord Mauleverer to a luxurious laze under a shady tree—in fact everyone had something more attractive than deponent verbs to think about. But strange to relate, Billy Bunter's voice, which was generally heard in

season and out of season, was silent. Billy Bunter was thinking—with a gleam in the little round eyes behind the big round spectacles.

Billy Bunter was resentful—indeed vengeful. Like most plump persons. Bunter was generally placable. But he had been sorely tried that morning, 'kept in' during break, and finally 'whopped'. Gladly would Bunter have caused Quelch to 'sit up' in return: and now it seemed to him that opportunity knocked. He was thinking it out while the other fellows talked: he was, in fact, like the deponent verbs he disliked so much, passive in form but active in meaning! And suddenly he rose and rolled out of his place.

'Sit down, fathead!' called out Bob Cherry. 'Quelch may be back any minute.'

Bunter did not heed.

He rolled over to his form-master's desk. His proceedings there caused most of the juniors to stare at him in surprised inquiry. From that desk Bunter picked up a volume: *Dr. Smith's Larger Latin Dictionary*—quite a hefty volume. He tucked it under a fat arm, and then, with the other arm, collected the high chair from the desk.

'What on earth's that game, Bunter?' asked Bob.

'You fat, foozling, frabjous ass!' said Johnny Bull. 'If you play tricks on Quelch, he will skin you when he comes in.'

'The skinfulness will be terrific, my esteemed idiotic Bunter!'

'Chuck it, fathead,' said Vernon-Smith.

Still Bunter did not heed. Laden with the high chair and the hefty volume, he rolled towards the door, watched now by all the Remove. The juniors could only wonder what the fat Owl was up to.

They were soon enlightened, however.

Billy Bunter turned the door-handle, and set the form-room door a few inches open. Then he clambered on the chair, gasping a little as he heaved up the weighty volume. Standing on the chair, he placed that volume on top of the door, resting against the lintel.

'Bunter!' exclaimed Harry Wharton. He stared, quite aghast.

'You dithering ass—' roared Bob Cherry. 'Chuck it!'

'Oh, my hat! Stop it, you fat chump!'

'By gum, if Quelch gets that—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Look out for squalls, Bunter, if Quelch gets that on his napper.'

Billy Bunter, unheeding, rolled back to Quelch's desk with the chair. *Dr. Smith's Larger Latin Dictionary* was left on the door-ready for Mr. Quelch when he came back to the form-room. Billy Bunter sat down in his place, grinning from one fat ear to the other.

Some of the other fellows were grinning too. From the point of view of unreflecting youth, there was something comic in the prospect of that hefty volume landing on Mr. Quelch's mortar-board when he came in.

'Make him jump, what?' grinned Bunter. 'I say, you fellows, will he jump when he gets that dick on his napper, what? He, he, he.'

'You howling ass—'

'Oh, really, Wharton—'

'Take it down at once, fathead!' exclaimed the captain of the Remove. 'Quelch will be as mad as a hatter—'

'The madfulness will be terrific.'

'Six of the best for Bunter,' said Vernon-Smith. 'If you have tears, old fat man, prepare to shed them, when Quelch stops that dick with his top-knot.'

'How's he going to know it was me?' grinned Bunter. 'I suppose you fellows ain't going to give a chap away? Quelch can guess who it was, and keep on guessing till he's black in the face. He, he, he!'

'Take it down, ass!' hooted Johnny Bull.

'Shan't!' retorted Bunter. 'I say, you fellows, Quelch will be back any minute now—just you watch and see him jump! He, he, he!'

'You dithering bloater,' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'Quelch mayn't guess who it was, but he'll know it was some chap here, and he will be in the maddest tantrum ever. Take that dick down, you benighted bandersnatch.'

'Yah!' retorted Bunter.

Bob Cherry rose in his place. A booby-trap in the form-room might seem quite a bright idea to Billy Bunter, as a reprisal for a 'whop'. But the prospect of Quelch in the 'maddest tantrum ever' was not attractive. Neither was Bob so regardless as Bunter of the respect due to a majestic member of Dr. Locke's staff. He stepped out from the form, and ran to the door.

There was an indignant squeak from Bunter. 'Look here, you let that dick alone, Cherry.'

'Ass!' answered Bob, over his shoulder.

'Beast!'

Bob ran to the door. He did not need to take a chair to stand on. But even as he reached the door, and was about to reach up to the volume lodged thereon, there was a step in the corridor without. The door was pushed open, colliding with Bob as it opened, and Mr. Quelch stepped in.

Crash! 'Oh!' Bump!

Mr. Quelch sat down in the doorway.

CHAPTER 3

UNEXPECTED!

'OH!' repeated Mr. Quelch.

He sat bewildered.

Something heavy—Quelch did not, for the moment, know what—had descended on his mortar-board as he stepped in. Taken utterly by surprise, it had floored him. He sat bewildered and amazed. Indeed, for a moment or two it seemed to Quelch that the venerable pile of Greyfriars School had collapsed on his head.

But he quickly realized that it was not quite so bad as that. *Dr. Smith's Larger Latin Dictionary*, on the floor beside him, enlightened him. It dawned on Quelch that he had walked into a booby-trap.

'Oh!' said Mr. Quelch, for the third time.

The Removites gazed at him in silence. They were not grinning. Even Billy Bunter did not grin. The expression that came over Quelch's speaking countenance, as he realized what had happened, warned even the fat Owl that it was no time for grinning. That expression was fearfully expressive. The glare of the fabled basilisk might have equalled, but never exceeded it, in expressiveness.

'Oh, crumbs!' breathed Bob Cherry, in dismay. He backed towards the form. But he had no chance of escaping the gimlet-eye.

Mr. Quelch picked himself up.

'Cherry!' His voice came like the grinding of a very rusty saw.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' stammered Bob.

'You have done this.'

'Oh! No, sir! I—I— No, sir.'

'You are out of your place, Cherry.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! But I—I—I never—'

'You are the only boy out of his place, Cherry.'

'Yes, sir! But—but—'

'Pick up that dictionary, Cherry.'

'Oh! Certainly, sir.'

Bob picked up the dictionary. At a gesture from Quelch, he carried it back to the form-master's desk, and deposited it there. Quelch followed him to the desk, and picked up a cane therefrom.

What he was going to do with that cane was only too evident. Latin dictionaries could not crash on form-masters' heads, causing them to sit down suddenly and inadvertently, without serious results to follow. There was going to be a whopping in the Remove form-room: and Quelch's look indicated that it was going to be a record in that line. It was going to be six of the very, very best: indeed, Quelch looked like making it sixteen, if not sixty.

He pointed to a chair with the cane.

'Bend over that chair, Cherry.'

'But, sir, I—'

'Silence! Bend over that chair, you impertinent, unruly boy. At once.' Quelch swished the cane.

Quelch, of course, had no doubt. He had, as it seemed to him, caught Bob Cherry practically in the act. Quelch was a just man: but he had no use for argument in a case that seemed absolutely clear. Swift and stern justice was going to be administered on the spot to the delinquent: and Quelch had not the slightest doubt that Bob was that delinquent.

Many glances in the Remove were cast at Billy Bunter.

Two or three fellows whispered to him. Bunter did not heed. Nobody, certainly, was going to give the fatuous fat Owl away: but any fellow was expected to own up, when another fellow was about to take the rap for him.

Bunter did not stir or speak. He blinked at Mr. Quelch, and he blinked at the swishing cane: and he sat tight.

'Cherry!' Quelch's voice was more than ever like a grinding saw. 'Bend over that chair, instantly.'

Bob Cherry gave Bunter one look. Then, slowly, he stepped to the chair, and proceeded to bend over it, shutting his lips hard as he did so. Bob was tough, and could take a licking: but he was well aware that what was coming was a little out of the ordinary. A form-master floored by a Latin dictionary was in no mood to spare the rod. It was well known, in the Remove, that Quelch could whop: and on this occasion, it was only too clear that he was going to put all he knew into the performance. The hapless junior braced himself to take it.

Up went the cane.

It was then that the unexpected happened. Hardly a fellow in the Remove expected Billy Bunter to play up. And up to the very last moment the fat Owl sat tight. Every ounce of fat on Bunter's plump person cringed, at the bare idea of bending under Quelch's cane, with Quelch in his present mood. He just couldn't: and he jolly well wouldn't! But——

But somewhere, under William George Bunter's innumerable layers of fat, there must have been a spot of pluck. For, even as the cane went up for the first swipe, up jumped Bunter.

'Please, sir.' His fat voice came in an almost agonized squeak. 'It was me, sir!' It was no time to think of the niceties of grammar! 'It—it—it was me, sir.'

Another moment, and the cane would have descended.

Quelch, indeed, did not have much time to check the swipe, as that anguished squeak reached him. Luckily, he did check it. For a moment or two the cane remained in air, suspended like Mahomet's coffin between the heavens and the earth. Then Mr. Quelch lowered it. His glinting eyes fixed on Bunter.

'You, Bunter!'

'Oh, dear! Yes, sir! Oh, lor!' gasped Bunter. 'It—it—it was me, sir! It—it—it wasn't Cherry, sir! Oh, crikey!'

'You placed that dictionary on the door, Bunter, to fall on my head as I entered the form-room!' thundered Mr. Quelch. 'Is that the truth, Bunter?'

'Oh, crikey! Yes, sir! Bob was only going to take it down, sir!' moaned Bunter.

'Oh!' ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

Henry Samuel Quelch was not often taken aback. But he seemed quite taken aback now, as he realized that he had been about to administer condign punishment to a junior who, so far from being the delinquent, had only tried to save his majestic head from the crash. Somewhat hastily, he laid the cane on his desk.

'Cherry!' His voice was almost subdued.

'Yes, sir.' Bob, still bending, looked up.

'You may go back to your place.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Very gladly Bob Cherry went back to his place. The gimlet-eyes fixed on Billy Bunter. Two fat knees knocked together, as Bunter blinked dismally at the grim face. Billy Bunter had, somehow, screwed up his courage to the sticking-point—for a moment! But it had now come badly unstuck. It was a terrified Owl.

But, to the surprise of the Remove, Quelch did not call him out to take Bob's place in the bending-over process. He had laid down his cane, and he did not pick it up again.

Undoubtedly, Quelch was wrathful. There was a slight ache in the majestic nut which the mortar-board had not wholly protected from *Dr. Smith's Larger Latin Dictionary*. And the disrespect of such an act could hardly be too severely punished. But—there was a 'but'. Quelch, a just man, was greatly relieved that Bunter's fat squeak had been uttered before he had administered an unjust punishment. That consideration weighed with Quelch: and Bunter had the benefit of it.

There was a pause. But the 'execution', evidently, was off. Quelch spoke at last.

'Bunter! I shall not cane you.'

'Oh! Thank you, sir!' gasped Bunter. The fat face brightened.

'I shall give you a book, Bunter.'

'Oh!' The fat face clouded again. Bunter, assuredly, was relieved and glad to escape the whopping that was his due. But he did not want a 'book'. A 'book' was an awful infliction.

'You will write out Book XII of the *Æneid*, Bunter—'

'Oh, jiminy!'

'You will bring it to my study tomorrow, Bunter.'

'Oh, crikey!'

'What? What did you say, Bunter?'

'Oh! Nothing, sir! I—I mean, yes sir, certainly sir!' gasped Bunter.

Quelch gave him a look. However, he left it at that. 'We shall now resume!' he snapped.

The incident was closed.

Deponent verbs were once more the order of the day in the Remove form-room. But if Billy Bunter had given little attention to those irritating verbs before, he gave less now. He sat quite overwhelmed—wishing, from the bottom of his fat heart, that he had never thought up that bright idea of reprisals on Quelch, or alternatively, as the lawyers say, that he had not owned up to it.

There were hundreds and hundreds of lines in a book of Virgil. It was, no doubt, better than a whopping. But it lasted much longer. It was going to be lines, and lines, and lines, for Bunter, thick as the autumn leaves in Vallambrosa. The prospect was simply awful, to a fellow who objected to work of any kind, in any shape or form.

When the hour was up, and the Remove were free, at last, of Quelch and deponent verbs, most of the fellows came out into the sunshine merry and bright. Not so Bunter. The summer sunshine was not reflected in his fat face. It was a sad and sorrowful Bunter.

CHAPTER 4

ONE GOOD TURN DESERVES ANOTHER

'I SAY, you fellows!'

'Trot in, Bunter.'

'Roll in, barrel.'

'Trickle in, old fat tulip.'

'Here's a chair, fatty.'

'Squat downfully, my esteemed fat Bunter.'

Billy Bunter blinked into No. 1 Study through his big spectacles, in some surprise. That cordial welcome was unusual: in No. I Study or in any other study in the Remove.

It was tea-time.

At tea-time, it was not at all unusual for Billy Bunter to blink into another fellow's study, rather like a lion seeking what he might devour. But it was rather unusual for him to be received so cordially.

Only too often, Bunter's absence was preferred to his company: especially at tea-time. But on this occasion, the Famous Five of the Remove welcomed him with one voice.

There was quite an attractive tea in Harry Wharton's study. A large cake, which Harry had received from home that day, graced the table. There was a plate of jam tarts, contributed by Frank Nugent. But these were not all. When the Famous Five tea'd together in Wharton's study, they generally brought along supplies to add to the festive board: and Johnny Bull had brought a bag of dough-nuts, Bob Cherry a packet of ham, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh a box of biscuits. Bread—supplied by the school—was ample, and there was almost enough butter, and half a pot of jam over and above.

So there was plenty for five fellows, every one of whom had come in with a keen and healthy appetite after cricket. There was not likely to be plenty for six: if the sixth was William George Bunter, who was as useful as at least half a dozen other fellows at a spread.

Nevertheless, the Famous Five welcomed the fat Owl of the Remove with one voice, just as if Bunter was, for the first time in history, a man whom they delighted to honour.

The fact was that Billy Bunter was, for once, popular in that study. There was no doubt that Bunter, by owning up in the form-room that morning, had rescued Bob Cherry from a record licking. Few, if any, had expected him so to do: but so he had done. It was not very often that Bunter did the right thing: so his action had on this occasion, as it were, a rarity value. It shone like a good deed in a naughty world, as a poet has expressed it. Bob, naturally, felt grateful about it, all the more because he wouldn't have expected it of Bunter. That feeling was shared by all his friends. For once, at least, Billy Bunter was a welcome visitor in No. I Study, even at tea-time!

For which reason, when a fat face appeared in the doorway, and a big pair of spectacles glimmered in, nobody said 'Buzz off, Bunter!' or 'Hook it, fatty!' Every voice joined in the chorus of welcome.

It was a little surprising to Bunter. But it was very agreeable. He lost no time in rolling in.

'I say, you fellows—'

'Jolly decent of you this morning, Bunter,' said Bob.

He gave the fat Owl a hearty smack on a plump back.

'Ow!' gasped Bunter.

'Jolly decent, old chap,' said Johnny Bull: probably the first time that he had ever addressed Billy Bunter as 'old chap'.

'Blessed if I thought you would-but you did.'

'Oh, really, Bull—'

'The decentfulness was terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Good man!' said Frank Nugent.

'Quelch was jolly well going to take my skin off,' said Bob. 'I call take a whopping: but the old boy was jolly well going all out, if you hadn't butted in, Bunter. Jolly decent of you.'

'Oh, that's me all over,' said Bunter. 'Some fellows wouldn't have owned up, with Quelch in such a tantrum. But am I the sort of chap to keep mum and let another man take my gruel? Hardly! Kindest friend and noblest foe, as Shakespeare says—that's me!'

'Wasn't it Tennyson?' asked Nugent.

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

'Not at all—Shakespeare if you like,' said Nugent. 'Had your tea, Bunter?'

'Well, I've had tea in my study,' admitted Bunter. 'But you know how jolly mean they are in my study. We had only three eggs, and Toddy and Dutton had one each—selfishness all round, as usual—'

'You fat octopus—'

'Oh, really, Nugent—'

'Squat down, Bunter,' said Harry Wharton, hastily. 'We've got rather a spread.'

'Here's a chair, old fat man,' said Bob.

Furniture was limited in junior studies. Bob handed Bunter his chair, and accommodated himself on a box.

Bunter sat down.

His fat face had been glum on arrival. There was a weight on his fat mind, in the shape of the Twelfth Book of Virgil's immortal epic. But it brightened as he blinked over the festive board. Foodstuffs always had an exhilarating effect on Bunter. And one egg in No. 7 Study had made little difference to him: he was more than ready for tea.

'I say, that looks a jolly good cake,' he remarked.

'Try the ham,' said Harry. 'Help yourself.'

'Thanks: I will!' assented Bunter.

He helped himself. The dish looked rather bare when he had done so. Bunter liked generous helpings. Johnny Bull stared rather hard at a stacked plate and an almost empty dish. Frank Nugent closed one eye at Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, who grinned a dusky grin. Bob Cherry chuckled.

'Go it, Bunter,' he said.

Bunter did not reply. His plump jaws were already too busy for speech. Musical as his own fat voice was to his own fat ears, first things came first with Bunter. Only an occasional gurgle came from him, till the plate was cleared.

But Billy Bunter was a fast worker in that line. The Famous Five resumed their meal, but they were simply not in it with Bunter. It was Bunter first and the field nowhere. The ham disappeared on the downward path at almost supersonic speed. Then Bunter found his voice.

'I'll have some of those tarts,' he remarked.

'Do!' said Harry Wharton, politely.

'Tuck in, old boy,' said Bob.

Bunter tucked in. There was no fewer than a dozen jam tarts. Bunter disposed of seven. Probably he would have disposed of the whole dozen, had not the Famous Five helped themselves to one each. However, there were still the dough-nuts and the cake. If that

spread was somewhat limited for the founders thereof, there was plenty for Bunter. Dough-nut after dough-nut followed the jam tarts: it was a happy, sticky, shiny Owl.

By the time he arrived at the cake, the keen edge had been taken off Bunter's appetite. He slowed down, and with his mouth full, and a wedge of cake in a fat hand, he had leisure for conversation between bites.

'I say, you fellows—!'

'Like the cake, old boy?'

'Oh, yes! Not like the cakes I get from Bunter Court, of course, but a jolly good cake,' said Bunter. 'I'll finish it, if you fellows don't want any more.'

'Oh, do!' gasped Harry Wharton.

Billy Bunter proceeded to do so.

'But I say, you fellows,' went on Bunter, his fat voice a little muffled by a barrage of cake. 'I say, that beast Quelch—'

'Oh, old Quelch isn't so bad,' said Bob Cherry, tolerantly. 'It was enough to make him wild, getting that dick on his napper.'

'He's given me a book!' hooted Bunter.

'That was luck,' said Johnny Bull, 'might have skinned you for playing that fatheaded trick on him.'

'That's all very well, but I've got that book, and Quelch said he was to have it tomorrow,' said Bunter.

'Well, haven't you done it?' asked Harry. 'You've had the whole afternoon to do it in.'

Bunter blinked at him.

'Done it?' he repeated. 'Done a whole book? I looked at it, and it's the longest on the whole *Æneid*. Quelch all over—picking out the longest when he gives a fellow a book. There's jolly well nearly a thousand lines in Book XII. Done it? Don't be an ass, old chap!'

'Look here, Bunter,' said Bob Cherry, 'you'd better buck up and put it through. Quelch let you off lightly: and he will be fierce if you don't hand in that impot on time.'

'That's what I came to speak to you fellows about,' explained Bunter. 'When a fellow's in a jam, he expects his pals to help him out. I did you a jolly good turn today, Cherry.'

'Oh! Yes! Much obliged.'

'Well, one good turn deserves another,' said Bunter. 'I got you off a licking, didn't I? Might have got it myself. I wasn't going to sit mum and let another fellow take my gruel. You might have—'

'What?'

'Or you, Nugent—'

'You fat chump!'

'Or you. Wharton—'

'Thanks.'

'Or you. Inky—'

'My esteemed idiotic Bunter—'

'Not me!' said Bunter, 'not my style! I just stood up and owned up, like a man! That's me—manly! Well, I got a book for it, and it's jolly nearly a thousand lines, and one good turn deserves another, and I jolly well think it's up to you fellows to whack it out, see?'

'Oh!' said the Famous all together.

It seemed that Billy Bunter's visit to No.1 Study was not wholly due to tea-time. Even more urgent than tea, was that awful book, hanging over his fat head like the sword of Damocles.

It was, of course, quite against the rules for fellows to help one another with lines. But rules on that subject were sometimes disregarded. A fellow with a heavy 'impot' on hand

would sometimes get a little help from a friend. The rules on the subject were, in fact, often honoured more in the breach than the observance. Billy Bunter, certainly, was not bothering about rules. It was the lines that worried Bunter.

There was a pause.

Not one member of the Famous Five was keen to sit in a study grinding out lines. They had many more attractive occupations. Moreover, Wibley had arranged a rehearsal of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the Rag after tea, and all the Co. were members of the dramatic company, and would be wanted, especially Bob Cherry, who was to play the part of 'Uncle Tom'. Still, it had to be admitted that Bunter had a claim. He was landed with that awful book simply and solely because he had, for once, done the right thing. Bob Cherry glanced round from face to face.

'What about it, you chaps?' he asked. Harry Wharton nodded.

'We'll help!' he said.

Johnny Bull gave a grunt. Like the other members of the Co. he had been feeling quite cordial towards the fat Owl—for once. Bunter's remarks had somewhat damped that cordiality. Still, Johnny contented himself with a grunt, and added a nod.

'Right-ho,' said Bunter, quite briskly. He grabbed the last wedge of cake and rose from the table. 'Come along to my study, and we'll get on with it. I've started it, you know. Mind, you fellows make your fists as much like mine as you can—I don't want Quelch to smell a rat. None of your scrawling.'

'Oh, my hat!' said Bob. 'If we don't scrawl, old fat man, think Quelch will take it for your fist?'

'Yah!' was Bunter's elegant reply to that. He rolled out of the study and the Famous Five followed him up the passage to No. 7. Peter Todd and Tom Dutton had gone down after tea and No. 7 was vacant. Billy Bunter slammed a sheaf of impot paper on the table.

'There you are!' he said.

They looked at it. On the top sheet a single word was written—the name 'Turnus'. They stared at it.

'Didn't you say you'd started it?' asked Bob.

'Eh? Yes. Look!'

'Oh, my hat!'

Billy Bunter, certainly, had 'started' that imposition.

Book XII of the *Æneid* began with 'Turnus'. That word Bunter had written: but no doubt fatigue had then overtaken him, and he had left it at that. The first word of the first line was written, out of a total of nine hundred and fifty-two lines!

'You fat ass—!' began Johnny Bull.

'Oh, really, Bull—'

'Oh, let's get on with,' said Bob.

They got on with it. And Billy Bunter, much relieved to see that awful 'book' a going concern at last, sat in Peter Todd's armchair, and contentedly finished the last wedge of Harry Wharton's cake.

CHAPTER 5

SIX IN THE SOUP!

DR. LOCKE gave quite a start.

'Bless my soul!' he murmured.

Mr. Quelch compressed his lips, in a line that looked like iron.

They stopped, in the Remove passage.

The presence of Dr. Locke, head-master of Greyfriars School, was unusual in the quarters of the Remove. Not oftener than once in a term did the majestic Head walk round the junior studies. Nevertheless, there was such a thing as a 'Head's inspection'. Seldom as it happened, it did happen at rare intervals: and it was happening now.

Such an inspection occurred, naturally, without any previous warning to the form concerned. Fellows, if they had known that the Head was likely to be in the offing, would have acted on that excellent Scout motto, 'Be prepared'. Books and torn papers would have been picked up from corners. Crocks would not have been left on study tables after tea.

There would not have been the ghost of a cigarette in Skinner's study, or of a racing paper in Smithy's. And certainly, most certainly, there would not have been a bunch of juniors in No. 7 Study writing Billy Bunter's lines for him!

After tea, on a glorious summer's afternoon, most of the Remove were out. Squiff and Tom Brown, Peter Todd and Ogilvy and Russell were at the cricket nets: Smithy and Redwing were out in a boat on the Sark: Lord Mauleverer was reclining in a deck-chair under a shady elm: Skinner and Snoop and Stott were loafing about with their hands in their pockets: William Wibley was walking in the quad thinking out a little more 'fat' for his own part in Uncle Tom's Cabin: even Fisher T. Fish was out of doors, jingling his money in his pocket. Not a fellow was to be seen in the Remove passage, when the Head came up with Mr. Quelch.

But that that passage was not wholly uninhabited, they were made aware by a deep voice, somewhat like that of the Great Huge Bear, proceeding from the open doorway of No. 7 Study. It was the voice of Johnny Bull, and its tones were emphatic.

'You lazy fat ass! Are you going to squat in that armchair while we do all your lines for you? Think we're going to do the lot? Think Quelch will believe that you did it, if you don't write a line? You fat, lazy, sticky lump of lard, get out of that armchair, and lend a hand writing your own impot, can't you?'

Dr. Locke stopped dead. Quelch stopped also. Johnny's powerful voice fairly boomed to their ears. It was a hot afternoon. There were six fellows in the study, which was no:le too large. Door and window had been left wide open. Even so it was very warm in No. 7. The balmy summer breeze zephyred in at the open window, and zephyred out at the open doorway, bearing every word uttered by Johnny to the startled ears of head-master and form-master.

'Bless my soul!' murmured the Head again. Quelch's lips set harder.

No form-master quite liked the Chief looking in on his form. But Quelch hoped that the majestic eye would discern nothing amiss in the Remove. And now this—!

'Yes, dash it all, Bunter.' This time it was Bob Cherry's voice. 'Look here, we're going to do a hundred and fifty each. Can't risk more than that with Quelch.'

'Oh, really, Cherry—!'

'Not safe to risk that much,' said Harry Wharton.

'Oh, really, Wharton—!'

'There'd be a row, if Quelch spotted it, Bunter,' said Frank Nugent.

'The rowfulness would be terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter.'

'Get out of that chair and lend a hand,' hooted Johnny Bull.

'Oh, really, Bull—'

'You fat, foozling flopper!' said Johnny, 'think you can land the whole dashed thing on us?'

'I'm going to do some, of course,' said Bunter, 'but look here, there's nine hundred and fifty-two lines in that rotten book. You fellows do a couple of hundred each, and I'll do the rest.'

'You fat chump—'

'Beast!'

'Look here, Bunter, don't be an ass,' said Bob Cherry, patiently, 'we want to help you out—'

'I should jolly well think so, after what I've done for you, Cherry. Look here, don't you fellows be lazy—'

'Lazy?' roared Johnny Bull.

'Yes, lazy! Get down to it, and for goodness sake, don't keep on grouching,' said Bunter peevishly.

'We can't do the lot,' said Bob, still patient. 'Quelch would smell a rat. You've got to do a couple of hundred, at least. Get a move on, Bunter.'

'You'd better, you slacking porpoise.' Johnny Bull's voice was once more like that of the Great Huge Bear. 'If you don't get out of that chair, I'll come over and pitch you out.'

'Beast!'

There was a sound of Bunter extracting himself from Toddy's armchair. Apparently he had made up his fat mind, at last, to lend a hand in the writing of his own lines. A chair creaked under his extensive weight as he sat at the table. A discontented squeak was heard.

'Gimme a pen! Got a pen? Oh, blow!'

'Go it, old fat man.'

'Oh, lor!'

The scratching of pens succeeded to the sound of voices.

Six pens were now at work in No. 7, five of them active, one of them very nearly passive.

In the passage, Dr. Locke looked rather fixedly at Mr. Quelch. Quelch breathed very hard and deep. Head's inspection could not have happened at a more unfortunate moment, with six members of Quelch's form breaking rules right and left. Dr. Locke's brow was growing very stern. Having given Quelch that fixed look, he rustled on up the passage to the open doorway of No. 7, and stood looking in.

Six juniors were bunched round the table. Five pens were travelling fast: one was crawling. But all the juniors were intent on lines, and not one of them glanced round at the awe-inspiring figure at the doorway. For a long moment, the Head stood looking in, his brow growing sterner and sterner. Then he spoke:

'Boys!'

The Head's voice was quiet. But a sudden thunder-clap could not have startled No. 7 Study more.

Six fellows jumped as if electrified. They stared round at their head-master.

'Oh!' they gasped, all together.

'Oh, crikey!' gurgled Billy Bunter, his little round eyes almost popping through his spectacles.

'The—the—the Head!' breathed Bob Cherry faintly. Quelch was looking in over the Head's shoulder. But even Quelch was less horrifying than the Head, at such a moment.

'It seems,' said Dr. Locke, 'that you boys—five of you—are engaged in writing Bunter's lines for him. You are, of course, aware that you are breaking a very strict rule. You will follow me to my study—Wharton, Nugent, Bull, Cherry, Hurree Singh.'

The majestic figure turned, and rustled away. Five hapless juniors exchanged dismal looks, and followed. Mr. Quelch gave them a very expressive glance as they passed him. But the matter, so far as they were concerned, was now out of his hands. The Head was going to deal personally with five breakers of a very strict rule! The Remove master gave his attention to Bunter. The fat Owl eyed him apprehensively as he stepped into the study.

'Bunter!'

'Oh! Yes, sir! No, sir! Oh, lor!'

'I see that quite a number of lines have been written here,' said Mr. Quelch, grimly. 'How many of them were written by you, Bunter?'

'I—I—I've done some, sir—'

'How many?' snapped Mr. Quelch.

'Tut—tut—tut—'

'What?'

'Tut—tut—tut—two, sir!' stuttered Bunter.

Mr. Quelch gathered up written sheets. Billy Bunter watched him. His fat face, generally as broad as it was long, grew longer and longer, as Quelch proceeded to tear those sheets across, and across again. Some hundreds of the lines had already been produced by five active pens. Not one of them was left to tell the tale, so to speak. Even Bunter's own two lines went with the rest.

'Bunter!' Quelch's voice was deep.

'Oh, lor!' I—I mean, yes sir,' groaned Bunter.

'You will write out your imposition, Book XII of the *Æneid*, with your own hand. I shall examine it carefully when you bring it to me, and if I detect a single line in another hand, I shall cane you with the utmost severity. Take warning, Bunter.'

With that, Quelch left the study. 'Oh, crikey!' groaned Bunter.

He almost collapsed into the armchair. That awful book was still before him: and after this, there was no chance of assistance in that Herculean labour. A glinting gimlet-eye was going to scrutinize that impot with unwanted concentration, and any further attempt to pull Quelch's leg could only result in 'whops'. Book XII of the *Æneid* from 'Turnus ut infractos' to 'indignata sub umbras', had to be written out by Billy Bunter's own fat hand, word after word, line after line, to the bitter end. There were six fellows in the soup: but Billy Bunter did not waste a thought on the five who were going through a somewhat painful interview in the Head's study. His own woes were enough for Bunter to contemplate. He contemplated them and groaned.

CHAPTER 6

THE LAST CHANCE

Deer Father.

Billy Bunter paused, and chewed the handle of his pen.

His fat brow was wrinkled in thought.

He sat at the table in No. 7, pen in hand. He was writing. But he was not writing Book XII of the *Æneid*. The more he contemplated that Everest to climb, the less he liked the prospect. For quite a long time after Mr. Quelch had left him, the fat Owl had sat in Toddy's armchair, thinking it out. But he was not thinking of getting the lines done. That was a very, very last resource. He was thinking of ways and means of dodging them.

A hundred lines, or even a couple of hundred, he might have struggled through. But almost a thousand! Lines and lines and lines, world without end! Billy Bunter did not often exert his intellectual powers, such as they were. But now he exerted them to the limit. If there was any imaginable loophole of escape from Book XII of Virgil's immortal epic, he was going to find it. And at length an idea germinated in his fat brain.

He did not feel very hopeful about it. But it was a case of any port in a storm. If it worked, he would escape that awful impot: if it didn't, he would be, so far as he could see, no worse off. It was a chance, at least, and the fat Owl caught at it, like a drowning man at a straw.



Deer Father.

I hoap this finds you as well as it leeves me at present.

Having written thus far, Bunter paused again, and once more chewed the pen-handle. It was rather a delicate matter, and he had to put it diplomatically if it was to produce the desired result. Obviously it would not be useful to tell Mr. Bunter that he wanted to dodge the penalty for playing a disrespectful trick on his form-master. That, certainly, would not evoke parental sympathy. It had to be put much more diplomatically than that. However, after a considerable chewing of the panhandle, the fat Owl resumed.

I have been wurking verry hard this term, and I am sure you will be glad to heer that Quelch is verry pleezed with me. Only this morning we were doing depponent vurbs, which as I daresay you rememmer are passive in phorm but active in meening, and

Quelch was quite surprized by my knowledge. I kno I shall get a furst-class repport this term.

Bunter paused again, with a nod of satisfaction, feeling that this was quite a happy touch. His reports from school had never pleased Mr. Bunter: indeed they had often evoked quite bitter comments at Bunter Villa.

Having nodded his fat head over that happy touch, he resumed:

But I have been wurking so hard lately at my studdies, in this hot wether too, that I pheel quite worn out, and pheel verry mutch that a phew days away from skool would be a verry grate bennyfit. Then I could tackel my studdies with renude vigger. A week at home would do wunders.

The fat Owl paused again. This was the gist of the letter: the crux of the matter. He had to be very careful about this. However, he felt that he was putting it as well as it could be put: and having dropped a blot, and smeared a line with a clumsy fat finger, he went on again:

So I hoap that you will rite to the Head to give me leeve home for a phew days. Of corse I would not think of trying to spin it out till the hollydays, or anything of that sort. Nuthing cood be further from my thorts. I shall be verry eeger to get back to my studdies, after a breefrest which I pheel I need. I hoap you will rite to the Head at once, and pleeze let me have a line that it is all rite.

*Your affeckshunate Sun,
William.*

P.S. You will notice that my speling has verry mutch improved since you rote to me about it, and I do not think there is anything rong with it now.

That epistle completed, Billy Bunter read it over, and once more his fat head nodded in satisfaction.

It might work!

He could not feel sure that it would. His letters home did not always evoke the desired replies. It was almost useless to write home explaining to Mr. Bunter the pressing need for a little extra pocket-money. Replies, when they came, were generally in the negative: and often Mr. Bunter did not reply at all.

And Bunter remembered that the last letter from Bunter Villa had been very stern, indeed almost fierce. Mr. Bunter seemed to have derived, from Quelch, an impression that his son at Greyfriars was incorrigibly lazy and work-shy. So far from remitting a postal-order, he had remitted only stern reprimands and injunctions to do better.

Still, Bunter felt that his touching epistle could hardly fail to make a more favourable impression on the parental mind. A fellow worn out by intense application to his studies in hot summer weather was really in need of a rest. And this time he hadn't asked for a remittance: only for a few days away from school. And with wonderful diplomacy he had assured his parent that he wasn't thinking of spinning those few days out till the holidays! On the whole, Billy Bunter considered that that letter might work the oracle: in which case, Mr. Quelch could whistle for Book XII of the *Æneid*. Anyhow it was worth trying on. Even if it failed, it only left him where he was—so far as Bunter could see, at all events. The fat Owl folded that letter in an envelope, and addressed it to his honoured parent at Bunter Villa, Surrey. Then he rolled out of No. 7 Study, in search of some fellow who had a threepenny stamp.

Voices were audible, from the open doorway of No. 1 Study, as he rolled down the passage. Generally, voices from that study had a cheery note. On this occasion that was not the case.

'Bother that fat ass and his lines.'

'Bother and blow! Ow!'

'The botherfulness is terrific.'

'What rotten luck, the Head trickling in like that.'

'Rotten!'

Billy Bunter stopped, and blinked into the study through his big spectacles. The Famous Five were all there, and at the moment, they did not seem to be enjoying life. Fellows seldom did, after a visit to the Head's study. Not one of them felt disposed to go down to the Rag and join in Wibley's rehearsal of 'Uncle Tom'. Even Bob Cherry did not feel like going down to the cricket nets. The healing touch of time was needed.

'I say, you fellows,' squeaked Bunter.

Five glares were turned on him. It was true that Billy Bunter was, for once, in the good graces of that study. But for the moment at least they had had enough of Bunter. The

Head, who took a very serious view of that discovery in No. 7, had dealt faithfully with them. Pangs had not yet died out: twinges were frequent and painful and free.

'Oh, get out!' growled Johnny Bull.

'Oh, really, Bull—'

'Buzz off, Bunter,' snapped Harry Wharton.

'Oh, really, Wharton! Did you get it hot?' asked Bunter.

'Sort of,' said Bob Cherry. 'Don't bother now. Bunter—roll away, old barrel. I can tell you that the old boy can whop.'

'Well I wouldn't make a fuss about it,' advised Bunter. 'a chap ought to be able to take a licking, without a lot of fuss.'

'What?' roared Johnny Bull.

'You needn't yell at me, Bull, because you can't take a whopping. But I say, you fellows—'

'Get out!'

'Lend me a stamp. Bob, old chap!'

'Oh, go and eat coke.'

'Oh, really Cherry! I think you might lend a fellow a stamp, after all he's done for you,' said Bunter, warmly. 'Look here. I've got to catch the collection with this letter—it's awfully important. I'm asking the pater to let me come home for a few days, and if it works—'

'Best of luck,' said Harry Wharton. 'There's a stamp in my desk—take it and buzz off. It's worth more tha

'Beast!'

Billy Bunter found the stamp, and affixed it to his letter home. Then he rolled to the door. At the door he paused to blink back at the Famous Five. His fat lip curled a little.

'I say, you fellows, you look like a lot of moulting fowls,' he said. 'I wouldn't make such a fuss about a licking. Fellows should learn to bear a little pain. Stiff upper lip, and all that, you know. Be men!'

'You fat, foozling, frabjous freak—'

'Well, that's my advice,' said Bunter. 'Catch me making a fuss over a spot of pain! Not likely! I know how to keep a stiff upper lip, I hope. You wouldn't hear a sound from me, and I can jolly well say—here, leggo, Bull, you beast—wharrer you up to? Leggo!' yelled Bunter.

Johnny Bull did not let go. He reached Bunter with a spring almost like a tiger's, grabbed a fat neck, and banged a fat head on a hard oak door. The yell from Billy Bunter woke every echo in the Remove studies.

'Yarooooh!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Ow! Beast! Wow! Oh, crikey, my napper! Ow! ow! ow! ow!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled the Famous Five. They almost forgot their own twinges, as Billy Bunter thus displayed how he could bear a little pain without making a fuss.

'Ow! Beast! Wow! Oh! Ow!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Billy Bunter dodged out of the study and fled. He went down the stairs wowing and jowing and rubbing a fat head. However, that important letter was safely dropped in the box in time for the collection. It remained to be seen what would come of it.

CHAPTER 7

WITNESS WANTED

'TODDY, old chap!'

'Done your impot?'

'Oh, really, Toddy! Think I've had time to write a thousand lines of rotten Latin?' hooted Billy Bunter. 'Why, it would take hours and hours and hours and hours.'

'You've had time to loaf about doing nothing for hours and hours and hours and hours!'

Peter Todd pointed out.

'Beast!'

It was the following day. After tea, Billy Bunter was due in his form-master's study, with Book XII of the *Æneid*, all written out by his own fat hand. He had to hand over that book to Mr. Quelch, and he had to be able to say, like Coriolanus, 'Alone I did it!' In such circumstances, even a fellow who made both a science and art of laziness, might have been expected to exert a little unusual activity. But there had been no sign of unusual activity about William George Bunter. Not a line of that tremendous imposition had been transcribed.

Tea was over in No. 7 Study, and Peter Todd and Tom Dutton were about to go down, to join Harry Wharton and Co. at the cricket nets. But Peter paused at the fat Owl squeaked from the armchair.

'Look here, you fat chump,' said Peter, 'you're asking for it! I noticed that Quelch had his eye on you in form today. If you don't let him have his impot, he will take it out in whops.'

'I want you to help me out, old chap,' said Bunter.

'Fathead! Think I want to go up to the Head, like those silly asses who were helping you out yesterday?' snorted Peter.

'I don't mean that,' exclaimed Bunter. 'That wouldn't work, now Quelch knows. But look here, suppose I'd done that impot—and suppose you'd used it by mistake to light the study fire—'

'Eh?'

'Well, then I could tell Quelch, and he would have to give me time,' exclaimed Bunter.

'But I haven't used it by mistake to light the study fire!' shrieked Peter.

'I know you haven't, but Quelch doesn't,' yapped Bunter. 'That's the point. All you've got to do is to own up that you did, if Quelch asks you.'

'You fat villain—'

'Oh, really, Toddy—'

'Quelch would be likely to believe that I lighted a fire in the study on a hot afternoon, wouldn't he?' asked Peter, sarcastically.

'Oh! Nunno! Perhaps he wouldn't!' admitted Bunter. 'He's jolly suspicious!'

The fat brow wrinkled in cogitation. 'Well, there's lots of things might happen to an impot, if I'd written it and left it on the study table, with a clumsy chap like you barging about the study, Toddy. Suppose you chucked it off the table when you were clearing for tea, and suppose it went out of the window, and suppose the wind blew it away—'

'Oh, my hat! There's hardly a breath of air this afternoon.'

'Isn't there? Well, let's think of something else,' said Bunter. 'I want you to back me up, Toddy, because Quelch mightn't believe me. He's doubted my word before.'

'I wonder why!' said Peter: sarcastic again.

'Oh, that's Quelch!' said Bunter, bitterly. 'Quelch all over! He doesn't even seem to know that it's ungentlemanly to doubt a fellow's word. Why, he even put in my report that I'm untruthful. Me, you know!'

'Oh, crumbs!'

'I've got to get time on that impot,' went on Bunter. 'You see, I've written to the pater to ask for a few days leave from school. If it works, Quelch can jolly well whistle for his impot.'

'You'd have to do it when you came back, fathead.'

Bunter winked, a fat wink.

'I fancy that will be all right,' he said. 'Once I get home, I can wangle it somehow to stay home till the holidays. See? Even Quelch wouldn't ask for an impot after weeks and weeks. If the pater plays up, I shall get away tomorrow. The trouble is that Quelch wants that impot today. If it's put off for just one day, I'm all right, if the pater plays up. Of course, he won't know that I'm going to spin out that few days till the holidays begin. I told him specially in my letter that I wasn't thinking of anything of that kind.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled Peter.

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at. Look here, Peter, you back me up with Quelch, and it will be all right. The study fire won't do, and if there isn't any wind, I suppose that beastly impot couldn't have blown away, but—but suppose you hid it for a lark, and forgot where you'd hidden it? That would work all right, Toddy. Quelch would take your word.'

'That's because I don't tell him whoppers, old fat man: and I'm not going to begin now.'

Cheerio.'

With that, Peter picked up his cap and left the study.

Apparently, Peter was not available as the witness Bunter required. What his objections were, Bunter did not know: but clearly he had objections.

Tom Dutton was about to follow him from the study, when the fat Owl yelled from the armchair.

'Hold on a minute, Dutton.'

Tom, who was afflicted with deafness, had not heard a word so far. But he heard that yell, and turned back in the doorway.

'Eh? Did you speak, Bunter?' he asked.

'Yes, I did, you deaf dummy,' snorted Bunter.

'No time for rummy now,' answered Dutton. 'I'm going down to the cricket.'

'Look here, I haven't done my impot for Quelch—'

'Eh? Did you say Welsh?' asked Dutton. 'Do you mean Morgan? He's the only Welsh chap in the Remove. What about him?'

'Oh, crikey! Nothing about Morgan—'

'Oh, organ!' said Dutton. 'I wish you'd speak plainly, Bunter, instead of mumbling so. I can hear all right if fellows speak plainly. It's really queer how fellows mumble so that a chap can hardly hear a word they say. What about the organ? Do you mean the one in the chapel?'

'No, I don't!' hooted Bunter. 'I mean that I haven't done my impot for Quelch, and if I tell him that you hid it for a lark, and forgot where you hid it, will you back me up, if Quelch asks you. I think you might back up a chap in your own study.'

'Rot!' said Dutton. 'It's rather dusty today, but it isn't muddy. And what do you mean about a bark? If it's Gosling's dog, I haven't heard him barking.'

'I didn't say bark—I said lark!' howled Bunter. He put on steam, and roared. 'Look here, Quelch is expecting me in his study. I want you to help me out.'

Tom Dutton stared at him.

'Well, you lazy fat slacker!' he said. 'You're too jolly lazy to live, Bunter. If you're too jolly lazy to get out of that armchair, you can stick there. Catch me lugging you out.'

With that, and a sniff, Tom Dutton marched out of the study.

Billy Bunter was left alone in No. 7. His fat brow was corrugated with thought. Only too well he was aware that Quelch was unlikely to give credit to a statement that he had written that wretched impot, and that some disaster had then accrued. Unless that statement was supported by a credible witness it was extremely unlikely to go down with Quelch.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

A cheery voice in the doorway interrupted his anxious meditations. Bob Cherry, in flannels, with a bat under his arm, looked in.

'Coming down to the cricket, Bunter?'

Snort from Bunter.

'Blow the cricket! I say, Cherry, old chap, come in a minute, will you? Never mind the cricket. I say, I got you off a licking yesterday, old chap, didn't I?'

'You did!' agreed Bob.

'Well, look here, I haven't done that impot for Quelch, and if I tell him I did it, and you hid it for a lark, and forgot where you put it, will you back me up if Quelch asks you?'

Bob Cherry's cheery expression altered very considerably. Certainly, he was willing to do anything he could to help a fat Owl out of a jam. But there was a limit: a very definite limit.

'You fat, frowsy, frabjous, footling frump!' he said. 'Think I'm going to ten Quelch a string of whoppers, because you're too dashed lazy to do your lines? I've a jolly good mind to jab you with this bat.'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'And I jolly well will!' added Bob.

And he did.

'Yarooooh!'

Bob Cherry tramped on down the passage, leaving a fat Owl spluttering in Toddy's armchair. It was some minutes before Billy Bunter recovered from that jab, which had been quite an energetic one. And it was borne in upon his fat mind that if he was going to pull Quelch's leg about that impot, he had to depend wholly on his own gifts as an Ananias.

'Beasts!' groaned Bunter.

Sometimes it seemed to Bunter that the Greyfriars Remove consisted wholly of beasts: himself the only really and thoroughly decent fellow in the form.

But it was more than time to present himself in Quelch's study, and he heaved himself out of the armchair at last, and rolled out of No. 7. In a state of uneasy trepidation, he rolled away to Masters' Studies. At Quelch's door he hesitated for a long moment. But it had to be—and at length he tapped, and entered.

Quelch, sitting at the table, laid down his pen, and fixed a grim stare on him. Doubtless he noted at once that Bunter had come empty-handed.

'If—if you please, sir—!' stammered Bunter.

'Where are your lines, Bunter?'

'I—I—I—I haven't been able to-to finish them, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'There—there's such a jolly lot, sir, a whole book, sir, and—and—'

The Remove-master knitted his brows. But Quelch was a reasonable man. It had to be admitted that Book XII of the *Æneid* was not exactly brief. If Bunter had completed a

considerable portion, Quelch was prepared to be satisfied with that, to go on with. He unknitted his brows.

'Very well, Bunter! If you have not wholly neglected your task—'

'Oh, no, sir! I—I've been working very hard, sir. If—if you'd give me another day to—to finish it, sir—'

'I will do so, Bunter.'

'Oh! Thank you, sir!' gasped Bunter.

He backed to the door, immensely relieved. Another day, he hoped at least, would see him through. If Mr. Bunter played up, he would be gone on the morrow. This was all right! He had never expected to get through so easily as this. It was a cheerful Owl that backed to the door.

But alas for Bunter! He was not quite through yet!

'Bunter!'

'Oh! Yes, sir!'

'You may bring me the lines you have written.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

That was, of course, Quelch all over! The fat Owl felt that he might have expected it—from Quelch. Quelch had, as he had told Toddy, doubted his word before. Now he seemed to be doubting it again. Really, Quelch seemed quite a Doubting Thomas, where Billy Bunter was concerned. Actually, he wanted to see the lines Bunter had written—if any!

'Well?' Quelch's voice took on its well-known saw-like tone. 'Well?'

'I—I—I—!' stammered the wretched Owl.

'Have you written any part of your imposition at all, Bunter?'

'Oh, yes, sir—lots and lots and—and lots! Only—Only—'

'Only what, Bunter?' came the grinding saw.

'There was—was an accident, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'A—a study in my accident, sir—I—I mean an accident in my study. Toddy was—was lighting the fire, sir, and—and he—'

'Lighting the fire!' repeated Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! No!' Billy Bunter was getting confused under the gimlet-eye, but he remembered that that was a chicken, so to speak, that would not fight. 'I—I don't mean Toddy was lighting a fire, sir—he—he was blowing out of the window—'

'What?'

'I—I mean, he chucked my lines off the table, sir, and they—they blowed—I mean they blewed—that is, they blew out of the fire—I mean out of the window—'

'That will do, Bunter.'

'Oh! Thank you, sir! Mum—mum—may I go now, sir?'

'You may not, Bunter.' Mr. Quelch rose, and picked up a cane. 'It is clear to me, Bunter, that you have wholly neglected the task set you, and that you have written no lines at all—'

'Oh! Yes, sir! It—it wasn't my fault that a fellow was larking with them, sir, and—and hid them, and—and forgot that they lighted the fire—I—I mean that they blowed out of the window—I—I—I mean—he forgot where he had hidden the fire—I mean the window—'

'Bend over that chair, Bunter.' Whop!

'Wow!'

'You may go, Bunter. You will bring me your imposition, the Twelfth Book of the Æneid, at this time tomorrow, the whole written in your own hand. Otherwise, I shall cane you again. More severely!' added Mr. Quelch, grimly.

A fat Owl rolled away from Masters' Studies, wriggling as he rolled. Quelch had administered only one whop.

But one was more than enough for Bunter. And unless his pater played up as so earnestly requested, that awful book still loomed over his fat head. But hope springs eternal in the human breast. Billy Bunter did not roll back to his study and begin on those lines. He rolled away to the tuck-shop, hoping as hard as he could that on the morrow, far from delivering nine hundred and fifty-two Latin lines, in Quelch's study, he would be miles and miles away, safe from Quelch and Virgil.

CHAPTER 8

THE ROMAN PARENT

'ONE for you, fatty.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. 'Good!' Billy Bunter beamed.

It was morning break on Friday. Fellows were looking in the rack for letters: among them, of course, the plumpest member of the Remove. Never had Billy Bunter been so anxious for a letter from home. Fortunately, he had not been 'kept in' again: and the moment the Remove were dismissed after second school, he made what Fisher T. Fish called a bee-line for the letter-rack. As he blinked up at the letters therein, Bob Cherry reached up, and handed down one for him.

The fat Owl clutched it. One blink assured him that it was in the parental hand. It was a letter from Mr. Bunter at Bunter Villa. For once, Mr. Bunter had replied promptly: almost by return of post. That, it appeared to Bunter, was a good omen. It looked as if Mr. Bunter, though he never seemed to understand how urgent it was for his son at Greyfriars to receive a little extra cash, did at least understand that a fellow exhausted by intense application to his studies, needed a spot of relaxation from school work. Bunter, grinning with satisfaction at that letter, had no doubt that it was 'all right'. So prompt a reply indicated as much.

He inserted a fat grubby thumb into the envelope and jerked it open. His fat face beamed like the summer sun at noonday, in happy anticipation.

'Good news, old fat man?' asked Bob.

Billy Bunter chuckled.

'I fancy so,' he answered. 'I told you I asked the pater to get me leave home for a few days. Looks as if it's worked. Once I get home. I can jolly well tell you that you won't see me here again till next term.'

'Fine!' said Johnny Bull.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'The finefulness is terrific,' chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Sniff from Bunter.

'Well, you fellows wouldn't have thought of a dodge like this,' he said. 'If you had a book, you'd squat in a study writing lines for hours and hours and hours and hours. I simply put it to the pater that I was quite worn out with working so hard at my studies—'

'With whatter?' gasped Bob Cherry.

'O ye gods and little fishes!' said Frank Nugent.

'Why, you fat, lazy, slacking Ananias—!' began Johnny Bull.

'It's jolly well worked, anyhow,' grinned Bunter. 'You fellows can go on grinding in the form-room, and kow-towing to Quelch, and saying "Yes, sir!" and "Oh, sir!" and "Please, sir!" and "No, sir!" And you can jolly well think of me sitting under a tree with my hands in my pockets! He, he, he! And old Quelch can jolly well whistle for his book! He, he, he!' Billy Bunter unfolded the parental letter. Even the summer sun at noonday couldn't have beamed quite so brightly as his fat visage as he did so.

But, for a moment or two later, there was a strange and sudden alteration in that plump visage.

Bunter blinked at that letter. He blinked at it as if he could hardly believe either his eyes or his spectacles. The happy satisfaction died out of his face as if wiped off with a duster. As the poet has put it, a change came o'er the spirit of his dream! It was quite a different Bunter—a dismayed, deflated, almost dumbfounded Bunter.

'Oh, crikey!' he gasped.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Anything wrong, old boy?' asked Bob.

Billy Bunter did not reply. Having scanned the parental letter once, he now re-read it, with breathless concentration, as if to make sure that his little round eyes and big round spectacles had not deceived him. The Famous Five looked at him, and looked at one another. Obviously, that letter from home did not after all contain what Bunter had hoped to find there.

Far, indeed, from that! The letter ran:

Dear William,

I have received your letter, which, as it happens, could not have arrived at a more propitious moment. I trust that you are, as you state, now applying yourself more seriously to your studies, since your last report described you as incorrigibly idle. I should be very glad indeed to see such a change in you: and shall now have an opportunity of doing so. One of my clients, manager of the local grocery store, has been left in a somewhat awkward position, by the sudden loss of his errand boy. No doubt, in the course of a week or so, he will be able to replace him. In the meantime, you will take his place.

I have written to your head-master, by the same post, requesting a week's leave from school for you, which I have no doubt he will grant. As soon as you are notified of this, you will come home. I shall expect you on Friday afternoon, and you will take up your duties at the grocery store on Saturday morning.

Your duties there will be simple, and will require only industry, attention, and obedience. You will begin at six o'clock in the morning by sweeping out the shop. After this, you will make yourself generally useful: there is, I believe, always something to be done in such an establishment. Then there will be the delivery of goods to various addresses. As you could not manage the motor-bicycle formerly used, you will walk. This will provide you with healthy exercise throughout the day.

I am glad of this opportunity of obliging Mr. Jones, the grocer. Your desire for a week's leave from school is, therefore, most opportune. I shall expect you to give every satisfaction at the grocery: and I need hardly add that I shall take a very severe view of the matter if you fail to do so.

Your affectionate Father,

W. S. Bunter.

Having read that letter a second time, Billy Bunter had to believe his eyes and his spectacles. It was no delusion—it was awful reality! He was going to get his week's leave from school—he was going to dodge deponent verbs, conjugations and declensions, and leave Quelch to whistle for his book. But he was not going to sit under a shady tree with his hands in his pockets! He was going to work! He was going to begin by sweeping out a shop at six o'clock in the morning! He was going to make himself generally useful! He was going to trudge and trudge and trudge, delivering parcels at various addresses! It seemed like a dreadful dream! But it wasn't—it was grim reality!

'Oh, lor'!' groaned Bunter.

'Bad news, old chap?' asked Harry Wharton, sympathetically.

'Oh, dear!'

'Anybody ill?' asked Bob.

'Eh? Worse than that!' groaned Bunter. 'I—I—I say, you fellows, the—the pater can't be joking, can he? I—I say, you read that letter and—and see if you think he really means it.' The Famous Five, quite concerned by the unhappy Owl's lugubrious aspect, looked at the letter. Then they stared at it. Then they grinned.

It was clear to them, if not to Bunter, that Mr. Bunter at Bunter Villa, knew his William too well to have his leg pulled. He knew, just as if Bunter had told him, that William's one object was to indulge his lazy fat self in a prolonged laze. Probably he was out of patience with William, which, after his reports from school, was not to be wondered at. Perhaps he had a grim sense of humour! Bunter had asked for a week away from school. He was going to get it. And he was going to spend it in real hard work, compared with which school work was as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine. Billy Bunter was getting what he had asked for—but undoubtedly his last state was worse than his first!

'Oh, my hat!' said Bob. 'The jolly old Roman parent! Brutus wasn't in it with your pater, Bunter.'

'Think he means it?' moaned Bunter.

'Looks like it! Brace up, old fat man—after all, you'll be getting away from Quelch, and deponent verbs, and maths, and all that!' said Bob, encouragingly.

Groan, from Bunter.

'And if you work hard for Mr. Jones, he may keep you on, and you won't have to come back and do that book for Quelch!' grinned Nugent.

Groan!

'Well, you've asked for it, and got it!' remarked Johnny Bull.

Groan!

'I—I say, you fellows, I—I can't turn out at six in the morning. I can't lug a lot of parcels about all day! Why, I'd rather do deponent verbs with Quelch all day long, or maths with Lascelles, or—or anything! I'd rather write out that book for Quelch—why, I'd rather write out the whole beastly Æneid! Oh, crikey! When I saw that letter from the pater, I thought it was all right—I—I—I thought I was going to get a holiday—and now— Oh, jiminy! I—I—I say, think the pater really means it?'

'Of course he does, fathead!' said Johnny Bull. 'Looks as if he's fed up with your laziness, and means to give you a lesson. You need one!'

'Beast!' groaned Bunter.

'The needfulness is terrific, my esteemed lazy Bunter.'

'It will do you good, old fat man,' said Nugent. 'You'll be jolly glad to come back. Even deponent verbs will seem easy, after a week of sweeping out the shop and lugging parcels round.'

'I jolly well won't go!' exclaimed Bunter. 'I—I—I shall have to get out of it somehow! I—I say, you fellows, how can I get out of it?'

Harry Wharton shook his head.

'You can't,' he said. 'If the Head's given leave, you'll have to go.'

'Oh!' Billy Bunter brightened a little. 'I say, the Head may not have given leave. He may have told the pater it can't be done, in the middle of term, you know. I say, if the Head's refused to give leave, it's all right—even if I do have to write that beastly book for Quelch! I say—'

'Bunter!' A sharp voice interrupted.

The fat Owl blinked round at his form-master.

'Yes, sir!' he mumbled. 'I—I—I was just going to—to begin on my lines, sir.'

'Your imposition may stand over till next week, Bunter.'

Dr. Locke informs that you are to have leave from school for a week—'

'Oh, crikey!'

'There is a train from Courtfield at two-thirty, Bunter. You will take that train after dinner.'

'Oh,lor!'' I—I say, sir—'

'That is all!'

Mr. Quelch rustled away. Billy Bunter blinked at the Famous Five, with a blink of the deepest woe. It was the last hope—and it had vanished. The Head had acceded to Mr. Bunter's request. Bunter had a week's leave from school—which he had wanted so much, and which he now still more didn't want. There was no help for it—Bunter had to go, he had to face up to a week of real work, from early morn till dewy eve—such was the decree of the Roman parent at Bunter Villa: and the fact that it was precisely and exactly what he deserved, was no comfort at all to Billy Bunter.

CHAPTER 9

TO GO OR NOT TO GO?

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!'

'Here's Bunter!'

'What are you doing here, Bunter?'

'Not gone yet?'

The Remove were due in their form-room at two-fifteen that afternoon. They were gathering as usual at the door, when Billy Bunter rolled up. Harry Wharton and Co. greeted him with surprised inquiry. As they had heard Mr. Quelch direct him to take the two-thirty from Courtfield, they naturally did not expect him to turn up for form at two-fifteen. But there he was! Other fellows, who had heard that the fat Owl had leave home, stared at him. For once, Billy Bunter was an object of general interest.

Billy Bunter was not looking his bonniest. His fat face was somewhat uneasy and apprehensive. He gave the Famous Five a dismal blink. Then he blinked round to ascertain whether Quelch was coming. Then he blinked at the chums of the Remove again.

'I say, you fellows, I—I ain't going!' mumbled Bunter. 'I—I wish now that I hadn't written to the pater to ask for leave home—'

'Too late!' grinned Nugent.

'Well, of course, I never thought of anything like this, you know. I suppose the pater must be in a wax with me, or something. It's Quelch's fault, with his rotten reports, making out that a fellow's lazy--'

'Making out!' murmured Bob Cherry.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'It looks to me as if the pater's got his back up,' said Bunter.

'It does look a bit like it,' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'But he'll get it down again, if you put in some real hard work at the grocer's.'

Bunter shuddered. The mere mention of hard work seemed to give him a pain.

'Better cut off, old boy, before Quelch comes along!' advised Bob. 'He won't be pleased to see you here when he thinks you've gone for your train.'

'I tell you I'm not going,' hooted Bunter. 'I've changed my mind, and I'm jolly well not going, see? Think I'm going to sweep out shops, and carry parcels, and tramp about all day long delivering groceries—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at. Tain't funny!' howled Bunter. 'I can jolly well tell you, and Quelch too—'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo, here he comes.'

'Oh, crikey!'

There was silence, as Mr. Quelch came rustling up to the door of the form-room. He stopped at that door, and fixed his eyes on Bunter. Like the Famous Five, he seemed surprised to see him there.

'Bunter!' he rapped.

'Yes, sir!' mumbled Bunter.

'You will lose your train, Bunter.'

'I—I—I ain't catching a train, sir.'

'What?'

'I—I—I mean, I—I—I've changed my mind about going home, sir,' stammered the hapless Owl. 'I—I—I'd rather stay, sir.'

'That does not depend on you, Bunter. Your father has requested leave for you, and your head-master has granted it. That ends the matter.' 'Bib—bob—bub—but, sir—!' stammered Bunter. 'Lose no more time, Bunter. If you have already lost the two-thirty, there is another train at three-fifteen. You will take it.'

'But—but I—I say, sir, I—I—I—I don't want to go.' gasped Bunter. 'I—I'm afraid I—I should get behind with my lessons, sir, if—if I go home for a week. I—I shouldn't like to—to miss my lessons, sir.'

'Oh crumbs!' murmured Bob Cherry, involuntarily.

A pair of gimlet-eyes fixed on Billy Bunter, as if they would penetrate him. It was the first time in history that Bunter had exhibited keenness for lessons. Mr. Quelch, unaware of the grocery activities that awaited the fat junior at home, was puzzled. Even quite dutiful and industrious fellows would, as a rule, have jumped at leave in the middle of the term. Yet here was Bunter, the most incorrigibly lazy person at Greyfriars, or in the wide world, stating that he preferred his lessons.

'What do you mean, Bunter?' asked Mr. Quelch at last.

'I—I—I mean, I—I'm so keen on my lessons, sir,' moaned Bunter. 'I—I don't want to miss geography this afternoon, sir—'

'The lesson this afternoon, Bunter, is English literature.'

'I—I—I mean English literature, sir. I—I'm awfully keen on English geography—I mean geography literature—I—I mean—'

'Your desire to apply yourself to your studies, Bunter, does you credit—'

'Oh! Thank you, sir.'

'If genuine,' said Mr. Quelch, grimly. 'But as you are the idlest, the most careless, and the least attentive boy in my form, Bunter. I doubt it very much. I can only conclude that for some reason of your own, you do not desire to do as your father requests. That is undutiful, Bunter. It is also immaterial. Your head-master's instructions are that you leave this afternoon, and remain at home for a week. Go at once.'

'B—b—but, sir—" mumbled the unhappy Owl.

'There is nothing more to be said, Bunter. Go!'

'B—b—b—but I—I don't want to go, sir—'

'I have told you that that is immaterial, Bunter—quite immaterial. You will take the three-fifteen train from Courtfield, as you have now lost the two-thirty'

'Yes, sir! No, sir! I—I—I might lose the three-fifteen, sir—'

'I warn you not to do so, Bunter. I should be sorry to be compelled to cane you before your departure, Bunter, but I shall certainly do so if I see you again today. Say no more.'

With that, Quelch unlocked the form-room door, and the Remove, most of them grinning, marched in. Billy Bunter blinked after them as they disappeared, with a dismal, dejected, dolorous blink. Never before had Bunter been anxious to roll into that form-room. Always he was reluctant, and often he was late. What went on in form-rooms was, to Bunter, weary, stale, flat and unprofitable: always he was reluctant to come, and eager to go. But that form-room, now, was the only alternative to the grocery at Redgate: and in comparison, it had become actually attractive! English literature, geography, even deponent verbs, were better than sweeping out shops, and lugging about grocery baskets. It was really tragic that that form-room, for the first time attractive in Bunter's eyes, was now barred to him.

The door closed on an unhappy Owl.

Bunter turned sadly away. But he stopped again. It was as if his little fat legs refused to carry him another step in the direction of home, sweet home. He turned back.

English literature was hardly under way, in the Remove, when the door was slowly and uneasily pushed open, and a fat face looked in. All the Remove fellows stared at it. Mr. Quelch glanced round, and gave it quite a petrifying look.

'Upon my word! Is that you, Bunter?' he exclaimed. 'Oh, yes, sir! If—if you please, sir—'
'Close that door:

'Oh' Yes, sir! But—but—but may I come into class, sir?' gasped Bunter. 'I—I'm so anxious not—not to miss a lesson. sir—'

'Go" thundered Mr. Quelch.

'But I—I—I say, sir—'

Quelch made a step to his desk. From that desk he picked, or rather clutched up, a cane. Then his eyes glittered round to the door again. It looked as if Quelch's patience was exhausted, with that particular member of his form.

'Bunter' You will bend over—'

Slam!

Bunter was gone!

CHAPTER 10

NOTHING DOING!

'OH, lor!'

Dr. Locke glanced round.

The head-master of Greyfriars had emerged from the school library. He was surprised, for a moment, to see a junior in the quadrangle, at a time when all Greyfriars had gathered in the form-rooms. Then he remembered that this particular junior, Bunter of the Remove, had leave home that day, which was no doubt the reason why he was out of form. But his glance lingered rather curiously on Bunter. A schoolboy granted leave from school in the middle of the term might have been expected to look extremely cheerful about it. Bunter was not looking cheerful. Quite the contrary.

The fat Owl was standing staring up at the clock-tower through his big spectacles. The clock indicated a quarter past three.

At three-fifteen, Bunter's train was due to leave Courtfield Station. It was now three-fifteen: and Bunter was still within the ancient walls of Greyfriars School. Having already lost the two-thirty, clearly Bunter had now lost also the three-fifteen. Bunter had to go. He had asked for it: and that for which he had asked had now come home to roost, as it were. But he was not gone.

'Oh, lor!'

He was not gone, as bidden. Quelch at present busy in the form-room, was regardless of him: probably had forgotten him, taking it for granted that he was on his way home. But when the Remove were dismissed, and Quelch found that Bunter was still there, what was going to happen? The hapless Owl knew only too well. No wonder he ejaculated 'Oh, lor!' in dismal and doleful tones, as he blinked up at the clock.

'Bunter!'

'Oh, crikey!' Billy Bunter spun round, and blinked at his head-master instead of the clock. He blinked apprehensively. He had felt safe at least till Quelch was due to emerge from the Remove room. And now here was his head-master: a still more awful personage than Quelch.

But the Head's look was quite kindly. He could see that the junior was troubled about something, and the 'Old Boy' had a kind heart.

'Is anything the matter, Bunter?'

'Oh! No! Yes! No, sir!' stuttered Bunter. 'I—I—I—'

'You have lost your train?' asked Dr. Locke. That seemed the most natural explanation of Bunter's continued presence, and of his dismal stare up at the clock.

'Oh! Yes, sir! I—I—yes, sir! I—I—'

'Do not distress yourself, my boy: said Dr. Locke. 'No doubt you will reach home later than your father expects, but you may, if you wish, use the telephone in common-room, and apprise him that you have lost your train.'

'Oh! Yes! No! Thank you, sir!' mumbled Bunter.

Dr. Locke passed on: Billy Bunter blinking after him with an expressive blink. The Head had been very kind: but that kindness was wasted on Billy Bunter. He did not want to apprise Mr. Bunter, at Bunter Villa, that he had lost his train. He wanted to lose all the trains that British Railways ever put on the Courtfield line.

However, the Head's kind suggestion had put a new idea into his fat mind. He rolled into the House. Was it possible that a telephonic appeal to the Roman parent at Bunter Villa might produce results?

Mr. Bunter undoubtedly had his back up with his hopeful son at Greyfriars. He had come down hard and heavy! He had, apparently, decided to teach that hopeful son a much-needed lesson. Still, perhaps there was a chance yet. Billy Bunter rolled into common-room with a glimmer of hope.

Common-room was vacant. The fat Owl rolled towards the telephone: but he paused in his roll, as the glimmer of a silver box on the sideboard caught his eyes and his spectacles. He headed for the sideboard.

He knew what that box contained. He had, in fact, been there before! The dismal pessimism in his fat face cleared a little, as he blinked into it. The box was full. The mere sight of foodstuffs had an enlivening effect on Billy Bunter. A fat hand groped in the box. Bunter was in a jam: he was booked for a week's leave home, and he was not going if he could help it. It was, in fact, quite a desperate situation. But there was still balm in Gilead, so to speak. It was a comfort to munch biscuits. He munched and munched till the box was empty.

Then, feeling a little better, he rolled over to the telephone.

But even a couple of pounds of biscuits packed in his extensive circumference failed to brace him when a familiar voice came through from the other end. And it was in a tremulous squeak that he replied:

'William speaking from Greyfriars, father.'

'William!' It sounded like a snort.

'Yes! You see, I—'

'There was no occasion to telephone, William.'

'Oh! Yes! No! But—'

'Well?' It was another snort.

It did not sound promising. It could not be considered encouraging. It certainly sounded as if the parental back was distinctly up!

'I—I—I—about that-that leave home!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I thought I'd better ring up, because—because I—I've changed my mind—'

'Indeed!' A still more emphatic snort!

'I—I don't think I—I ought to leave in the middle of the term!' babbled Bunter. 'I—I should lose my—my place in form, and—and I—I'd rather stick to my lessons, if—if you don't mind! And—and we've been doing deponent verbs, and—and I'm specially keen on deponent verbs, and—and—and—'

'Is that all?'

'I—I've thought it over since—since I wrote, and—and I'd rather stay at school! 'Taint because of the grocer's, of course—I—I—I should like that—quite a—a—a nice change, but—but may I tell Quelch that it's all washed out, and I'm to stay—'

'You will tell Mr. Quelch nothing of the kind.'

'I—I—I say, Quelch is—is very ratty about it—he—he—he doesn't want me to—to miss my lessons. He—he said so! He was—was quite fierce about it. He—he objects very much—he—he keeps on objecting—'

'It is for your head-master to decide, William. Now listen to me. I have made arrangements for you here, as I stated in my letter. Those arrangements stand. They will not be altered by one iota—not by a single iota, William.'

'Oh, lor!'

'If your head-master grants leave of absence, William, you will come home. If he refuses leave, you will remain at school. That is for Dr. Locke to decide. If leave is granted, I shall expect you home today. That is all, William. There is no occasion for further communication.'

'But—!' gasped the hapless Owl.

'I have said that that is all, William.'

There was quite a whirr on the line. It indicated that the receiver at Bunter Villa had been jammed back. Mr. Bunter had cut off! Having said all he had to say, he was apparently uninterested in further remarks from William.

'Oh, lor!'

mumbled Bunter. He replaced the receiver, and blinked dismally at the telephone. Evidently, there was 'nothing doing' at Bunter Villa! His appeal had failed! Mr. Bunter was adamant. William, if the Head granted leave, was booked for that grocery at Redgate. And William knew, if Mr. Bunter did not, that the Head had already granted leave!

Was there still a glimmer of hope in the gloom?

If William did not arrive home at Bunter Villa that day, his parent would naturally conclude that leave had not been granted: and in that case would not expect him home. If, somehow or other, William George Bunter could contrive to hang on at Greyfriars, there would be no trouble from the Bunter Villa end. But how could he? He was going to—if he could! But how?

A worried Owl rolled out of common-room. But he did not roll out into the quad. He did not want to risk meeting the head-master's eye again, and to hear an inquiry as to why he had not gone for his train. In such dire circumstances he would have been glad to take counsel with other fellows: but other fellows were all in the form-rooms: and he dared not linger in public view till Quelch came out. Dismally, he made his way up to the Remove studies. And there, as in common-room, he found a spot of balm in Gilead—in the shape of a cake and a pot of jam in Lord Mauleverer's study, and a bag of dough-nuts in Smithy's. With that booty he retired to the box-room, where he would at least be safe out of view of a gimlet-eye.

What he was going to do, Billy Bunter just didn't know: except that somehow, or anyhow, he was going to dodge that week's leave home. It was a knotty problem to be solved, and when he had disposed of Mauly's jam and cake, and Smithy's dough-nuts, he still hadn't solved it.

CHAPTER 11

GONE?

'How's that?' asked Bob Cherry.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

It was not on the cricket-field that Bob asked that question. It was in No. 1 Study in the Remove.

Five fellows were in that study after class. They had been refreshing themselves with ginger-beer after the labours of the form-room. Four of them were in flannels, about to go down to the nets for a spot of cricket before tea-time. But Bob, generally the most strenuous member of the Co. was for once giving the strenuous life a miss.

He was standing at the looking-glass, engaged in a somewhat unusual occupation—daubing his cheery, ruddy face with black. Having been assigned to play the part of 'Uncle Tom' in Wibley's production of Uncle Tom's Cabin, Bob realized that he needed a little experience in the gentle art of make-up. He had to be a coloured gentleman in the play: and he wanted to be a convincing coloured gentleman. So there he was, trying it on, as it were. He turned from the glass as he inquired 'How's that?' and there was a ripple of laughter in the study. He had left several white streaks and patches in his black complexion, and the effect seemed to impress his friends as comic.

'A little piebald, so far,' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'A few blanks to fill in,' said Johnny Bull.

'Behold he is black but comely!' grinned Nugent.

'The blackfulness is terrific, and the comelifulness is preposterous,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a chuckle.

'Well, Rome wasn't built in a day,' said Bob. 'I'm not so good at this as old Wibley is, and I want some practice. But it will be all right on the night! A spot of practice works wonders. You fellows get off to the cricket, and leave me to it. I'll have tea on when you come in.'

He turned back to the glass, and resumed the blackening process. He grinned at his reflection. In schoolboy clothes, and with a mop of flaxen hair surmounting his black face, he did not perhaps look much like 'Uncle Tom': but he did not look anything at all like Bob Cherry. He could hardly recognize the black face that grinned back at him from the glass. The door of No. 1 Study was kicked open, and Herbert Vernon-Smith looked in: in flannels, with a bat under his arm.

'You fellows coming down?' he asked.

'Just coming,' answered Harry. Four juniors made a move, but Bob remained at the glass, daubing and dabbing. Smithy glanced at a back view of him.

'Isn't Cherry coming?' he asked. 'What the dickens are you doing at that glass, Cherry? Admiring your beauty—if any?'

'Fathead!' answered Bob, and he looked round. Vernon-Smith jumped, at the sudden sight of an unexpected black face. His eyes popped at it. 'What—who—what—who's that?' he stuttered.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Me Uncle Tom!' explained Bob, grinning. 'Me good nigger, sar, live along cabin. Bery good nigger, sar, belong Massa George, sar.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh,' gasped the Bounder. 'You ass! Blessed if I knew you. Come on, you chaps—there's not a lot of time before tea.'

'Yes, cut off,' said Bob. 'I'll get through with this, and have tea ready when you come in. Cheerio.'

The Co. followed Vernon-Smith down the passage, and Bob was left to his peculiar occupation. Probably he would have preferred cricket, also: but William Wibley, to whom amateur theatricals were the beginning, the middle, and the end of all things, was keeping him up to the mark: and there was no doubt that Bob needed some practice.

Satisfied at last with his new complexion, he proceeded to sort out wigs from the property-box, and selected a large woolly one. It was not easy to adjust a wig accurately over a mop of somewhat unruly hair, and Bob was hard at work, when Lord Mauleverer looked in from the passage.

'Anybody at home?' he asked. 'I say—'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' Bob looked round.

Lord Mauleverer did not merely jump. He bounded.

He goggled at the black face. 'Good gad! What—who—'

'Only little me,' chuckled Bob. 'Making up as Uncle Tom.'

'Oh! You!' gasped Mauly.

'Just me! If you want the other fellows, they're at the nets.'

'Oh, no—only looked in to ask about Bunter—'

'Bunter?' repeated Bob.

'Yaas. I suppose he's gone?'

'Eh? I suppose so,' answered Bob, staring. 'You heard Quelch tell him to hike off for the three-fifteen at Courtfield. Must be nearly home by this time. Poor old Bunter—he's got what he asked for, and a little over.'

'Well, he must have gone, I suppose,' said Mauleverer. 'But—'

'But what?'

'Well, there was a cake, and a pot of jam, in my study. They're not there now. So I sort of wondered whether Bunter was gone, after all.'

'Must be,' said Bob. 'Quelch promised him a whopping if he saw him again, and you can bet that Bunter won't meet his jolly old eye if he can help it. He's gone all right. Nobody's seen him since class, anyway.'

Lord Mauleverer nodded, and ambled on down the passage. He was puzzled. Billy Bunter, ordered to go, and with a 'whopping' awaiting him if he was seen again, must be gone. Yet a cake and a pot of jam had mysteriously disappeared from No. 12 Study. It really looked as if Billy Bunter, having departed, had left his manners and customs behind him with some other member of the Remove!

Bob Cherry resumed his labours at the looking-glass.

That woolly wig was rather a spot of bother. Tips of curly, flaxen hair persisted in emerging here and there. But Bob was patient: and at long last, he had that woolly wig adjusted to his satisfaction. He was gazing, and grinning, at the final result in the glass, when he gave a sudden start. That glass reflected not only Bob, but the study doorway behind him. And in that doorway there suddenly appeared an unexpected figure.

Bob stared at it, in the glass.

Really, he could not quite believe his eyes for a moment.

Bunter was gone—he must be gone—he had to be gone. Yet it was a fat figure, a fat face, and a pair of little round eyes blinking through a pair of big round spectacles, that appeared in the doorway reflected in the glass. That fat face was familiar: and a smear of jam round the extensive mouth was familiar also. It was either Billy Bunter, or his ghost.

The fat figure rolled in.

'I say, Bob, old chap!' It was the old familiar squeak.

Billy Bunter blinked at Bob Cherry's back. But the sturdy figure was easily recognizable at a back view. 'I say, old fellow—'

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped Bob.

He spun round from the looking-glass.

Then it was Bunter's turn to jump, like Smithy and Mauly before him. He jumped as if electrified. Probably he would have jumped clear of the floor, had he not had so much weight to lift.

'Oh! Ooooh! Oh, crikey! Who's that? I—I thought it was Bob Cherry—who is it?—I say—oh, crikey! I—I—I say—who—?'

'It's me, you fat ass!' said Bob. 'Only practising as Uncle Tom, fathead. What are you doing here, Bunter?'

'Oh!' gasped the fat Owl. 'You silly ass, you gave me a turn! I thought it was a nightmare, for a minute. You look like one.'

'What are you doing here?' hooted Bob. 'If Quelch catches sight of you, you're booked for the whopping of your life.'

'Don't I jolly well know it!' gasped Bunter. 'But he ain't going to catch sight of me, old chap. I'll watch it.'

'You footling, foozling ass——'

'Beast!'

'Where have you been, all this time?' demanded Bob. 'Why didn't you go for your train?'

'I tell you I'm not going, if I can help it.'

'But you can't help it, fathead! Isn't your pater expecting you at home now?'

'Well, yes, but if I don't go, he will think that the Head hasn't given me leave after all,' explained Bunter.

'But the Head has given you leave.'

'Well, I can't help that, can I?' yapped Bunter. 'I'm jolly well not going to that grocer's, I know that, I say, I've been up in the box-room, keeping doggo, you know. But a fellow can't stick in a box-room for ever—'

'Hardly,' chuckled Bob.

'And a fellow gets hungry, too,' added Bunter, pathetically. 'I've had nothing to eat since dinner, except—'

'Except a cake and a pot of jam?' asked Bob. 'Look here, fathead, buzz off and get the next train, before Quelch gets his jolly old eye on you. You're asking for whops before you go.'

'Well, Quelch thinks I'm gone, and I'm going to take jolly good care not to catch his eye. It's all right so long as he thinks I'm gone. But—but how can a fellow keep doggo for a whole week?' groaned Bunter. 'It's all right so long as the pater thinks I haven't got leave, and Quelch thinks I'm gone—but that means keeping doggo for a week—and I don't see how.'

'It wants some seeing!' agreed Bob.

'Well, I think you might try to help a fellow out,' yapped Bunter. 'Didn't I do you a jolly good turn, and get a book for it, too? It was that beastly book that landed me like this.'

'What the dickens can I do?' asked Bob.

'Well, you might ask a fellow whether he'd like to stay to tea, to begin with. I say, where are the other fellows?'

'They're at the nets, and we're going to have tea when they come in. You can stick here if you like,' said Bob, 'but the minute it gets about that you're still here, Quelch will be on your track. You'd better go while the going's good.'

'I'm not going.'

'But you've got to go!' hooted Bob.

'Shan't!'

'Look here, Bunter—'

'Beast!'

Billy Bunter closed the study door, and rolled across to the armchair. He sat down in that armchair. Bob Cherry stared at him, rather nonplussed: then, giving it up, he resumed his decorative activities at the looking-glass. If Billy Bunter fancied that he could think up some dodge for remaining at Greyfriars, while his pater supposed that he had been refused leave, and Quelch supposed that he had already gone home, he was welcome to sit in that armchair and wrestle with the problem. Anyhow there was going to be tea in the study: and that, at least from the fat Owl's point of view, was so much to the good. Billy Bunter sprawled in the armchair, his fat thoughts about equally divided between his problem, and the prospect of tea.

CHAPTER 12

THE BIG IDEA

'HE, he, he!'

Billy Bunter chuckled.

He was alone in No. 1 Study.

Bob Cherry was through with his experiments in make-up. He had packed up the property-box, and left the study, and was busy in a bathroom cleaning off the last traces of 'Uncle Tom's' complexion. He had left Billy Bunter sitting in the armchair, with a corrugated fat brow: a dismal and dejected Owl. It was fixed in Billy Bunter's fat mind that he wasn't—if he could help it—going home for that week's leave, to face up to the week of hard work which his pater apparently thought would do him good, and be a useful lesson to him. The problem was, how could he help it? For the moment, he was safe in No. 1 Study: Quelch, under the impression that he was already gone, was not looking for him, or thinking of him at all. But—!

Thinking was not, really, much in Billy Bunter's line.

But now his fat intellect was under unusual pressure. A fellow couldn't possibly keep 'doggo' day after day, undiscovered. But if he could—!

And could he not?

The big idea germinated in the fat brain. The dismal fat face brightened, as Bunter thought of it. The little round eyes gleamed behind the big round spectacles. And Bunter chuckled: 'He, he, he!'

Grinning, he sat and pondered it over. It might work!

Why shouldn't it work? It was a startling idea. It was, in fact, unheard-of. But that really made it all the more likely of success. Nobody, not even Quelch, ever could or would guess the amazing scheme that was evolving in Billy Bunter's fat brain. And if he could get by with it, it would see him through, and rescue him from that most terrible of all fates, a spot of real hard work!

'He, he, he!'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

Bob Cherry came back into the study. He was now his own natural self again, his face ruddy from recent rubbing and scrubbing. He glanced in surprise at the fat junior in the armchair. He had left there a dismal, dejected Owl: he returned to find Bunter grinning and chuckling.

'Enjoying life, old fat bean?' asked Bob, puzzled.

'He, he, he!'

'You can lend me a hand getting tea, if you like,' said Bob. 'The fellows won't be long now.'

'Never mind tea,' said Bunter.

'Eh?'

'I said never mind tea—'

'Oh, my hat!' said Bob. This was still more surprising.

Billy Bunter really was not the fellow to 'never mind' tea or any other meal. As a rule he minded very much indeed.

'Aren't you hungry?' asked Bob.

'Eh? Yes. But never mind that.'

'Never mind that!' repeated Bob, almost dazedly. 'Did you say never mind that? I say, you're not ill, are you—or wandering in your mind?'

'Oh, really, Cherry! Look here, there's no time to get tea now. I've thought of a way of dodging Quelch, and sticking on here without the old bean knowing. And there's jolly well no time to lose. If I'm seen about, it will get to Quelch, and he will come down on me. He's got to go on thinking that I went home this afternoon, see?'

'And how?' asked Bob.

'He, he, he! I've thought it up, and you're jolly well going to help me,' said Bunter. 'It's up to you, old chap, after I got you out of that licking in the form-room. I told you one good turn deserves another—'

'No need to tell me again,' said Bob. 'I'd do anything I could, of course. But what the dickens do you fancy I can do?'

'It was seeing you making-up as a nigger that made me think of it,' explained Bunter. 'If you'd kept that black face on, nobody would know it was you.'

'I didn't know myself in the glass,' asserted Bob. 'But what on earth has that got to do with dodging Quelch?'

'Lots!' grinned Bunter. 'Suppose you make me up-?'

'Eh?'

'Make me up as a nigger—'

'What?'

'See?' grinned Bunter. 'I tell you, Quelch wouldn't have known you, if he'd seen you with that black face. Well, he won't know me with a black face. See? If he sees a nigger, how's he to guess it's me?'

'Oh, great pip!'

Bob Cherry fairly blinked at the grinning fat Owl in the armchair. He really could hardly believe his ears, as Billy Bunter propounded that amazing idea. Evidently, Bunter had been doing some thinking! This was the extraordinary outcome!

'Mad?' gasped Bob.

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'You fat ass! Quelch mightn't know it was you, if he saw a black chap about, but think he wouldn't want to know what a black chap was doing at Greyfriars?' howled Bob.

'I've thought that out, too,' retorted Bunter. 'Suppose Inky had a relation coming to see him from India—'

'He hasn't.'

'I know he hasn't, but he might have,' yapped Bunter. 'If he had, the chap would naturally come and see him at his school, wouldn't he? Well, I'm that relation, see?'

'Oh, suffering cats and crocodiles!'

'You needn't make me as black as Uncle Tom,' explained Bunter. 'Darkish brown, like Hurree Singh. See? You can do it, old chap. You're awfully clever at making up.'

'Thanks.'

'I mean it, old fellow! Cleverest chap I know—'

'Pile it on,' said Bob, sarcastically.

'Being so jolly clever at it, you could do it as easy as anything,' said Bunter. 'You can make me look like anything you like, so long as I don't look like me. I can't keep on dodging Quelch for ever, but he can see me as soon as he likes when you've made me look like somebody else. All you've got to do is to shove on a complexion like Inky's, and my brother Sammy or my sister Bessie wouldn't know me. And I can change into some of that clobber in your property-box—theatrical things, just as if I was fresh over from India, you know, and dressed in their outlandish way, see? That'll make it safer. See?'

'Oh, holy smoke!'

'Keep it dark that I'm here at all, and jolly well keep me dark too!' chuckled Bunter. 'Keep me as dark as Inky—he, he, he! What about it, old chap?'

'What about it?' gasped Bob. 'Nothing about it, you potty porpoise. It wouldn't work for a minute. For one thing, you'd give yourself away the minute you opened your mouth.'

'He, he! I shouldn't be able to speak English, being a native fresh over from India!' grinned Bunter. 'I've thought that out too. Besides, I can keep my mouth shut, can't I?'

'Can you?' said Bob. 'You never have, so far.'

'Beast! I mean, look here, dear old chap, you've just got to help me out. Didn't I help you out the other day, owning up in the form-room, and getting that beastly book from Quelch? There's such a thing as gratitude. You know what Spokeshave—I mean Shakespeare—says about a thankless serpent being sharper than a child's tooth—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, don't waste time cackling,' hooted Bunter. 'We've got to get this through before somebody spots me here. I'm jolly well not going to be hiked off by Quelch and whopped, to please you, Bob Cherry. Look here—'

'It wouldn't work, you fat ass—it wouldn't and couldn't—'

'It jolly well could, and it jolly well would. You're so jolly clever at make-up, old chap,' said Bunter, persuasively. 'I—I've always admired you for it, old fellow. Wonderful, I call it. Mind, I'm not just buttering you up because I want you to help me out—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'There you go—cackling again! Talk about Nebuchadnezzar fiddling while Carthage was burning—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Will you stop cackling at everything a fellow says?' howled Bunter. 'Look here, its jolly well up to you, and you can jolly well get on with it, see?'

'I suppose it would be rather a lark,' said Bob. 'But—'

'Oh, stop butting and get going.'

'Well, look here,' said Bob, at last, 'it's just potty, but I'll try it on if you like. I'll fix you up before the other fellows come in to tea, and if they don't tumble, you can carry on if you like.'

Bunter heaved himself out of the armchair.

'Go it!' he said, 'and look here, don't give me away by calling me Bunter. Call me by some Indian name—something like Jam Bang Wallop—or Rum-tum-Fuzz—'

'Oh, my hat! Are they Indian names?' gasped Bob.

'Get on with it, for goodness sake,' said Bunter. And Bob Cherry, grinning, got on with it.

CHAPTER 13

KEEPING BUNTER DARK!

'HERE we are.'

'Tea ready?'

'Oh! Who's that?'

Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, came cheerfully into No. 1 Study, fresh and ruddy from cricket. Bob Cherry, boiling eggs over a spirit-stove in the fender, glanced up, grinning. The study table was set for tea, and it was almost ready. But the eyes of the four juniors, as they came in, turned in surprise upon a figure in the armchair.

It was a plump figure. But, excepting in that respect, it bore no resemblance to any person of their acquaintance. A dark-brown complexion, some shades darker than Hurree Singh's, hinted that the stranger was a visitor from some torrid clime. A red fez on a bullet head added to that effect. And loose trousers and a gold-braided tunic had quite an Oriental aspect. Who that dark youth was, and why he was there, and whence he had come, Harry Wharton and Co. had no idea. But certainly they did not even dream of suspecting that he was a member of the Greyfriars Remove.

'You've got a visitor, Bob,' said Harry.

'Oh! Yes! Chap you know I think,' answered Bob.

'Don't you remember having met him before?'

Harry Wharton shook his head.

'Don't you know him, Franky?'

'Can't say I do,' answered Nugent.'

'Or you, Johnny?'

'Never met him that I know of,' answered Johnny Bull.

'Friend of yours, Bob?' asked Harry, puzzled.

'Sort of! I've known him a long time, anyway. Sure you don't remember ever meeting him?'

'Quite sure! But if he's a friend of yours, he's welcome in this study. Hadn't you better introduce us?'

'Does he speak English?' asked Johnny.

'He speaks only his own language,' answered Bob, blandly.

'Well, that won't make things easy. What's his name?'

'Call him Sam Ram Jam.'

'Oh, my hat! Relation of yours, Inky?'

'Not at all-fully, my esteemed Johnny. I have no relation named Sam Ram Jam.'

'I suppose he understands English, even if he doesn't speak it,' said Nugent.

'Oh, yes, he understands it all right,' grinned Bob, 'but don't expect him to speak a word of English. Not a word.'

'Well, so long as he catches on all right,' said Harry Wharton. 'Will you stay to tea in this study, Sam Ram Jam?'

'Acky woo oo toot coot.'

'Eh?'

'Kicky woodle snoo.'

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped Johnny Bull. 'Is that his language, Bob?'

'By gum!' said Bob, staring at the fat figure in the armchair. That fat figure not only did not look anything like Billy Bunter—except in width—but the voice did not sound in the least

like Bunter's familiar fat tones. It was a throaty voice quite unlike Bunter's fat squeak. Bob almost wondered, for a moment, whether it really was Bunter!

'Wooty wang parky coo toot!' went on the throaty voice. 'Oodle! Wop!'

'Oh, crumbs!' murmured Bob.

'Is that Hindustani, Inky?' asked Nugent.

'It is certainly not Hindustani,' answered Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'It is not a language of India at all. I do not understand it.'

'Acky woop toodle wang woo!' came from the dark stranger.

'Sorry we don't understand you. Sam Ram Jam,' said Harry Wharton, politely. 'But you're welcome here, and we hope you'll stay to tea.'

'Sacky bag ag wop.'

'Does that mean yes, Bob?'

'I fancy it does,' grinned Bob. 'Sam Ram Jam isn't the fellow to say no to a feed. More likely to wolf the lot.'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

Four fellows jumped, as if electrified. Up to that moment, not one of the four had had the slightest doubt or suspicion. The dark youth in the armchair was an absolute stranger to their eyes. That remark from Billy Bunter made them wonder, for a moment, whether they were dreaming.

'Wha—a—t—?' stuttered Harry Wharton, blankly. 'What—who—what—?'

'That's Bunter speaking!' exclaimed Johnny Bull. 'Is Bunter here? Hasn't he gone after all? Is Bunter about?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' roared Bob Cherry. 'Yes, Bunter's about!

He's keeping dark! Ha, ha, ha!'

'He, he, he! I say, you fellows—'

'BUNTER!' howled four juniors, together.

'Great pip!' said Johnny Bull, almost dazedly, as he stared with popping eyes at the dark-skinned inhabitant of the armchair. 'That—that—that's not Bunter! What the thump is he got up like that for?'

'It's Bunter!' stuttered Nugent.

'The Bunterfulness is terrific.'

'You silly ass, Bob,' exclaimed Harry Wharton, 'we left you making up as a darkey. Have you been experimenting on Bunter too? Is this a lark, or what?'

Bob Cherry chuckled.

'Well, it's rather a lark,' he said. 'Did any of you know it was Bunter?'

'His own pater wouldn't know him, got up like that.'

Nothing to recognize about him, except his specs and his circumference.'

'Oh, really, Wharton—'

'You see, Bunter doesn't want to go home and find out what work is like,' Bob explained.

'He thinks he can dodge Quelch, got up like that.'

'Oh, suffering cats!'

'The fat chump isn't thinking of staying like that is he?' gasped Harry blankly.

'I jolly well am!' said Billy Bunter, emphatically. 'I told Cherry it would work, and it jolly well will! You fellows didn't know me, and Quelch won't. I'm jolly well not going to that grocer's and I'm jolly well not going to be whopped, either. You fellows have got to keep it dark, of course. Quelch can think I'm a friend of Inky's just over from India, or a relation—you can tell him I'm your cousin from Bhanipur, Inky—'

'I shall certainly not tell the esteemed Quelch any terrific crammers,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Beast! I—I mean, look here, I expect my pals to stand by me,' said Bunter. 'I don't care who Quelch thinks I am, so long as he doesn't think I'm me! That's important! I've got to keep this up for a week, somehow—'

'A week!' gasped Harry Wharton.

'Yes, or else I shall have to go home and turn up at that grocer's. I can't do that, can I?'

'Why not?' asked Johnny Bull. 'Oh, really, Bull—'

'That's an easy one,' chuckled Bob. 'It would mean a spot of work, too awful to contemplate!'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'Well, if Bunter tries this game on Quelch, he will feel a pain, when Quelch spots him!' said Johnny Bull. 'And so shall we, if we back him up in it.'

'Well, it's rather a lark,' said Bob.

'Quelch won't think it a lark.'

'Quelch isn't going to know a thing,' yapped Bunter. 'Think he'd know me now if he butted in? Did you fellows? Look at me! Do I look like me?'

The Famous Five looked at him. It had to be admitted that Billy Bunter did not look in the very least like William George Bunter. Except, as Wharton had remarked, in his spectacles and his circumference, there was no resemblance. Indeed, looking at Sam Ram Jam in the armchair, they could hardly believe that it really was Bunter, though they knew it was. Even Quelch's gimlet-eye was not likely to penetrate his identity. But—!

'There'll be a row when it comes out,' said Nugent.

'Well, it mayn't come out,' said Bob. 'And look here, Bunter did me a good turn, as all you fellows know, owning up as he did, and he got that book for it. It's up to me to see him through if I can—'

'I should jolly well think so!' yapped Bunter.

'Oh, we'll all back up,' said Harry Wharton, laughing.

'It will mean six all round when it comes out, that's all.'

'That's all right, then: said Bunter. 'And now, I can tell you fellows that I'm jolly hungry. What about tea? I've had nothing since dinner except a cake and some jam and a few dough-nuts, and some biscuits—'

'Shush!' breathed Bob Cherry, 'somebody's coming.'

There was a step outside the door of No. I Study.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter, 'if it's Quelch—'

'Quiet, you fat ass.'

'Mind you fellows don't say anything—'

'Quiet!'

'Yes, but I say—'

'Shut up, you blithering fat chump!' hissed Bob Cherry.

And, little as shutting up was in Billy Bunter's line, he contrived to do so, as the study door opened and Mr. Quelch looked in.

CHAPTER 14

SAFE AS HOUSES

BILLY BUNTER quaked.

Up to that moment, he had been feeling quite a fat confidence in his remarkable scheme for dodging that week's leave home. No doubt it had its risks: and no doubt there were difficulties ahead. But Billy Bunter was not the fellow to look very far ahead. Somehow or other he had to dodge the awful programme mapped out for him by a pater who seemed to have taken a leaf out of the book of the stern Roman parent of old. Desperate diseases, as the poet has told us, require desperate remedies. Bunter had thought this up: Bob Cherry had lent his aid: his deep disguise had taken in the Co., and why shouldn't it take in Quelch also? It was going to be all right for Bunter. But—

But as that angular figure appeared in the doorway, and those keen eyes glinted into the study, the fat Owl quaked.

Often, in the Remove, Quelch's eyes were compared to gimlets, for their piercing quality. And never had they seemed so much like gimlets, as they did at this moment to the disguised Owl. He quaked in the armchair, in dread expectation of those gimlet-eyes fixing on him, penetrating his disguise, and of an awful voice snapping 'Bunter! What does this mean?'

It was a terrifying moment for Bunter. But his dread was unfounded.

The gimlet-eyes did not fix on him. Mr. Quelch did not even glance in his direction. The Famous Five were all on their feet, and Quelch's eyes were on them: and he did not, for the moment, notice the dark-complexioned inhabitant of the armchair at all. Billy Bunter quaked unheeded.

Five fellows exchanged rather uneasy looks, wondering what had brought Quelch up to the Remove studies. If Bunter was discovered there, hours after he was supposed to have gone home, it spelt trouble all round. Bob might regard this as a 'lark', but as Johnny Bull had sapiently remarked, it was quite certain that Quelch wouldn't.

'Wharton!'

'Yes, sir! stammered Harry. 'Is—is anything the matter, sir?'

'Yes, Wharton! I am investigating an act of depredation in common-room,' said Mr. Quelch. 'I trust that no boy in my Form was guilty of it, but I must question the boys in all the Remove studies. If Bunter were still here—'

'Eh?'

'If Bunter were still here, I should have little doubt where to look for the culprit. He has been punished more than once for a similar act.'

'Oh! murmured Harry.

'But—but what's happened, sir?' ventured Bob. 'Someone has taken the biscuits from the biscuit-box in common-room, Cherry. It is not merely a matter of a thoughtless boy taking a biscuit or two. Mrs. Kebble tells me that the box was filled today. Yet not a single biscuit remains in it. Some boy has entered common-room while it was vacant, and completely cleared out the biscuit-box. Such an act cannot be allowed to pass. The culprit must be found and punished. I trust that he will not be found in my Form. But I must ascertain.'

'Oh!' murmured Bob. Evidently, Billy Bunter had not been quite idle while masters and pupils were busy in the form-rooms that afternoon! The biscuits from the box in common-room had accompanied Mauly's cake and jam down the fattest neck in the Remove.

'I do not suppose for one moment,' added Mr. Quelch, kindly, 'that the culprit will be found in this study. But I must question all boys in the Remove. You know nothing of this?'

'Nothing, sir,' said Harry.

'No, sir,' said Johnny Bull and Frank Nugent, together.

'The nothingfulness is terrific, sir.'

Bob Cherry paused for a second. Certainly, he knew no more than the other fellows about the 'depredation' in Masters' common-room. But he suspected very strongly that the late contents of the biscuit-box were now parked inside the fat figure in the armchair. But his pause was only for a second.

'I haven't been anywhere near common-room, sir.' Mr. Quelch gave a quite gracious nod.

'Very well,' he said. 'I shall now proceed to the other studies, and—!' He broke off suddenly, as his eyes fell on a sixth occupant of the study. He gave quite a start as he looked across at a dark face under a red fez, and two little round eyes watching him anxiously through a pair of big round spectacles. 'Bless my soul! Who is that, Wharton? Five fellows caught their breath. If Billy Bunter was quaking, the Famous Five, at that moment, were not far from the same state. The gimlet-eyes were fixed on Bunter now. But it was a relief to note that there was only surprise in Quelch's face. He was naturally surprised to see a dark-complexioned youth, in a red fez and a gold-trimmed tunic, in a Remove study. But it was plain that he was taking that youth at face value, as it were. Obviously, he had not the remotest suspicion that he had ever seen him before.

'That, sir,' stammered Harry. 'Oh! It—it's a chap we know, sir. We—we—we've asked him to—to tea, sir—'

'Indeed!' said Mr. Quelch. 'You should have requested leave, Wharton, before doing anything of the kind.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! Sorry, sir.'

'A relative of yours, Hurree Singh?'

'Not an esteemed relative, sir, but I have known him a long time,' said the nabob of Bhanipur.

'What is his name?'

'He is called Sam Ram Jam, sir,' said Bob.

'Dear me!' said Mr. Quelch. 'Well, there is certainly no harm in your receiving a visit from this lad, though you should have asked leave first. As a visitor from a distant foreign land, no doubt he is interested in an English school: and you may show him over Greyfriars, if he wishes.'

'Oh! Thank you, sir.'

'No doubt he will find many things to interest him,' said Mr. Quelch, graciously. 'Have you been in England long, my young friend?'

Billy Bunter breathed rather hard. It was his cue not to be able to speak English: an easy way of avoiding awkward questions. But he hesitated to hand out the remarkable language of which he had given Harry Wharton and Co. a sample.

But it was no time for hesitation. It was a case of in for a penny, in for a pound. He had to answer, and chance it, carefully disguising his voice.

'Acky-too-woo arley barley!' came a throaty mumble. Mr. Quelch gave quite a start.

'What? What did you say? What do you mean?'



'Oodle oo warley barley wacky,' gasped Bunter.

'Bless my soul! Does not this boy understand our language? Does he not speak English?' exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

'He—he understands it, sir!' stammered Bob, 'but—but he speaks only his own language, sir!'

A reply which, though strictly truthful, savoured a little more of the wisdom of the serpent, than of the innocence of the dove!

'Oh!' said Mr. Quelch. 'You understand what I say, Sam Ram Jam?'

'Icky too coo.' Bunter was growing more confident again, as it was clear that Quelch had not the slightest suspicion. 'Pooh wacky tag.'

'Dear me,' said Mr. Quelch. 'I see that he understands me, though he cannot reply in our language. I am unacquainted with Oriental tongues: but no doubt you understand him, Hurree Singh. Otherwise I do not see how you boys communicate with him at all. Is he speaking Hindustani?'

Four fellows caught their breath. One—a fat one—quaked again. They had not thought out that little detail. But the quick-witted nabob was equal to the occasion.

'It is not Hindustani, sir, but I will interpret pleasurefully, sir, if it is your esteemed wish,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, meekly.

'Very good,' said Mr. Quelch. 'You are welcome here, Sam Ram Jam, and your friends may show you over the school.'

'Ooku-coo wicky wop,' gasped Bunter.

'Please translate for me, Hurree Singh.'

'Certainly, sir. Sam Ram Jam is thankfully obliged by your kind beneficence.'

Mr. Quelch smiled.

'Very, well, very well!' he said, and with that, the Remove master rustled out of No. 1: to continue his investigations into the mystery of the missing biscuits farther up the passage. The door closed behind him.

The juniors stood looking at one another, rather breathlessly, after Quelch had gone. They had been through a somewhat trying ordeal. The silence was broken by a fat cachinnation from the armchair.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Billy Bunter. 'Safe as houses, what? He, he, he!'

'By gum!' said Bob, with a deep breath, 'if Quelch had tumbled—'

'Well, I don't see how he could have, really,' said Harry. 'Nobody could guess that that object in the armchair was Bunter.'

'But the sooner he goes for his train, the better,' said Nugent.

'I'll watch it!' snorted Bunter.

'How long do you think you can keep this up, you fat ass?' grunted Johnny Bull.

'As long as I jolly well like,' retorted Bunter, 'and you fellows have got to back me up, and keep me dark—he, he, he! Now what about tea?'

Billy Bunter did not seem troubled by doubts. The Famous Five had a good many.

However, tea was the next item on the programme: and Sam Ram Jam proceeded to demonstrate that a box of biscuits, a bag of dough-nuts, a cake, and a pot of jam, had not diminished the appetite of William George Bunter.

CHAPTER 15

BUNTER WON'T GO

'Ass!'

'Fathead!'

'Ditherer!'

'Chump!'

'Blitherer!'

Five voices spoke in unison. It seemed to be a case of five souls with but a single thought, five tongues that spoke as one! The remarks of Harry Wharton and Co. left no doubt about their opinion of the fat intellect of William George Bunter, alias Sam Ram Jam.

They were on the Remove landing. After tea, the Famous Five were due in the Rag, for a rehearsal of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' under the expert supervision of William Wibley. Billy Bunter, as so often happened, was superfluous. But they had Sam Ram Jam on their hands.

Billy Bunter leaned on the banisters—Bunter always leaned, if there was nothing at hand on which to sit—and blinked at the five through his big spectacles, with an indignant blink. The fact that he was superfluous and a worry, did not bother Bunter. His fat thoughts, as usual, were concentrated on his fat self. It would have been quite a surprise to Bunter to learn that anybody else mattered.

'Now, look here, Bunter—!' said Bob Cherry.

'Oh, really, Cherry! You'd better not call me Bunter for anybody to hear. Do you want to give me away?' snapped the fat Owl.

'You can't keep this up!' hooted Johnny Bull.

'Can't I?' Bunter seemed to think that he could.

'You've got through with Quelch. Now cut off and catch a train before he sees you again,' said Nugent.

'I'll watch it.'

'You can't stay on in that rig, you howling ass!' said Harry Wharton.

'I'm jolly well going to.'

'Oh, kick him!' said Johnny Bull.

'Beast!'

Billy Bunter, evidently, was determined. And the Famous Five were rather at a loss. That extraordinary scheme had worked, so far. Bunter, supposed to be at home, was still at the school: and his remarkable disguise had saved him from the 'whopping' that was his due from Quelch. Now, in the opinion of the chums of the Remove, it was time-high time for Bunter to 'chuck' it, and disappear from the Greyfriars scene. Carrying on longer as Sam Ram Jam did not really seem a practical proposition.

'Quelch will be as mad as a hatter, if he finds out: said Nugent. 'He will know that we were pulling his leg in the study—'

'He's bound to find out, if that fat ass hangs on with his potty black face,' grunted Johnny Bull. 'I told you so—'

'Have a little sense, Bunter,' said Harry Wharton, 'how the dickens do you think it can be fixed for you to stay on as Sam Ram Jam? It can't be done.'

'That's easy!' retorted Bunter.

'And how?' asked Bob Cherry. 'You're supposed to be a visitor. Visitors have to catch their train home.'

'I can lose a train, I suppose!' said Bunter. 'I've lost two today already—he, he, he! Well, I can lose another. Suppose I go to the station for a train, and lose it, and come back? I should have to be put up for the night, shouldn't I? What about that?'

'Oh!' said the Famous Five, together. Evidently, Billy Bunter's fat intellect, little as they thought of it, had been working!

'Easy as falling off a form!' said Bunter. 'Quelch couldn't leave me out for the night, I suppose—me a foreign chap who can't even speak English—he, he, he! It will work all right.'

'And even if it did, what about tomorrow?' asked Nugent. 'You couldn't keep on losing trains all day, I suppose.'

'Never mind about tomorrow,' said Bunter. 'What's the good of meeting troubles half-way? You fellows can chew on this—I'm jolly well not going home for that week's leave, and I'm jolly well not going to have Quelch whopping me for not going. You can take that as settled, fixed like the laws of the Swedes and Nasturtiums—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! What are you cackling at now?' demanded Bunter.

'You don't happen to mean the Medes and Persians?' asked Nugent.

No, I don't—I mean the Swedes and Nasturtiums,' snapped Bunter. 'Don't you show off your ignorance, Frank Nugent. Look here, you chaps, you can jaw till you're black in the face, but I can jolly well tell you that I'm sticking on, and chance it, and I jolly well won't go, and that's that!'

To which the Famous Five seemed to find no reply adequate but a repetition of their former remarks: which they now repeated:

'Fathead! Ass! Ditherer! Chump! Blitherer!'

Herbert Vernon-Smith came out of the Remove passage, and stopped on the landing as he heard those remarks.

'What's this—a slanging match?' he asked. Then he stared at the dark-complexioned youth leaning on the banisters. 'Hallo, who's this merchant? Chap from your country, Inky?'

'Not precisely, my esteemed Smithy. But he is an old acquaintance of ours,' answered the nabob of Bhanipur. 'He is called Sam Ram Jam.'

The Bounder looked very curiously at Sam Ram Jam.

But there was only curiosity in his look: obviously he suspected nothing.

'Well, we're due for the rehearsal,' he said. 'You chaps had better come down, or you'll have Wibley after you. By the way, there's going to be a supper in my study, and I want all you fellows to come, after prep.'

'Good egg,' said Bob. 'We'll come.'

'Pleased,' said Harry Wharton.

'The pleasurefulness will be terrific.'

'You can bring your friend, if he's still here then,' said Vernon-Smith. 'That is, if you'd like to come, Mr. Sam Ram Jam?'

Very nearly did Billy Bunter reply, 'Yes, rather!' But he checked that reply in time.

'Acky arley barley,' he said, in the throaty voice of Sam Ram Jam.

'Oh, my hat!' ejaculated Vernon-Smith. 'Doesn't he speak English? Well, trot him along all the same, if he'd like to come.'

Smithy walked on to the stairs. But he turned back for a moment.

'I suppose Bunter's gone?' he said.

'Eh? What about Bunter?'

'Well, it's odd,' said Vernon-Smith. 'We all know Bunter's gone, of course, but it's odd. Somebody's bagged a bag of dough-nuts from my study. And that isn't all.'

Mauly's missed tuck, and Quelch has been in the studies inquiring after some sportsman who's cleared out the biscuit-box in the beaks' common-room. Looks as if somebody's taking up Bunter's ways now he's gone. I'll jolly well punch his head if I spot him, I know that.'

Vernon-Smith went down the stairs, and the Famous Five looked at one another, and looked at Billy Bunter. Bunter gave a sniff.

'Beast!' he remarked, when the Bounder was out of hearing. 'Just like Smithy to make a fuss about a few dough-nuts! Not that I had them, of course. I never went near his study, and I never saw any dough-nuts when I was there, either. I say, you fellows, if you're booked for that rehearsal, you'd better go.'

'And you'd better go-for your train!' said Johnny Bull.

'Yah!'

'Look here, Bunter—!' urged Harry Wharton.

'Shan't.'

'You'd better go while the going's good!' urged Nugent.

'Beast!'

'You fat ass—!' said Bob.

'Oh, give a fellow a rest,' yapped Bunter. 'I'm not going. That's settled. You fellows cut off for your silly rehearsal, and I'll go out just as if I was going to the station—and come back later after I've lost my train, see? Now cut off and don't jaw any more.'

Once more the Famous Five stated, in expressive terms, their opinion of Billy Bunter's fat intellect. Then, as there seemed nothing more to be done, they went down the stairs to join the other fellows at the rehearsal of 'Uncle Tom' in the Rag. They could only hope that even the fatuous fat Owl would realize, on reflection, that he was not, so to speak, backing a winner: and that when he went, he would be gone for good.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter, when they were gone. He relieved the banisters of his weight. But he did not immediately descend the stairs. He was going out of gates, to give colour to a tale of having lost a train at the station: but a shady tree on the tow-path by the Sark was going to be his destination. Sitting in soft warm grass, under a shady tree, on a summer's afternoon, suited Bunter: especially if there was an accompaniment of tuck. And Smithy's mention of a 'study supper' indicated that there was tuck in good supply, at the moment, in No. 4 in the Remove.

The fat Owl rolled up the Remove passage, and into No. 4. He emerged from that study with a bundle under a fat arm. In matters of tuck, Billy Bunter seemed quite incapable of discerning any distinction between 'meum' and 'tuum'. Smithy could have left his wallet, fat with pound notes, on his study table, and the fat Owl would not have blinked at it. But somehow or other it always seemed to Bunter that, if there was tuck about, its natural destination was his own extensive inside. And on this occasion, as Smithy had invited him to the study supper, Bunter considered that he was really only helping himself in advance! Certainly he was helping himself, at any rate there was no doubt about that. He had helped himself very liberally. Amply supplied, and leaving only an extremely thin study supper for Smithy and his guests, the fat Owl rolled away, and rolled out into the sunny quad.

He attracted a good many glances. There were plenty of fellows out of the House, enjoying the bright sunshine: and the somewhat unusual aspect of Sam Ram Jam was not likely to pass unnoticed. The fat Owl grinned, as he rolled away to the gates. He did not mind being the cynosure of all eyes: so long as those eyes did not penetrate his identity. And certainly none of them did. A loud voice floated to his fat ears as he passed a group of Fifth-form men: Coker and Potter and Greene.

'Hallo, who's that nigger?' asked Coker. He stared at Sam Ram Jam. It was really not good manners to stare at a fellow with a dark complexion: but good manners had never been one of Horace Coker's weaknesses.

'Shut up, old man—he'll hear you!' muttered Potter.

'I suppose I can call a nigger a nigger if I like, George Potter.'

'Look here, Coker—!' murmured Greene.

'Some relation of that young nigger in the Remove, I suppose,' said Coker. 'He looks as fat as that fat frog Bunter. Here, young shaver, who are you?'

'Ack wack barley warley boo,' answered Bunter.

'Wha—a—t?' stuttered Coker.

'Ooo cooley-wooley-wack, slam,' said Bunter.

'Oh, great pip!' gasped Coker. 'Is that his language! Oh, gum!'

Bunter rolled on, leaving Coker staring. Not only his outward aspect, but even his remarkable flow of language, seemed to go down, as a strange Oriental tongue. Billy Bunter was no whale on languages: his French was the despair of Monsieur Charpentier: his Latin often disposed Mr. Quelch to tear his scanty locks: even his English left something to be desired. Of more exotic tongues he knew not a syllable. He had to think up a language for Sam Ram Jam as he went along, as it were. Luckily, few Greyfriars fellows knew more than Bunter did of the strange tongues of the East. Coker, at all events, had no idea whether that fat, dark-complexioned stranger had been speaking Hindustani, or Urdu, or Tamil, or Chinese.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter, as he rolled.

But that fat chuckle died away, as two majestic figures appeared in the offing. Dr. Locke and Mr. Quelch were walking and talking in the quad. Both of them glanced at Bunter, and the fat Owl changed direction to avoid contact. Secure as he was feeling in his new character of Sam Ram Jam, he did not want to meet his head-master's eyes, if he could help it.

'Dear me!' Dr. Locke's voice came to his fat ears. 'Is that a visitor to the school, Mr. Quelch? I was not aware—'

Billy Bunter heard no more, and he did not hear Quelch's reply. He hurried out of gates. Ten minutes later he was seated under that shady tree, by the rippling waters of the Sark: his bundle open, and Smithy's study supper disappearing on the downward path.

CHAPTER 16

AN UNEXPECTED WASH FOR BUNTER

'BLOW!' breathed Billy Bunter.

He did not want to move.

But, as a stately figure appeared in sight, coming up the tow-path with slow and majestic tread, he realized that he had better do so. Sam Ram Jam had passed muster under many eyes, even under the gimlet-eyes of Quelch. But a head-master was rather a terrifying personage. Very much indeed the disguised Owl did not want to come under Dr. Locke's gaze at close range.

Very much indeed, also, he did not want to stir from his comfortable seat under that shady tree by the river. Never much inclined to stir, he was now less inclined than ever. He had, in fact, loaded a little over the Plimsoll line. A cake, a pot of jam, a bag of dough-nuts, and a box of biscuits, followed by tea in No. 1 Study, had been hardly enough for the voracious Owl. But Smithy's study supper had done it! Bunter had disposed of his bundle not wisely but too well! He felt that he needed a rest: and he had plenty of time on hand, before he was due to return to Greyfriars after losing an imaginary train. Leaning on the trunk of that shady tree, blinking dreamily over the shining Sark, he was quite at his fat ease, till that awe-inspiring figure hove into the offing.

'Blow!' hissed Bunter.

He blinked warily and uneasily at the approaching figure in the bright sunshine. It was really an unfortunate moment for Dr. Locke to be taking his walk along the river. He had not yet noticed the fat form under the shady tree, but it was certain that he would do so when he came nearer, and as likely as not he would stop to speak to that exotic visitor to the school! Billy Bunter had to make an effort, to move. But he made it. Slowly and reluctantly he heaved himself up, and rolled round the tree, to keep 'doggo' behind the trunk till Dr. Locke had passed.

A few minutes later, there were footsteps close at hand. Behind the tree, Billy Bunter waited impatiently for them to pass on. But they did not pass on.

They stopped.

'Blow!' breathed Bunter again, inaudibly.

He peered round the tree through his big spectacles.

Dr. Locke had come to a halt. The fat Owl had a back view of him. He was standing by a willow tree, close to the edge of the high bank, gazing out over the river. Billy Bunter glared at that stately back.

It was particularly exasperating for the Head to stop at that particular spot, at that particular moment, to admire the scenery. True, it was worth looking at: the shining, rippling river, the green banks, backed by deep woods, with Popper's Island a mass of greenery in the distance. It had not interested Bunter. His interest had been concentrated on Smithy's tuck. But it seemed to interest Dr. Locke.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter.

It is sad to relate that Billy Bunter was applying that disrespectful epithet to his head-master! But such was the case! He was anxious for Dr. Locke to pass on and disappear up the river. Instead of which, there he was, standing like a stone image, only a few yards from a fat Owl behind a tree. Billy Bunter could not feel at ease till he was gone. And any person who came between Bunter and his ease, was, naturally, a beast-even a head-master!

Quite unaware of a fat junior blinking at him impatiently across the tow-path. Dr. Locke stood there, gazing out over the Sark. But it was not solely to admire the scenery that he had stopped. No doubt he felt the heat somewhat, on a hot summer's afternoon. There was a trickle of perspiration on the majestic brow. With one hand, he removed his hat. With the other, he extracted a handkerchief and gently wiped away a few beads from that brow. And then it happened!

Proverbially, it is the unexpected that happens. And what happened next could not have been more utterly unexpected, either by Billy Bunter or by his head-master.

Mopping a perspiring brow with one hand, Dr. Locke inadvertently dropped the hat from the other. That, in itself, would have been merely a trifling incident. But the hat, as it fell, rolled over the edge of the bank. Dr. Locke made a hasty—too hasty—clutch at it, to save it before it fell into the water. He did not save the hat. He overbalanced.

Splash!

'Oh!' gasped Billy Bunter. He blinked transfixed.

A moment ago. Dr. Locke had been standing in full view of his eyes and his spectacles. Now the bank was bare. He had vanished, like a conjurer performing a sudden and remarkable vanishing trick! A handkerchief lay on the grass. That was all that remained to indicate that the head-master of Greyfriars had been standing there a moment ago.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter, again.

But if the Head was not visible he was audible. From under the high grassy bank came sounds of splashing and spluttering. Close under the bank the water was shallow, not more than a foot or so of water over more than a foot or so of soft mud. Dr. Locke, hidden from the Owl's staring eyes by the grassy edge, was wrestling with a wild mixture of water and mud.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

'Oooogh!' came a gasping voice over the grassy edge.

"Ooooh! Bless my soul! Urrrggh! Help! "

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter again.

Splash! Splash! Splutter! Splash! In shallow water close by the bank there was no danger, and anyone who fell in might have been expected to scramble out. But Dr. Locke did not scramble out. His voice came again, in agitated tones:

'Help! I cannot get out— If anyone can hear me, please come to my assistance. Help!'

'Oh, crikey!' murmured Bunter, for the third time.

He hesitated. Then, slowly, he emerged from behind his tree, and blinked up and down the tow-path. Plenty of people used that tow-path: and anyone might have come along at any moment. But there was no one to be seen. Billy Bunter had the tow-path to himself. If anyone was going to the Head's assistance, it had to be William George Bunter, alias Sam Ram Jam.

Billy Bunter was as anxious as ever not to come under his head-master's close inspection. But—! Again the voice came from under the bank.

'Help!'

Billy Bunter was not accustomed to giving much thought to others. Generally, his fat thoughts were concentrated wholly on his fat self. But even Billy Bunter could not leave an elderly gentleman splashing in water and mud unaided. He rolled across the tow-path to the river's edge.

He blinked down at his head-master.

Dr. Locke was quite near the bank. He was sitting in shallow water, that flowed and rippled round him. He was making frantic efforts to extract feet and legs from the clinging mud into which they had sunk, and were now embedded. But those efforts were in vain.

He was, in fact, stuck in the mud: and though in no actual danger, inevitably booked to stay there till someone heard him and came to his assistance, to help him out. No doubt, sooner or later, someone coming along the tow-path would have heard and helped. In the meantime, his situation was extremely discomfiting: soaked to the skin, and in danger at least of catching a very bad cold. Even Bunter couldn't leave him to it.

'Help!' Dr. Locke stared up at the dark-brown face staring down, and recognized the exotic visitor he had noticed in the quad. 'Boy! Help me if you can. Help!' Billy Bunter opened his lips—and closed them again, remembering in time that Sam Ram Jam could not speak English!

But it was a moment for action, not for words. By reaching down, he could grasp an outstretched hand, and drag, extracting his head-master from the mud rather like a cork from a bottle. With his left fat hand, he grasped a drooping branch of the willow-tree on the edge of the bank, to save himself from falling in under the strain: with his right, he reached down to Dr. Locke, who immediately grasped the fat fingers in a tenacious grip. Bunter tugged.

The willow-branch sagged under Bunter's weight. With Dr. Locke's weight added, it dipped down to the water.

Splash!

'Urrrggh!'

Before Billy Bunter knew what was happening, he was floundering in water and mud with his head-master. His fat head went under, and came up again streaming. 'Wurrrrrggh!' gurgled Bunter. He floundered, blinking wildly through wet spectacles. 'Urrrgh! Oooogh!' But his fat hand was still grasping the willow-branch.

And now that it was dragged down within reach, Dr. Locke grasped it. Both of them held on to it, wallowing in the Sark, and the mud stirred up by their struggles. But now it was plain sailing. Billy Bunter, clutching that branch, scrambled back on the bank, where he collapsed in the grass, gasping and gurgling, drenched from head to foot. Dr. Locke followed more slowly, dragging one foot after the other from the clinging mud, holding on to the willow.

'Urrrggh!' gurgled Bunter.

He sat up, and dabbed at a streaming face. Then he gave a sudden jump.

Before his plunge in the Sark, his fat fingers had matched the dark complexion of his fat face. All the visible parts of Bunter had been of the same Oriental hue. But those fat fingers were no longer the dark-brown fingers of Sam Ram Jam. They were the grubby fingers of William George Bunter. With a thrill of horror, Bunter realized that his fat face must be in the same state as his fat fingers—Sam Ram Jam's dark complexion had washed off in the Sark!

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

For a moment, he sat in the grass, horrified. He had been anxious to avoid the Head's eye, even with his Oriental complexion intact! And now--! Dr. Locke, with the aid of the willow-branch, was already clambering over the bank. In a few moments his eyes would be on a face from which most of the Oriental complexion had washed away!

Billy Bunter did not lose those few moments! He bounded to his feet, and ran!

A drenched and dripping head-master dragged himself onto the bank, and stood panting for breath. He looked at Bunter. But he did not see Bunter's face. All he saw was Bunter's back as he fled.

He stared at that plump back in astonishment.

From that dark-complexioned youth, that exotic visitor to Greyfriars, he had received much-needed aid: and the boy had not only helped him out of his painful predicament, but

had himself received a ducking and a drenching in doing so. Naturally he desired to thank that dark-complexioned youth for services rendered. Why the boy was fleeing from the spot as if a bull were behind him, he could not begin to guess.

'Boy!' called out Dr. Locke.

Billy Bunter heard—but he heeded not. He tore on. 'Boy! Bless my soul! Boy! Stop! Please come back!'

Bunter was not likely to come back! The fat figure fairly whizzed along the tow-path, dodged into the trees, and vanished.

'Bless my soul!' repeated Dr. Locke.

For some moments, he stood in astonishment, staring.

Then, realizing that his most pressing need was for a towel and a change, he started for the school at a considerably more hurried pace than his accustomed stately progress. And Billy Bunter, once more blinking cautiously from behind a tree, was immensely relieved to see the last of him.

CHAPTER 17

GONE FOR GOOD?

'HE'S gone!' said Harry Wharton.

'Gone all right!' agreed Frank Nugent, 'but is he coming back?'

'Not if he has any sense!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'But has he?' sighed Bob Cherry.

'The sensefulness of the esteemed and idiotic Bunter is not terrific,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head.

The Famous Five were in the quad waiting for the bell for prep. After the rehearsal in the Rag, they had looked for Billy Bunter, and ascertained that Sam Ram Jam had gone out of gates. They hoped that prudence had prevailed and that he was gone for good. But whether Billy Bunter had, after all, headed for home, or whether he was coming back after 'losing' a train, they could not tell. They could only wait and see!

The chums of the Remove were feeling far from easy in their minds. Bob Cherry, from a mixture of good-nature and grateful acknowledgement, and perhaps a spot of thoughtlessness, had given the fat Owl aid in starting on that remarkable scheme. His friends had backed him up automatically as it were: sticking together in any enterprise whatsoever was an invariable rule in the Co. The scheme had worked, so far: but that it could continue to work seemed to them very highly improbable. No doubt it was, as Bob had declared, rather a 'lark', but it was not comforting to think of what Quelch would say—and do—if he learned that his august leg had been pulled. If the facts came out, Bunter assuredly would be up for very severe judgment: and the vials of wrath were not likely to spare the fellows who had backed him up. Bunter, owing to Bob's ministrations, had escaped the whopping that was his due for not going when bidden to go: and now obviously the best thing all round was for the fat Owl to go while the going was still good. 'The fat ass!' grunted Johnny Bull, 'and you're as silly an ass as Bunter, Bob-landing us all in this.'

'Well, Bunter did me a good turn, as you all know—'

'He did,' said Harry Wharton, 'But—'

'Well, one good turn deserves another. But I hope he's had sense enough to clear off now,' said Bob. 'If that dithering fathead is still hanging about—'

'Hush!' breathed Nugent. "Ware beaks!"

There was sudden silence, as Mr. Quelch and Mr. Prout came along. Prout's fruity voice was heard, as they came. 'Sam Ram Jam, did you say, Quelch?'

'Yes, that appears to be his name.'

'A very peculiar name, Quelch.'

'Very!'

Five juniors exchanged startled glances, as those remarks came to their ears. The Fifth-form master and their own 'beak' were, evidently, discussing Sam Ram Jam, and the juniors wondered uneasily whether something might have already come to light. It was an anxious moment.

'A relative, no doubt, of the Indian boy in your form, Quelch,' went on Prout's fruity voice.

'No, I think not, Prout—an old friend or acquaintance, from what the boys told me,' said Mr. Quelch.

Five faces registered relief! Clearly, from this, there was no suspicion of the identity hidden under Sam Ram Jam's Oriental complexion.

'You have seen the boy, Quelch?'

'Oh, yes. He came to visit some boys in my form this afternoon.'

'Fortunately, in the circumstances, Quelch.'

'Very, from what you tell me, Prout. Quite fortunate, indeed. You saw the head-master when he came in—'

'I saw him, Quelch—and in a very shocking state,' said Mr. Prout, impressively. 'I trust—I very sincerely trust—that he will not catch a cold! Drenched from head to foot, Quelch-drenched, soaked, dripping, and smothered with mud—a most unfortunate and unhappy accident—completely drenched with water, Quelch, and indescribably muddy—and but for this foreign boy, Cham Bang Jam, I think you said his name was—'

'Sam Ram Jam,' said Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Yes! Sam Ram Jam. But for this boy, Sam Ram Cham—I mean Jam—but for him, matters might have been much worse, Quelch. Is the boy still in the school, Quelch?'

'I really do not know, Prout. Probably he has gone for his train before this. But his friends will know.' Mr. Quelch paused, and glanced round at the group of juniors. 'Wharton!'

'Yes, sir.'

'Is the foreign boy, Sam Ram Jam, whom I saw in your study this afternoon, still in the school?'

'Oh! No, sir!' stammered Harry, 'he—he—he left after tea, sir.'

'You will be pleased to hear, Wharton, that this friend of yours rendered some very valuable assistance to your head-master,' said Mr. Quelch, graciously.

'Oh! I—I—I'm glad, sir.'

Prout and Quelch walked on. They left the Famous Five staring at one another blankly.

'What the thump!' breathed Bob Cherry, when the two masters were out of hearing. 'What has Bunter been up to?'

'He was going to hang about till it was time to roll in and pretend that he had lost a train,' said Nugent. 'He seems to have got mixed up with the Head while he was about it. But how—'

'Goodness knows,' said Harry Wharton. 'From what the beaks were saying, the Old Boy had some accident, and got drenched. I can't see where Bunter would come in on that!'

'Can't make head or tail of it,' said Johnny Bull. 'Bunter ought to have had sense enough to keep out of the Head's way.'

'Well, Quelch says he rendered the Old Boy valuable assistance,' said Bob. 'But how—and where—and why—'

'The howfulness and the wherefulness and the whyfulness are an esteemed mystery,' remarked Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

'The fat ass will tell us, if he comes back—'

'But is he coming back? It's just on lock-ups now,' said Bob.

'May blow in any time up to dorm.'

'Bother him!' said Johnny Bull.

'He can't have gone home, unless he changed before he went out,' said Bob. 'And he can't have done that, if he was still Sam Ram Jammy when he barged into the Head. He's keeping it up.'

'Might have cut in and changed, while we were at the rehearsal if he had sense enough,' said Johnny Bull. 'Might have,' said Bob. 'But—'

He shook his head. 'Looks to me as if the fat chump means to keep it up.'

'Bother him!' said Johnny, again.

'Blow him!' agreed Bob.

'Bothering' and 'blowing' the exasperating Owl did not afford much relief. No fat figure had rolled in, when Gosling came out to close the gates: but the Co. could not conclude from that that Bunter was gone: they could only hope that he was!

He had not, at all events, turned up, when the bell summoned them to prep, and they went up to the studies.

In No. 1 Study, Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent more than half-expected prep to be interrupted by the arrival of a fat Owl. But prep was not interrupted. No fat Owl rolled in. But as they were putting their books away after preparation, there was a thump at the door of No. 1, and it flew open. The two juniors exchanged a glance: and looked round, expecting to see a fat face with an Oriental complexion.

But still it was not Bunter! It was Herbert Vernon-Smith who looked in, with a cheery grin.

'Coming along?' he asked. 'Supper in my study, you know.'

'Coming!' answered Wharton and Nugent together.

And they joined the Bounder in the passage.

At the door of No. 4, they were joined by Bob Cherry, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh. Smithy's study-mate, Tom Redwing, was in No. 4: the table had been cleared, and the cloth laid: and Redwing was standing at the study cupboard, as the Bounder led his flock in. Study suppers were more popular in the Remove than supper in hall, and the wealthy Bounder's 'spreads' were always lavish, so there was cheery anticipation all round. 'Here we are, Reddy,' said Vernon-Smith, 'why haven't you trotted out the tuck. Get a move on, old bean.'

Redwing looked round, with a rather odd expression on his face.

'These chaps coming to supper?' he asked.

'Yes. Tons to go round,' answered Smithy. 'Why don't you trot it out?'

Redwing, apparently, had been left to 'trot out' the good things, while the Bounder collected his guests. Nothing, so far, had been 'trotted' out: the table was, as yet, bare, but for the cloth. Redwing looked at the Bounder, and at the guests, and then turned back to the cupboard.

'Oh, all right,' he said.

He placed a loaf on the table. It was followed by a pat of butter. Then a tin of sardines.

Then a couple of dough-nuts. Then half a dozen biscuits. Then Redwing stopped, as if his work was done.

The guests exchanged surprised glances. They scented that something was amiss with that study supper. The Bounder, always quick to irritation, gave Redwing a stare. 'Why don't you shove out the things?' he snapped. 'That's all—'

'What?'

'There isn't anything else—'

'Oh, don't be a silly ass!' exclaimed Vernon-Smith. 'I haven't asked five fellows to supper on a tin of sardines. Trot out the stuff, I tell you.'

'But there isn't—I don't see anything more—'

'Blind?' hooted the Bounder. 'Didn't I stack it there just before we went down to the rehearsal? Trot it out and don't play the goat.'

'But I tell you—'

'Oh, chuck it,' snapped Vernon-Smith. He tramped across the study, pushed Redwing roughly aside, and stared into the cupboard. Then a sudden change came over his face. He stared blankly into a cupboard which, except for a few articles of crockery, was empty. He stared as if he could not believe his eyes.

'Oh!' he gasped.

'Well?' said Redwing, quietly.

'It—it's gone! Somebody has been larking here.' The Bounder turned from the cupboard, with a thunderous brow. 'Cleared right out—somebody's been here.' He glared at the extremely thin supply on the table. 'That's all he's left. Who's done this?'

'The who-fulness is terrific,' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. The other four members of the Co. were silent. Somebody, evidently, had been in that study, clearing out the Bounder's lavish supply of tuck. They were at no loss to guess the identity of that somebody!

'If that fat villain Bunter was still here, I should know who it was,' went on Vernon-Smith, 'but Bunter's gone—he's at home now. Somebody else seems to be picking up his ways, now he's gone. I tell you there was a stack of stuff in that cupboard. Who's had it? By gum, I'll find out who it was, and change his features for him. I—I—I'll—!' Words seemed to fail Smithy.

The Famous Five made a movement towards the door.

Evidently, there was not going to be study supper after all in No. 4.

'Sorry, you chaps,' said Redwing.

'Oh, not at all,' answered Harry Wharton, politely, 'it's all right, Smithy—thanks all the same, old fellow. We'll hike down to hall.'

'Don't mind us, Smithy,' said Bob. 'Thanks all the same.'

'The thankfulness all the same it terrific.'

'But who was it?' hooted Smithy. 'By gum, I'll go up the passage and draw every study, and I'll find out who it was. I'll smash him!'

Harry Wharton and Co. made no reply to that. Smithy was not likely to have much luck in seeking the culprit in a Remove study! They departed supperless: leaving the Bounder in the worst temper ever.

On the staircase, as they went down, they exchanged expressive glances.

'That fat villain!' said Nugent.

'Bunter, of course,' grunted Johnny Bull.

'Who else?' said Bob. 'Can't put Smithy wise—we've got to keep Bunter dark. But—we'll jolly well kick him, all round, after supper. He's bound to come in for supper, if he's coming at all.'

'The kickfulness is the proper caper,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Hard!' agreed Harry Wharton.

But no fat figure rolled in to supper in hall. It seemed improbable that Billy Bunter, if he was returning at all, would fail to return in time for a meal. Kicking him all round, after supper, was quite an attractive idea: but it was not a practical proposition, for Billy Bunter, alias Sam Ram Jam, did not roll in for supper, and he did not roll in after supper. From which the Famous Five drew the consoling conclusion that he must, after all, have made up his fat mind to head for home, and that he would not be seen at Greyfriars again till his week's leave was up. Which was really more satisfactory than kicking him all round!

CHAPTER 18

AFTER DARK

'OH, crikey!' mumbled Billy Bunter.

It was a worried Owl.

The shades of night were falling fast, as a poet has already expressed it. Shadows lengthened in the wood by the Sark. The birds were silent: they had gone to rest. But there was no rest for William George Bunter, alias Sam Ram Jam.

Hours had passed since his dip in the river. But Billy Bunter had not dared to venture far from the spot. His clothes had dried in the summer sun: he hardly heeded that detail, in the stress of much greater troubles and trials and tribulations. That unlucky encounter with the Head had left him in a situation which could only be described as awful.

Most of his Oriental complexion had washed off. He no longer looked like an exotic visitor from the East. He looked like an unusually grubby Bunter. Had Bob Cherry been at hand, with the make-up box, it would have been all right. But Bob Cherry was not at hand: Bob was in the school, quite unaware of the unforeseen disaster that had overtaken Sam Ram Jam. How to communicate with him, unseen and undiscovered, was a problem compared with which anything in Euclid would have been quite easy going.

The fat Owl had had it all cut and dried. A tale of a lost train would surely have secured a lodging for the night at Greyfriars. That would have seen the astute fat Owl through till the morrow. On the morrow he could think up some further dodge for prolonging his stay. He was prepared to fall ill, if nothing better occurred to him. A fellow unrestrained by any considerations of veracity could always think up something!

But that dip in the Sark had knocked the fat Owl's plans into a cocked hat, as it were. Sam Ram Jam could have returned to Greyfriars with a tale of a lost train. A grubby-faced Bunter couldn't. That grubby-faced Bunter dared not even venture out of the wood, in the daylight. He dared not let an eye fall on him in his present state.

Almost he wished that he had taken the train for home as bidden, awful as was the prospect mapped out for him by the Roman parent at Bunter Villa.

But it was too late for even that now. Billy Bunter had, so to speak, burned his boats behind him.

If the facts came out now, the consequences would be quite overwhelming. Not only had Quelch's command been disregarded: for which a whopping was due; but Quelch's leg had been pulled: he had been taken in by Sam Ram Jam in No. 1 Study: he had, in fact, been made a fool of. Quelch was about the last person at Greyfriars, or in the wide world, to be made a fool of with impunity. His wrath, if he discovered it, was likely to be quite volcanic. He would march the delinquent off to the Head. He would demand the severest punishment. It would be a flogging at least: it might be the 'sack', Whatever it was, all Billy Bunter's fat cringed at the bare idea of facing it. And after that, there would be home, sweet home, a wrathful parent, and the grocer's shop! In fact, having started on that extraordinary programme, the hapless Owl had no choice but to keep on with it—if he could!

'Oh, crikey!' mumbled Bunter. 'Oh, jiminy! Oh, lor!'

He had plenty of time to think it out, while he waited for darkness to fall. Somehow, he had to get in touch with Bob and the make-up box. He had to get his disguise renewed. Once that was effected, he would take care that no such mishap recurred: a dozen headmasters stuck in the mud would not tempt him to risk it. The summer afternoon seemed endless to the fat Owl dismally lurking in the wood. But the shades of night fell at last.

Then, at length, he made the venture.

He had, first of all, to get into the school. That, now that the shadows covered him, was not difficult. Bunter knew the spot on the old cloister wall where it was easy to climb: a spot not infrequently used by Smithy, or Skinner, in surreptitious nocturnal excursions out of bounds. The deep dark lane by the wall was almost as black as a hat, when Bunter reached it, under the branches of overhanging trees.

He groped his way to the selected spot. Masses of thick ancient ivy overhung the wall. It was quite an easy climb for any Remove fellow but Bunter. For Bunter it was not easy, with so uncommon a weight to lift. But he had to get in—unless he was to face a night out, with a lodging on the cold, cold ground. He clambered and scrambled, gasping for breath, in the rustling ivy, shaking out innumerable spiders and insects that had retired for the night. He rolled, at last, over the top, and was within the precincts of Greyfriars.

There he had to pause for breath. It was a rather long pause: wind was always in short supply with Bunter. Having at last refilled, as it were, he rolled on, blinking round him cautiously through his big spectacles.

He hoped that nobody was about. Nobody, really, was likely to be about, so late in the evening, unless perhaps some 'beak' taking a stroll, or Gosling on his rounds. But the fat junior trod on tiptoe, casting watchful blinks on all sides like a startled owl.

He stopped, at last, in the deep shadow of an ancient elm, and blinked at lighted windows in the distance.

Those lighted windows had a very attractive and indeed home-like aspect to a homeless and dejected Owl. But Billy Bunter dared not approach nearer, at the risk of some eye falling on a grubby fat face in the glimmer.

Deep in the shadow of the elm, he debated in his fat mind what his next step was going to be.

He had to get in touch with Bob Cherry, somehow.

Bob was not the fellow to let a fellow down: and he would stand by the unfortunate Owl in this extremity—if he knew! But how was he to know?

Bunter had had a vague idea of getting into contact by throwing a stone up to the window of No. 13 Study. That might have worked if the Remove had still been up in the studies at prep; if the sun had set earlier, and Bunter had not had to wait so long for dark. But the sun, regardless of Bunter, had been tardy in setting, as was the solar custom in the summer. It was too late for that now. Prep was over in the Remove studies: Bunter realized that supper must be almost over, too. There was not a glimmer in any of the Remove study windows.

'Oh, lor!'

mumbled Bunter. How was he going to get in touch with Bob? It had to be done somehow, before the Remove went to bed. But how?

'A lovely night, Quelch.'

Billy Bunter jumped. That remark, in the fruity tones of Mr. Prout, master of the Fifth, came suddenly to his fat ears, startling him like a thunderclap.

He blinked round in alarm.

Evidently, some of the 'beaks' were taking a stroll in the quad, in the balmy summer evening. And one of them was his own 'beak'.

'Very, Prout,' came another voice, in the more incisive tones of Quelch.

Billy Bunter could have groaned—if he could have ventured to utter a sound.

The voices were quite close at hand. Bunter, blinking at the distant windows, had not noted two figures on the path under the elms. He noted them now, as he blinked round in wild alarm.

For a terrified moment he thought of flight. But to emerge from the dark shadow of the elm was to emerge into view. Palpitating, Bunter hugged the ancient trunk close, hoping that Quelch and Prout would pass by unseeing.

'You are not going in, Quelch?'

'Yes, I think so, Prout. I—'

'It is a lovely evening for a stroll.'

'Oh, quite! But I have a number of Form papers to correct, Prout, and then bridge in common-room. You are not coming in?'

'I think I will smoke a cigar before I come in, Quelch.'

It really is a lovely evening for a walk.'

Outside the circle of black shadow under Bunter's tree, two figures were visible in the dusk, stopping in their walk—one tall and lean, the other short and plump. The former moved off in the direction of the House.

Prout remained. He was hardly a couple of yards from Bunter, fumbling in his pockets: no doubt for his cigar-case.

The long, lean figure disappeared.

That, at least, was a relief: Bunter dreaded the gimlet-eye. He was glad that Quelch had those Form papers to correct! Prout, on the other hand, was short-sighted: he felt safer with only Prout around.

Prout selected his cigar. Then he was fumbling again.

A fruity mumble came to a terrified fat ear:

'Dear me! Where did I put my match-box? Oh! Here it is.'

Billy Bunter gasped, as he realized that a match was about to be struck. That match, it was fairly certain, would reveal to Prout's startled eyes a figure huddled against the trunk of the elm.

Bunter had only a second. But he did not lose it.

Prout was so close at hand, that he could not stir without being heard. But he had to take that chance. He whipped round the trunk and fled.

'Oh!' ejaculated Mr. Prout.

The match flared in his plump fingers.

But Mr. Prout did not apply it to his cigar. He held it up, and stared, quite amazed. He did not see anyone. But he heard panting breath and hurrying feet. Someone, dodging among the elms, was running.

'Bless my soul!' exclaimed Mr. Prout.

Someone had been there, within a yard or two of him, under that elm. Who it was, Prout had no idea. Quelch's gimlet-eye might have spotted a fleeing fat figure even in the deep shadows of the branches. Prout's dimmer vision did not. But though he saw nothing of the panting runner, Prout had no doubt what it meant. Some boy was out of the House after lock-ups, against all rules. It could only be some delinquent who was dodging to escape recognition.

'Boy!' boomed Prout. Bump!

'Wow!'

Those sounds, floating back, indicated that the unseen runner had run into something in the dark—probably a tree-trunk.

'Boy!' boomed Prout, again.

Running feet were heard again, fading in the distance. 'Upon my word!' exclaimed Mr. Prout. Then he added, on a rising note, 'Oh! Oooh! Whooooooh!' He had forgotten the match for the moment. He was reminded of it, as it burned down to his plump fingers.

Mr. Prout dropped the remains of that match in haste.

He rubbed a plump finger, breathing hard. Then he looked round for Quelch. 'Quelch!' he called.

But the long, lean figure was gone. Mr. Quelch had already gone into the House. Prout was left to find that truant who was out after lock-up, if he was to be found. And between a sense of duty, which was strong, and the irritation caused by a scorched finger, which was perhaps stronger, Prout was going to do just that, and he lost no time.

CHAPTER 19

THE ONLY WAY

'GOSLING!'

It was a fruity voice.

Billy Bunter fairly trembled.

He had been feeling safe, for a few minutes. He had dodged Prout successfully in the dark under the old elms. He was now, as he had hoped at least, at a safe distance from the spot. Close beside Gosling's lodge was a bank of laurels. A fat figure, huddled in those laurels, was completely hidden from view. Whether Prout was looking for him, Bunter did not know—if he was, he was welcome to hunt for him under the elms till he was tired. But—! The door of the porter's lodge was open, light glimmering out from within. A chair was set in the doorway. The ancient porter of Greyfriars had been sitting there, no doubt enjoying the calm of the summer evening, but a tinkle on the telephone bell in his lodge had called him within. Bunter, in the laurels round the corner, could hear him at the telephone. He was not afraid of Gosling coming out and spotting him. But he was deeply alarmed, when there was a heavy tread terribly near at hand, and a fruity voice called:

'Gosling!'

Why Prout had come to Gosling's lodge, Billy Bunter didn't know and couldn't guess. But he did know that Prout was only a few yards away, and that a mere rustle of the laurels might betray him. He huddled motionless and dumb.

But Prout, evidently, had no idea that he was there.



BUNTER, IN THE LAURELS, COULD HEAR HIM AT THE TELEPHONE.

Prout had stepped into the doorway, and was calling to the porter.

'Gosling!' repeated Mr. Prout.

Gosling's voice could be heard within: but he was not answering that call. He was answering someone on the telephone.

'Yes, that will be all right, Mr. 'Orrocks. I know how it is with them dratted boys. They forgets everything. You send it along in the morning, and it will be okay.'

'Gosling!' Prout almost hooted.

There was a sound of a receiver jamming back on hooks. Then Gosling's crusty voice was heard, in answer to the Fifth-form master. Every sound came to the fat ears of an uneasy Owl dumb in the laurels.

'Yessir! That Mr. Prout, sir? Yessir! I was jest answering Mr. 'Orrocks on the phone, sir—'

'Yes, yes, yes,' said Mr. Prout, impatiently.

'But—'

'Mr. 'Orrocks' boy, sir, forgot to deliver the 'am,' explained Gosling. 'Them dratted boys—they're all the same, forgetting everything. Wot I says is this 'ere—'

'Will you listen to me, Gosling?'

'Oh! Yessir, certainly, sir. But them dratted boys—paid more'n a man's wages these days, and forgetting everything, and a lot they cares, too! They'd up and walk out as soon as look at you! It wasn't like that in my young days, sir—'

'Kindly get your lantern, Gosling!' snapped Mr. Prout.

Apparently he was not interested to hear about the palmy state of things in Gosling's young days.

'My lantern, sir?' repeated Gosling, blankly.

'Yes, and at once,' said Mr. Prout, irritably. 'Some boy is out of the House in lock-ups, Gosling. I almost walked into him taking a walk under the elms.'

'Yessir! Which of the young rips—I mean which of the young gentlemen is it, sir?'

'I do not know, Gosling, as I cannot see in the dark,' snapped Mr. Prout. 'He eluded me in the darkness under the elms. He must be found, Gosling, and at once, and taken to the head-master. He is hiding somewhere under the elms. Kindly light your lantern at once, and come with me.'

'Yessir!' grunted Gosling. His tone did not sound enthusiastic. Probably he would have preferred his chair in the doorway, to a hunt under the shadowy elms for some elusive Greyfriars fellow who was out of House bounds. But a senior member of the Staff was not to be argued with. Having grunted, Gosling went for his lantern.

Billy Bunter, in the laurels, breathed relief.

Prout, evidently, supposed that the unseen truant was lurking in the darkness under the elms. If so, there was no doubt that he would be rooted out with the aid of Gosling's lantern. Prout, rubbing a scorched finger, was quite keen to take him by the collar and march him off for judgment. Billy Bunter, certainly, did not mind how long they searched under the elms. They could look for that truant as long as they liked, so long as they did not look under the laurel bush beside the porter's lodge.

Prout, several times, sniffed with impatience, as he waited for Gosling to emerge with the lantern. Gosling was not in a hurry. It was a long time, in fact a very long time, since Gosling's young days: and Gosling's movements had slowed down considerably during the past few decades. However, Gosling emerged at last with a lighted lantern.

"Ere you are, sir—"

'Come with me,' snapped Mr. Prout.

'Yessir.'

A fat Owl in the laurels heard departing footsteps. They were going. Gosling's lantern winked away in the summer night. They were gone.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

He ventured to move, and stretch his fat limbs a little.

He was safe from discovery now. Neither Prout nor Gosling, it was certain, would discover him under those elms, however long they searched with the lantern. He only had to keep 'doggo' till they gave it up.

But now that the peril was past, his pressing problem recurred to his fat mind. He had escaped discovery—he was within the walls of Greyfriars, as yet unseen and unsuspected. So far, so good: but he had to communicate with Bob Cherry, or all was lost. How? Supper would be over by this time: Bob, with a crowd of other Remove fellows, would be in the

Rag. Before very long now, it would be dorm for the Remove: and then it would be too late.

'Oh!' ejaculated Bunter, suddenly. He caught his breath.

There was one means by which a fellow could communicate with another fellow unseen. The telephone! And there was a telephone in Gosling's lodge, and Gosling was at a safe distance, exploring the shadowy recesses under the elms with Mr. Prout. And he had left his door wide open.

Remove fellows, of course, were not expected to get telephone calls, especially late in the evening. Still, Quelch, crusty as he was, was not likely to refuse to let a boy of his form take a call. Bunter, he supposed and believed, was at home at Bunter Villa. Could he suspect, could he even dream, if Bunter rang up, that the fat Owl was no further off than Gosling's lodge?

He couldn't—and wouldn't!

'Oh!' gasped Bunter again.

It was a startling idea. But it was feasible. And it was, in fact, the only way. If it failed, Sam Ram Jam was at the end of his tether. For some minutes, Billy Bunter's fat mind swayed in doubt. Then he made it up. He was going to chance it.

Cautiously, he emerged from the laurels.

Like Moses of old, he looked this way and that way.

Like Moses again, he saw no man. Nobody was about. He fancied that he saw, for a moment, the wink of a distant light, moving, under the elms. That was all. It was safe, if he got through and got away, before Gosling came back. And there was no sign of Gosling coming back.

He tiptoed into Gosling's lodge.

His fat heart thumped as he stood at the telephone, a fat hand on the receiver. He hesitated again. He dreaded to hear Quelch's sharp voice, even over the wires. If Quelch guessed—!

But how could he? He couldn't! And really there was no time for hesitation, when, with one fat ear to the phone, he had to listen with the other for Gosling's returning footsteps! Billy Bunter had to get on with it. And, taking his fat courage in both hands, as it were, he got on with it.

CHAPTER 20

TELEPHONIC!

Buzzzzzz!

Mr. Quelch frowned slightly.

He was busy with Form papers, and did not want interruptions. After his walk with Prout in the quad, the Remove master had settled down in his study, to get through those Form papers: a task that was to be followed by bridge in common-room with Hacker, Capper, and Twigg. He was almost through, when the telephone bell rang. Quelch was not expecting a telephone call that evening: neither was he desiring one. He frowned. Several papers remained to be scanned.

But a telephone-bell, like a Royal invitation, amounts to a command. It might be only some absurd parent unduly anxious about the welfare of Tom, Dick, or Harry. But it might be of importance. Unwelcome as the interruption was, with bridge awaiting him in common-room, Quelch had to take the call.

'Well?' He rapped that monosyllable into the transmitter. 'If—if—if—'

'What?'

'If—if—if you please, sir—'

Quelch gave a start. There was something familiar in the voice that stammered over the telephone.

'Who is speaking?' rapped Quelch.

'Me, sir!'

'Who?' Quelch barked.

'Only me, sir.'

Apparently it did not occur to the caller that Quelch did not know who 'me' was. However, the familiar tones of the fat voice, added to the obtuseness of the reply, enlightened the Remove master.

'Is that Bunter speaking?' he rapped.

'Yes, sir! I—I—I thought you-you'd like to know that I—I—I got home safe this afternoon, sir.'

Snort, from Quelch. He had not the slightest doubt that Bunter had got home safe that afternoon! There was no reason whatever to suppose that British Railways had failed to carry that plump passenger safe to his destination.

Certainly it did not occur to Quelch that the artful fat Owl had begun in this way, in order to leave no doubt in Quelch's mind that he was speaking from Bunter Villa! Like many obtuse persons, Bunter had a vein of artfulness in him: and it was well to the fore now.

Quelch very nearly replied 'Nonsense'. But he restrained that impulse. He was interrupted, and he was annoyed. But after all, Bunter was away from school—his most troublesome pupil was off his hands for a week! It was as well to be gracious.

'Very well, Bunter! I am glad to hear that you arrived home safely,' said Mr. Quelch. 'Good night, my boy.'

'Oh! Please hold on, sir—'

'What? What?'

'I—I—I wanted to ask you something, sir, if you'd be so kind—'

Mr. Quelch glanced at the three or four papers on his table, still to be scanned, and then at the clock. Hacker, Twigg, and Capper would be ready, in common-room: and Hacker especially did not like waiting. Very likely, Hacker would be making some acid remark to

Twigg and Capper, if he were kept waiting for bridge. However, suppressing his impatience, Quelch rapped into the mouthpiece:

'What is it, Bunter? Be brief.'

'Oh, yes, sir. I wouldn't like to waste your time, sir. I know how busy you are, sir, and I wouldn't think of wasting your time—'

'You are wasting it, Bunter. If you have anything to say, say it at once, and be brief.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! Kik—kik—kik—'

'What?'

'Kik—kik—can I speak to Bib—Bub—Bob—' Bunter was stammering again.

'What do you mean, Bunter?'

'I—I mean, Bob, sir—Bob Cherry, sir—kik—kik—can I speak for just a minute to Cherry, sir—'

'Nonsense!'

'Oh, really, sir—'

'I have no more time to lose, Bunter—'

'If—if—if you'd let Cherry come to the phone, sir, for just a minute, sir. It—it—it's rather important, sir. I—I forgot something when I—I left this afternoon, sir—I—I was in such a hurry to—to catch my train, sir, and—and if you'd let me speak to Cherry about it, sir—'

The fat voice was quite pleading.

It did not plead in vain. Quelch, under a somewhat crusty exterior, had a kind heart. No doubt this was some petty schoolboy matter of no importance whatever: still, as Bunter had rung up from a distance, it did seem rather harsh to shut him off with a refusal. Quelch wanted to wind up those Form papers and get to common-room: and he did not want to be bothered by Billy Bunter. But he answered:

'Very well, I will send for Cherry.'

'Oh! Thank you, sir.'

'You may hold the line, Bunter.'

Quelch laid down the receiver, and touched a bell. He sat at the table, and had time to get through another Form paper, by the time Trotter, the House page, answered the bell. Then Trotter's chubby face looked in.

'You rang, sir?'

'Kindly find Cherry, of my form, and request him to come to my study immediately, Trotter.'

'Yessir.'

Trotter closed the door and departed. Quelch, with a slight lingering frown, concentrated on the remaining Form papers. Only one yet remained, when there was a tap at the door.

'Come in!'

Bob Cherry came in. He came in rather slowly, and Quelch, if his mind had not been occupied by other matters, might have noticed that there was a wary look in his eye. Bob, as a rule rather a thoughtless fellow, was on the alert. That summons to his form-master's study was, in the circumstances, a little alarming. If anything had come out about Sam Ram Jam, five fellows were going to be severely in the soup. Bob entered Quelch's study rather as Daniel might have entered the lion's den.

'You sent for me, sir!'

Quelch looked up from the last Form paper. 'Yes, Cherry! Bunter—'

'Bunter!' gasped Bob. That name came like a punch.

Quelch had sent for him about Bunter! What did that mean, except that something had come out, and that all the fat was in the fire?

'Yes, Bunter,' said Mr. Quelch, unaware of the startling effect of that familiar name upon the junior before him. 'You are aware, Cherry, that Bunter left the school this afternoon—'
'Oh! Yes! I—I—I think I—I heard that he had leave home, sir,' stammered Bob. 'I—I—I hope he got home all right, sir.' Bob Cherry certainly hoped that. from the bottom of his heart. He couldn't have had better news than that Billy Bunter was safe at home, and no longer a spot of bother for the Famous Five at Greyfriars.

'Oh, quite, quite,' said Mr. Quelch. 'Bunter is on the telephone now, Cherry.'

'Oh! Is—is—is he, sir?'

'It appears, Cherry, that the stupid boy forgot something before he left this afternoon, and he desires to speak to you about it. I have told him that I would send for you, and you may take the call.'

'Oh!' gasped Bob, in great relief. Evidently, nothing had come out! Bunter was at home, and had telephoned about something he had forgotten, that was all! It was all plain sailing! Mr. Quelch made a gesture towards the telephone, and then concentrated on the last Form paper. Bob Cherry stepped to the telephone, and picked up the receiver. He was feeling quite reassured now: and his tone was cheery as he spoke into the transmitter:

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

'Is that you, Cherry, old chap?' came a familiar squeak.

'Yes, Bob speaking. What's it all about, Bunter? Everything all right at home, what?'

'How should I know?' came a peevish snap.

'Eh! What?'

'I haven't gone home, fathead—'

'Wha—a—t?'

'I say, is that beast still in the room? If he is, you be jolly careful what you say. He can't hear me, can he?'

Bob Cherry stood holding the receiver, almost petrified.

Bunter had not, after all, gone home. Quelch believed that he had, clearly: but he hadn't. And Bob dreaded that that fat squeak might have reached Quelch's ears. Those ears, he knew, were very keen. Luckily, Quelch's writing-table was at a little distance from the telephone, and Quelch was concentrated on the final Form paper. He did not look up. The fat squeak ran on.

'I say, answer me, will you? Mind what you say if Quelch is in the study. Is he? Has the beast gone? Is he there? Speak, can't you? I say, I'm in a jam, and you've got to help me out! Don't let Quelch guess anything! If he knew I was phoning from Gosling's lodge—'

'Oh!' gasped Bob.

Bunter, evidently, was not far away! He was still a spot of bother to the chums of the Remove—more so than ever, in fact. How to answer the fat Owl, without saying anything that would bring a gimlet-eye on him, Bob did not know. But at that moment came a scrape of chair-legs. Mr. Quelch pushed back his chair as he rose from the table. That final paper was finished.

'Can you hear me, Bob?' came the anxious squeak. Bob pulled himself together.

'Yes, I can hear you, Bunter,' he answered. He had the corner of his eye on Quelch. He hoped, fervently, that Quelch was going.

That hope, fortunately, was well-founded. Quelch gave him a glance.

'I am going to common-room now. Cherry! After you have taken your call, do not forget to switch off the light before leaving the study.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! Certainly, sir.'

Quelch left the study. Never, since he had been at Greyfriars, had Bob been so glad to see his form-master's back. He waited till the door had closed on that back, and then hissed into the telephone:

'You fat, foozling, footling, frabjous frump—you blithering, bloated, burbling, bandersnatch—you dithering, dunderheaded, diddling dummy—what do you fancy you are up to now, you pie-faced piffling porker?'

CHAPTER 21

UP TO BOB!

'BEAST!'

'You fat footling'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'You blithering, dithering—'

'I say, is Quelch there or not?'

Bob Cherry burst into a laugh. His flow of eloquence into the telephone certainly would not have flowed, had Quelch been still there!

'No, ass! No, fathead! He's just gone! Think I should be calling you fancy names if Quelch was at my elbow? He's gone. Now get on with it. Where are you? What are you up to? Quelch said you wanted to speak to me because you'd forgotten something when you went.'

'He, he, he!'

'What are you he—he—heing about, you ditherer?'

'I had to stuff Quelch, of course. You see, I had to speak to you, old chap. I'm in a jam, and you've got to help me out. I'm phoning from Gosling's lodge—'

'What on earth for?'

'I tell you I'm in a jam. I want you to lend me a hand—'

'I'd rather lend you a foot.'

'If that's what you call gratitude. Bob Cherry, after I got you out of that licking in the form-room—'

'Oh, give us a rest! You told us, you were coming back with a string of crammers about losing a train. If you haven't gone home, why haven't you?'

'I couldn't come in, in this state—'

'What state, fathead?'

'I got all wet, and my face washed off the paint—'

'What?'

'I mean the paint washed off my face. There's hardly a spot left on. Anybody would know me at once. I can't show up like that, can I? That's why I waited till after dark—'

'What did you want to get wet for, you howling ass? It hasn't rained.'

'I fell in the Sark—'

'You would!' snorted Bob. 'If there was anything handy to fall in, you'd fall into it, you blitherer.'

'I couldn't leave the old donkey sticking in the mud, could I?'

'Eh! What?'

'The old donkey fell in off the bank, and was stuck in the mud and couldn't get out, and I jolly well had to help him out, and I fell in and got wet all over, and—'

'Oh, my hat! If you got wet helping an old donkey out of the Sark, that's jolly decent of you, Bunter.' said Bob Cherry, in very much milder tones. 'Jolly decent, old fat man. Whose donkey was it?'

'He, he, he!'

'Was it old Joyce's donkey?'

'He, he, he!'

'What are you cackling at, fathead?'

'He, he, he! I mean, it was the Head—'

'What?' howled Bob.

'The Head! You see, the old donkey dropped his hat, and grabbed after it and tipped in. and got stuck in the mud—'

'The Head!' repeated Bob. 'You mean the Head? You fat villain, I'd jolly well boot you if I were near enough. You fat, frumptious frog—'

'Oh, really, Cherry! Don't waste time jawing, old chap! Gosling may come back any minute and catch me here. You're like a sheep's head, old chap—all jaw! Do give a fellow a chance to speak. "Look here, you've got to help me out—get out of the House with the make-up box—'

'It's long past lock-ups, fathead.'

'I can't help that can I?' yapped Bunter. 'You can get out of the box-room window, like Smithy does when he goes out of bounds after lights out—'

'And get six if I'm copped doing it!'

'Well, I shall get worse than six, if I'm copped. Don't you be so jolly selfish, Bob Cherry! Think of me!' hooted Bunter, indignantly. 'That's what's wrong with you fellows —always thinking of yourselves, and never thinking of others, as I always do—'

'Oh, crumbs!'

'Didn't I own up in the form-room and get you out of a licking from Quelch, and get that beastly book for it—'

'Sing it over again to me!' snorted Bob.

'And couldn't I have left the old donkey sticking in the mud?' went on Bunter, warmly.

'Then I shouldn't have got the paint washed off, and shouldn't be in this awful jam. It's just being unselfish that's landed me like this. Just try to be unselfish too, for a change, old man. Take a leaf out of my book.'

'You fat, foozling, footling fathead—'

'There you go again, wasting time jawing, when Gosling may be back any minute. Get out of the House somehow with the make-up box. I'll wait for you in a quiet corner—say, by the water-butt behind Gosling's wood-shed. Nobody ever goes near it after dark, and it will be safe as houses. It won't take you long, you're so jolly clever, old chap—'

'Oh, pack it Up!'

'Beast! I—I mean, I—I mean it, old fellow—I don't think you're a silly fathead like the other fellows do—'

'You blithering, bloated—'

'Do listen to a chap! You'll get back before dorm, all right, if you don't waste time. You'll come, won't you, old fellow? Once it's done, I can come in just as if I'd lost that train—and it will be all serene. I can't come in like I am now, and I can't stay out all night, can I? Be a sport, old chap. It's up to you.'

Bob Cherry paused before replying.

To get out of the House after lock-ups was neither easy nor prudent. The discovery that Billy Bunter was still at Greyfriars, was neither grateful nor comforting. The prospect of seeing Sam Ram Jam still about the school, at the imminent risk of the facts coming to

light, was extremely unattractive. But Bob's pause was brief. The hapless Owl was undoubtedly in a 'jam', out of which only Bob could help him. He just couldn't leave him in the lurch. It was, as Bunter stated, 'up' to him!

'You'll come, old chap? I say, be quick—I tell you Gosling may come in any minute, and if he sees me—' came an anxious fat squeak.

'I'll come, bother you.'

'Good!' came a gasp of relief. 'I knew you wouldn't let me down, old chap. I'll wait for you behind Gosling's wood-shed. Mind you don't forget to bring the make-up box—'

'Think I should forget that, ass?'

'Well, it would be like you—'

'What?'

'I—I mean, I—I know you wouldn't forget it, old fellow. But mind you don't, all the same. If you forget it—'

'Oh, ring off', blitherer. 'I'll come, and I've a jolly good mind to duck your silly head in the water-butt when I do come.'

'Beast!'

With that graceful and grateful valediction, Billy Bunter rang off in Gosling's lodge. Bob Cherry put up the receiver in Quelch's study. Then, having duly switched off the light as his form-master had bidden him, he left the study: to hurry back to the Rag, and consult with his friends on this new and unexpected development in the peculiar and perilous performance of keeping Bunter dark.

CHAPTER 22

QUICK WORK

'WHAT'S Up?'

Four fellows asked that question all at once.

The Famous Five were in No. 1 Study. Bob had found his friends in the Rag: but the affair of Bunter could not be discussed in a crowded room, with many ears to hear. To all the Remove, excepting Harry Wharton and Co., Billy Bunter was gone—far away from Greyfriars under the parental roof at Bunter Villa. That he was still haunting Greyfriars like a fat ghost, was a secret that could not be too carefully kept.

Keeping secrets was not much in the line of the Famous Five: least of all in Bob's. But obviously it would not do to let so much as a whisper escape about Bunter. So Bob beckoned his friends from the door of the Rag, and they followed him up to the studies. That something was 'up' they easily guessed, though they did not know what it was. Bob shut the study door before he answered.

'That dithering ass—!'

'Bunter?' Again four voices were heard in unison. 'That blithering cuckoo. What do you think Quelch sent for me for?' asked Bob. 'It was Bunter on the phone.'

'From home?' asked Nugent, hopefully.

'No,' from Gosling's lodge.'

'Oh, my hat!'

'Gosling must have gone out, I suppose. Anyhow, that fat chump got at his phone, and pulled Quelch's leg into thinking he was phoning from home about something he forgot before he left, and Quelch let me take the call. Now I've got to get out to him—'

'You can't get out in lock-ups,' said Johnny Bull.

'I've got to,' grunted Bob. 'The clumsy fat chump seems to have tumbled into the Sark, and got a wash—his first this term, I daresay! He can't carry on till I do the decorating act again.'

'You were an ass to do it at all!'

'Fathead—'

'I told you so—'

'If you tell me so again, I'll punch your silly head,' hooted Bob. 'Look here, it's up to me to stand by the fat chump.'

'What the thump did he want to tumble into the Sark for?' grunted Johnny. 'Even Bunter needn't have been such a clumsy ass—'

'You heard what the beaks were saying in the quad this afternoon,' said Bob, 'about the Head coming in all drenched and dripping, and Sam Ram Jam having helped him. Well, from what Bunter says, the Old Boy tipped into the mud and was stuck there and Bunter lugged him out, and got that wash doing it.'

'Oh!' said Johnny. 'If that was it—'

'Well he could have steered clear, and left him to it,' said Bob. 'Anyhow, that's what happened, and he's got to be decorated again before he can show up here. If he had the sense of a bunny rabbit he would be at home now: but he hasn't, has he? He's coming back, after all, with that yarn of a lost train, but I've got to fix him up first. If I'm missed, it will mean six from Quelch for breaking out in lock-ups, but that can't be helped.'

'And we fancied we were done with him!' sighed Nugent.

'He was bound to turn up again, like a bad penny!' grunted Johnny Bull. 'We're going to have the fat chump on our hands till we're found out, and then we're all going to get toco from Quelch.'

Harry Wharton laughed.

'Well, we've had toco before, and lived to tell the tale!' he said. 'You'd better get going, Bob—it's not long to dorm now. You'll have to be wary—some of the beaks ramble about on a fine evening. If you ran into Prout or Hacker—'

'I'll be jolly careful,' said Bob. 'Bunter suggested the box-room window—I believe Smithy's got out that way more than once—'

he has,' said Harry, rather drily. 'I'll come up and help you out. You other chaps get back to the Rag—don't let anybody fancy there's anything on. Here's the box. Bob—let's get a move on. I suppose you've fixed up where to find that pain in the neck?'

'Yes, he's going to wait for me by the water-butt behind Gosling's wood-shed, next to the kitchen gardens. That's a safe spot.'

'It's the other side of the quad,' said Johnny Bull. 'You'll have to cut across the quad, and if you run into Prout or Hacker or Capper or Wiggins—'

'Then you can tell me that you told me so!' snorted Bob, 'and you'd better guard with your left at the same time, fathead. Come on, Harry.'

No more time was lost.

Three members of the Co. returned to the Rag, in a somewhat anxious frame of mind.

Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry hurried up the Remove passage to the box-room stair at the end, Bob with the make-up box under his arm.

Nobody was about the studies: the coast was clear.

The box-room, when they reached it, was dark and silent.

They groped across to the little window where the summer stars glistened.

Cautiously, Harry Wharton pushed up the sash. Under the window were the leads of an out-building, and there was a stout ancient rain-pipe clamped to the wall in the corner, by which descent to the ground was practicable. It was a mode of egress not difficult for an active fellow: used more than once, as the juniors knew, by the Bounder on surreptitious nocturnal excursions. Their ways were not Smithy's ways: but circumstances alter cases, and for once it was a member of the Famous Five who was going to 'break out' in lock-ups.

'All serene, old chap,' whispered Harry. 'I'll hold that box while you get out. For goodness sake get through as quickly as you can, and get back before the bell goes for dorm. I'll wait here and help you in.'

'Okay!'

Bob clambered actively from the window, to the leads, and Wharton handed out the box.

He watched anxiously as Bob disappeared down the rain-pipe at the corner. He glimpsed him again, a minute later, in the glimmer of the stars. Then Bob' disappeared for good: and the captain of the Remove was left to wait anxiously for his return.

Bob lost no time. With watchful eyes, and ears on the alert, he scuttled away like a shadow in the deep dusk. Many lighted windows gleamed out on the quad, and Bob was careful to give them all a wide berth.

But suddenly he stopped, catching his breath, as a twinkling light quite near at hand caught his eye. It did not come from a window. It was moving, and came apparently from a lantern in some unseen hand.

It had not occurred to the fat Owl to mention on the phone how and why Gosling was absent from his lodge. Bob was quite unaware that a hunt was going on in the quad. He became aware of it suddenly and unexpectedly.

He backed swiftly into the shadow of a tree. In the dark, he stumbled over a loose stone, and there was a distinct sound. That that sound had been heard was demonstrated the next moment, by an exclamation in a fruity voice:

'Did you hear that, Gosling?'

'I didn't 'ear nothing, sir!' came Gosling's crusty voice. 'There ain't nobody 'ere, sir—'

'I have told you, Gosling, that some boy is out of House bounds in lock-ups, and that he must be found.'

'Oh, my hat!' breathed Bob, inaudibly. Prout and Gosling, evidently, were on somebody's track. They had not found that somebody: but they looked perilously like finding Bob Cherry!

'Look 'ere, sir.' It could be gathered, from Gosling's tone, that he did not relish rambling with his lantern, no doubt preferring an armchair in his lodge. 'Wot I says, sir, is this 'ere—' 'I heard some sound, distinctly,' said Mr. Prout. 'Come this way, Gosling, and show the light.'

'Wot I says is, there ain't nobody—'

'Come this way at once, and show the light of your lantern under that tree, Gosling.'

'Oh, orl right, sir.'

Bob caught his breath. That unlucky stumble had betrayed him: Prout's ears, if not his eyes, were keen. He was coming to investigate: and in few moments more, the lantern-light would be gleaming on a hapless junior out of House bounds in lock-ups: in which case, Billy Bunter was booked for a very long wait by the water-butt behind the wood-shed, and Bob for a painful interview with his head-master.

But Bob was quick on the uptake. He had a few moments: and he made rapid use of them. He stooped and groped for the stone on which he had stumbled. A moment more, and it whizzed as if from a catapult at Gosling's lantern.

Crash!

'Cor!' gasped Gosling, the lantern dropping from his horny hand under that sudden impact: instantly extinguished as it banged on the earth. Bob gasped with relief as the light went out.

All was dark! There was an angry exclamation from Mr. Prout.

'Gosling! Have you dropped your lantern, Gosling?'

'Cor!' Something 'it it, sir—'

'What? What? Nonsense! How extremely clumsy of you to drop your lantern, Gosling! How very clumsy indeed—'

'Wot I says is this 'ere, sir: something 'it that lantern, and knocked it out of my 'and—'

'Nonsense! How could anything have struck your lantern? Do not be absurd, Gosling! Pick it up and re-light it at once! How can you be so clumsy, Gosling?'

'Something 'it that there lantern—'

'Do not waste time talking nonsense, Gosling. Light the lantern at once. Why have you not picked it up, Gosling? Lose no more time.'

Gosling, grunting, stooped and groped. Prout peered impatiently in the gloom. He could see nothing now that the light was out, under the shadowy branches. Neither, it seemed, could Gosling. Prout rapped sharply:

'Gosling! I have told you not to waste time—will you pick up that lantern and re-light it at once—?'

'I ain't a blinking cat to see in the dark!' came Gosling's reply, in goaded tones. 'It's somewhere 'ere—praps you can see it—I can't—drat it '

'Pooh! Nonsense! I will certainly find it—OH!'

Prout stooped and groped.

Crack!

'OH!' It was quite a roar, from Prout.

'Ow!' howled Gosling.

Two heads seemed to have met in the dark! To judge by Prout's roar, and Gosling's howl, it was quite a painful contact.

'Oh! Ah! Bless my soul! Oooh!'

'Ow! My 'ead! Ow!'

Bob Cherry did not stay to listen to the duet. Two pained voices died away behind him, as he darted away in the shadows. In a very few minutes he was far from the spot.

A little breathless, he groped round the wood-shed, at the corner of the kitchen gardens.

There, safely screened from view, he ventured to turn on the gleam of a pocket flash-lamp.

There was a startled squeak from the shadows.

'Oh!

The gleam of the flash-lamp was reflected from the surface of the water in a large butt, and from a big pair of spectacles that adorned the grubby face of a fat figure sitting on the edge of the butt.

'Yes, you fat frog!' growled Bob.

'You made me jump, you silly ass! Want me to tip over into the water?' yapped Bunter.

'I've a jolly good mind to tip you in anyway, you fat ditherer.'

'Beast!'

'Look here, Bunter, if you've got a spot of sense, you'd better chuck it and stop playing the giddy goat, and—'

'You're wasting time jawing, Cherry. Look here, I've got to get in—I want some supper—I can tell you I'm jolly hungry—'

'Shove your ugly mug this way, fathead, and hold this flash-lamp to show me a light, blitherer, and don't flash it all over the shop and give us away, cuckoo, and—'

'Shut up, old chap, and get on with it. I've told you I'm hungry.'

By the glimmer of the flash-lamp, behind the wood-shed, Bob Cherry got on with it. A grubby fat countenance disappeared under a dark Oriental complexion. Slowly, but surely, Sam Ram Jam was himself again—and Billy Bunter, once more, in a condition to carry on with his remarkable scheme and 'keep dark' at Greyfriars. After which Bob, leaving the fat Owl to his own devices, made his way cautiously back to the House, with a wary eye open for Prout. But Mr. Prout had given it up, by that time, and gone in, and the coast was clear. Bob clambered in at the box-room window with a helping hand from Harry Wharton.

'All serene?' whispered Harry.

'Yes: except that I forgot to kick Bunter! Let's get back to the Rag before we're missed—it's jolly near dorm now.'

They hurried down and rejoined their friends in the Rag, with still minutes to go before the bell rang for dorm. And those minutes had not yet elapsed, when a summons came for Hurree Jamset Ram Singh to repair to his form-master's study: and four members of the Co. were left to wait anxiously for his return.

CHAPTER 23

A LODGING FOR THE NIGHT

'MR. OUELCH, sir—'

'What is it, Trotter?'

'The furrin young gentleman, sir—'

'What?'

'The furrin young gentleman, sir, that was here this afternoon, sir. He's come back, sir.'

'Bless my soul!'

Bridge had ended in common-room. Prout had come in, and was relating to Quelch, Hacker, Twigg, and Capper, that he was sure—definitely assured—that some truant had been out of House bounds in lock-ups—though, owing to Gosling's clumsiness in dropping his lantern, at the psychological moment, he had failed to make a catch. Prout was interrupted by a tap at the door, by Trotter's chubby face looking in, and by his surprising announcement.

'I can't understand a word he says, sir: said Trotter. 'I've took him to your study, sir, and come to tell you, sir—he's waiting there now, sir—the dark young gentleman, sir—'

'Dear me!' said Mr. Prout, 'that must be the foreign youth who rendered assistance to the head-master this afternoon—Rum Tum Chunk, I think you said his name was, Quelch—' 'Sam Ram Jam,' said Mr. Quelch. 'It is very singular that he should have returned, and at this hour! I had better see him at once.'

Mr. Quelch left common-room, in a state of considerable surprise.

That foreign youth, Sam Ram Jam, had left the school after a visit to some boys of his form that afternoon: and Quelch naturally had not expected to see anything of him again. Why he had come back, and at so late an hour, was quite a mystery. Quelch proceeded at once to his study to elucidate it.

A plump figure rose rather hastily from an armchair as he appeared in the doorway. Two gimlet-eyes fixed on a dark face under a red fez: and under an exotic tunic a fat heart gave an extra beat. Billy Bunter was going on with this: he had passed muster under many eyes, even Quelch's: and he was confident of passing muster again. He was not going home for that week's leave so long as there was, so to speak, a shot in the locker. But, assured as he was of passing muster, his fat heart beat faster as those gimlet-eyes fixed on him. '

But there was no doubt, no suspicion, in Quelch's glance He was merely surprised to see Sam Ram Jam there: and his expression was quite kindly.

'Why are you here at this hour, my boy?' asked Mr. Quelch: forgetting for a moment that Sam Ram Jam could speak only his own language!

'Acky wag tooky too!' mumbled Bunter.

'Ah! I was forgetting—you cannot speak English,' said Mr. Quelch.

'Ook wook woo coo ticky.'

'I regret, my boy, that I cannot understand what you say, though I am glad that you understand me: said Mr. Quelch. 'I will send for Hurree Singh, who will doubtless be able to explain.'

Mr. Quelch glanced at his watch. It was close on 'dorm' for his form, but the bell had not yet rung.

'Trotter!'

'Yessir.'

'Go at once and request Hurree Singh, of my form, to come here.'

'Yessir.'

'Please be seated, my boy,' added Mr. Quelch, kindly, as Trotter departed. Billy Bunter dropped into the armchair again. Bunter was always pleased to be seated!

In a couple of minutes, the nabob of Bhanipur appeared in the doorway. As Mr. Quelch turned to him, Bunter, behind the Remove master's back, grinned at the nabob. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh did not grin. The gimlet-eyes were upon him.

'Come in, Hurree Singh,' said Mr. Quelch. 'As you see, this foreign lad, who visited you and your friends this afternoon, has returned here. I cannot imagine why. You are, I think, the only person here able to understand what he says, so please ask him to explain.'

'Certainly, sir,' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. He came slowly into the study. He gave the fat figure in the armchair one expressive look. As a matter of choice, he would have preferred to boot the egregious Owl round the study. But there was no help for it, now. In for a penny was in for a pound!

'Acky-wack toodle-coo!' said Bunter, cheerfully. 'Moo arley barley cook.'

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh breathed hard. Mr. Quelch listened: but he could make absolutely nothing of that strange Oriental tongue!

'What does he say, Hurree Singh?' he asked, as the nabob did not immediately translate. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh paused. It was a difficult position for him.

Billy Bunter never had the slightest hesitation in rolling out what the juniors called 'crammers': in fact, Remove fellows sometimes wondered whether Bunter was aware of any distinction between truth and untruth. Other fellows were more particular in such matters: and the nabob, certainly, had no intention of adopting the fat Owl's manners and customs.

He had to answer Quelch: and to answer him, without giving Bunter away, and at the same time without departing from the strait and narrow path of veracity, was not easy.

'Oo wo inky icky slam,' said Bunter, blinking at him. 'Go snoo arley barley snap.'

'Please translate, Hurree Singh,' said Mr. Quelch. 'I gathered from what was said in Wharton's study this afternoon, that you understand this boy.'

'The understandfulness is terrific, sir!' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh: which was quite a veracious answer, for he certainly understood Bunter, if not his remarkable language.

'Then tell me what he means,' said Mr. Quelch.

'His esteemed meaning is that he desires permission to remain for the night, sir.' That, undoubtedly, was what Bunter meant, if not what he said!

'Bless my soul! And why?' exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

'Oodle coo woolly wap widdy woo,' said Bunter.

'He has failed to catch a train, sir, said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'He has come back to say that the train was lost, sir, and to ask permission to stay for the night.'

'Dear me!' said Mr. Quelch, 'even if the boy lost his train, surely he could have taken a later one. But perhaps, as a foreigner, he is unacquainted with our railways, and at a loss. No doubt he was in difficulties, being unable to speak English. I see no alternative to his staying the night, at this late hour—it would be most inhospitable to refuse, especially after the service this boy rendered to the head-master. I will speak to Mrs. Kebble, and make the necessary arrangements.'

'Icky tang wang oodle.'

'Bless my soul! What is he saying, Hurree Singh?'

'He is very pleased, sir, that he is permitted to remain for the night, sir,' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Oh, quite, quite,' said Mr. Quelch. 'Sam Ram Jam. you are very welcome to remain for the night, and I will see that a room is prepared for you. I will do so at once. Perhaps you would like some supper before going to bed.'

'Acky wang took woop.'

'He would like some supper, sir!' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Very well, very well. I will see to it. You may remain here with the boy, Hurree Singh, while I speak to the House-dame. If he desires to communicate with his people at home, he may use the telephone.'

Mr. Quelch quitted the study.

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh breathed hard and deep.

Billy Bunter grinned at him, when the door had closed on the Remove master.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter. 'It's all right. Inky! What? He, he, he!'

'You terrific fathead!' breathed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'We shall all be in the preposterous soup if Quelch finds out that his absurd leg has been pulled—'

'He, he, he! Quelch don't know a thing, and he jolly well won't!' chuckled Bunter. He ceased to chuckle suddenly, as the nabob of Bhanipur grasped a fat neck. 'Here, leggo—what are you up to—leggo—don't you bang my head on that table, or I'll jolly well—Yarooooh!'

Bang!

'Wow! Beast! Wow! Bang!

'Yarooooh!'

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh left the study: leaving William George Bunter, alias Sam Ram Jam, rubbing a fat head. He was still rubbing it when Mr. Quelch returned. But there was balm in Gilead, in the shape of a substantial supper: after which Sam Ram Jam went to bed, happily satisfied that, having negotiated the first fence, as it were, successfully, he could rely upon his uncommon artfulness to 'wangle' a longer stay somehow. Harry Wharton and Co., in the Remove dormitory, were far from feeling so happily satisfied: and they could only wonder what on earth was going to happen on the morrow, with the ineffable Owl still at Greyfriars. 'keeping dark'.

CHAPTER 24

LOAN FOR BUNTER

'LOOK!'

'Him!'

'Bother him!'

'Blow him!'

'The blowfulness is terrific.'

It was morning break at Greyfriars, a bright and sunny morning.

Many aces were as bright and sunny as the morning.

But there were five fellows in the Remove who had very serious looks. Five faces were, as the poet has expressed it, sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.

On a summer's morning, with a half-holiday due in the afternoon, and cricket to come, Harry Wharton and Co. would have felt rather on top of the world—in other circumstances. But—! Sam Ram Jam was on their minds.

Quelch's august leg had been successfully pulled. That exotic visitor to Greyfriars had had a lodging for the night. Billy Bunter was still haunting Greyfriars like a fat ghost.

They had seen nothing of him before going in to form that morning. Bunter was not likely to turn out at rising-bell, when there was no compulsion so to do.

In early school, they had nourished a faint hope that the egregious Owl might be gone by the time the bell rang for break.

But that hope was faint: and it vanished when they came out into the sunny quad. Under the windows of Masters' Studies, shaded by the ivy-clad wall from the blaze of the summer sun, was a deck-chair. In that deck-chair reclined, or rather sprawled, a fat figure. The sunlight gleamed on the dark skin of Sam Ram Jam and the spectacles of William George Bunter.

It suited Billy Bunter to laze in a deck-chair while other fellows were in form. But he was not wholly unoccupied. He was helping himself from a bag of caramels, and chewing quite industriously.

'That fat ass!' growled Johnny Bull. 'Still here!' sighed Bob Cherry.

'If you hadn't—!'

'Give us a rest, old chap.'

'You were a silly ass, and I told you so—'

'Br-r-r-r-r!'

'My esteemed Johnny,' murmured Hurree Janset Ram Singh, 'speech is silvery, but silence is the bird in hand that goes longest to the bush, as the English proverb remarks.'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! There's Quelch looking out!' muttered Bob. 'That dithering Owl is right under his nose.'

Mr. Quelch had appeared at his study window. He glanced over the sunny quad, and then his eyes fell on the fat figure in the deck-chair. The Famous Five, as they watched, felt a twinge of uneasiness. Deep as was the fat Owl's disguise, so impenetrable that at moments they could hardly believe themselves that it was really Bunter, they could not feel at ease with Sam Ram Jam under the gimlet-eye. But Quelch's look was quite unsuspecting, and quite kindly.

'Good morning, Sam Ram Jam!' he said, genially. Billy Bunter blinked up at him.

'Acksammy pook,' he answered, in the throaty voice he had adopted along with his new language, and which was quite unrecognizable as the fat voice of William George Bunter.

Mr. Quelch smiled.

'I am afraid that I do not understand,' he said, 'but as you understand me, that is no matter. Perhaps you would like to stay to dinner with your friends, and leave by an afternoon train. I trust that you have enjoyed your visit to Greyfriars.'

'Soppy pop tack coot.'

'I will speak to your friends later about your train today.'

'Ooty coot.'

Mr. Quelch disappeared from the window. Billy Bunter blinked round at the Co., and gave them a fat wink. They gave him quite expressive looks, and walked away. Billy Bunter was about to squeak 'I say you fellows!' when he remembered in time that he was under Quelch's window. He heaved himself out of the deck-chair, and rolled after the juniors. Apparently he wanted their company. They had no yearning whatever for his. But under many eyes, they could hardly walk away from their supposed guest: so they came to a halt, at a safe distance from Quelch's window.

'I say, you fellows—'

'So you're still sticking on here!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'What do you think?' grinned Bunter.

'You can't keep it up, you fat ass.'

'Can't I jolly well?' chuckled Bunter. 'I'm jolly well not going home to sweep out that grocer's shop, I can jolly well tell you. Isn't it as safe as houses? Only we've got to think out how I can stay on as a visitor, see? Have you fellows thought that out?'

'No, ass.'

'No, fathead.'

'No, blitherer.'

'Well, it's got to be fixed up,' said Bunter, decidedly. 'Quelch has just spoken to me about my train. I'm not catching any train, I know that. And I can't keep on losing trains for a week, can I?'

'You'll have to cut, you howling ass.'

'I'll watch it! Suppose I fall ill?' said Bunter, thoughtfully. 'Suppose I caught a chill when I had that ducking yesterday, and—'

'You didn't!' hooted Bob Cherry.

'I know I didn't, but that's no reason why it shouldn't work,' yapped Bunter. 'Can't you keep to the point?'

'Oh, boot him!' growled Johnny.

'Mind, I'd rather not be ill,' said Bunter, shaking the fat head under the red fez. 'They might shove me into sanny, and you know what the grub's like there. But if you fellows can't think of anything better, it will have to be that. After all, I needn't be ill enough to go into sanny: only ill enough not to be able to travel. Something caused by that ducking, see?'

What do you fellows think?'

'Fathead!'

'Ass!'

'It's all right till after dinner, from what Quelch said. 'So I needn't have that chill till later— he, he, he! A chill will be all right, as I had that ducking—might have a spot of pneumonia or something in my leg—'

'Wha-a-at?'

'Then I shouldn't be able to walk, see?' explained Bunter. 'That would make them sympathetic, too, a fellow getting pneumonia in the leg through hooking the headmaster out of the mud—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! What are you cackling at?' snapped Bunter. 'I tell you we've got to fix this up. I couldn't travel this afternoon if I had pneumonia in the leg—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, do stop cackling,' exclaimed Bunter, peevishly.

'Think pneumonia would sound a bit too steep?'

'Just a few, if you had it in the leg,' chuckled Bob. 'Well, perhaps I had better make it plumbago—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I wish you wouldn't cackle every time a fellow opens his mouth. I'll start with a chill, anyhow, if you fellows can't think of anything better. But never mind that now— we're all right till after dinner. I say, you fellows, I suppose one of you can lend me half a crown till my postal-order comes! I believe I told you I was expecting a postal-order. '

'I believe you did,' agreed Bob Cherry. 'Many a time, and oft! Don't tell us again.'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'You fat ass!' said Harry Wharton. 'If you've got a spot of sense, you'll cut in and get a wash and change your clobber, and cut off, before it all comes out and we're all in the soup.'

'Cut off while the going's still good,' said Bob.

'If that's what you call gratitude, Bob Cherry, after all I've done for you—'

'Oh, give us a rest.'

'Didn't I jolly well own up in the form-room, and get you out of a licking, and get a book for it too?' hooted Bunter, indignantly. 'Didn't I jolly well—?'

'Here comes Smithy! Do you want him to hear?' Billy Bunter certainly did not want Smithy to hear. He cut off the flow of his eloquence as the Bounder came up. Vernon-Smith's brows were knitted, and his eyes had an unpleasant gleam. Evidently he was not in a good temper. 'Anything up, Smithy?' asked Bob.

'Yes: that grub-grabber has been at it again,' said the Bounder. 'You fellows got any idea who it is?'

'I—I wonder!' murmured Bob.

'It's too jolly thick,' said Smithy. 'By gum! When I spot him, I'll boot him all over the school. A fellow's tuck was never safe when Bunter was about, but now Bunter's away, who's doing it? My study supper last night, and now—'

'What now?'

'Mauly asked Reddy and me into his study to whack out a bag of caramels. Well, there weren't any! They were gone.'

A fat hand closed quickly over a sticky paper bag that still contained a few caramels. Smithy had not noticed that bag in the fat dusky paw of Sam Ram Jam. He was not going to notice it now.

'I can't make it out,' went on Vernon-Smith. 'I've been all over the Remove, and nobody seems to know anything about that study supper. Think it might have been some fellow in another form?'

'Oh! No! Hardly,' murmured Harry Wharton. 'I—I don't think it was any fellow in another form, Smithy.'

'Well, if it was a Remove man, who was it?' demanded Smithy. 'It's the same tick that's scoffed Mauly's caramels, of course. But who?'

'The whofulness is terrific, my esteemed Smithy.'

'Well, I can jolly well tell you that I'll root him out, and I'll make an example of him when I spot him!' growled the Bounder, and he stalked away with a frowning brow. Billy Bunter grinned.

'You fat villain!' breathed Bob Cherry, when Smithy was gone.

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'If Smithy knew you were still here, he would be booting you round the quad this minute,' said Nugent.

'Well, Smithy won't know,' said Bunter, cheerfully. 'Not that I had Mauly's caramels, of course. I never saw any caramels in his study. Besides, I never looked into his study while you fellows were in form. I was sitting in that deck-chair all the while I was up in the studies—I mean, all the while you fellows were in form. But I say, what about that half-crown? The tuck-shop's open now, and I've had nothing since breakfast except some caramels—'

'We haven't booted Bunter yet for snooping in Smithy's study,' said Bob, 'but I suppose it would make the fellows stare, if they saw us booting a visitor.'

'The starefulness would probably be terrific,' chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Oh, don't be an ass,' yapped Bunter. 'Look here, Bob Cherry, I think you might lend a fellow something, after all I've done for you.'

'You want me to lend you something?' asked Bob.

'Yes, I jolly well do.'

'Oh, all right! Come round the corner, so that everybody won't see me handing it over,' said Bob.

'Look here—!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'My dear chap, Bunter wants me to lend him something, and I'm going to. Come on, Bunter.'

'You jolly well shut up, Bull,' yapped Bunter. 'Bob can lend me something, if he likes, without asking you.' And Bunter rolled after Bob Cherry, as he walked round the corner of the House, out of the general view.

'Make it five bob, old chap,' said Bunter.

'I'm afraid I couldn't make it five bob,' answered Bob, shaking his head.

'Well, half a crown, then—'

'Or half a crown, either.'

'Eh! What are you going to lend me, then?' yapped Bunter.

'My boot.'

'Eh?'

'Here you are!'

'Yaroooh!'

'Have another?'

Billy Bunter did not wait for another. One loan of that nature seemed to satisfy him. Like the guests in Macbeth, he stood not upon the order of his going, but went at once! The Famous Five did not enjoy any more of his attractive society during morning break. But when the bell summoned Greyfriars to third school, and Harry Wharton and Co. went in with the rest of the Remove, the quad was still adorned by the exotic figure of Sam Ram Jam. That fat figure sprawled in the deckchair under the study windows, wriggling occasionally from the effects of Bob Cherry's loan. Never, probably, had the chums of the Remove been so completely and thoroughly fed up with Billy Bunter: never so anxious to see the last of him. But it was only too clear that they were not going to see the last of him. Sam Ram Jam was sticking to them like the Old Man of the Sea to Sinbad the Sailor!

CHAPTER 25

THE ROMAN PARENT AGAIN

Buzzzzzz!

Billy Bunter blinked round, as the buzz of the telephone-bell, floating out at the open window of Mr. Quelch's study, impinged upon his fat ears.

Bunter was enjoying life, that summer's morning. Sprawling in a deck-chair by a shady wall, blinking over the sunny quad, was ever so much more attractive than the form-room: at least to a lazy fat Owl. Certainly it was infinitely more attractive than the grocer's shop at Redgate: to which, but for his astute scheme, he was doomed by the stern decree of the Roman parent at Bunter Villa.

The rest of the Remove were in form, grinding with Quelch. Billy Bunter wished them joy of it! He was getting out of lessons, and dodging that 'book', just as if he had gone home for that week's leave. And he was keeping out of that grocer's shop, which was more awful than any number of lessons, with all the books of the *Æneid* added thereunto. All had gone well so far: and all was going to go well! All he had to do was to think up some pretext for prolonging his 'visit': and there his encounter with the Head on the bank of the Sark, which had seemed so unlucky at the time, came in useful: for could hospitality be refused to a visitor who had caught a bad chill in rendering a much-needed service to the head-master?

Bunter was, however, in no hurry for that chill to develop. He was safe till after dinner, and it was unnecessary to become unable to travel till it was time to go for his train!

In the meantime, he was quite at his fat ease. So long as Mr. Bunter supposed that leave had not been granted, while Mr. Quelch supposed that he was home on leave, it was safe as houses.

Buzzzzzz!

The telephone buzzed again.

As Quelch was in form with the Remove, he could not take that call. It was Trotter's duty to attend to the telephone on such occasions: and a few moments later, Bunter, heard the sound of an opening door within, and of a receiver jerked off the hooks. Then Trotter's voice:

'Mr. Quelch's study. Who's speaking?'

The fat Owl did not hear the reply from the other end.

But a moment later he heard Trotter's voice again, and gave a jump that shook the deck-chair.

'Mr. Bunter? Yes, sir! Certainly, sir! If you'll 'old on, sir, I'll go and tell Mr. Quelch, sir.'

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Billy Bunter.

He sat in the deck-chair almost petrified. It was his parent at Bunter Villa who was on the phone: and Trotter was going to call Quelch!

A minute ago, the fat and fatuous Owl had been feeling quite at his ease, assured that his remarkable scheme was working like a charm. Now all of a sudden came a bolt from the blue. Once Mr. Bunter and Mr. Quelch compared notes—!

For a moment, Bunter was petrified. Then he jumped up. Not often, indeed very seldom, did Billy Bunter's fat intellect move swiftly. Seldom, very seldom, was he quick on the uptake. But peril sharpened his fat wits. From within, he heard the sound of a closing door: Trotter had gone to notify Quelch, in the Remove room, that Mr. Bunter was on the phone and holding the line. Mr. Bunter had to be cut off before Quelch arrived, if the alarmed fat Owl could contrive it. He made a jump from the deckchair, and another to the window.

Clambering in at a window was not easy work to Billy Bunter. His avoirdupois was against it. But there was no time to go round by the door—indeed, it was doubtful whether there was time even by the window! Seconds were precious. With a frantic bound, the fat Owl caught the window-sill in fat hands, and by a tremendous effort, hoisted himself up. He plunged headlong in at the window, lost his hold, and rolled.

Bump!

'Wow!'

He scrambled up, gasping. He had banged a knee and an elbow. But he had no time to rub the afflicted spots. He leaped to the telephone. A moment more, and his fat voice was audible at Bunter Villa.

'Is that you, father? William speaking.'

'William! I rang up to speak to Mr. Quelch—'

'Oh! Yes' You see, he—he—I—I—he—I mean—I—'

'Did Mr. Quelch send you to answer the telephone, William?'

'Oh! Exactly,' gasped Bunter. 'He—he—he's busy in the form-room—he—he—he can't leave the class. So—so he sent me—'

'I understand. As you did not return home yesterday, William, I concluded that your head-master had not granted leave of absence—'

'Oh! Yes! No! I—'

'I certainly expected your head-master to accede to my request, William, as I made a particular point of it. I understand that it is your form-master, Mr. Quelch, who objected?' 'Eh?'

'From what you told me on the telephone yesterday, William, it appears that Mr. Quelch objected—'

'Oh! Yes!' gasped Bunter. 'He—he objected no end, just—just as I—I said. I—I wasn't making that up—'

'What?'

'I—I mean, he wouldn't hear of it! He said, "Certainly not " He-he said, "Most assuredly not!" Just like that! Snapping like—like anything! He—he was awfully annoyed about it, really. He—he would hardly hear it mentioned. Not for a—a minute! Good-bye—'

'Hold the line, William.'

'I—I've got to get back to form!' gasped Bunter. 'Quelch will be in a bait if—if I don't go back to the form-room—'

'I have told you to hold the line, William! Now listen to me. While I quite understand Mr. Quelch's objections, I have no doubt that he will withdraw them if I request him personally to do so.'

'Oh, crikey!'

'What? What did you say, William?'

'Oh, jiminy!' gasped Bunter.

'I fail to understand you, William! What do you mean by this meaningless repetition of absurd ejaculations?'

Billy Bunter did not answer that. He stood blinking in dismay at the telephone. Not for the first time in his fat career, it was borne in upon his fat mind 'what a tangled web we weave, when we practise to deceive!' The previous day, he had 'piled it on' about Quelch's objections to that leave from school. The fact that Quelch had raised no objection at all, was a trifle light as air to the unvarnished Owl. Now he wished that he hadn't piled it on! But he hadn't. of course, foreseen such a result as this! The 'Roman parent' at Bunter Villa was evidently as Roman as ever! He was going to secure that week's undesired leave for William if he could! He was going to ask Quelch to withdraw those objections!

Billy Bunter's fat head fairly swam.

'Are you there, William?' came testily from Bunter Villa.

'Oh! Yes! No! Oh, dear! Yes,' groaned William. 'Go back to Mr. Quelch—'

'Oh, crumbs!'

'Do not interrupt me with foolish ejaculations, William.

Go back to Mr. Quelch and request him to be kind enough to come to the telephone for a few moments, as I desire particularly to speak to him.'

'He—he—I—I—eh!—I mean, he—'

'What?'

'He—he can't come!' gasped Bunter. 'He—he can't leave the form-room in class, you know. That—that's why he—he sent me! He—he—he gave me a message for you—'

'Then why have you not told me already, you stupid boy. If Mr. Quelch gave you a message, what was it?' 'He—he—he said that if—if it's about leave from school, he—he—he won't hear of it—'

'Really, William—'

'He—he said he—he won't even hear it mentioned again, and—and—and that he—he—he doesn't want to—to hear anything from you about it—'

'Upon my word!'

'Good-bye!' gasped Bunter.

'William—!'

Mr. Bunter, at Bunter Villa, got no further than that: or, if he got further, his hopeful son at Greyfriars did not hear: for at that point, Billy Bunter slammed the receiver back on the hooks. A sound from the corridor reached a fat ear. It was an approaching footstep!

Quelch was coming!

Billy Bunter made a bound for the window. He disappeared almost headlong through that window. A deckchair curled up as a fat figure landed on it. Billy Bunter sat up, dizzily, gasping for breath. From that open window above his fat head, he heard a sharp annoyed exclamation.

'Dear me! How very stupid of Trotter to replace the receiver! Mr. Bunter is cut off! How very, very stupid of Trotter.'

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

He listened, with both fat ears. Quelch, finding that the caller had been cut off, would naturally return to his duties in the form-room. All was still 'safe as houses' if Mr. Bunter did not ring up again. And surely he would be satisfied with that 'message' from Quelch! Bunter fervently hoped so!

But alas for Bunter!

Buzzzzzz!

It was the telephone again!

CHAPTER 26

WHERE IS WILLIAM?

'MR. QUELCH speaking—'

'Good morning, Mr. Quelch.'

'Good morning, Mr. Bunter.'

'I am extremely sorry if I have interrupted a lesson, sir—'

'Not at all, sir! But perhaps I may request you to be brief, as I must return to my form-room.'

'Oh, quite! Quite! A few words only, sir, about my request that my son William should be granted leave of absence. I am aware that it is unusual, in the middle of a term, but I have a particular reason—I have made certain arrangements, which I am unwilling to cancel, for William's stay at home: and if you would be kind enough to withdraw your objection—'

'Eh?'

'I quite understand your objection, Mr. Quelch: I am aware that William is a very backward pupil, and you may feel, very justly, that he should not miss his lessons. Nevertheless—'

Mr. Quelch blinked at the telephone. This was the first he had heard of his 'objection' to Bunter's leave of absence!

'Nevertheless,' went on the plump voice from Bunter Villa, 'if you would consent to reconsider the matter, Mr. Quelch, I am sure that the head-master would accede to my request—'

'I do not follow, sir. I have raised no objection whatever, and the head-master acceded to your request, and Bunter left the school yesterday afternoon, and telephoned me later—'

'Mr. Quelch!'

'Well?'

'I fail to understand you, sir!'

'Indeed! I believe I spoke quite plainly, sir. Bunter was granted leave to go home, as requested in your letter to Dr. Locke, and he accordingly left Greyfriars yesterday afternoon, to take the train from Courtfield, and—' Mr. Quelch paused, suddenly. 'Oh! Mr. Bunter! You surely do not mean that your son has not arrived home?'

'I certainly mean exactly that, Mr. Quelch.'

'Bless my soul!' Mr. Quelch's expression, which had been growing a little irritable, became serious and concerned at once. 'Can there have been an accident? If the boy has not reached home— Yet he certainly telephoned—'

'William could scarcely have reached home, Mr. Quelch, as he has not left the school!' came a snap from Bunter Villa.

'I can only repeat, Mr. Bunter, that he left Greyfriars yesterday afternoon, to take the three-fifteen at Courtfield—'

'And I can only repeat, Mr. Quelch, that he can have done nothing of the sort, as he is still at Greyfriars.'

'He is certainly not at Greyfriars, Mr. Bunter—'

'He certainly is, Mr. Quelch, or he could not have spoken to me, only a few minutes ago, on this telephone.'

'Eh?'

'Only a few minutes ago, Mr. Quelch, William was speaking to me on this telephone—'
'Impossible!'

'Really, Mr. Quelch—'

'I repeat, sir, that you are making some strange mistake, as your son certainly is not at Greyfriars now. He left yesterday afternoon—'

'Only three or four minutes ago, Mr. Quelch, William was on the phone, and he explained that you had sent him from the form-room to take my call—'

'Bless my soul!'

'We were suddenly cut off, and I rang up again,' went on Mr. Bunter. 'Will you kindly explain what all this means, Mr. Quelch? If my son is not granted leave, I must accept the head-master's decision, and cancel the arrangements I have made for him. But if leave has been granted, why has he not come home? Why is he still at the school today?'

'He is not at the school—'

'If he is not at the school, Mr. Quelch, will you kindly explain to me how he could have spoken, only a few minutes ago, on this telephone—this telephone which you are using this very moment, Mr. Quelch?'

'If—if—if you are sure—!' stuttered Mr. Quelch.

'If I am sure!' came another snort! Evidently, Mr. Bunter was quite sure!

'Then I—I—I cannot understand it!' gasped Mr. Quelch. 'Bunter certainly left the school yesterday—'

'If he did, he must have returned, as he is certainly there now. Am I to repeat that only a few minutes ago he was speaking to me on your telephone? Perhaps, sir, you would like me to speak in words of one syllable, at dictation speed?' Mr. Bunter was growing angry and sarcastic.

'Bunter is not here—'

'Nonsense!'

'What? What! Did you say "nonsense", Mr. Bunter?'

'I did say nonsense, Mr. Quelch. You tell me that William is not there, when only a few minutes ago he was standing where you are standing now. If that is not nonsense, Mr. Quelch, I should be very glad to know how you would describe it.'

Mr. Quelch breathed very hard. He was quite bewildered by this unexpected spot of news from Bunter Villa. And he was getting angry, too. Still, he had to believe that spot of news. 'Mr. Bunter.' Quelch was barking now. 'If your son has not left the school to go home—'

'There is no question of "if", sir. He has not done so.'

'In that case, sir, he must have remained here surreptitiously!' barked Mr. Quelch. 'I recall now that he seemed reluctant to go home—'

'Probably, sir, very probably: but—'

'I certainly believed that he had left. He has not been seen since yesterday afternoon. I had no doubt whatever that he was at home now. If he is not at home—'

'Will you inform me, Mr. Quelch, how many times you desire me to repeat that William is not at home?'

The gimlet-eyes glinted over the telephone. Irritation was intensifying at both ends of the wire.

'If Bunter is still here, sir, he is here surreptitiously, deliberately keeping out of sight—' Quelch almost shouted.

'Absurd!'

'That is the only possible explanation, sir, if Bunter, as you state, was speaking on this telephone a few minutes ago,' barked Mr. Quelch. 'I most certainly was unaware of his presence in the school.'

'You must permit me to say, sir, that a schoolmaster should not be unaware of the whereabouts of a boy in his form.'

'I—I—I—' Quelch choked.

'I fail to understand all this, Mr. Quelch. I entirely fail to understand it. I must know, sir, whether to expect my son home or not. I shall expect to hear from you, sir, definitely, and before long, whether I am, or am not, to expect William here!'

'I—I—I—'

'Good-bye. Mr. Quelch.'

'Really, Mr. Bunter—I repeat—do you hear me, sir?

I repeat—' Mr. Quelch ceased to speak, as he realized that Mr. Bunter had cut off.

He put up the receiver, breathing hard and deep. Where was Bunter?

He had not, after all, gone home, as Quelch had naturally supposed. That was clear now. He had not left Greyfriars. That was equally clear. He had been there, actually in Quelch's study, only a matter of minutes ago. It was quite bewildering. Quelch stared round the study, almost expecting to spot a fat figure in some corner. But Bunter, certainly, was not there now: neither could he have left the study by the door, unseen by Quelch as he came. The open window was indicated: and Quelch stepped to the window, and stared out into the quadrangle. It was deserted, with the whole school in form.

Only one figure, in fact, met the gimlet-eyes, as Quelch scanned the open spaces. It was that of a dark Oriental youth with a red fez on a fat head, in a deck-chair under the window.

But Quelch gave Sam Ram Jam only a careless, casual glance. He was not interested in Sam Ram Jam: he was interested in William George Bunter.

Nothing, however, was to be seen of William George Bunter. If he was still at Greyfriars, as Mr. Quelch could hardly doubt now, he really seemed to have borrowed the cloak of darkness in the fairy tale, and become invisible. Quelch had not seen him: nobody, so far as Quelch knew at least, had seen him and he was certainly solid enough to be seen, if he was visible at all. Yet he was at the school, and had been in that very room only minutes—indeed only moments—before Quelch had entered it. It was mystifying, bewildering—and it was also very exasperating. Mr. Quelch's lips were set in a very tight line, when he left his study, at last, to return to the Remove form-room.

CHAPTER 27

A SUPRISE FOR THE REMOVE

'WHAT'S up?' whispered Bob Cherry.

'Something!' murmured Nugent.

'That fat ass—!' breathed Johnny Bull.

'That fat chump—'

'That terrific fathead!'

The Famous Five had little doubt of it. One glance at Quelch's speaking countenance, as he came back into the form-room, was enough. That speaking countenance indicated only too clearly that something was up.

Quelch's brows were knitted. His lips were set. His eyes glinted. Obviously something had occurred, during his brief absence, to rouse his ire. All the form had heard Trotter state that Mr. Bunter was on the telephone. It was to take a call from Mr. Bunter that Quelch had left the form-room. And he came back looking like Rhadamanthus and Æacus rolled into one, only a little more so! Something had come out!

'Six all round, if he knows!' murmured Bob. It was a painful prospect.

The Co. watched Quelch's expressive face quite anxiously. It was a relief to note that the gimlet-eyes did not turn on them specially. Those keen eyes scanned the whole form, sharply, searchingly. But fortunately they did not linger on the Famous Five.

English History was the order of the day in third school that morning. But Quelch did not immediately resume English History. King John had just been caught in the tide, when Quelch was called away. Quelch left him there. Something much more recent was in his mind now.

He did not speak immediately. He stood scanning an uneasy form. Not only the Famous Five felt uneasy under that scanning. Skinner and Snoop wondered whether anything could have come out about a certain expedition out of bounds. Vernon-Smith wished that he could have felt quite sure that he had put Racing Tips safely out of sight in his study. Other fellows remembered little sins of commission or omission, under that grim stare. But Quelch spoke at last: and his words brought relief to all but the participators in Billy Bunter's remarkable scheme of 'keeping dark'.

'Has any boy in this form seen Bunter since yesterday afternoon?'

There was no answer to that unexpected and surprising question. It simply made the juniors stare blankly. Five members of the form could have answered. But they remained as mute as the rest.

Quelch, like Brutus of old, paused for a reply. But like Brutus he paused in vain. No reply came. After that pause, he resumed:

'I have just learned that Bunter did not leave the school yesterday afternoon, as he was supposed to have done. He has not gone home. He has remained here—surreptitiously. He is still at Greyfriars. Only a very short while ago, he was in the House actually using the telephone in my study.'

'Oh!' ejaculated Vernon-Smith, involuntarily. Smithy had been puzzled about the disappearance of that study supper in No. 4. That was no longer a puzzle—if Billy Bunter was still in the school!

The gimlet-eyes fixed on him. 'Vernon-Smith!'

'Oh! Yes, sir.'

'Do you know anything about this extraordinary action of Bunter's?'

'Oh! No, sir! I thought he had gone home, as all the fellows did,' answered the Bounder, hastily. 'I had no idea—'

'Very well! Todd!'

'Yes, sir,' said Peter Todd.

'As Bunter shares your study, possibly you may know something of this?'

'Nothing at all, sir,' answered Peter. 'If Bunter's still here, sir, I haven't seen him. He hasn't been in the study.' 'He said nothing to you of his intentions?'

'Nothing, sir! I thought he was gone home. Everybody did.'

There was another pause. Again the gimlet-eyes scanned the form. But again it was a relief to the Famous Five that those gimlets did not single them out. Quelch knew now that Billy Bunter was still at Greyfriars—but evidently he was not thinking of Sam Ram Jam. That secret was safe—so far, at all events!

But the chums of the Remove hung anxiously on Quelch's next words. They realized only too clearly that they were on very thin ice now.

'I need hardly say that so extraordinary and impertinent a prank as this will be visited with very severe punishment.' Quelch's voice was deep. His tone left no doubt about the severity of the punishment! 'How that stupid boy, Bunter, has been able to keep out of sight since yesterday afternoon. I do not understand: but I am satisfied that he cannot have done so without the knowledge and assistance of others. I cannot doubt that other boys in this form were, and are, aware of Bunter's extraordinary proceedings, and could tell me precisely where he is now.'

Dead silence.

Most faces in the Remove were surprised. Many were quite blank. Blankest of all were the faces of five fellows who, certainly, could have told precisely where Bunter was now: but had not the remotest intention of doing so.

Mr. Quelch's lips set harder.

'Very well,' he said: and he really seemed to be biting off the words rather than uttering them, 'very well! I have said that this impertinent prank will be severely punished. That punishment will be shared by any boy who has assisted Bunter in his proceedings. That is all—for the present!'

With that, the subject dropped: evidently 'for the present' only! English History was resumed in the Remove form-room: and King John, at last, emerged from the Wash!

But after Quelch's startling communication few of the juniors could contrive to take much interest in ancient Plantagenets. Even the glint of a gimlet-eye could scarcely keep down excited whispering in the form.

It was a relief to both form and form-master when that lesson came to an end. Quelch was keen to investigate the extraordinary circumstances of Billy Bunter's continued presence in the school from which he was supposed to be absent. The Removites were eager to discuss the surprising news they had heard. It was a quite exciting topic: and there was a buzz of voices in the corridor as the Remove went out.

'Bunter's still here—'

'That fat ass Bunter—'

'He never went yesterday—'

'What an ass! I'd be jolly glad to get a week off in term.'

'Same here!'

'But where is he, if he's still about?'

'Nobody's seen him—'

'Some fellows jolly well know—you heard what Quelch said—'

'I say, Toddy, don't you know where Bunter is?'

'Not a thing.'

'He can't be here—'

'Oh, he's here all right—remember those bikkers Quelch was inquiring after yesterday? Who had them?'

'And Smithy's tuck, too—'

'But how can he be still here, and nobody seeing him—?'

'He's fat enough to be seen.'

'But where the dickens—'

'Quelch will be after him. I say, did the old boy look waxy!'

Ha, ha, ha!'

Harry Wharton and Co. did not join in the excited discussion. The surprise to the Remove was no surprise to them, and they did not share the general curiosity on the subject: they knew only too much already! They went quietly out into the quad with very serious faces, and walked along to the corner of the House, where they stopped, and exchanged expressive looks.

'Well, it's out now,' said Bob.

'That fat chump will have to chuck it, now,' said Johnny Bull.

'If he's got sense enough—!' said Nugent.

'But has he?' sighed Bob.

'Hush—here comes Smithy,' murmured Harry Wharton. Herbert Vernon-Smith joined the group at the corner.

There was quite a grim expression on his face.

'It's pretty plain now who had that study supper,' he said.

'Think so?' murmured Bob.

'Well, Quelch says that Bunter is still here, and I suppose he knows what he's talking about. But where is he?'

'Echo answers where.'

'Esteemed echo answers that the wherefulness is terrific,' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Must be hiding somewhere,' said Smithy, 'and I can tell you that I'm jolly well going to root him out. But where the deuce can he be? He can't be anywhere in the studies. Where do you fellows think he is? Got any idea?'

Five fellows glanced at a fat figure, with a dark Oriental complexion, that had heaved itself out of a deck-chair at a distance. They certainly had an 'idea' where Bunter was!

'He's keeping dark somewhere,' said Smithy.

'Eh? Oh! Yes! He's certainly keeping dark,' said Bob.

'The darkfulness is terrific.'

'Quelch thinks that some other fellows are helping him to keep dark. What do you fellows think?'

'I shouldn't wonder!' murmured Bob.

'Well, I don't envy them, when Quelch spots them,' said the Bounder. 'They're for it, you can bank on that. Look here, I think I'll draw the box-rooms for that fat rotter. You fellows come and help.'

'Oh, bother Bunter: said Harry Wharton. 'Let him rip!'

'I'll let him rip when I've booted him for snooping my tuck!' snapped the Bounder: and he went back into the House, no doubt to 'draw' the box-rooms for a hidden Owl. He was not likely to have much luck. He did not even glance at that fat figure with an Oriental complexion, that rolled up to the Famous Five as he walked away.

CHAPTER 28

MOST EXTRAORDINARY!

'I SAY, you fellows.'

'You fat chump!'

'Oh, really, Wharton—'

'It's all out now,' hooted Bob Cherry. 'Quelch has found out that you're still here. He seems to have got it on the phone—'

'I heard him, under his window,' said Bunter, nodding his fat head. 'The pater rang up, and I tried to shut him off, but it was no go. He rang up again and got Quelch! I say, you fellows, think Quelch will be looking for me, now he knows?'

'Think so!' howled Johnny Bull. 'You dithering duffer, Quelch will be going over Greyfriars with a fine comb now, till he combs you out.'

'He won't leave a jolly old stone unturned,' said Bob. 'For goodness sake, Bunter, get out while the going's still good.'

'If you think I'm going home to sweep out that grocer's shop, Bob Cherry—'

'You can't keep this up, now Quelch knows, image.'

'Well, Quelch doesn't know a lot,' argued Bunter. 'Suppose he does look for me. I don't care, so long as he doesn't look for Sam Ram Jam. He, he, he.'

'You fat, frabjous, frumptious—'

'Oh, draw it mild,' said Bunter. 'It's all right, you fellows. You needn't get the wind up. Quelch couldn't guess—'

'He will guess fast enough if he hears you speaking English with your own squeak!' growled Johnny Bull.

'Well, he jolly well won't!' said Bunter. 'Think I'm a fool?'

'Yes, rather!' answered five fellows, all at once.

'Yah! Now look here, you chaps, we've got to fix up about my being unable to travel this afternoon. After dinner—'

'If you've got as much sense as a bunny rabbit, you'll cut before tiffin,' said Nugent.

'I'll watch it! After dinner I'll have that chill,' said Bunter. 'Suppose it's been coming on ever since I had that ducking yesterday, see: and this afternoon it comes on bad. You'll come up to your study. Wharton, and find me with my leg stuck up over a chair, too stiff to move—absolutely stiff with plumbago—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Mind, I think pneumonia might be better,' said Bunter. 'Anyhow, I'm going to have a bad leg, and can't travel. You can explain to Quelch how awfully bad my leg is, Cherry, and—'

'You can tell Quelch your own whoppers, you fat villain.'

'Look here, Bob Cherry, if you're going to let a fellow down, after all I've done for you—'

'Come round that corner, Bunter,' said Bob. 'I want to lend you something.'

'Beast!'

Billy Bunter was not likely to go round that corner again for another loan from Bob Cherry! He surveyed the Famous Five with an indignant blink.

'Now, look here, Bunter,' said Harry.

'You jolly well look here,' retorted Bunter. 'I'm not going home to be bunged into that grocer's shop. That's fixed, like the laws of the Swedes and Nasturtiums, as I said before.'

I'm sticking on here, and chance it, and you fellows have jolly well got to keep it dark, and back me up, and—'

'Shut up!' breathed Bob Cherry, hastily, as an angular figure emerged from the House, and came along the path under the windows, towards the corner where the juniors were standing.

'Shan't!' retorted Bunter. 'I can jolly well tell you—'

'Hush!' breathed Harry.

'Quiet!' gasped Johnny Bull.

'Shan't! I can jolly well tell you—'

'Quelch, you fat ass!' hissed Bob. 'Shut up or he'll hear you.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

Little as shutting up was in Billy Bunter's line, he did shut up, like an oyster, as he blinked round at the approaching Remove master. Certainly, if Quelch had heard Sam Ram Jam speaking English in his natural voice, he would not have had very far to look for William George Bunter!

'Jolly weather for cricket this afternoon,' said Bob Cherry, rather loudly, for Quelch's benefit as he drew near.

'Topping!' agreed Harry Wharton.

'The topfulness is terrific.'

Cricket talk was all Quelch heard as he came up. The juniors were anxious for him to pass on. But he did not pass on. He stopped to speak.

There was a moment of dread. Now that Quelch was aware that Billy Bunter was still somewhere in the school, the peril of the gimlet-eyes was greater than ever. And Quelch's brow wore a frown. But there was relief the next moment. That frown relaxed, as Quelch glanced at Sam Ram Jam, and his voice was quite kindly as he spoke.

'Wharton!'

'Yes, sir,' murmured Harry.

'You will see that your friend Sam Ram Jam does not lose his train today. You had better go to the station with him.'

'Oh! Yes! Certainly, sir.'

'If you would like to stay to lunch, Sam Ram Jam, Wharton will see you off at the station afterwards.'

'Ooh pooky sandy bang wang,' came the reply in the throaty voice of Sam Ram Jam. The fat Owl was on his guard.

Mr. Quelch smiled.

'What does he say, Hurree Singh?' he asked.

'The esteemed Sam Ram Jam would like to stay to lunch, sir!' murmured the nabob of Bhanipur.

'Very good! By all means,' said Mr. Quelch. 'Wharton! I am now looking for Bunter, and I have requested the prefects to make a search in the House for him. If you should see anything of the foolish boy, kindly notify me at once.'

Fortunately, Mr. Quelch did not wait for a reply to that.

He walked on, and turned the corner of the House, disappearing from sight.

The Famous Five exchanged eloquent looks. Certainly they had 'seen something' of Bunter—more than they wanted, in fact. But notifying Quelch was quite another matter! They were silent, lest Quelch should still be within hearing. But Billy Bunter was never silent for long.

'I say, you fellows—!' he recommenced.

Bob Cherry made him a frantic sign to be silent. But it was too late! There was a rapid footstep at the corner and Quelch reappeared.

'BUNTER!'

It was almost a roar.

Six pairs of startled eyes shot round to Quelch. The Co. had doubted whether he was yet out of hearing. That doubt had been well-founded. Quelch's ears were as sharp as his gimlet-eyes. Evidently, that fat squeak had reached them.

Quelch came back round that corner almost with a bound. He thundered the name of Bunter as he came.

He had started out to look for Bunter. That was unnecessary now. The fat familiar voice floating round the corner after him indicated that the missing Owl was at hand.

Quelch had walked round that corner at the leisurely pace suited to a middle-aged form-master. He came back round it like a young and active kangaroo.

Harry Wharton and Co. stood dumb. Billy Bunter quaked—in silence. Quelch swept up like a thunderstorm.

Then he stopped: and the wrath in his speaking countenance changed to an expression of utter bewilderment.

He stared at the group of juniors.

He had heard Bunter's voice. That fat voice was familiar to his ears, and he had heard it—he was sure that he had heard it. He had not seen Bunter—but he had undoubtedly heard him: so Bunter was there—he must be there—he had to be there! Only—he was not there! Five boys of his form were there, with their Oriental visitor, Sam Ram Jam. Of Bunter, whose voice he was certain he had heard, there was no visible sign.

'Bless my soul!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch, blankly.

He stared at the juniors. He stared round the quad.

He stared hither and thither, up and down and round about. But he failed to see Bunter.

'Wharton!' Quelch almost gasped.

'Yes, sir,' breathed Harry.

'Where is Bunter? I was assured that he was here, but—but—but I do not see him! Where is Bunter?'

'Bunter, sir? Did—did you say Bunter, sir?' stammered the captain of the Remove.

'I did. Wharton. I heard his voice—'

'His—his voice. sir?'

'I am sure of it! Where is he? A moment ago—hardly more than a moment ago—I heard Bunter speaking! I had no doubt that he was here—on this spot! Yet he does not seem to be here! It is most extraordinary.'

In amazement, Mr. Quelch scanned the adjacent quad.

He had heard Bunter—he was assured of it. His return to the spot had been so swift, that the speaker had had no time to cut and run. Yet he was not there!

He scanned and scanned. Six fellows were under his eyes: Wharton, Nugent, Bull, Cherry, Hurree Singh, and Sam Ram Jam. Farther off, he could see a good many others—Redwing, Squiff, Peter Todd, Tom Dutton, Mark Linley, of the Remove: Hobson of the Shell: Coker and Potter and Greene of the Fifth: Wingate and Loder of the Sixth: Nugent minor of the Second, Tubb of the Third, all in various directions. He scanned them all. But he failed to spot Billy Bunter among them.

It was, as he had said, most extraordinary!

Unless his ears, usually very reliable, had deceived him, he had heard Bunter's voice. But if Bunter had been there, he seemed, like Mercury in the *Æneid*, to have dissolved into thin air! He was, at all events, not to be seen!

'Bless my soul!' repeated Mr. Quelch, in bewilderment. Six fellows were dumb.

'This—this—this is most extraordinary! I can scarcely have been mistaken—I—I was sure that I heard Bunter speaking! That he is still somewhere in the school is certain, and I was sure that I heard his voice—it is very extraordinary! Can any of you see Bunter?'

That was not an easy question to answer for fellows who did not share Billy Bunter's indifference to veracity. But the quick-witted nabob solved the difficulty. He moved so that his back was to Sam Ram Jam: after which, he certainly could not see Bunter!

'The seefulness is not great, sir!' he murmured.

Harry Wharton, at once taking his cue from the nabob, turned his back to Sam Ram Jam: and scanned the quad in every other direction!

'I can't see anything of him, sir,' he said.

Bob Cherry, Johnny Bull, and Frank Nugent, playing up automatically, as it were, all turned their backs on the fat Owl, and answered together:

'I don't see him, sir.'

'Can't see anything of Bunter, sir.'

'Not a sign of him, sir, that I can see.'

'Most extraordinary!' said Mr. Quelch. He scanned the landscape again, and shook a puzzled head. 'I—I certainly thought—I fancied at least—I was sure—but as Bunter is not here, I must have been mistaken.'

With that, to the immense relief of the juniors, Mr. Quelch walked away: an extremely puzzled man. 'Oh, crikey!' breathed Billy Bunter.

'Oh, suffering cats and crocodiles!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'Come on, you chaps, let's have a trot round till tiffin.'

'I say, you fellows—!' squeaked Bunter.

But he squeaked in vain. Conversation with Billy Bunter, never very attractive, was altogether too perilous, with Quelch anywhere about. The chums of the Remove departed at a trot: and the fat Owl was left to waste his sweetness on the desert air!

CHAPTER 29

ANOTHER GOOD TURN

BILLY BUNTER grinned.

He was amused.

After dinner, the fat Owl was reposing his plump person in the armchair in No. 1 Study. Harry Wharton and Co. that afternoon, were thinking chiefly of cricket: and, having lost sight of Sam Ram Jam, were quite content to go on losing sight of him. Bob Cherry had his lines to write for Quelch, and his friends had gone up to No. 13 with him to see him started on them. Billy Bunter had No. 1 Study all to himself.

Sprawling in the armchair, Bunter was thinking over his plans for the afternoon. He was sticking on: that was settled: the grocer's shop at Redgate was as unattractive as ever. Having decided upon a chill, due to that ducking in the Sark, and a bad leg which made him unable to travel, he had to consider just when that chill had better develop. In the meantime, he was quite at his fat ease: only feeling the need of something sticky in the way of toffee or caramels to keep him company.

It was the sound of voices in the passage outside that caused a fat grin to spread over his face. The Bounder's rather strident voice came to his fat ears through the door. 'Seen anything of Bunter?'

'Oh, bother Bunter!' came Harry Wharton's reply. 'Where can the fat ass be parking himself, if he's still here?'

'The wherefulness is terrific.'

'Think Quelch was mistaken about it?'

'Quelch doesn't make a lot of mistakes.'

It was quite amusing to Bunter, as he listened in. All over the Remove, fellows were asking one another whether they had seen anything of Bunter. According to Quelch, he was still in the school, though nobody knew where! Naturally, Harry Wharton and Co., among other fellows, were asked whether they had seen anything of him: questions that it was not easy for them to answer. They certainly could not say that they hadn't! On the other hand, they could not admit that they had! So their replies had to be very diplomatic, if not exactly evasive.

'You fellows think he's still here?' went on the Bounder's voice.

'Well, Quelch thinks so!' It was Nugent who replied. 'But how could he be keeping dark all this while?'

'He's keeping dark all right!' came a grunt from Johnny Bull.

'I don't see how.'

'The howfulness is terrific.'

'I looked for him all over the shop before tiffin. Quelch has been on the prowl for him—I believe he's still on it. Some of the prefects have been rooting about, too. Not a sign of him anywhere. I should think Quelch had dreamed it, only tuck missing from the studies looks like Bunter.'

'Beast!' murmured the fat inhabitant of the armchair in No. 1 Study, as he heard that.

'It does!' said Harry Wharton.

'But it may be some other fellows, as I thought at first.' The Bounder, evidently, was in doubt. 'I simply can't see how the fat villain could keep dark all this while, if he's here. Do you?'

'Oh, bother him!' said Harry Wharton. 'What have you got there, Smithy?'

Billy Bunter grinned again, as Harry Wharton asked a question in his turn. He could guess that the captain of the Remove was anxious to change the subject.

'Only a parcel from home,' was the Bounder's answer.

'Only!' said Nugent. 'Lucky man!'

In No. 1 Study, Billy Bunter sat up and took notice.

Bunter was interested in parcels from home: especially Smithy's, which were always ample and very attractive. Apparently the Bounder was taking that parcel up to his study, when he stopped to speak to the juniors in the passage.

'Spread in my study, after the cricket, if you fellows care to come.'

'Good egg: we'll come.'

'I can't make it out about Bunter—'

'Oh, blow Bunter! Let's get down and change.'

'Okay! Wait a tick while I land this in my study.' Footsteps receded up the passage. Smithy ad gone to No. 4, to land his parcel there. Then Bunter heard Harry Wharton's voice again, in a lower key.

'Bother that fat ass! We can't say we haven't seen him, and we can't say we have. Know where he is now?'

Grunt, from Johnny Bull.

'Somewhere where there's something to eat, or an armchair to sprawl in,' he snorted.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter.

'Let's hope he'll have sense enough to cut while we're at cricket.'

'I've a jolly good mind to start him with my boot! The fat chump—'

'Here comes Smithy!'

The voices broke off. Footsteps faded away towards the stairs.

Billy Bunter's fat grin widened.

They had gone down, to change for cricket. Smithy had left that 'parcel from home' in his study! There would be good things in that parcel—sticky things for which the fat Owl's fat soul yearned! Billy Bunter's thoughts dwelt on that parcel. It was sheer luck, from Bunter's point of view, that he had overheard that talk in the passage.

He waited a few minutes, to make sure that the coast was clear. Then he heaved his weight out of the armchair, and rolled across to the door.

He blinked cautiously into the passage. It was necessary to be cautious. Sam Ram Jam was supposed to be a visitor in the school: but it was quite certain that Smithy would not have stood on ceremony with that visitor, if he had caught him 'snooping' tuck in No. 4.

But the coast was clear. The passage was deserted. Few fellows were likely to be up in the studies on a summer's afternoon which was also a half-holiday. As a matter of fact, only one Remove fellow was up in the studies—Bob Cherry, hurrying through the lines that had to be delivered to Quelch before he could join his friends. But the door of No. 13 was closed, and the fat Owl was unaware of Bob's activities in that study.

Having blinked this way and that way, and ascertained that nobody was about, Billy Bunter rolled out of No. 1. He rolled up the passage to No. 4.

His fat hand clutched the door-handle. There was eager anticipation in the fat face under the Oriental complexion. A moment more, and Sam Ram Jam would have been inside Smithy's study, and Smithy's parcel from home would have been at the mercy of William George Bunter.

But at that precise moment the door of No. 13, up the passage, opened. Bob Cherry came out, with a sheaf of impot paper in his hand. Bob had finished his lines, and was in a hurry to get them down to Quelch, and get out to the cricket. But as he emerged from No. 13, his eyes fell on Sam Ram Jam pushing open the door of No. 4!

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' roared Bob.

Billy Bunter jumped.

'Oh!' he gasped.

He spun round in Smithy's doorway.

Bob Cherry came down the passage at a run. He was in a hurry to get rid of those lines, and join his friends. But he stopped as he reached No. 4.

'You fat villain!' he roared.

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'What are you up to in Smithy's study?'

'Oh! Nothing! I—I was only just looking in—I—I mean, I—I wasn't looking in—I—I mean—!' stuttered Bunter.

'I know what you mean,' agreed Bob. 'You fat, footling octopus, I'll jolly well—'

'You keep off, you beast!' gasped Bunter. 'Didn't I do you a jolly good turn? Didn't I—?'

'So you did!' said Bob. 'And you told me that one good turn deserves another.'

'I should jolly well think so—!'

'So I'm going to do you a good turn,' said Bob.

'That's right, old chap! One good turn deserves another. You just cut off—'

'I'm going to do you that good turn first! I'm going to give you something that you really want—and that's a tip about snooping in the studies!'

'I—I say, old chap—'

Bob glanced up and down the passage.

'There's nobody here to see me booting a jolly old visitor,' he said. 'Turn round, Bunter.'

'Beast! You jolly well keep off! Ow! Leggo my neck—yow—ow! Will you leggo my neck?'

Wow!' Billy Bunter yelled, as a sinewy grasp on the back of a fat neck slewed him round.

He yelled in dread anticipation. The next moment that dread anticipation was realized.

Thud!

'Wow! Ow! Oh! Ow! Wow!' Thud!

'Yarooooh!'

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Billy Bunter forgot all about that parcel in Smithy's study. He flew up the Remove passage, yelling. After him flew Bob Cherry, letting out one foot after the other, dribbling the fat Owl to the end of the passage. There, the fat Owl flew up the box-room stair, bolted into the box-room, and slammed the door.

Bob Cherry, having done Bunter that good turn, went cheerily on his way: for a long time Billy Bunter spluttered for breath, and wriggled like an eel, without feeling the smallest spot of gratitude for that good turn!



CHAPTER 30

A SURPRISING DISCOVERY

'OH!' gasped Billy Bunter.

He was alarmed.

And he had reason to be!

While Harry Wharton and Co. were enjoying life, in their own way, on the cricket-field. Billy Bunter, alias Sam Ram Jam, was also enjoying it, in quite another way. He was enjoying it to such an extent that he almost forgot the twinges left in his plump person by Bob Cherry's good turn.

Standing by the table in No. 4 Study, the fat Owl was helping himself to the 'parcel from home'. Not till he was quite, quite sure that Bob had gone down to the cricket, did Bunter venture back to the Remove studies. But he ventured at last, and the coast was clear. Now he was busy in Smithy's study.

His fat face beamed under its Oriental complexion over that parcel. There were all sorts of good things in it: a cake, dough-nuts, meringues, jellies: all sorts of good things. And all was grist that came to Billy Bunter's mill. The fact that the parcel was Smithy's was a trifle light as air to the voracious Owl. He was not likely to remember 'meum' and 'tuum' with those delightful things spread out under his eyes and his spectacles. He concentrated on parking them, one after another, inside his extensive circumference.

He was happy, and shiny and sticky, and feeling quite secure.

Smithy, no doubt, would fly into one of his tempers, when he came back to his study, and discovered what had happened to his parcel from home. He might guess that Bunter had been there. But he would never guess that Sam Ram Jam had been there! How could he? It was as safe as houses—or was it?

Footsteps stopping at the door of No. 4. warned the fat depredator that it was not quite so safe and secure as he had supposed.

Billy Bunter's eyes and spectacles shot round to the door in alarm.

It couldn't be Smithy—Smithy was playing cricket! But if it was Smithy—'

There was a hand on the door-handle outside!

Billy Bunter made one frantic jump, to get behind the door as it opened. It was his one chance! If it were Smithy—!

Bunter's movements generally resembled those of the tortoise. On this occasion he understudied the hare! And he was just in time—backing breathlessly against the wall, as the door opened.

That door did not open in the usual way. It was flung open with a crash: obviously by a fellow in a bad temper. Crashing wide open, it tapped on a little fat nose. It tapped rather hard!

But Billy Bunter did not dare to squeak.

It was Smithy coming in—only too evidently in one of his tempers, for some reason unknown to Bunter. If he was in a bad temper already, what was he going to be like when he saw what had happened to his parcel from home? The fat Owl fairly cringed behind the door.

He could only hope that Smithy would leave that door open, keeping him out of sight! For if Smithy found him there, it was absolutely certain that Sam Ram Jam's Oriental complexion would not save Billy Bunter!

The Bouncer tramped, or rather stamped, into the study.

Undoubtedly, he was in a very disgruntled temper. It was the glorious uncertainty of the game of cricket that was the cause. Smithy had lost his wicket unexpectedly early in the innings. He had gone in to make fifty at least: and Hobson of the Shell had dismissed him for five. The Bouncer was a bad loser. Bob Cherry and Frank Nugent had also had bad luck at the wickets, taking it as all in the day's work. Smithy couldn't take it the same way. It was the most disgruntled fellow at Greyfriars who came stamping into No. 4 Study. Bunter, behind the door, heard him kick a chair out of the way. Then he heard a sudden exclamation: or rather, a roar!

'What's this? Who's been here?'

A fat Owl trembled behind the door.

The Bouncer was staring at the havoc on his study table. Bunter could not see him: but he could guess what his expression was like.

'It's Bunter! That fat swab's still about, as Quelch said! He's been here! Why, I'll smash him—I'll pulverize him—I'll burst him all over the place—I'll—I'll—' Billy Bunter hardly breathed. If only Smithy left that door open, hiding him from view—!

He heard Smithy, after staring at the wreck of his parcel from home on the table, tramp back to the doorway. If only he was going—if only a fat depredator had a chance of dodging out of that study undetected—!

But Smithy was not going. He was staring up and down the passage from the doorway, no doubt for a sign of the recent raider. But the Remove passage was quite uninhabited. Obviously, Smithy had no idea—as yet—that the tuck-raider was still in the study. If only he went—!

He did not go. Having stared up and down the passage, he turned back into the room.

Bunter heard his voice again:

'Must have been Bunter, if he's still here! But is he still here, or was Quelch talking out of his hat? Nobody's seen him, at any rate. But if it was somebody else, who was it? By gum, I'll find out, and give him jip!'

Bunter heard a hand placed on the door-handle, on the further side of the door. His fat heart almost died within him. Smithy was going to slam the door shut! And then—!

In another instant, Sam Ram Jam would have been revealed! In sheer desperation, the fat Owl slammed the door at Vernon-Smith, with all the force he could muster.

Crash!

Smith hardly knew what was happening. It seemed to him, for a moment, like an earthquake. The door, hurled at him by the desperate Owl, crashed on him, and knocked him fairly spinning.

Bump!

'Oh! Oh, gad! Oh!'

The Bounder sprawled headlong on his own expensive study carpet. He sprawled dizzy and dazed. A fat figure whipped past the door and ran.

Smithy's eyes popped at it, as it whizzed through the doorway.

He could hardly believe those eyes.

It was the tuck-raider, who had been hidden behind the door. But it was not—to all appearances, at least—Bunter. Neither was it some other Remove fellow who had taken up Bunter's manners and customs. It was the dark-skinned foreigner who had visited Harry Wharton and Co. at the school. It was Sam Ram Jam!

That exotic figure vanished the next moment. A patter of racing feet died away down the Remove passage.

Vernon-Smith sat up on the carpet, dizzily.

He had had a hard knock as the door slammed on him, and another as he landed on the floor. He had several distinct aches and pains. He sat and rubbed an elbow with one hand, and a knee with the other. And his temper was at boiling-point!

'That nigger!' he gasped.

He understood now. He had discovered the mysterious tuck-raider. It was not Bunter! It was Sam Ram Jam! He would never have dreamed of suspecting him. But he could believe the evidence of his own eyes. It was Sam Ram Jam who had banged the door at him, whizzed out of the study, and fled—with a good half of Smithy's parcel from home in his Oriental inside!

The Bounder picked himself up. The expression on his face was quite deadly. He tramped out of the study, with a twinge in his knee as he went. There was no sign of Sam Ram Jam in the passage. No doubt that exotic youth was putting the greatest possible distance, in the shortest possible time, between himself and Smithy. But Smithy knew whom to look for now: and he was going to look for him: and when he found him, 'jip' was going to be the next item on the programme. Smithy looked into No. 1 Study, and found it empty. Sam Ram Jam was probably very much farther off, by that time. He tramped down the stairs, and out of the House.

'Seen that nigger?' he called to Skinner, in the quad. 'That pal of Wharton's they call Sam Ram Jam?'

'Yes, he came out a few minutes ago. Looked in a hurry.'

'Where is he now?'

'He cut across the quad: haven't seen him since.'

The Bounder tramped away across the quad. Mr. Quelch, who was walking in the quadrangle, with an eye open for Billy Bunter, gave him a glance of disapproval. Quelch did not approve of angry faces. Headless of Quelch and disapproving glances, the angry Bounder tramped on, to hunt for Sam Ram Jam, quite determined not to give up the hunt till he had found him, and administered 'jip' in ample measure. There was no sign of him in the quad, and the Bounder called out to Snoop, who was lounging by the elms.

'Seen that nigger, Sam Ram Jam?'

'Yes: he's just gone round the gym. What's up?' asked Snoop. 'He looked as if somebody was after him.'

'I am!' snarled the Bounder. 'I'm going to smash him!'

'But what—?'

Without answering again, the Bounder hurried on. He did not know, or perhaps did not care, that his words had reached majestic ears. Mr. Quelch stared after him with a frown. 'Vernon-Smith!' he rapped. Smithy disappeared round the gym. 'Upon my word!' murmured Mr. Quelch. And with thunder in his brow, the Remove master walked after Smithy.

CHAPTER 31

ALL UP!

'OH, crikey!' breathed Billy Bunter.

His fat face registered alarm under its Oriental complexion. His fat ears pricked up at the sound of a footstep.

A footstep, at that moment, was as startling to Billy Bunter, as the foot-print in the sand to Robinson Crusoe.

He was sitting on the flat rim of the water-butt behind Gosling's wood-shed: where, the previous evening, he had waited for Bob Cherry. In that remote and secluded spot, he hoped that he was secure. Only too well he knew what to expect from Smithy, after banging him over with the door of his own study. Sam Ram Jam had hunted cover, with a speed very unusual for Billy Bunter. He had no doubt that Smithy would be looking for him. The pressing need, at the moment, was to keep out of Smithy's way: and surely Smithy would never think of looking behind the wood-shed at the corner of the kitchen gardens! Bunter, at all events, hoped that he wouldn't!

He sat on the edge of the butt, because there was nothing else at hand on which to sit. He watched the corner of the wood-shed with anxious eyes, and listened with apprehensive fat ears.

Not for the first time in his fat career, Billy Bunter wished that he had resisted the lure of another fellow's tuck. True, Smithy had not dreamed of guessing the real identity of the tuck-raider. That secret was still safe. But a booting for Sam Ram Jam was a booting for Billy Bunter: and the prospect was painful.

A footstep came to his anxiously listening ears.

It was coming round the wood-shed!

Perhaps it was only Gosling, rooting about for something! Bunter, his fat heart palpitating, hoped fervently that it was only Gosling!

It was a delusive hope!

A head appeared round the corner: two angry, glinting eyes glanced along the back of the wood-shed. Those angry eyes fixed on a fat figure sitting on the rim of the water-butt. Then there was a shout:

'Oh! There you are!'

The Bounder came up with a rush.

There was no escape for the hapless Owl. He had been tracked to his lair, and in a moment more, the Bounder's grasp was on him.

'Now, you black sweep—you coffee-coloured pilfer—now you've got it coming— If I don't boot you all over the shop—'

The fat Owl struggled in that angry grasp, almost toppling over into the water-butt. A fat elbow dipped in water, and there was a yell of alarm.

'Ow! Leggo! Stoppit!' Sam Ram Jam forgot, at that moment of wild alarm, that he could not speak English! 'Ow! Leggo, you beast, or you'll have me in! Will you leggo?'

'Why, what—' Smithy stared, at that unexpected flow of English from a foreigner who could not speak the language.

'Oooh!' gasped Bunter, frantically clutching the edge of the butt, and balancing very precariously. 'Keep off, you beast!'

'You spoofing black swab—'

'Leggo!'

'So you can speak English, if you like,' exclaimed Smithy.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. He remembered—a little too late! 'Oh! No! I—I can't speak English—not a syllable—'

'Wha—a—t?'

'Ook wook pooky slam bang!' gasped Bunter. 'Arley barley boo! Leggo, Smithy, you beast! I—I—I mean, ooky pooky wang slang rummy tummy snoot— Leggo!' The fat Owl involuntarily reverted to his native language again, as he sagged over the water in the butt.

'Leggo, Smithy, you beast! You'll have me in if you don't leggo!'

'Just what I'm going to do, you spoofing black rascal! I'm going to duck your head in that butt—'

'Yaroooooh! '

Splash!

'Urrrrggh! '

Billy Bunter struggled frantically. Not only did he not want his fat head ducked, but he remembered that happening in the Sark. His Oriental complexion was in danger! But he struggled in vain, in the Bounder's sinewy grasp. The red fez floated away, as his head was ducked deep in the water-butt. Bubbles and squeaks floated up.

Up came a fat face, streaming with water. Bunter gurgled wildly.

'That's for snooping my parcel,' said Smithy. 'Gurrrrggh! '

'And this is for banging me over in my study—'

Splash!

Once more the fat head went under. Bubbles and squeaks floated up again. Little fat legs kicked out frantically.

Up came the fat face again, streaming. 'One more for luck!' grinned the Bounder.

Splash!

'Urrrrggh!'

Even Smithy seemed to think that that was enough.

The fat Owl, drenched and dripping, was allowed to slip down to the ground, where he sat gurgling for breath, leaning back against the water-butt, and dabbing wildly at a streaming fat face. The Bounder drew back his foot.

'Now get up, you spoofing, coffee-coloured sweep—' he snapped.

'Gurrrrggh!'

'I'm going to boot you—'

'Ow! Keep off, you beast!' yelled Bunter.

There was something familiar in that fat voice, that caused the Bounder to stare at him hard. His stare became a fixed gaze of utter amazement, as if he could not believe what he saw: as, indeed, he hardly could. He had been surprised to hear Sam Ram Jam speaking English. But he was not merely surprised, he was quite dumbfounded, to see Sam Ram Jam's Oriental complexion coming off! Between the streaming water, and the fat Owl's frantic dabbing, that complexion was disappearing! It was not a dark-skinned Oriental face at which the amazed Bounder was staring. It was a grubby face that was growing vaguely familiar.

'Who—what—who—what?' Smithy fairly stuttered. 'What the dickens—what's this game? You're not black at all— It's paint—'

'Urrrrggh! '

'It's paint, and it's coming off!' gasped Smithy. 'Who are you? What—'

'Oh, crikey! Oooogh! I say—woogh!'

'Paint—!'

A sharp voice interrupted. 'Vernon-Smith!'

Neither Smithy nor Bunter had heard, or heeded, footsteps coming round the wood-shed in those exciting moments. But they heard, and heeded, the sharp voice that rapped, as Mr. Quelch came striding into view. Quelch's brows were knitted in a formidable frown.

'Vernon-Smith!' He thundered.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' gasped the Bounder.

'I heard what you said to Snoop, Vernon-Smith, and if—' Quelch broke off, as his eyes fell on the drenched figure squatting against the water-butt. 'What—what is this? Did this boy fall into the butt? Or did you—upon my word! If you have done this, Vernon-Smith, to a visitor at the school—a foreign youth who cannot even speak our language—'

'He can speak English if he wants to, and he's no more foreign than I am,' gasped Smithy.

'He's not black—it's only make-up—'

'What?'

'Look at him—the colour's coming off—'

Two fat hands shot up to a fat face. They spread out and covered that fat face from view. Quelch stared blankly. But those outspread paws did not wholly screen the terrified fat face. Sufficient was left on view, for the gimlet-eyes. That Oriental complexion was coming off in streaks and patches.

'Bless my soul!' said Mr. Quelch, almost faintly. 'What—what does this mean, boy?'

'Oh, crikey!'

'If you can speak English, answer me—'

'I—I—I can't! Not a word—'

'Wha—a—at?'

'I—I—I mean, wooky pooky coo wang bang—'

'Upon my word! There is something familiar about this boy—something— Boy! Remove your hands at once, and let me see your face—'

And as that command was not immediately obeyed, Quelch strode at the fat junior, stooped, and jerked the fat hands away from the fat face. Then the gimlet-eyes almost bored into that plump countenance.

It was smudgy and grubby: but it was no longer Oriental. It was so smudgy, and so grubby, that it was not easily recognizable. Slowly—only very slowly—it dawned on Quelch, and on the staring Bounder. Slowly, but surely: and then there was something like a thunderclap!

'BUNTER!'

The game was up!

CHAPTER 32

CALLED TO ACCOUNT

'WHARTON—'

'Yes, Wingate.'

'You're wanted—Quelch's study.'

'Oh!'

'Cherry, Bull, Nugent, Hurree Singh, you're to go with Wharton.'

'Oh, scissors!'

'I say, Wingate, we're playing cricket, you know!' remonstrated Bob Cherry.

'You young ass, cut off.'

The Famous Five exchanged startled and dismayed glances. Other fellows at the pavilion looked on curiously. The innings, in which Smithy had had such bad luck, was nearing its end. Harry Wharton and Co. were all out: but Tom Brown and Squiff were at the wickets: and New Zealand and Australia between them were still keeping Hobson and Co. of the Shell busy. The Famous Five, watching that last stand of Remove batsmen, had wholly, completely, and utterly, forgotten the fat existence of such a person as William George Bunter: and, in fact, of such a person as Henry Samuel Quelch! Now they were suddenly and unexpectedly reminded of both—when Wingate of the Sixth came down to Little Side to summon them to their form-master's study!

'Is—is anything up, Wingate?' asked Harry. It was rather a superfluous question. Only too clearly, something was 'up', and the Co. could not help guessing that it was something in connexion with the egregious Owl of the Remove.

'Yes: cut off!'

'But what—?' asked Nugent.

'It's about Bunter—!'

'Bunter!' repeated Bob. 'Is—is—is Bunter really still about the place, Wingate? Quelch was saying so this morning—'

'He's in Quelch's study now.'

'Oh, crumbs!'

'And Quelch wants the lot of you. Cut off at once.' Wingate walked away: leaving the Famous Five gazing at one another. They forgot even the strenuous last stand that Tom Brown and Squiff were making at the wickets. Slowly, in silence, they moved off.

'What's up, you chaps?' asked Peter Todd, as they went. 'Our number!' grunted Johnny Bull.

Slowly, but inevitably, the Famous Five walked away to the House. If Bunter, as Wingate said, was in Quelch's study, it was clear that all was up: and that it only remained to face the music now that they were called to account.

'That fat chump—!' muttered Nugent.

'It's come out, I suppose,' said Bob. 'It was bound to.'

'I told you so!' remarked Johnny Bull, sententiously.

'Fathead!'

'Well, you know I told you so—'

'We're for it!' said Harry.

'What cannot be cured must go longest to the well, as the English proverb remarks,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'But the whopfulness will probably be terrific. The esteemed Quelch will be infuriated.'

No member of the Co. doubted that! The majestic leg of Henry Samuel Quelch was not to be pulled with impunity! The vials of wrath were ready to pour! Five faces were very serious, indeed solemn, as they arrived at Mr. Quelch's study door. No Remove fellow was ever keen to enter that apartment: but never, never had the Famous Five been so reluctant to do so. But it had to be: and Harry Wharton tapped at the door, and they marched sadly in.

Glinting gimlet-eyes scanned them as they entered.

Rhadamanthus of old could scarcely have looked quite as Rhadamanthine as Mr. Quelch at that moment. Billy Bunter blinked at them with a dismal blink. In less serious circumstances, they could hardly have helped grinning at the fat Owl's aspect. Bunter, evidently, had had a wash—or half a wash! His fat face was smeared and smudgy. He had rubbed it dry: and only smears and smudges remained of the Oriental complexion of Sam Ram Jam. He looked a dismal, doleful, disconsolate, dilapidated object. But the hapless five did not feel like grinning. Quelch's look did not encourage merriment.

'You sent for us, sir!' murmured Harry Wharton.

'Here is Bunter!' said Mr. Quelch, in a deep, deep voice. 'I was already aware that he had remained in the school surreptitiously. I have now learned by what means he evaded detection. I cannot doubt that you—all of you—were concerned in this! Answer me—yes or no?'

There was only one answer that the juniors could make to that.

'Yes, sir.'

'I—I say, you fellows,' mumbled Bunter. 'I—I haven't said anything—not a word about you—'

'You may be silent, Bunter.'

'Yes, sir! But—'

'Silence! You have all taken part in assisting Bunter in this extraordinary, this impertinent imposture. Doubtless you are aware that your punishment will be very severe.'

Five hapless juniors were only too well aware of that!

They stood silent.

'I am about to take Bunter to his head-master,' continued Mr. Quelch. 'Dr. Locke will deal with him. He will be flogged—'

'Oh, crikey!'

'I shall request the head-master to administer the severest possible punishment for this impertinent, this fantastic imposture—'

'Oh, lor!'

'You will wait here until I return,' said Mr. Quelch. 'I shall then deal with you as you are doubtless fully aware that you deserve.'

'It—it was really only a lark, sir,' ventured Bob Cherry. Two gimlet-eyes glinted at him.

'What did you say, Cherry?'

'I—I—I said it was—was only a lark, sir,' stammered Bob.

'I have been deluded—imposed upon—and you are pleased to describe that as a "lark"!'

said Mr. Quelch. 'You will find it a very serious matter, Cherry! You had better say no more. Bunter! Follow me—'

'Oh, crikey!'

A dismal Owl limped after Mr. Quelch as he strode out of the study. The Famous Five were left to wait their form-master's return. Bob gave an anticipatory wriggle. 'We've got it coming!' he remarked.

'Hard!' sighed Nugent.

'We shan't feel much like cricket when it's through!' said Harry. 'Bother that fat ass!'

'Bless him!'

'Blow him!'

'Blow everybody and everything!' sighed Bob. 'I hope Quelch isn't going to keep us waiting long! What a life!'

'Bunter will be going through it.'

'Poor old Bunter!' said Bob.

'Well, he's asked for it,' grunted Johnny Bull. 'So have we—'

'I told you—!'

'Shut UP!' roared Bob.

It was not a happy party that waited in Quelch's study!

And when, at last, a returning footstep was heard, the chums of the Remove exchanged melancholy glances, and braced themselves for what was to come!

CHAPTER 33

WHAT LUCK!

DR. LOCKE frowned.

There was a deep silence in the Head's study.

Mr. Quelch stood like a ramrod, with contracted brows.

Billy Bunter stood rather like a sagging sack, his fat knees knocking together.

He blinked dismally at Quelch, and read only doom in that grim face. He hardly dared blink at the Head. He was in that awful presence for judgment: and the chopper was about to come down! From the bottom of his fat heart, the unhappy Owl wished that he had never evolved that remarkable scheme for eluding the stem decree of the Roman parent at Bunter Villa. Even the grocer's shop at Redgate would have been better than this!

The Head seemed in no hurry to speak. He appeared to hesitate. Mr. Quelch's lips set harder. He could see no reason for hesitation or delay. He had explained the whole matter. It only remained for the Head to pass sentence. That sentence had to be severe. Quelch had been deluded: imposed upon: his leg had been pulled: he had been, as the juniors might have described it, made a monkey of, though Quelch himself would not have described it so! The severest punishment was hardly adequate. A flogging, even the 'sack' hardly met such a case, in Quelch's grim opinion. Yet the head-master sat silent, as if considering the matter. However, he spoke at last.

'Bunter!'

'Oh, lor!' I—I mean, yes, sir!' moaned Bunter.

'You must be aware, Bunter, that you merit the most condign punishment for having played this extraordinary, this impertinent, this fantastic trick on your form-master.'

'Oh! No, sir! I—I mean, yes, sir! I—I mean—oh, crikey!'

'Nevertheless—!' said Dr. Locke, slowly. Quelch breathed hard.

'Dr. Locke—!' he exclaimed.

'I am placed in a somewhat difficult position, Mr. Quelch. I fully agree with your view that this absurd boy merits the most severe punishment. Yet I cannot forget that only yesterday, when I was placed in a most unfortunate and indeed dangerous situation, this boy came to my help, and actually fell into the river in rendering me the aid I so badly needed.'

Quelch gave a little start. He had forgotten that incident. So, indeed, had Bunter.

Evidently, Dr. Locke remembered!

'In view of this,' went on the Head, 'while agreeing with every word you have said, Mr. Quelch, I would yet regard it as a personal favour to me, if you would consent to take a lenient view.'

The Head was always courteous and urbane. He left it to Quelch to decide. But a head-master's wish was law, all the same.

Mr. Quelch did not reply for a moment. Billy Bunter watched the varying expressions on his face, with his little round eyes almost popping through his big round spectacles. Was he getting off that flogging after all? Was he?

'As you wish, sir!' Quelch spoke at last. He seemed to choke a little. 'As you wish, certainly, sir.'

'Thank you, Mr. Quelch.'

'But—but—' Quelch choked a little again. 'But, sir, while I certainly consent, as you wish, to take a lenient view, surely some punishment—'

'Quite so!' said the Head. 'Bunter!'

'Oh,lor!'

'In the circumstances, Bunter, you will be dealt with leniently. But it is my duty to inflict some punishment, and I shall do so. I shall cancel your leave from school.'

'Eh?'

'You were granted a week's leave of absence from school,' said Dr. Locke. 'That is now cancelled, Bunter.' Bunter blinked at him!

'Mr. Quelch, will you kindly notify Mr. Bunter that his son's leave from school is cancelled, and that in no circumstances will Bunter be allowed a single day's leave during the present term.'

'Certainly, sir! But—'

'That, I think, will meet the case, if you agree, Mr. Quelch'

Quelch breathed hard. He breathed deep. But he nodded his head.

'As you wish, sir.'

'Very good!' said Dr. Locke. 'Bunter! You may go!' Bunter went!

He hardly waited to close the door before he chuckled with glee! In the course of his fat and fatuous career, quite a good many punishments had come Billy Bunter's way. He had never liked them! But for once, if for once only, the sentence fell upon happy fat ears! That week's leave was cancelled! He was not going to undergo the severe discipline mapped out by the Roman parent! The grocer's shop at Redgate faded away like some horrid vision!

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter.

And he rolled away—a happy Owl!

Mr. Quelch was not looking, by any means, so satisfied, when he emerged from the Head's presence. His eyes glinted under contracted brows as he made his way back to his own study. Bunter—except for the cancellation of that week's leave—had escaped. But five offenders remained to be dealt with. Five members of his form had aided and abetted the egregious fat junior in his trickery, 'making a monkey' of Henry Samuel Quelch: and with those offenders Quelch was in a mood to deal very faithfully!

Voices were audible in his study as he reached the door. 'Here he comes!'

'Brace up—we've got it coming now.'

'Well, I told you so—'

'Oh, shut up, Johnny.'

There was silence, as Quelch opened the door. He glanced at the five waiting juniors. They watched him, as he crossed to the table, and picked up a cane therefrom.

Cane in hand, he looked at them across the table.

Quelch's face was often grim. Never had the Famous Five seen it look grimmer than now. Yet he seemed in no haste to utter the fatal words 'Bend over!' Harry Wharton and Co. waited in silence. It had to come: and they wished that Quelch would get a move on and get it over. Yet the pause continued: the gimlet-eyes glinting at them across the table, the cane inactive in Quelch's hand. And their form-master's grim countenance was growing, perhaps, a little less grim.

Quelch was thinking! If Quelch was, as Billy Bunter often declared, a 'beast', at all events he was a just beast! Bunter, who was, so to speak, the head and front of the offending, had escaped. Was it quite just for punishment to fall upon lesser offenders, when the principal offender had escaped scot-free? Quelch decided that it was not! It cost him an effort. But he made the effort.

Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, Bob Cherry, Johnny Bull, Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, waited; quite unaware of what was passing in Quelch's mind. When, at length, he laid down the cane, they wondered what was coming next. What came next astonished them, when it came.

'You may go!'

For a moment they gazed at him, hardly believing their ears. Then there was a scamper from the study. They scampered into the quad.

'Oh, what luck!' gasped Bob Cherry. 'The luckfulness is terrific.'

'Come on,' said Harry Wharton. 'Cricket!'

Five happy juniors almost danced their way back to the cricket-field.

'I SAY, you fellows.'

Billy Bunter blinked into No. 1 Study, where five fellows were refreshing themselves with ginger-pop after the cricket. Harry Wharton and Co. had perhaps forgotten Bunter. Now that they were reminded of him, they rather expected to see him looking dolorous, after his interview with the Head. But it was not a dolorous Owl that blinked into the study.

There was no sign of Sam Ram Jam about him. Billy Bunter was himself again. Neither was there a sign of dolour. It was a cheerful Owl.

'Whopped?' asked Bob Cherry.

'He, he, he!' the fat Owl chuckled. 'No fear! He, he, he! The Old Boy let me off, except— he, he, he!'

'Except what?'

'He, he, he!' Bunter chuckled, and chuckled again. 'He, he, he! He's washed out my leave home— he, he, he! So that's all right! No grocer's shop for me— he, he, he! Right as rain! He, he, he! But—'

Apparently there was still a 'but'.

'But there's still that book!' went on Bunter. 'Quelch says I'm to hand in that book. That beastly book, you know! That's what I want to speak to you fellows about. There's jolly nearly a thousand lines in that book. How many are you fellows going to do for me?'

Bunter paused for a reply. He received no reply.

'You got whopped for helping me before,' he resumed. 'You'll have to be more careful this time. Mind, Quelch wants that book. I believe he's in a bad temper about something. He looked it! A thousand lines ain't much for the five of you, if you don't slack. Of course, I'll do some. Look here, suppose you do three hundred each, and I'll do the rest—'

Bob Cherry picked up a glass of foaming ginger-pop. 'Stand steady. Bunter,' he said.

'Eh? What for?'

'I'm going to give you another wash! Don't move!' Whether Bob really would have wasted good ginger-pop on another wash for Bunter, was perhaps doubtful. The fat Owl did not wait to ascertain. He did move—quite rapidly: in fact, a bounding kangaroo had nothing on Billy Bunter as he vanished from the doorway of No. 1 Study.

The next book in

THE BILLY BUNTER SERIES

will be

BILLY BUNTER'S TREASURE-HUNT