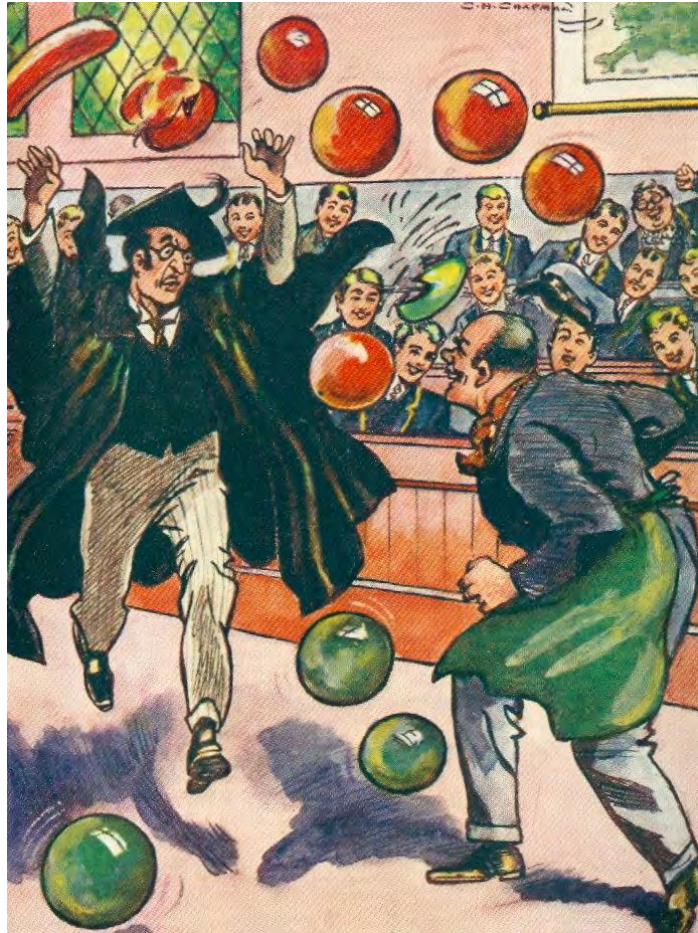


BUNTER THE VENTRILOQUIST



FRANK RICHARDS



'TAKE THEM AWAY!' THUNDERED MR. QUELCH

BUNTER THE VENTRILOQUIST

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Chapter 1

ORTHOGRAPHICAL!

'HENRY'S late!' remarked Bob Cherry.

'The later the better,' said Frank Nugent.

'The betterfulness is terrific!' agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

It was unusual for 'Henry' - otherwise Mr. Henry Samuel Quelch, master of the Greyfriars Remove - to be late for his form. Quelch, as a rule, was quite a whale on the punctuality which is said, proverbially, to be the politeness of princes.

But on this particular morning, 'Henry' undoubtedly was late.

He had let his form into the form-room as usual, and the Remove had taken their places. Then he had been called away to the telephone. No doubt he had expected to return in a few minutes. But more than a few had elapsed, and 'Henry' was still absent.

There was a buzz of cheery voices in the form-room.

Fellows keen on Latin, anxious to begin on construe, perhaps regretted Quelch's tardiness. But such fellows, if any, were few. Most of the Remove followed the example of the mice when the cat was away.

Some fellows sat on their desks. Some whizzed ink-balls at one another. Harry Wharton conned over a list of names for a pick-up game that afternoon. Herbert Vernon-Smith pondered over the chances of Blue Bag in the two-thirty at Wapshot. Skinner carefully arranged a 'crib' inside his Virgil, to make things easier if he was called upon for 'con'. Most of the juniors were talking. Strange to relate, the voice of Billy Bunter was not heard among the rest.

Generally Bunter's voice, like that of the turtle of old, was heard in the land. In season or out of season, Bunter usually had something to say. His own fat voice was music to his own ears, if to no others.

But Bunter was busy.

He sat at his desk, pen in hand, with inky fingers, his fat brow corrugated in deep thought. Anyone who did not know Bunter might have fancied that he was concentrated on Form work.

Actually, he was concentrated on a letter home. He had started that letter in his study the previous evening: but laziness had supervened, and it had remained unfinished. Now he was taking advantage of Quelch's absence to get through with it. But there seemed to be difficulties in the way. Hence the wrinkle on his fat brow.

'I say, you fellows.' Bunter's fat squeak became suddenly audible in the hubbub of many voices. 'I say, how many "k"s in "conduct"?''

'How many whiches in what?' ejaculated Bob Cherry.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, don't cackle,' snapped Bunter, peevishly. 'I want to get this through before Quelch comes in, and catch the post in break. And I want to get the spelling right. The pater rags me about my spelling, and you can't be too careful when you're writing home for a tip. I say, Wharton, is there one "k" or two in "conduct"?''

Harry Wharton laughed.

'None at all, fathead,' he answered.

'Oh, don't be an ass,' yapped Bunter. 'Fat lot you know about it. I say, Nugent, is it c-o-n-d-u-k-t, or k-o-n-d-u-k-t?'

'Neither, ass!' answered Frank Nugent.

'I think you might help a chap, when he's writing home, and had to be jolly particular about the spelling!' said Bunter, reproachfully. 'I say, Bull, do you know how many "k"s there are in "conduct"?' 'Two "c"s, and no "k"s at all,' answered Johnny Bull.

'Beast!' yapped Bunter.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Evidently, Billy Bunter was not satisfied with two 'c's in 'conduct'. He wrinkled his fat brow again over the problem of the 'k's. It was probable that if a 'tip' from Bunter's pater depended on the spelling in that letter, the 'tip' was a doubtful proposition.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' exclaimed Bob Cherry, suddenly. 'Ware beaks!'

There was a well-known tread in the corridor. Immediately, fellows who were out of their places rushed back to them. Sitters on desks slid off them in a hurry. Peter Todd, about to launch an ink-ball in the direction of Lord Mauleverer's placid countenance, dropped it to the floor instead. Fisher T. Fish hurriedly shoved an account-book into his pocket. The hubbub of voices ceased as if by magic. By the time Henry Samuel Quelch appeared in the doorway, all was in order - with a single exception. Billy Bunter had just finished his letter home. He blotted it and slipped it into his Virgil. He was in the very act of slipping it in, when Mr. Quelch entered, and a gimlet-eye glinted over the form. Little ever escaped that gimlet-eye in the Remove form-room.

'Bunter!'

'Oh! Yes, sir!' Billy Bunter blinked at his form-master through his big spectacles, in alarm. Why Quelch picked on him, the minute he entered, Bunter did not know: but a snap from Quelch was always alarming.

'What is that paper you have just slipped into your book. Bunter?' inquired Mr. Quelch, in a deep voice.

'Oh! Nothing, sir!' stammered Bunter.

'Bring it to me at once!

Bob Cherry winked at his friends. Many of the juniors grinned. Quelch, evidently, suspected a 'crib'. Skinner, at that moment, rather wished that he hadn't brought one in.

Quelch, like most school-masters, was 'down' on cribs, with a heavy down. Certainly, a fellow was not likely to learn much Latin, if he had a translation at hand to refer to in 'con'. Quelch was 'wise' to cribs, and had a very keen eye open for such labour-saving devices. And really, Bunter's action in hastily slipping a paper into his book did look very suspicious. If that paper contained a translation of the section of the *Æneid* with which the Remove had to deal in that lesson, the thunder was scheduled to roll.

'But, sir—!' stammered Bunter.

'At once!' repeated Mr. Quelch.

'Tain't a crib, sir!' gasped Bunter.

'I shall ascertain that for myself, Bunter,' said Mr. Quelch, grimly. 'Bring it to me this instant.' Billy Bunter reluctantly rolled out before the form.

Actually, that paper was not a crib. It was a letter home. There was absolutely nothing of a contraband nature in that paper. But Billy Bunter did not want it scanned by the gimlet-eyes. However, there was no help for that now.

Grimly, Quelch took the paper. He scanned it. He fully expected to behold a crib. It was so much easier for a slack fellow to copy out a translation, instead of swotting at prep. And Billy Bunter was the prize slacker of the Remove: slack in class, slack in games, and slack in everything else, except in

dealing with foodstuffs. So it was quite a surprise to Quelch to see that that paper was not a crib at all, and had no connexion whatever with Publius Vergilius Maro or his immortal works.

'Bless my soul!' said Mr. Quelch, rather blankly.

He stared at that paper. It was not a crib. It was a letter. But there seemed to be something in that letter that roused Quelch's ire as much as a crib could have done. It ran:

Deer Father,

I hoap this finds you well as it leeves me at pressent. I am sorrey that you have herd from my form-master that he is not sattisfied with my jeneral kondukt, but I am gowing to be mutch more kareful from now onn, and wurk hard boath in klass and at gaims. I shood be in the Form teem now but there is a lot of jellussy in football. I am rather shaut of munny and shood like you to send me a poastal-order.

Your affeckshunate Sun, William.

'It—it—it's only a letter home, sir!' stammered Bunter, quite alarmed by the thunder gathering in Quelch's expressive countenance.

'Bunter!' Quelch's voice was very deep. 'Your spelling in this letter would disgrace the most backward boy in the Second Form. It reflects upon me, your form-master. Your slackness in such matters, Bunter, is not merely reprehensible. It is shocking. It is scandalous. I will not allow such a letter to be put in the post, Bunter.'

'Oh, really, sir—!' gasped Bunter.

'You will be kept in this afternoon, Bunter—'

'Oh, lor!' It was a half-holiday that afternoon. Billy Bunter had been looking forward to a long, lazy slack. 'I—I—I say, sir—'

'You will come to the form-room at two-thirty, Bunter, and you will remain until you have written out this letter, twenty times, with the spelling of every word absolutely correct—'

'Oh, crikey!'

'I recommend you to consult a dictionary, Bunter, and to consult it with care. Now go back to your place.'

'B—b—b—but, sir—'

'Silence! Go to your place.'

Billy Bunter gave his form-master one blink. It was a very expressive blink. It was so very expressive, that it might almost have cracked his big spectacles. Then, with deep feelings, he rolled back to his place, in a grinning form.

Evidently, that letter home was not going to catch the post in break, as the Owl of the Remove had intended. And Bunter was not going to spend a happy half-holiday frowsting in an armchair before the fire in the Rag. He was going to sit in the form-room, writing and re-writing that letter, with a dictionary to keep him company, and no escape till every word was orthographically exact.

The ultimate result might gratify Mr. Bunter at Bunter Villa, when he received the missive. But the prospect did not gratify William George Bunter. The blinks he cast at his form-master, as he sat in form that morning, were positively deadly. Indeed he could not help feeling that what Quelch really deserved, for coming down on a fellow like this, was something lingering, with boiling oil in it!

CHAPTER 2

A SPOT OF VENTRILOQUISM

'BEASTS!' breathed Billy Bunter.

It was the sound of footsteps, and cheery voices, in the Remove passage, that caused Bunter to utter that ejaculation, under his breath. At that particular moment, Harry Wharton and Co. were not wanted in No. 1 Study - by Bunter, at all events. It was quite disconcerting for a fellow who was standing at another fellow's study cupboard, reaching for a bag of toffees on the shelf therein. Billy Bunter was due for detention in the form-room that afternoon, and there was only one consolation for a fellow in detention: at least for a fellow named William George Bunter. That was a supply of 'stickers'. With a bag of toffees in his pocket, to cram two or three at a time into the most capacious mouth in the Remove, Bunter felt that he could face it.

Unluckily he had been - not for the first time - disappointed about a postal-order. His financial resources were down to zero. On such occasions Bunter was wont to find other resources. He had found them in the study cupboard in No. 1. Quite a cheery smile overspread his fat face as he blinked into that cupboard, and spotted a bag of toffees there.

But even as his fat fingers closed on that bag, those footsteps and cheery voices in the passage impinged upon his fat ears.

He had just time to close the cupboard door, and turn from it, with the bag of toffees in a fat hand held carefully behind him, as Harry Wharton and Co. crowded into the study.

'I—I say, you fellows—!' stammered Bunter.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! How did that barrage balloon blow in?' asked Bob Cherry.

'Oh! Is it you, Bunter?'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'Want anything, Bunter?' asked Harry.

'Eh! Oh! No! Yes! I—I just looked in to—to—' Bunter cudgelled his fat brain for some explanation unconnected with tuck. But he was seldom, if ever, at a loss for a fib. 'To—to—to borrow a dick! Quelch said I was to take a dictionary to the form-room. You know he made out that my spelling in that letter wasn't right—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Found out yet how many "k"s there are in "conduct"?' asked Frank Nugent.

'Better look out that word in the "C"s, not in the "K"s, Bunter!' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'You can borrow the dick if you like. There it is, on the shelf behind you. Take it and travel.'

Billy Bunter would have been quite glad to travel, with or without the dictionary. But he was anxious, when he travelled, to travel without revealing the bag of toffees he was holding in a fat hand behind his plump back.

He did not turn round to the book-shelf. That would have revealed his plunder at once to five pairs of eyes. He stood blinking uneasily at the chums of the Remove.

'I—I say, you fellows, ain't you playing football this afternoon?' he asked.

'Yes - ifs a pick-up,' answered Harry.

'Well, hadn't you better get down to the changing-room?' asked Bunter, hopefully.

'Lots of time - it's not till three. I'm going to make up the list for the pick-up now.' Harry Wharton sat down at the table, and took up a pen. Then he glanced at Bunter, still standing like a fat statue.

'Want anything else, Bunter?'

'Oh! No! Yes! I mean no,' stammered Bunter.

'Then roll away, like a good barrel.'

Again Billy Bunter had to cudgel his fat brains. Gladly he would have rolled away, whether like a barrel or not. But it was simply impossible to roll out of the study without some of the eyes, among ten, spotting that bag of toffees - unless the attention of those eyes could be concentrated, for a few moments at least, elsewhere.

Then the fat Owl had a sudden inspiration.

Billy Bunter's gifts were few. He was no good at games. He was no good in class. He was no good at anything in particular - with a single exception. There was one thing that Billy Bunter could do, and do remarkably well. He could ventriloquize.

He could make imaginary dogs growl in unexpected corners. He could imitate almost any voice. His peculiar skill in that peculiar line did not add to his popularity. A fellow who was startled by hearing a dog growl just behind him, and turned round to find that there was no dog, was more likely to kick Bunter than to be amused. The Greyfriars ventriloquist was seldom, if ever, encouraged to perform. But there were occasions when a spot of ventriloquism might come ill useful: and it occurred to Bunter that this was one of them.

He gave a fat little cough.

That, if any of the juniors in the study had thought of it, was Bunter's usual preliminary to a ventriloquial stunt.

But Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, Bob Cherry, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, were all thinking of Soccer, and certainly not of Billy Bunter's weird tricks in throwing his voice about. That fat little cough passed unheeded.

But what followed was not unheeded.

'I say, Wharton—!' began Bunter.

'Oh, buzz off,' exclaimed the captain of the Remove, impatiently. 'I've got to get on with this list.'

Wharton was scribbling names for the pick-up.

'But I say, is that a dog under the table—?'

'Fathead! How could a dog get into this study?'

Gurrrrrrgh!

Five fellows jumped.

That sudden, savage growl certainly seemed to indicate that there was a dog in the study, and a vicious one at that. And if it did not proceed from under the table, it certainly sounded as if it did.

'Oh, my hat!' ejaculated Harry Wharton. He withdrew his legs from under the table so suddenly, that his chair almost tipped over backwards. That deep, savage growl, so close at hand indicated that legs under the table were in danger!

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'Look out, you fellows. There's a dog in the study, and he sounds jolly fierce—'

Gurrrrrrgh!

Five fellows backed hastily from the vicinity of the table.

How a dog could have wandered into a Remove study was quite a mystery: but a growl could hardly be there without a dog: and nobody wanted that vicious growl to be followed by a snap of teeth.

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh made a jump for the fender, and clutched up the poker in a dusky hand.

'Keep clear, my esteemed chums,' he exclaimed. 'I will drive him out pokerfully.'

All attention was concentrated on one spot. The juniors did not even notice Billy Bunter sidle round to the door. He backed out of the doorway, his fat hand clutching the bag of toffees still behind him.

Not an eye was turned in his direction.

The fat Owl disappeared into the passage. He left a hubbub of excited voices in the study as he disappeared.

'Look out!'

'Mind your legs!'

'How the thump did a dog get in here?'

'Goodness knows-keep well clear - he sounds jolly savage—'

'Mind he doesn't spring—'

'Careful with that poker, Inky.'

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter.

He did not linger. It was not likely to take the Famous Five long to discover that there was no dog in the study. Then there was no doubt that they would guess that their legs had been pulled by the Greyfriars ventriloquist. A booting for Bunter, if he was still within reach, was a very probable result. Prompt retreat was indicated: and Billy Bunter retreated promptly.

He descended the stairs at unaccustomed speed, and headed for the form-room. Orthography was as unattractive as ever: but there was comfort in toffees, and the fact that they weren't his toffees was, to Bunter, a trifle light as air. A fat and sticky Owl finished them to the last sticky morsel

CHAPTER 3

PAINFUL FOR PROUT!

MR. PROUT jumped.

Not often did Prout jump. The Fifth-form master of Greyfriars was elderly. He was portly. He was plump. He was often short of wind. Jumping was not in his line at all. His motions resembled more those of an old and stately tortoise.

Nevertheless, he did jump: in fact, he bounded. He was taken so completely by surprise.

Prout was proceeding at a gentle walk along Friardale Lane, in the direction of the village. His progress was slow and stately. He was going to meet Mr. Quelch at the village, or on the hither side of it, and walk back to the school with him. And he was in no hurry.

While Harry Wharton and Co. were playing Soccer, and Billy Bunter was acquiring undesired orthographical knowledge in the Remove form-room, Quelch had gone for one of his long grinds. Long grinds did not appeal to Prout. He preferred to take his exercise in small doses. So he was going to join up with Quelch on his homeward way, on the last lap of that long grind.

Peregrinating gently along the leafy lane, under branches rich with the tints of autumn, Prout expected every minute to see the lean, angular, active figure of the Remove master appear in sight ahead of him.

Quelch, so far, had not appeared. But another figure, quite unexpectedly, did!

Prout did not even notice a squat man in a dingy check suit, with a bowler hat cocked rakishly on one side of a rather greasy head, leaning on a tree by the lane. Had he noticed him, he would hardly have wasted a disdainful glance on him. The man was, on his looks, one of the dingy mob who were unwelcome visitors to the neighbourhood when the races were on at Wapshot. To the Greyfriars form-master he would have seemed merely a blot on the landscape.

But if Prout did not notice the squat man, the squat man noticed Prout. He had a pair of very sharp eyes, rather like a rat's, which scanned the portly Prout as he came ponderously along. And all of a sudden - so suddenly that a more wary man than Prout would have been taken by surprise - he leaped out into the lane as the Greyfriars master came abreast.

It was then that Prout jumped!

He jumped almost clear of the ground in his amazement, as a pair of wiry hands fastened on him in a sudden grip.

He had time for only one jump! For the next moment, he was whirled over, his plump leg hooked, and he sprawled in the dust of the lane.

'Ooooooooooh!' gasped Prout.

He was too amazed, too dazed and dizzy, quite to know what was happening. He sprawled and panted, while a thievish hand ran through his pockets. It was probable that Jimmy the Spiv had more than once indemnified himself for losses at the races, by proceedings of this kind. But never had he had so easy a victim.

It did not take him more than a minute. Then, with Prout's wallet in his hand, he ran, leaving Prout sprawling breathlessly.

Prout sat up, gurgling. He stared dizzily after the running man, realizing that he had been robbed, and that the thief was escaping with his wallet, but quite incapable of making an effort to pursue.

'Ooooooooooh!' gurgled Prout.

Then, suddenly, a well-known angular figure appeared in the lane, ahead of the running pickpocket.

Mr. Quelch, with his walking-stick under his arm, came round the bend of the lane with his vigorous strides, face to face with the rascal as he ran.

Prout found breath enough for a yell. 'Stop thief!'

Henry Samuel Quelch was quick on the uptake. One glance of the gimlet-eyes took in the whole scene - Prout sitting and bawling, the pickpocket sprinting with the wallet in his grasp.

In a moment the walking-stick slipped from under Quelch's arm into his hand. In a moment more, Jimmy the Spiv would have dodged past him and dashed on. But in that moment, Quelch reached out with the walking-stick, and caught the racing man's leg with the crook handle.

With a leg hooked from under him, the man fairly flew. He crashed headlong, the wallet flying from his hand as he crashed. The yell he gave, as his nose pegged into the dust, awoke the echoes of woods and meadows for quite a distance, on either side of Friardale Lane.

Quelch gave him a look, as he sprawled, and then stepped to the wallet and picked it up, with his left hand. In his right, he gripped the walking-stick ready for further use: with a wary eye on the sprawling rascal.

It was well that he was wary.

Prout was still sitting, panting for breath, and goggling at the scene from a distance. There was no help from Prout, if the racing man showed fight. And Quelch, though strong and wiry, was hardly fitted to stand up to a muscular racing rough, with bare hands. He was likely to need that walking-stick. Fortunately, it was a thick and heavy one.

Up scrambled Jimmy the Spiv, smothered with dust, his nose streaming red from its contact with the earth. The fury in his face was quite unpleasant to see. He came at the Remove master with a rush.

Up went the walking-stick.

'Stand back!' rapped Mr. Quelch. 'Stand back, or—'

He did not finish the sentence. Jimmy the Spiv did not stand back: he came rushing on. Down came the walking-stick, and there was a loud crack as it contacted a bullet head. Jimmy the Spiv went down under that swipe, as if the walking-stick had been a cannon-ball.

He sprawled once more in the dust.

This time he did not seem in such a hurry to get up again. He sat up, but he did not scramble to his feet. He sat holding his bullet head with both hands, clasping it as if to make sure that it was still there.

'Ow! oh! ow! oh! ooooh!' he mumbled. 'Strike me pink! Ooooh.'

Quelch, gripping the walking-stick, stood looking down at him. Quelch was quite cool. He was prepared for more.

But the racing man did not seem to want any more.

He sat rocking in the dust, clasping his suffering head, on which a huge bruise was already forming. Jimmy Jugson, known among his friends as Jimmy the Spiv, was a truculent character, always ready for a shindy at the races, or a scrap in a 'pub': but that one swipe from Quelch's walking-stick seemed to have been enough for him. He did not want another. But the look he gave the Remove master was fearfully expressive. It indicated very plainly what might happen to Mr. Quelch, if Jimmy chanced upon him again, in a lonely spot - and without his walking-stick!

That look, expressive as it was, had no more effect on Henry Samuel Quelch than water on a duck.

As soon as it was clear that the ruffian intended to carry hostilities no further, Quelch, with calm contempt, turned away, and walked up the lane to Mr. Prout.

Prout tottered to his feet.

'My dear Quelch,' he gasped, 'how fortunate that you came along at that moment—'

'Quite!' said Mr. Quelch. 'Here is your wallet, Prout.'

'Thank you, Quelch. He would certainly have escaped with it, and it would have been a serious loss to me. I am much obliged to you, Quelch.'

'Not at all, Prout.'

'I was taken by surprise,' explained Mr. Prout. 'The man suddenly leaped at me like a—a—a tiger! I was taken completely by surprise. Otherwise, I should have felled him with a blow.'

A smile flickered on Quelch's face for a moment. He could not quite see the portly Prout felling that muscular racing rough with a blow, or with a dozen for that matter. But Prout had cut a rather inglorious figure in this episode, and Quelch was not the man to rub it in. The smile vanished as soon as it appeared.

But fleeting as it was, Prout's eye had caught it. His plump brows contracted in a frown.

'I should certainly have knocked him down, had I not been taken so completely by surprise,' he said, with unnecessary emphasis.

'No doubt,' said Mr. Quelch. He was careful not to smile again.

Prout breathed hard.

Mr. Prout was a somewhat pompous gentleman. He liked to be impressive. But he was conscious that he could not have looked very impressive, sitting in the dust, gasping for breath, while the pickpocket ran off with his wallet. Certainly, he was very glad to recover that wallet: but he almost wished that Quelch had not come along so fortunately, after all. He suspected that Quelch was amused.

'Shall we walk on?' asked Mr. Quelch.

'Very well,' said Mr. Prout, stiffly.

They walked on. Prout, no doubt, was still somewhat short of breath, and that perhaps was why he did not utter a further word as they walked on to the school. They arrived at Greyfriars in stony silence.

CHAPTER 4

BAD LUCK FOR BUNTER!

'I SAY, you fellows!'

Billy Bunter, no doubt, intended to say more than that.

But he did not say more. He was interrupted. 'That fat villain—'

'That piffling porpoise—!'

'Bag him!'

'Scrag him!'

'Scrag him terrifically!'

Five fellows, in No. 1 Study, were sitting round the table at tea, after the pick-up. They were talking Soccer. But they ceased to talk Soccer, as a fat face and a big pair of spectacles looked into the study. Harry Wharton, Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh jumped up as if every member of the Famous Five was suddenly moved by the same spring.

Billy Bunter gave them one blink.

Then he bolted. He vanished from the doorway of No. 1 Study like a fat ghost at cock-crow. A patter of feet died away down the passage and across the landing.

Five fellows, grinning, sat down again. No doubt, had Bunter remained, he might have been bagged and scragged, as a reward for his ventriloquial trickery earlier that afternoon. But his prompt departure had saved him from bagging and scragging: and Harry Wharton and Co., dismissing him from their minds, resumed tea and Soccer chat.

But the guilty flee when no man pursueth. Unaware that he was unpursued, Billy Bunter charged out of the Remove passage, and across the landing. It was Herbert Vernon-Smith's ill-luck that he had just come upstairs, and was coming across the landing to the Remove studies, when Bunter appeared. Bunter did not see him till he crashed, and Smithy had no time to dodge. He went over backwards, with a fat Owl sprawling over his legs.

'Oh!' gasped Smithy.

'Oooogh!' gurgled Bunter.

'Oh, gad! You mad fat ass—'

'Urrrrgh!'

Billy Bunter rolled on the landing, as Smithy scrambled up. He was winded. But he found breath enough to yell, as a foot landed on his tight trousers. The Bounder of Greyfriars was not the best-tempered of fellows: and that crash on hard oak seemed to have annoyed him.

'Wow!' yelled Bunter. 'I say - stoppit! Yarooooh!' Thrice the Bounder's foot landed, before Billy Bunter scrambled up and fled. A last lunge of Smithy's foot helped him on his way. Then Smithy, feeling better, went on to his study: while Bunter, feeling considerably worse, scuttled down the stairs.

'Beast!' gasped Bunter, as he leaned his fat person on a wall, and gurgled for breath. 'Ow! Beast! Wow!'

It was a disconsolate Owl. Billy Bunter had not enjoyed his half-holiday. Orthography in the form-room was far from entertaining. True, there had been the toffees. But after the toffees had disappeared on the downward path, orthography remained. Exploring the mysteries of the dictionary certainly improved Bunter's spelling in that letter home, which no doubt was so much to the good: but it made the fat Owl feel that life, even at Greyfriars, was weary, stale, flat, and

unprofitable. Bunter was a slow worker - when he worked at all. He took so many rests, over his task, that that task seemed almost interminable.

Any fellow but Bunter would have been through in ample time for tea. But when the bell rang, the hapless fat Owl was still wearily scribbling at his desk. He dared not leave his task uncompleted. He laboured wearily on, with a sad foreboding that little would be left by the time he rolled into hall to tea.

However, it was finished at last, and he had twenty copies of that wretched letter done, everyone of them with absolutely correct spelling. It was just a spot of comfort, when he rolled away to his form-master's study with his imposition, to find that Quelch was out. Even Quelch couldn't have found fault with the spelling, but he might have found fault with a considerable array of blots, smears, and smudges. It would have been like him! So it was a relief to find that Quelch had gone out, and that all he had to do was to leave the impot on the table for him when he came in.

Free at last, Bunter, naturally, concentrated on food.

He rolled away to hall, where his sad forebodings were realized. Tea was over, and the clearing-away process had set in.

His next visit was to his study, No. 7, in the Remove.

But if his study-mates, Peter Todd and Tom Dutton, had tea'd in the study, they had finished and gone, and the cupboard, like the celebrated Mrs. Hubbard's, was bare. Wherefore did Bunter roll along to No. 1 Study, where his reception, as already related, was quite discouraging.

Leaning on the wall, slowly recovering his wind. Billy Bunter ran fat hands through sticky pockets, in the faint hope of unearthing therein some coin of the realm that might have been overlooked.

Not a single coin came to light.

'Oh, lor'!' moaned Bunter.

He thought of Smithy's study, which was rather like a land flowing with milk and honey. Sad to relate, Billy Bunter would have had no scruple whatever in helping himself to the Bounder's good things. But Smithy had gone up to his study, so Bunter had nothing to look for there, unless it was another lunge from the Bounder's boot.

He rolled away at last, and his fat little legs carried him in the direction of Masters' Common-Room. In that apartment, as Bunter knew from more than one experience, there was a biscuit-box on the side-board, generally well filled. If there was nobody about Common-Room, it was all right. Quelch, at least, was out: there was no danger from that gimlet-eye. If any other beak was there, it would be easy to invent an excuse for looking in. If nobody was there, there would be biscuits for a hungry fat Owl.

He tapped cautiously at Common-Room door, and opened it. He blinked in through his big spectacles.

Had Prout, or Hacker, or Twigg, or Lascelles, or any other beak been present he had an excuse ready. He would simply have said 'Please, is Mr. Quelch here?' as if all he wanted was a word with his form-master.

But the room was vacant. Not a single armchair was occupied. Common-Room was quite deserted. The fat Owl rolled in. and closed the door after him.

He almost shot across to the side-board. In a moment, the box on that side-board was open, and a fat grubby, hand was groping in it. Then there was a happy sound of munching and crunching.

But the fat Owl was wary while he munched and crunched. His eyes and spectacles were on the door. At a sound from that door, he was prepared to cut across to the french window on to the garden, which stood wide open, and vanish as swiftly as he had vanished from Harry Wharton's

study.

But alas for Bunter!

There was no sound from the door. Nobody came to Common-Room from the corridor. But suddenly the french window on to the garden was darkened by a portly form.

That portly form was in an unusually dusty state. Mr. Prout looked as if he had rolled in a dusty road—as indeed he had! Nor did his plump face wear its accustomed genial expression. Prout was not in a good temper. His encounter with Jimmy Jugson in Friardale Lane, and his lurking suspicion that Quelch had been secretly amused by the somewhat absurd figure he had cut, irked Prout. He was conscious, too, of dusty untidiness, and he had come in by the french window from the garden, to avoid the gaze of curious eyes in the quad. And the first object he beheld, as he stepped in at the french window, was Billy Bunter guzzling biscuits from the biscuit-box on the side-board!

'BUNTER!' Prout boomed.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter. His eyes, and his spectacles, swivelled round from the door to the french window. And his startled eyes almost popped through his spectacles at Prout.

'Bunter! What are you doing here?'

It was quite a superfluous question. What Bunter was doing was quite clear - he was guzzling biscuits from the biscuit-box. His mouth was full and sticky with crumbs, and he had a further supply ready in a fat hand. Never had a pilferer of tuck been caught so thoroughly red-handed.

'I—I—I—oh, lor!'

Prout elephantined in. He dropped a plump hand on a fat shoulder, frowning thunderously.

'Bunter!' boomed Prout. 'I shall take you to your form-master. Mr. Quelch will deal with you for this depredation. Come.'

In a more genial mood Prout might have taken a more lenient view. He might have dismissed the fat Owl with a reprimand.

But Prout was not in a genial mood. He was in a mood of extreme irritation: and Bunter had the benefit of it.

'I—I—I say, sir—!' stammered the dismayed Owl.

'Come!'

'Mum—mum—Mr. Quelch has gone out, sir!' gasped Bunter: a last hope!

'Mr. Quelch came in with me, Bunter, and I have no doubt that I shall find him in his study. Come!'

The plump hand on the fat shoulder marched Bunter to the door. It marched him down the corridor to Mr. Quelch's study. The blinks Bunter cast at the portly Prout, as he marched, were almost ferocious. He would have given all the postal-orders he had ever expected, just to hack Prout's plump shins, and bolt. But that, though a happy thought, was not practical politics. In a state of dire - and well-founded - apprehension, Billy Bunter was marched into his form-master's study.

Quelch was there. He was standing at the table, from which he had picked up Bunter's imposition. He did not look pleased with it.

That every word was now spelt with absolute correctness was no doubt satisfactory to Quelch. But blots and smears and smudges afforded him no satisfaction whatever. He was frowning when the perpetrator of those blots, smears, and smudges was propelled into his study with a plump hand on a fat shoulder.

'Mr. Quelch—!' boomed Prout.

'Well?' Quelch's tone was curt.

'I have found this boy of your form pilfering biscuits from the box in Common-Room, sir. Pilfering, sir!' repeated Prout, as if he rather relished that unpleasant word. 'Pilfering, sir, in Common-Room—'

There was a howl from Bunter.

'I didn't—I wasn't—I never—' To do the fat Owl justice, it never penetrated his fat brain that his appropriations of other persons' comestibles could be described by so very horrid a word as 'pilfering'. 'I—I—I—I only had some of the biscuits, sir.'

Quelch's lips set a little. He did not like complaints from other beaks about boys of his form. Still less did he like that horrid word 'pilfering'. But he had no choice about dealing with the matter.

'Thank you for reporting this to me, Mr. Prout,' he said.

He did not look very thankful!

'You may leave Bunter to me.'

'Very good, sir!' boomed Prout, and he elephantined out of the study. Mr. Quelch picked up a cane.

'Bunter! Bend over that chair.'

'I—I—I only had two or three, sir!' mumbled Bunter. 'Not more than five or six, sir—or—or a dozen at the most, sir - when old Pompous—I—I—I mean Mr. Prout, came in'

'Bend over that chair!' rapped Mr. Quelch, in a voice that made Bunter jump.

The unhappy Owl bent over the chair.

Whop!

Quelch laid down the cane.

'You may go, Bunter.'

'Ow! wow!'

Billy Bunter was glad, at least, to go. He rolled away down the corridor, wriggling as he rolled.

Coming out into the quad, he almost rolled into a group of five Remove fellows. There were exclamations at once.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo, here he is!'

'Here's the fat spoofer!'

'Bump him!'

'Bump him terrifically.'

Once more Billy Bunter bolted. He left the Famous Five smiling. But the hapless Owl was not feeling like smiling. He was feeling more like that ancient monarch who never smiled again: indeed, like the Raven's unhappy master whom unmerciful disaster followed fast and followed faster! It was not Billy Bunter's lucky day!

CHAPTER 5

THE WORM WILL TURN!

'PREP!' said Peter Todd.

Snort, from Billy Bunter.

Bunter was not feeling like prep.

Two fellows were busy in No. 7 Study in the Remove.

Preparation, whether fellows felt like it or not, had to be done: and Peter Todd and Tom Dutton were getting on with it. Billy Bunter's fat person was extended, with more or less elegance - rather less than more - in the armchair. And his fat brow wore a frown.

Bunter was disgruntled. Often had it seemed to Bunter that Greyfriars was a spot chiefly populated by beasts: himself the only really and thoroughly admirable fellow in the whole place. On this unlucky day it seemed to him more so than ever.

Quelch had been a beast in form that morning, jumping on a fellow and making out that his spelling was not up to the mark. Harry Wharton and Co. had been beasts: more disposed to boot or bump Bunter for that spot of ventriloquism, than to think what a wonderfully clever chap he was. Prout had been the most beastly of beasts, actually describing Bunter's exploits in Common-Room as 'pilfering' - a description that stirred Bunter's deepest indignation. And he had missed his tea! Indeed, he would have been hungry at the present moment, had he not found a cake in Lord Mauleverer's study. And as likely as not, Mauly might make a fuss about that cake, and suspect that Bunter had had it!

Altogether, Bunter was not in a sunny mood. He was disgruntled, and he was resentful. So many injustices, piled one on another, like Pelion on Ossa, and on Pelion Olympus, might have made a worm turn. Bunter, as all the Remove would have agreed, was a bit of a worm! He was thinking of turning!

'Better get on with it, fatty,' advised Peter. 'Quelch isn't any too pleased with you, and if you cut prep—'

'Blow Quelch!' grunted Bunter. 'I say, Toddy, you might shut that door. There's a draught from the passage.'

'You came in last, and left it open!' Peter pointed out. 'What's the matter with shutting it yourself?'

'I'm sitting down!' said Bunter, with dignity.

Peter grinned, and went on with his prep. The door remained open. The fact that he was sitting down, made it a practical impossibility for Bunter to shut it.

The fat Owl sniffed. The draught from the passage played round his fat little legs as he sprawled in the armchair. But Toddy was not going to get up and shut that door -one more sample of the selfishness to which Bunter was sadly accustomed.

'I say, Dutton,' squeaked Bunter.

Tom Dutton did not look up. Tom was a little deaf: not wholly a disadvantage to a fellow who shared a study with Billy Bunter.

'I say, Dutton, shut that door, will you?' hooted Bunter.

Dutton looked up, at that, staring across at the fat figure in the armchair.

'Eh! I didn't speak!' he answered. 'And if I did, what the dickens do you mean by telling a fellow to shut his jaw? You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head, Bunter.'

'You deaf ass—'

'Eh?'

'Will you shut that door? There's a draught,' howled Bunter.

'Daft yourself!' retorted Dutton. 'You must be jolly daft, to tell a fellow to shut his jaw when he hadn't spoken at all. I'll tell you what, Bunter - you call me names again, and I'll shy this dick at you.'

Billy Bunter gave it up.

Prep went on in No. 7 Study - for two. Bunter's fat thoughts were occupied with other matters.

Bunter was not, as a rule, a vengeful person. Like most fat persons, he had a placid temper. But there was a limit. And the wrongs and injustices he had undergone that day seemed, to Bunter, over the limit. He was going to get his own back - if he could! And he fancied that he knew how.

'I'll jolly well make 'em sit up!' said Bunter, breaking the silence in No. 7 Study. 'I jolly well know how, Peter. You know what a wonderful ventriloquist I am, Toddy - but Quelch doesn't, and Prout doesn't! They wouldn't know it was me.'

'You fat chump!' said Peter Todd. 'Better not try any ventriloquist tricks on Quelch. He would take your skin off.'

'How would he know!' argued Bunter. 'I can imitate Quelch's bark to a "T", and I could do Prout with a bit of practice. Suppose I made Prout think that Quelch was calling him a pompous old ass—'

'Wha-a-at?' gasped Peter. He forgot prep, for a moment, as he stared at the fat Owl in the armchair. That bright idea of Bunter's seemed to have taken his breath away.

'I could do it,' said Bunter, blinking at him. 'And would it make Prout jolly wild? He wouldn't know it was me! I could make Quelch's bark come in at his study window, or through the keyhole - see? Wouldn't Prout go right off at the deep end, if he fancied Quelch was calling him a pompous old ass?'

'Sort of!' gasped Peter. 'But—'

'You see, he is a pompous old ass, but nobody's ever told him so,' said Bunter. 'I'd jolly well like to tell him myself! Making out that a fellow was pilfering, because he helped himself to a few bikkers—'

'What else do you call it?' inquired Peter.

Billy Bunter disdained to answer that frivolous question! 'I'd jolly well like to tell him what I think of him,' went on the fat Owl. 'Only of course, you can't, with a beak. But if he fancied it was Quelch, it would be all right. Make him sit up, what?' Bunter chuckled. 'And if it worked all right with Prout, then I'd give Quelch a turn, see? With a bit of practice I could do that gurgle that Prout calls a voice. Think Quelch would jump, if he heard Prout calling him a bony old sketch?'

Billy Bunter chuckled again, evidently much entertained by the idea. Peter Todd gazed at him.

'You blithering, blethering, burbling fathead!' said Peter, in measured tones. 'Quelch would skin you alive if you played ventriloquist tricks on him. So would Prout! Forget all about it.'

'Think I couldn't do it?' demanded Bunter. 'And get away with it, too?'

'Not in your lifetime,' answered Peter.

'I jolly well could, and I'm jolly well going to!' declared Bunter. 'Prout told Quelch I was pilfering those bikkers—'

'Right on the wicket.'

'And Quelch whopped me—'

'Serve you right!'

'Beast! I'll jolly well make both of them sit up for it!' said Bunter, vengefully. And if you think I couldn't do it, Peter—'

'I jolly well know you couldn't,' answered Peter. 'And my tip to you is to steer clear, you fat chump. Keep your ventriloquial acts for the Remove! Old Quelch isn't safe!'

'Todd!' It was a sudden sharp voice that rapped, and Peter almost jumped out of his chair, as he heard it. 'Todd! How dare you allude to your form-master in such disrespectful terms?'

'Oh, scissors!' gasped Toddy.

He stared round at the open doorway. He had not heard a footstep in the passage: but as he heard Quelch's voice, he naturally expected to see Quelch. Nobody, however, appeared in the doorway. But the voice rapped on: and if it did not come from the passage, it certainly seemed to Peter that it did.

'Such impertinence! Upon my word! Todd, follow me to my study at once!'

'Oh! Yes, sir! I—I—I—I didn't mean—!' stammered Peter.

'Silence! Follow me!'

'Yes, sir!' gasped Peter.

With a dismayed face, Peter Todd went to the door.

Billy Bunter grinned at his back as he went.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter.

Peter did not heed that fat chuckle. He stepped out of the doorway into the Remove passage to follow Quelch down to his study as bidden. Then he fairly goggled in his astonishment. The passage was empty. Quelch was not there. The length of the passage was visible to Peter, as far as the landing at the end. And it was absolutely untenanted!

Unless Quelch, like Mercury in the *Æneid*, had dissolved into thin air, it was quite a mystery what had become of him. For a moment or two, Peter Todd was blankly amazed.

But it was only for a moment or two! Quelch, obviously, couldn't have dissolved into thin air like Mercury. He hadn't been there at all! His voice had been heard - or rather, a remarkable imitation of it. And there was a ventriloquist in No. 7!

It dawned on Peter. The expression on Peter's face, as he turned back into the study, was quite alarming.

Bunter was chuckling.

'He, he, he! Didn't you think it was Quelch, Toddy?'

Were you scared? He, he, he! Think I can do Quelch's bark now, Peter? I say— Yaroooooh!' Billy Bunter's fat chuckle changed to a roar, as Peter came across the study with a bound, grasped the back of the armchair, and tilted it over. The fat Owl rolled out on the floor. 'Ow! wow! Stoppit! Wow! I say—yaroooooh!'

Peter picked up a ruler from the table. Thrice that ruler landed .on Bunter's tight trousers as he rolled and roared.

'There!' gasped Peter. 'Now you give me some more ventriloquism, you fat fozler, and I'll give you some more ruler.'

'Owl wow! Beast! Wow!'

There was no more ventriloquism. It was said of old that a prophet is without honour in his own country: and evidently the Greyfriars ventriloquist was scheduled to receive no encouragement whatever in his own study.

CHAPTER 6

OUT OF BOUNDS

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!'

'What—?'

'Ware beaks!'

'Oh!'

Five juniors, sauntering carelessly on a woodland path, suddenly became alert. The sight of Henry Samuel Quelch, their respected form-master, would not, in other circumstances, have been alarming to the Famous Five. Quelch's somewhat crusty countenance was never, perhaps, very attractive, but in the form-room, or the quadrangle, it was not alarming. On that shady path in Friardale Wood, it was!

Not that the chums of the Remove had any particular sins on their youthful consciences. But they were breaking a rule. Rules, in Quelch's fixed opinion, were made to be kept, and never to be broken. In such matters, schoolboys and schoolmasters did not always see quite eye to eye.

It was morning break at Greyfriars. In break, which lasted only a quarter of an hour, juniors were not allowed out of gates. The Famous Five had slipped out over a wall in a quiet corner. They had been doing French with Monsieur Charpentier: and a ramble in the autumn woods was just the thing to take the taste of French irregular verbs out of their mouths, as it were. They had not expected to see Quelch till third school. Now, suddenly and unexpectedly, they saw him.

Quelch, apparently, had gone out for one of his walks, while his form was with Mossoo. Now he was returning: at an inopportune moment for five members of his form. Some distance ahead, coming towards them, the well-known angular figure appeared in sight. They sighted him: and probably Quelch would have sighted them at the same moment: but by great good luck, he was looking at his watch, no doubt to ascertain that he was in good time to take his form in third school.

One glimpse of him was enough.

Bob Cherry's warning was hardly uttered, when five fellows backed into the trees beside the footpath. They were out of sight in a twinkling. Screened by trunks and brambles, they grinned rather breathlessly, and waited for Quelch to pass on.

'Narrow escape!' murmured Bob.

'The narrowness is terrific,' agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, 'but the stitch in time saves the cracked pitcher from going longest to the well, as the English proverb remarks.'

Harry Wharton peered through the brambles.

'Quelch hasn't seen us,' he said. 'It's all right. He's coming on, but he hasn't an idea we're here.'

'Not a suspish!' said Nugent.

'Quiet!' murmured Johnny Bull.

Silently, the juniors watched from cover. Through the interstices of bramble bushes, they could see Quelch as he came along the footpath. Evidently he had no suspicion that members of his form were in the offing. He did not once glance in their direction. They were very keen indeed to leave him in that state of blissful ignorance. Nobody wanted lines for breaking rules.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' breathed Bob, suddenly.

'Quiet!' whispered Johnny.

'But - look!' breathed Bob.

Quelch was quite close at hand now. And suddenly, another figure had appeared behind him on the

footpath. It was that of a squat man in dingy checks, with a bowler hat slanting on his bullet head. The juniors had never seen him before, but on his looks they could guess that he was one of the dingy crowd that came down to Wapshot for the races.

But it was not his looks, it was his actions, that riveted their attention. His sharp, rat-like eyes were fixed on Quelch's back. The hostility in his hard face was not to be mistaken. He came on at a run, his footsteps making no sound on the thick carpet of fallen leaves on the path. And, as he came, he drew from his pocket a short, thick stick, which he gripped in his right hand as he ran noiselessly on towards the unsuspecting Remove master.

For some moments, the juniors stared as if spell-bound.

Mr. Quelch was now passing their cover, hardly a couple of yards away. Behind him, the squat man was drawing closer, without a sound that could have caused the Remove master to look round. That he was following Quelch, and that he intended to attack him as soon as he was within reach, was quite clear: amazing as it was to the schoolboys, who knew nothing of the affair of the previous day. Quelch, had he looked round, would have recognized Jimmy Jugson, alias Jimmy the Spiv. But he had not the remotest suspicion of his danger, and he did not look round.

Mr. Quelch walked on, and the juniors now could see only his back. The running man came abreast of their ambush. A few more moments, and he would have overtaken Quelch, and it was only too clear what he intended to do with the stick viciously gripped in his hand.

Harry Wharton and Co. were quite keen not to catch their form-master's eye, out of school bounds in break.

But they were not likely to remain idly by while an unwary man was knocked out by a stealthy blow from behind. 'Come on!' breathed Bob.

He plunged out through the brambles into the footpath, just as the squat man was running past. Jimmy the Spiv, wholly intent on his intended victim, was taken quite by surprise by that sudden and unexpected irruption. Bob Cherry crashed into him, sending him staggering across the footpath.

After Bob rushed the other four.

'Collar him!' shouted Johnny Bull.

Jimmy Jugson staggered against a tree, and turned on the crowd of juniors, almost spitting with fury. He brandished the stick, and they jumped back as it swept the air.

Mr. Quelch, only a few yards away, spun round, at the sudden commotion behind him. For a moment he stared blankly: quite astonished to find that apparently solitary footpath so thickly populated all of a sudden.

'What—what—!' Quelch almost stuttered. 'Look out, sir—'

'That brute was after you—'

'Look out—!'

But the gimlet-eyes had already recognized Jimmy Jugson. Those gimlet-eyes glinted, as Quelch, slipping his walking-stick into his hand, came back with swift strides.

Jimmy the Spiv did not wait for him. But for the intervention of the juniors, Quelch would have gone down under a blow from behind. Face to face, Jimmy Jugson was not disposed to carry one. He had had more than enough of that walking-stick the previous day. He made a vicious slash at the juniors, causing them to jump back again, and then took to his heels. He disappeared down the footpath, the way he had come, almost with the fleetness of a hare.

'After him!' roared Bob.

Snap, from Quelch.

'Stop!'

Bob stopped.

'He was going to cosh you, sir—!' he panted.

'I am aware of that!' answered Mr. Quelch. 'I shall certainly not allow you boys to deal with him. I shall telephone to the police-station immediately I return to the school. The man is a dangerous character.' Then Quelch's brows knitted. 'What are you boys doing here, out of school bounds, in break?'

No member of the Famous Five answered that question.

They were caught: and the fact that they had saved Quelch from a cracked nut did not alter the other fact that they were out of school bounds in break. But they could not help feeling that, in the circumstances, it was up to Quelch, whole on discipline as he was, to go easy.

Fortunately, Quelch seemed to take the same view.

The grim frown melted from his magisterial brow. He almost smiled.

'Well, well, you may return to the school, at once: he said. Then, still more graciously, he added, "I am much obliged to you, my boys. You acted very promptly and courageously. Now return to the school, and lose no time.'

Which was a relief to the Famous Five, and they departed at a trot, quite pleased with the outcome of their ramble out of bounds.

CHAPTER 7

BUNTER TRIES IT ON

BILLY BUNTER gave a fat little cough.

Nobody noticed it.

The Remove were in third school. Harry Wharton was on 'con': and Mr. Quelch was giving attention. Other fellows were listening in, prepared to go on where Wharton left off, if bidden so to do. All but Bunter.

Billy Bunter was not prepared to carry on if bidden. Not for the first time - Bunter had given 'prep' a miss the evening before. Other matters, much more important in Bunter's esteem, had occupied his fat mind, to the exclusion of prep.

The worm, in fact, had turned! William George Bunter was on the war-path! By means of his weird gift of ventriloquism, he was going to avenge all those wrongs and injustices that had roused his indignation. His fat mind was made up on that point.

Naturally, he hesitated a little to begin. 'Ragging' Quelch was not a safe bet. Other masters at Greyfriars were sometimes ragged: seldom or never Quelch. The general opinion in the Remove was that to 'rag' Quelch was about as safe as to twist a tiger's tail. Even the Bounder, the most reckless fellow in the form, was likely to think twice, and thrice, and yet again, before engaging in so risky an enterprise. Billy Bunter, certainly, was not a reckless fellow. But it was said of old that fools rush in where angels fear to tread!

The fat mind was made up: but the fat Owl still hesitated. Quelch was well known to be a 'downy bird', and if he spotted a ventriloquial trick, the consequences would be dire. On the other hand, how could he? A ventriloquist who could make the Famous Five jump away from an imaginary dog under a table, and dismay Peter Todd with a disembodied voice from a passage, could get away with anything. Bunter hesitated: but he was quite resolved that if Quelch called on him to construe, there was going to be a spot of ventriloquism in the form-room.

The Remove were supposed to have 'prepared' the section of the Æneid assigned by their form-master. Bunter hadn't! His mind was a beautiful blank on the subject. If called upon, all he could hand out was a series of 'howlers': and that meant lines, or a detention: it might even mean 'whops' if Quelch was very irate. The hour was nearly at its end: and a spot of ventriloquism might carry Bunter happily on till the bell rang, escaping 'con' altogether! So the Greyfriars ventriloquist gave that little fat cough, his usual preliminary, ready to 'chance it' if the gimlet-eye turned on him.

And it did!

'That will do, Wharton.' Quelch's tone was quite gracious. Keeness on Soccer did not prevent Harry Wharton from giving due attention to form work: and his 'con' had been very good indeed. Quelch, probably, would have preferred to let him run on, rather than call on a dunce like Bunter. But Quelch was a whale on duty. The more backward members of his form required his care: though some of them, no doubt, would have been satisfied with a less dutiful form-master!

'Bunter!' The gimlet-eye turned on the fattest member of the Remove. 'You will go on.'

'Oh!' Billy Bunter's plump heart gave a jump. The time had come! 'I—I—I've lost the place, sir!' stammered Bunter, to gain time.

'Go on from "fortemque Cloanthum", Bunter.'

'Oh! Yes, sir!'

Bunter blinked at his book. Following 'fortemque Cloanthum' came 'Et jam finis erat, cum Juppiter

aethere summo', which, as even Bunter knew, must have meant something, though what it meant was a deep mystery to him. For a flustered moment the fat Owl wished that he had done his 'prep' in No. 7 Study instead of relying on ventriloquism. But it was too late to wish that, now. It was neck or nothing now!

Miauooooowwww!

The sudden and unexpected mew of a cat sounded in the Remove form-room. It made all the juniors start and stare round. It caused Mr. Quelch to take the gimlet-eyes off Billy Bunter, and switch them round the form-room in search of the cat.

Miauooooowwww!

'Bless my soul!' ejaculated Mr. Quelch, in surprise and annoyance. 'Is there a cat in the room? Where is it? Do you see the cat, Wharton?'

'No, sir.'

'If you please, sir—!' squeaked Billy Bunter.

'Can you see the cat, Bunter?'

'Oh! No, sir! But it sounds as if it's in that cupboard, sir!' A grubby finger pointed to the form-room cupboard, in which easels, rolled-up maps, and other articles were kept when not required.

'Nonsense!' snapped Mr. Quelch.

'Oh, really, sir! It sounded to me—'

'That will do, Bunter!'

Quelch had no use for futile suggestions. It was a wall-cupboard, with a tall door opening at floor level. That door was shut and latched. No cat could have wandered into that cupboard. It was true that the House-dame's cat, Thomas, sometimes roamed the House, and penetrated into the studies, and had even been shooed out of a class-room. But even the enterprising Thomas could not have negotiated a closed cupboard-door.

Miauooooowwww! Miauaaaaaaow!

If the cat had not mewed again, Quelch would probably have carried on, disregarding the feline trespasser in the form-room. But the mew was repeated more loudly, and repeated again. It was quite a shrill and persistent mew. Strangest of all, it did seem to proceed from the closed cupboard. No doubt that was partly because, after Bunter's remark, all eyes had turned on the cupboard, and all ears were prepared to hear a mew from that direction. Very artfully, the Greyfriars ventriloquist had concentrated attention on the spot whence the mew was supposed to come.

Quelch, about to tell Bunter to 'go on', did not do so.

Instead, he stared rather blankly at the cupboard-door. 'Bless my soul!' he exclaimed. 'Can there be a cat shut up in that cupboard?'

Mew-au-au-ew! Louder still came that wailing mew. To carry on the lesson to such an accompaniment was scarcely possible. Besides, Quelch was a humane man. If an unfortunate cat was shut up in a cupboard, it had to be let out without delay. Even the immortal works of Virgil could not be allowed to stand in the way of that.

Mew-w-w-ew!

'There is certainly a cat in that cupboard!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch. 'Someone must have shut it in. Skinner, do you know anything of this?'

Skinner jumped.

'Me, sir? No, sir!' he gasped.

'You rotter, Skinner,' murmured Bob Cherry. 'I'll punch your nose for this, after class.'

'I didn't—!' hissed Skinner.

'Who did, then?'

'Silence in the form!' rapped out Mr. Quelch.

Several fellows were giving Skinner expressive looks.

Skinner was a rather malicious fellow, given to playing ill-natured tricks. He had been known to tie a can to the tail of Mrs. Keeble's cat. Now that there was, or at least appeared to be, a cat shut in a cupboard, few fellows doubted that Skinner had been at his tricks again. Quelch evidently suspected it.

'Wharton!'

'Yes, sir.'

'Please go and let the cat out of that cupboard.'

'Certainly, sir.'

Harry Wharton left his place, and cut across to the map-cupboard. He turned the handle and threw open the door.

Everyone expected to see a cat whisk out. But no cat whisked out. The captain of the Remove peered into the dusky interior. No cat was to be seen among the various paraphernalia stacked there. Neither was the distressed mew heard again. Harry Wharton peered among easels, rolled-up maps, and other objects, without discerning a cat.

Mr. Quelch watched him impatiently. The last minutes of the hour were ticking away: and Quelch, unlike some members of his form, did not like wasting time in a lesson.

'Wharton!' came a sharp rap. 'Let that cat out at once.'

'I can't see it, sir—'

'What? What? Nonsense!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch, testily. 'The cat is large enough to be seen, I presume. Let the animal out at once.'

'But—but I can't see any cat here, sir—' stammered Harry. 'There doesn't seem to be any cat, sir—'

'Do not be absurd, Wharton! Take that cat from the cupboard immediately.'

'But—but, sir—'

'Are you wasting time deliberately, Wharton?'

'Oh! No, sir! But—'

Mr. Quelch breathed rather hard. There was only one possible cat - Mrs. Keeble's Thomas, and Thomas was large and plump: certainly large enough to be seen, even in a dusky cupboard crowded with various objects. Quelch was getting angry.

'Go back to your place, Wharton,' he snapped.

'There isn't a cat here, sir—'

'Kindly do not talk nonsense, Wharton. Go to your place-I will deal with the cat myself!' snapped Mr. Quelch.

Harry Wharton, with a flushed face, sat down again.

Mr. Quelch rustled across to the cupboard, with a frowning brow.

His gimlet-eyes glinted into the dusk within. But the cat - if cat there was - escaped them. Quelch failed to discern any sign whatever of a cat.

He stared and stared. Then, with set lips, he dragged three or four objects out of place, to scan behind them.

There was a crash as an easel went over. That crash should surely have startled any cat into jumping out. But no cat jumped out. Then a rolled-up map toppled and measured its length on the floor. Still no cat appeared.

The gimlet-eyes almost bulged from Quelch's face, in his astonishment. He stood staring blankly into

the cupboard.

There was no cat! Unless his ears, generally very reliable, had deceived him, he had heard a cat mew from that cupboard. It seemed that his ears must have deceived him! That distressed mew must, after all, have come from some other direction. It was fortunate for Billy Bunter that Quelch could not possibly guess from what direction it had come!

He turned from the cupboard at last. The gimlet-eyes flashed round the form-room, in search of that elusive cat: and he listened for another mew, which he had no doubt would guide him to the intrusive animal.

But another mew was not heard. There was no occasion for it: as a bell began to ring. The hour was up!

It was a puzzled, mystified, and irate form-master who dismissed the Remove. Billy Bunter grinned from one fat ear to the other, as he rolled out with the form. Whatever 'et jam finis erat, cum Juppiter aethere summo' might mean, Billy Bunter did not have to disentangle its meaning now, and he couldn't have cared less. The Greyfriars ventriloquist had 'tried it on': and undoubtedly he had got away with it.

Quelch remained in the form-room for some minutes after the juniors had gone. He was looking for that cat! He looked into every corner, under every desk, in every possible or impossible place. He discovered nothing remotely resembling a member of the feline species, and he had to give it up. It really seemed as if that cat had faded into invisibility like the Cheshire Cat in Wonderland.

CHAPTER 8

A SURPRISE FOR SMITHY!

'ROT!' said Vernon-Smith.

'My dear chap—!'

'Rubbish!'

'It was Bunter—!'

'Bosh!'

'Must have been—!'

'Piffle!'

Smithy, evidently, was not to be convinced. After class, Harry Wharton and Co. were in the Rag. They, like other fellows, had been puzzled by the curious incident in the form-room. But they had 'tumbled', after thinking it over. Remembering the imaginary dog in No. 1. Study the day before, they had no doubt that the Greyfriars ventriloquist was responsible for an imaginary cat in the form-room cupboard. Peter Todd, who also had had recent experience of the fat Owl's trickery, concurred. But Smithy shrugged his shoulders at the idea.

'Rot!' he repeated. 'That fat ass couldn't— Rot!

There was a cat about somewhere. Rubbish!'

'He made us all jump yesterday, with a dog growling under the table in our study,' said Nugent.

'He might make you jump - but he wouldn't make me jump, in a hurry,' retorted the Bounder.

'Look here—!' growled Johnny Bull.

'Rubbish!'

'He made me believe that Quelch was calling me from the passage, at prep yesterday,' said Peter Todd. 'It was Quelch's bark to a "T". I tell you I was taken right in.'

'I'd like to see him take me in!' said the Bounder, derisively. 'You fellows must be silly asses to have your legs pulled.'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo, here he comes!' said Bob Cherry. 'Let's ask him. This way, old fat man.'

Billy Bunter rolled into the Rag. He blinked round through his big spectacles, and came promptly over to the group.

'Is it a feed?' he asked.

'No, you guzzling gollywog, it isn't a feed!' answered Bob. 'Was it you playing tricks in the form-room this morning?'

The fat Owl chuckled.

'What do you think? He, he, he! I say, you fellows, did I pull Quelch's leg? I got out of "con", too! He, he, he! Me all the time! He, he, he!'

'Gammon!' said Vernon-Smith.

The fat Owl blinked at him indignantly. 'Think it wasn't me?' he demanded.

'I know it wasn't!' answered Smithy. 'You couldn't do it, you fat ass.'

'I jolly well did—'

'Rats!'

'Think I couldn't make you believe Quelch was calling you, like I did Toddy?' demanded Bunter.

'I know you couldn't!'

'I'll jolly well show you!' yapped the indignant Owl.

He gave his fat little cough.

'Oh, do,' said the Bounder, sarcastically. 'Quelch was in the passage when I came in here. Now make me believe he's calling me out - if you can, you fat spoofer.'

'Vernon-Smith!'

That sharp bark followed the Bounder's words. It was so exactly Quelch's distinctive voice, on an angry note, that all the juniors started, and stared at the half-open doorway. Smithy gave quite a jump.

'Oh ! Yes, sir!' he stammered.

'Vernon-Smith! Come here at once! I have found cigarettes in your study, Vernon-Smith! Come here.'

'Oh, gad!' breathed the Bounder.

He stood quite still for some moments. Cigarettes, in a junior study, were a serious matter at Greyfriars. Smithy had been in a spot of trouble on that score more than once. Now it looked like another spot.

'The old ass!' breathed Smithy. 'What's set him rooting in my study?' Slowly and reluctantly, he made a step towards the door.

'Hold on, Smithy,' said Bob Cherry. 'Was that you, Bunter?'

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter.

'It's all right, Smithy,' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'Only a spot of that fat chump's ventriloquism. It wasn't Quelch.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

The Bounder scowled.

'Don't be a silly ass!' he snapped, and he walked across to the door. The juniors stared after him.

They had been prepared for a spot of ventriloquism, and though they had been startled for a moment, had no doubt that Bunter had evolved that bark from the corridor. Smithy, however, evidently believed that it was the genuine article. He was aware that Mr. Quelch was in the corridor, and did not believe for a moment that he could be taken in by a ventriloquial trick. He slouched out of the Rag with a scowling face.

'He, he, he!' chortled Bunter.

Mr. Quelch, in the corridor, was standing at the open window, looking out into the quad. He smiled faintly as Mr. Prout passed at a little distance. Prout, generally only too ready to talk, changed his direction slightly, as he saw Quelch at the open window, evidently to avoid contact. The episode of the previous day should really have left Prout feeling grateful. Unluckily it had left him in a state of offended dignity. Quelch's smile was slightly sarcastic.

He turned his head, as a junior emerged from the Rag, and came up to him at the window. He gave Vernon-Smith an inquiring look.

Smithy stood looking at him, and waiting. Naturally he expected Quelch to speak, as he had called him out of the Rag to go into a matter of surreptitious cigarettes! Smithy waited for the thunder to roll.

Quelch's inquiring glance became a stare. Why this junior walked up to him in the corridor and stood silent there, was a mystery to him. It was Quelch who broke the silence.

'Well?' he rapped. 'What is it, Vernon-Smith?'

The Bounder stared.

'You called me, sir—'

'What? What?' Quelch's tone was testy. 'What do you mean, Vernon-Smith? I did not call you. What do you want?'

'N-n—nothing, sir!' stammered the Bounder. 'But—but you called me, and I came out - because you called me—'

'I have said that I did not call you, Vernon-Smith.'

'But—but I heard you, sir—'

'What?'

'You called to me—'

The gimlet-eyes glinted.

'I do not know what your object is, Vernon-Smith, in coming here and stating that I called you, when I did nothing of the kind!' said Mr. Quelch, in a grinding voice. 'But I suspect that it is intended for impertinence. Take a hundred lines, Vernon-Smith, and go.'

'But—but—!' stammered the Bounder.

'Go!' snapped Mr. Quelch: and he turned back to the window.

Vernon-Smith stood staring at him, blankly, for a moment or two. Then he went back into the Rag, breathing hard. A crowd of grinning faces greeted him there. But Smithy did not grin. He could hardly believe, even now, that he had been deluded by the fat ventriloquist: but, as Quelch evidently had not called him, he had to believe it. Smithy did not like admitting that he had been too cocksure: neither did he like a hundred lines. He came over to Bunter with gleaming eyes.

'So it was you!' he snapped.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter. 'Did Quelch want you? He, he, he!'

'He thought I was cheeking him—!'

'He, he, he!'

'And he gave me a hundred lines.'

'He, he, he!'

Smack!

'Yaroooooh!'

Vernon-Smith stalked out of the Rag, scowling. He left Billy Bunter rubbing a fat head, and the other fellows laughing. There was no doubt that Bunter was a remarkable ventriloquist: but there seemed no doubt also that his remarkable gift was likely to earn him more kicks than ha'pence, so to speak, in the Remove.

CHAPTER 9

UNEXPECTED!

'ANY for me?'

'Yes : here you are.'

'Oh, good!' said Billy Bunter.

It was the following morning, in break. In break fellows generally looked in the rack for letters: and William George Bunter seldom failed so to do. Bunter was, as usual, expecting a postal-order. Often and often that expected postal-order failed to materialize. But hope springs eternal in the human breast.

On this particular morning, Bunter was more hopeful than usual. His letter home should surely have touched the parental heart. It had been very carefully compiled to produce that effect.

Mr. Bunter, only too often, seemed dissatisfied with his son's progress at school. Quelch's reports were never flattering. According to his form-master, Bunter was slack in class, and slack in games. Mr. Bunter had been quite irate about it. For which reason the fat Owl had assured him that he was going to work hard at both: and it was possible, at least, that that assurance might elicit the desired remittance.

Anyhow, Mr. Bunter had replied with unusual promptness. Very often Billy Bunter haunted the rack for days and days and days in vain. But here, on Friday, was a reply to his letter posted on Wednesday. Bob Cherry handed it down from the rack, and Bunter's fat face brightened as he recognized the paternal hand on the envelope.

'Good!' he repeated, with satisfaction. 'It's from the pater! Good!'

The fat Owl inserted a fat and grubby thumb into the envelope. He drew out the letter, and unfolded it in haste. He was not in a particular hurry to read the letter: but he was very eager to get his fat fingers on the postal-order which he hoped was enclosed therein. If the postal-order was there, Bunter was going to make what Fisher T. Fish called a 'bee-line' for the tuck-shop: arriving at that establishment by the shortest possible route in the shortest possible time, to expend the exact value of that remittance in refreshments liquid and solid. But a doleful change came over his fat face the next moment. There was no enclosure in the letter.

'Oh, lor!'

mumbled Bunter. The promptness of Mr. Bunter's reply did not, after all, indicate that he had acceded to William's request for extra cash. Whatever else it might indicate. Bunter was in no hurry to learn. Admonitions about slackness, and idleness, and faulty orthography did not interest him. He crumpled the letter in a grubby fat hand, and rolled disconsolately away.

It was sunny in the quad, but Billy Bunter's fat visage did not reflect the autumn sunshine. It was clouded and morose. However, having nothing else to do, he decided to read his pater's letter. Having lodged his fat shoulders against a buttress - Bunter always leaned if there was anything at hand upon which to lean - he uncrumpled that missive from home and blinked at it through his big spectacles.

Then the clouds on the fat visage lifted a little. True, there had been no remittance in that letter. Nevertheless, there was a spot of interest. Mr. Bunter's epistles often gave the impression of a stern Roman parent. But this time Bunter's pater seemed to be in a quite ameliorated mood.

Dear William,

For once, I have been very pleased with a letter from you. To my surprise, and certainly to my satisfaction, I find a great—I may say an immense—improvement in your spelling. You will remember that I have spoken to you, very often and very severely, on this subject. It would seem that you have, at last, taken my admonitions to heart. Not a single word in your letter was misspelt. This is so great a change, and so great an improvement, that I am prepared to believe that you are, at length, making some effort to overcome your habitual slackness and carelessness. I am pleased with you, William.

'Oh, crikey!' ejaculated Bunter, at that point. Evidently, that detention in the form-room on Wednesday afternoon had borne fruit. Bunter had simply loathed it. The mere sight of a dictionary made him feel tired. And he had had to root, and root, and root, through a dictionary, to get that letter into a proper state for inspection by Quelch. For once, if for once only, Bunter had written home a letter that was orthographically exact! It had been awful at the time! But the fat Owl was glad of it now. The awfulness was over: and here was the result: very unaccustomed words of commendation from Bunter Villa! Bunter would have preferred a postal-order: but commendation was something to go on with - it might lead to a remittance later! More cheerfully, the Owl of the Remove went on with the letter. It was getting quite interesting.

You tell me that you have resolved to work hard both in class and at games. You have said so before, but with no results. But the great improvement in your spelling encourages me to believe that you may now be in earnest. I trust that that is the case, and that I shall hear a good account of you, not only in the form-room, but on the playing-field. It would give me great pleasure to hear that you have played in a football match, for your Form. There is no reason why you should not do so, if you are assiduous at games-practice.

'Oh, crikey!' ejaculated Bunter, again.

The idea of being assiduous at games-practice did not appeal to Bunter. On a 'compulsory' day he had to roll out with the rest of the form: but even then he had a quite wonderful faculty for inventing excuses to get off. On a 'non-compulsory' day, all the King's horses and all the King's men could hardly have dragged him down to the football ground. He had about as much chance of playing for the Remove, as of playing for England - even if he had wanted to, which he didn't! An armchair before the fire in the Rag appealed to Bunter much more than urging the flying ball. However, he went on with the letter.

If indeed you are turning over a new leaf, William, I shall certainly encourage you. While I consider that your accustomed allowance should be amply sufficient for your needs, and see no reason for adding to it, nevertheless I will make an exception in certain circumstances.

At that, Billy Bunter's little round eyes glistened behind his big round spectacles. He blinked eagerly at the next passage in his pater's letter: eager to learn what were those certain circumstances.

If, and when, I hear that you have played in a football match for your Form, as a member of the eleven, I will remit you the sum of £2. 0. 0 (Two Pounds) as a reward for your effort to overcome what I had believed to be incorrigible slackness.

Your affectionate Father,
W. S. Bunter.

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

Plainly, that orthographically-exact letter home had made a good impression. Mr. Bunter had hopes of his hopeful son in class: and was prepared to be hopeful of him in games! He was prepared to come down quite handsomely, if the fat slacker really ceased to slack. It was an unexpected but happy outcome!

Billy Bunter thought it over. The amount of tuck that could be obtained for the sum of two pounds was attractive - indeed, quite dazzling. It was worth the exertion of playing in a Soccer match, if a fat, slack, and lazy Owl could somehow squeeze into the Form eleven. But—!

Five cheery juniors came sauntering along in the sunshine, as the fat Owl pondered. Bunter squeaked to them. 'I say, you fellows!'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'



'I'D LIKE TO COME ALONG AND PLAY' SAID BUNTER

'I say, you're playing Soccer tomorrow afternoon: said Bunter, blinking at the Famous Five. 'You're playing the Shell in a Form match, Wharton.'

Harry Wharton laughed.

'Fancy Bunter remembering the matches!' he said. 'Yes, we're playing the Shell tomorrow. Like to

come along and watch our goals?'

'I'd like to come along and play!' said Bunter.

'Eh?'

'What?'

'Which?'

'I mean it,' said Bunter. 'You fellows are always making out that I'm slack at games, and dodge the Soccer—'

'No making out about it,' grunted Johnny Bull. 'You dodge the Soccer every time you can, you fat spoofer.'

'Well, I don't want to dodge it tomorrow,' said Bunter. 'I want to play for the Form. Put my name down. Wharton, will you?'

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

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! I could play your heads off at Soccer, and chance it!' yapped Bunter. 'Look here, Wharton, I'm jolly keen to play - keen as mustard. It's jolly well time you gave me a chance in the games. Put me down to play. Will you?'

'I will - when we play a match at marbles,' answered the captain of the Remove. 'Not at Soccer.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Look here, you beasts—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

The Famous Five walked on, laughing. Billy Bunter's sudden desire to disport himself in a Soccer match surprised them: and seemed to amuse them too. Bunter cast a devastating blink after them as they went. That he was the world's worst footballer was, to Bunter, a trifle light as air: but the sum of two pounds to expend on tuck was no trifle. But as that sum depended on the fat Owl wedging into the Remove eleven, it was going to remain an attractive but unsubstantial mirage in the distance.

Or was it?

CHAPTER 10

SHOCK FOR PROUT!

TAP!

Mr. Prout stirred irritably in his armchair as that tap came at his study door.

Generally genial, Prout was not in his accustomed placable mood. He had not been quite his placable self since that painful episode in Friardale Lane on Wednesday afternoon.

He could not help feeling that he had cut a somewhat ludicrous figure on that occasion. He had a very strong suspicion that Quelch thought so. It was irritating and annoying. A coldness had accrued between him and Mr. Quelch. Other members of the staff had noticed it, and commented on it in Common-Room. In the Fifth Form, they had noticed that something was up with 'Old Pompous'. He had displayed unusual acerbity in the form-room. Indeed that afternoon he had come very near to caning Coker of the Fifth, who often tried his patience, and tried it harder in his present disgruntled frame of mind. Now, in his study, Prout was taking a rest after class, and considering whether to telephone to Courtfield Police-Station, and inquire whether Inspector Grimes had yet succeeded in laying by the heels that bad character who had ventured to lay unwashed hands on his majestic person. The tap at his study door interrupted his considerations.

'Come in!' Prout almost snapped.

To his surprise, the door did not open. He stared at it across the study from the armchair. Someone had tapped: and his 'Come in' should naturally have been followed by the entrance of that someone. But nobody came in. The door did not stir.

But a voice came through: a voice that the Fifth-form master knew, or at all events was assured that he knew. It was a sharp voice: almost a bark.

'Are you there, Prout?'

Prout stared harder. In view of the coldness that had arisen, he certainly did not expect a call from Mr. Quelch. Still less could he possibly have expected Quelch, if he called, to speak through the door, instead of opening it. He stared blankly.

'I am here, Mr. Quelch!' he snapped. 'What do you mean? If you have anything to say to me, why do you not enter?'

'I'm not coming in, Prout. I only want to say that I'm fed up with you meddling in my form.'

'WHAT?'

Prout jumped. If he had not had so much weight to lift, he might have jumped clear of the armchair. He could hardly believe his ears. Such a remark, from a member of Dr. Locke's staff, was not merely amazing. It was incredible. It was unthinkable. It was true that Prout, a senior master, of long experience, sometimes, indeed often, gave advice to younger members of the staff, which they did not fully appreciate. But no one, hitherto, had described his kindly and well-meant interventions in the affairs of other 'beaks' as 'meddling'. And such an expression as 'fed up'! A Remove boy might use that expression. But the Remove master—!

Prout fairly goggled at the door. The voice went on.

'Just listen to this, Prout! Mind your own business! Don't come to me with any more rot about a Remove boy helping himself to a few biscuits. You talk too much, Prout! You meddle too much! It's about time somebody told you where to get off. You're a pompous old ass, Prout!

Mr. Prout gurgled.

'Pompous old ass! Got that? Pompous old ass! That's all!'

Prout sat and gazed at the door. He was quite overwhelmed. Quelch - he had no doubt that it was Quelch - had talked to him through the door, in a manner in which no beak at Greyfriars School, assuredly, had ever talked before. Prout sat staring, overwhelmed with amazement. But amazement rapidly changed into wrath.

'Upon my word!' gasped Prout. 'Quelch! How dare you? I repeat, how dare you address me in such a manner? Are you out of your senses, sir?'

'You were never in yours, you pompous old donkey.'

'Bless my soul!'

Prout heaved himself out of the armchair. His plump face was a picture of indignant wrath. Achilles' wrath, to Greece the direful spring of woes unnumbered, had simply nothing on Prout's at that moment. He elephantined across to the door, and dragged it wide open. He thundered in the doorway:

'Quelch! How dare you? Such impertinence - such insolence - such—such—' Prout broke off suddenly. He was staring into space. Naturally he had expected to find Quelch outside the door, as he had talked through it. But Quelch was not visible.

'Bless my soul!' ejaculated Mr. Prout.

He stared into the corridor. Quelch was not to be seen. Only one person was visible there: a fat Removite, who was standing at a window on the other side of the corridor, at a little distance, looking out: his back to Prout.

Prout stared at Billy Bunter's plump back.

Not for a moment did he dream of connecting Bunter with the voice that had barked through his door. Such a suspicion could not possibly occur to him. That barking voice bore no resemblance whatever to Billy Bunter's fat squeak. And Prout, of course, could not guess that a fat ventriloquist at his door had cut across to that window when he heard the armchair creak in the study, and knew that Prout was on the move!

'Bunter!' boomed Prout.

The Owl of the Remove blinked round through his big spectacles. There was a glimmer in the little round eyes behind those big round spectacles. But the fat Owl was careful not to grin: very careful indeed.

'Yes, sir!' squeaked Bunter. 'Did you call me, sir?'

'Where is Mr. Quelch?'

'Mr. Quelch, sir? I don't know, sir! I haven't seen him since class, sir.'

'What? He was here a moment ago.'

'Was he, sir?'

'A few moments ago! Did you not see him, Bunter?'

'No, sir! I—I was looking out of the window, sir! I never saw anybody in the passage, sir.'

Mr. Prout stared up and down the corridor. Every door was shut, including that of Common-Room, at the upper end. Quelch must have moved off very rapidly after his last remark at Prout's door. He must have gone into Common-Room or into one of the studies. That stupid boy, Bunter, had had his back turned and had not seen him! It was possible - indeed it seemed to Prout probable - that Quelch had not ventured to remain and face him, after such insulting remarks. At all events he seemed to have beaten a very rapid retreat.

Prout stood in the doorway, breathing hard.

He had been prepared to thunder forth his indignant wrath. But there was no one at hand at whom to thunder it forth.

He turned back into his study. He closed the door with unnecessary emphasis. Then, and not till then, did William George Bunter allow his fat features to relax in a grin.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter. He rolled away grinning.

Prout, in his study, sat down heavily in his armchair.

He had quite forgotten that bad character in Friardale Lane, and his intention of phoning Inspector Grimes, now. His flustered mind was wholly occupied by this amazing, this astounding, this unprecedented, this unparalleled occurrence. Had Quelch gone out of his senses? O - awful thought! - had he been drinking? Could he leave the matter where it was, or should he take steps? If so, what steps should he take? In a state of simmering wrath and indignation, Prout pondered.

While he pondered, a fat junior, in the quad, chuckled and chuckled, till he had no breath left with which to chuckle. Bunter had set out to make "Old Pompous" sit up, as a just reprisal for describing the bagging of biscuits in Common-Room as 'pilfering', and landing him in a row with Quelch. He had, undoubtedly, made Prout 'sit up'. Prout, emphatically, was sitting up! And the fat ventriloquist was not finished yet. It was Quelch's turn next!

CHAPTER 11

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

'I DESPISE you, sir!'

Five fellows, in the Remove passage, fairly blinked. They came to a halt at the door of No. 1 Study, as if rooted to the floor.

Harry Wharton and Co. had come up to the study to tea. Bob Cherry had a parcel under his arm. The Famous Five were thinking chiefly of tea in the study, and a cheery 'jaw' over the same, about the Soccer match with the Shell due on the morrow. But the rich fruity voice that floated out from No. 1 Study banished both feed and football from their minds. It astonished them - indeed it almost petrified them.

They knew that voice, of course. The fruity tones of Mr. Prout, master of the Fifth, were not to be mistaken. But why, in the name of wonder, was a senior master in a junior study, and to whom could he possibly be speaking there? And in such terms, too!

They had naturally supposed the study to be untenanted, in their absence. True, they would not have been surprised to find Billy Bunter there. Bunter was often found in another fellow's study about tea-time. But the last person they would have expected to find in that study was 'Old Pompous.' Yet - unless Prout's voice was there without Prout - he was there!

'What the dickens—!' breathed Harry Wharton.

'Prout!' said Johnny Bull, in wonder.

'The esteemed and absurd Prout!' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'What on earth is Prout doing in our study?' said Nugent.

'Talking!' said Bob. 'Prout's generally talking! But why the jolly old dickens has he come here to talk?'

'And to whom?' said Harry, blankly.

His hand was on the door-handle. But he hesitated to open the door. The fruity voice within was going on.

'I repeat, sir, that I despise you! I desire, sir, to make my meaning absolutely clear! I regard you, sir, with contempt.'

It was not only Prout's voice, but Prout's manner.

Prout was long-winded: much addicted to repetition in his remarks. He would repeat a remark twice, or thrice: and he never used two or three words if six or seven would do.

'What's up?' asked Vernon-Smith, coming up the passage from the landing, and stopping to stare at the amazed group outside No. 1.

'Prout!' answered Harry. 'He's in our study— Oh! Listen!'

The fruity voice went on. It came quite clearly and audibly through the door.

'Your form, sir, is the most disorderly in the school. I doubt, sir, whether you have the capacity to manage even a junior form. I doubt it very much, sir! Every member of the staff, sir, is aware that your form-room resembles a bear-garden! A bear-garden, sir! I said a bear-garden, Mr. Quelch!'

'Oh, gad!' gasped Smithy.

'Is he talking to Quelch?' asked Bob. almost dazedly. 'Quelch can't be in there too, can he?'

'Can't be just talking to himself, I suppose,' said Johnny Bull. 'Is he having a row with Quelch?'

'Sounds like it!' said Harry. 'But - two beaks coming to a Remove study to have a row - what the holy smoke—!'

'Beats me!' said Nugent. 'The beatfulness is terrific.'

'What's up, you fellows?' asked two or three voices.

Other Removites, coming up to the studies, stopped to join the group outside No. 1. Quite a crowd of the Remove gathered there.

'It's Prout—'

'And Quelch—'

'In our study—'

'Having a row—!'

'We haven't heard Quelch, but Prout's jawing him - listen!'

A wondering crowd listened as the fruity voice went on within:

'I repeat, sir, that I regard you with contempt! With contempt, sir! Do I make my meaning clear, Mr. Quelch? Contempt!'

'Great pip!' said Skinner. 'What will Quelch say to that?'

But they listened in vain for a reply from Quelch.

Quelch, if he was in the study, seemed to be taking all the remarks addressed to him in stony silence. Only Prout's voice had been audible, all the while.

Then suddenly, to their startled ears, came an utterly unexpected sound - a sound, in the circumstances, even more startling than Prout's remarks. It was a fat chuckle. 'He, he, he!' Every fellow jumped as he heard it.

'Bunter!' gasped Bob Cherry.

'Bunter's there too—!' stuttered Nugent.

Evidently, Billy Bunter was in No. 1 Study. That two 'beaks' should be having a 'row' in a junior study was amazing. But that they should be having it in the presence of Billy Bunter was simply astounding. Harry Wharton and Co. almost wondered whether they were dreaming.

'He, he, he! That's all right! I've got it to a "T" I jolly well know! He, he, he!'

Harry Wharton threw open the study door. This extraordinary mystery had to be solved. The whole crowd stared into the study.

Billy Bunter was there - grinning from one fat ear to the other. But, to their utter amazement, no one else was there. The fat Owl of the Remove had the study to himself.

They stared round the study. Quelch was not there: but they had heard Prout's fruity voice, so Prout simply had to be there. But he was not there. Only Bunter.

'Bunter—!'

'He, he, he!'

'Where's Prout?'

'He, he, he! Did you think he was here?' chuckled Bunter. 'He, he, he! Only me practising! I knew I could get his gurgle, with a spot of practice! He, he, he! I say, you fellows. I've got it all right! If you thought it was Prout, Quelch will think the same, when I start on him! He, he, he!'

'Oh!' gasped Bob Cherry. 'That fat ass—'

'The blithering bloater—'

'That dithering duffer with his potty ventriloquism—'

'He, he, he!' chortled Bunter. 'Did I take you fellows in? He, he, he! Did you think Prout was ragging Quelch in your study? He, he, he! Only a spot of practice! He, he, he! I'm doing it here because that beast Toddy kicked me when I was trying it on in our study. I say, you fellows - he, he, he!'

'Toddy kicked you, did he?' asked Bob.

'Yes, the beast - he's jealous because I'm such a wonderful ventriloquist, you know. So—'

'Toddy has jolly good ideas sometimes,' said Bob.

'Let's all do the same.'

'Good egg!'

'Hear, hear!'

'Go it!'

The grin of happy self-satisfaction vanished from the fat face as if wiped off by a duster. It was replaced by alarm, as the fat Owl skipped round the table to elude lunging feet. The 'mystery' was explained, now: it was not Prout in the study at all: it was only Bunter practising an imitation of his fruity voice: obviously with the intention of passing it off on Quelch later! And once more it was borne in upon Billy Bunter's fat mind that ventriloquial trickery was not a popular form of entertainment in the Remove. He dodged those lunging feet - but not successfully.

'I say, you fellows - yaroooooh!' roared Bunter. 'I say - stoppit! Wow! If you keep on kicking me, you beasts, I'll - wow! wow! wow! Oh, crikey! Whoop!'

The Famous Five landed one each before the fat Owl dodged out of the study. In the doorway, Skinner landed another: and the Bounder administered one more - a very good one - as the fat ventriloquist fled yelling down the passage. Billy Bunter had made Prout 'sit up': and he was, apparently, going to make Quelch 'sit up' in his turn: but in the meanwhile a ventriloquist's life, like the policeman's in the song, seemed to be not a happy one!

CHAPTER 12

BUNTER KNOWS HOW

'HE, he, he!'

Mr. Quelch glanced round, frowning slightly, as that sudden and unmelodious chuckle impinged upon his ears. Really there seemed no reason why Billy Bunter, at that particular moment, should indulge in that unmusical expression of inward merriment.

It was Saturday morning, after third school. Billy Bunter was leaning on a buttress, deep in thought. His deep thoughts were about equally divided between dinner, which was coming soon, and the Soccer match, which was coming later. In normal circumstances, Bunter's thoughts would have been wholly concentrated on dinner. But the football match that day was of unusual interest to him. Generally, Soccer passed him by like the idle wind which he regarded not. But the letter from Bunter Villa had made a great deal of difference on this occasion. Bunter's finances were, as usual, at a low ebb. The handsome sum of Two Pounds would have been as welcome to the fat Owl as corn in Egypt in the lean years. If, by hook or by crook, he could wedge into the form eleven, that reward would be forthcoming.

The question was, how? The captain of the Remove picked his men very carefully for a match with Hobson and Co. of the Shell. He would no more have dreamed of playing Bunter, than of playing Gosling the porter. In Billy Bunter's esteem, Soccer mattered little, and Two Pounds mattered a lot. In Harry Wharton's, Soccer mattered a lot, and Billy Bunter and his concerns did not matter at all. So it looked as if those Two Pounds from Bunter Villa had to remain an unsubstantial mirage.

It was, in fact, a problem that Billy Bunter's fat brain could not solve. And it was Mr. Quelch who, all unknowingly, provided a solution - causing the fat Owl to burst into that sudden chuckle, as the bright idea flashed into his fat head.

Quelch was speaking to Hacker, in the quad. Neither of the masters heeded the fat junior leaning on the buttress. Quelch, that afternoon, was going on one of his 'grinds'. He might have asked Mr. Prout to walk with him, but for the state of freezing dignity into which Prout seemed to have retired. Now he was discussing it with Mr. Hacker.

'A very pleasant day for a good long walk, Hacker,' Mr. Quelch was saying. 'By Redclyffe Hill - the autumn scenery is really magnificent - and home by way of Lantham—'

Billy Bunter was not interested. Whether Quelch walked with Prout, or with Hacker, or on his own, whether he walked to Lantham or to Land's End, the fat Owl couldn't have cared less. Nevertheless, Quelch's words caused that bright idea to germinate in his fat brain. They indicated that Quelch was going to be absent all, or most, of the afternoon. And with Quelch safe off the scene, it flashed into the fat ventriloquist's mind that he knew how to solve that problem that had seemed to have no solution.

'He, he, he!'

Bunter could not help chuckling at the idea.

But Mr. Quelch's frown, as he glanced round, cut short that fat chuckle, like an alarm-clock suddenly stopping. Billy Bunter detached himself from the buttress, and rolled away. Quelch unknitted his brows, resumed his conversation with Mr. Hacker, and dismissed that fat member of his form from his mind.

Billy Bunter rolled in search of Harry Wharton. He found the Famous Five punting a footer in a corner of the quad.

'I say, you fellows!' squeaked Bunter.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Stop this one, Bunter!' called back Bob Cherry.

'Yaroooooh!'

Bunter stopped the whizzing footer with a fat chin, and sat down. He sat and roared. The Famous Five roared also:

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Ow! Beasts! Wow!' Billy Bunter tottered up. 'I say, you fellows - wow! I say - ow! wow! wow!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Kick that ball this way, fathead!' called out Bob.

'Beast!'

Billy Bunter's eyes gleamed behind his spectacles. He was going to kick that ball back - right in the middle of Bob Cherry's features! He took a little run, and kicked, with all the force of a podgy leg. It was quite a hefty kick, with plenty of weight behind it. Had that kick crashed the ball, as intended, on Bob's grinning features, those features must have sustained some damage. But Billy Bunter was not only cack-handed - he was cack-footed also. That tremendous kick missed the ball. Bunter's foot, without touching the leather, flew into the air. For the millionth part of a second he stood, like a stork, on one leg. Then he sat down again, with a bump that almost shook the solid quad.

'Wow!'

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

'Ow! wow! wooh! Ooooh!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Very kindly, the chums of the Remove gathered round the fat Owl, and helped him to his feet.

Bunter stood spluttering.

'Urrrrgh! Ooooh! Woooooh!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, stop cackling,' yapped Bunter. 'I say — oooogh! — I want to speak to you—goooh!—about the Soccer, Wharton. Wow! I've asked you to play me this afternoon— wow! — Look here, I'm jolly keen on it— wow! — so will you put me down to play?'

'After you've just shown us what you can do with a Soccer ball?' asked Harry, laughing.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Yes or no?' yapped Bunter.

'No, fathead! Now roll away like a good barrel.'

'Then I shall jolly well speak to Quelch about it,' said Bunter. 'I'm not going to be left out every time, I can tell you. You'll jolly well have to play me if Quelch says so. I'm going to appeal to Quelch.'

'You silly ass!' said Harry. 'Lascelles is games-master: Quelch never interferes in the games.'

'You'd jolly well have to play me, all the same, if Quelch told you to,' yapped Bunter. 'I'm going to put it up to him to see fair play.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'You can cackle—!'

'Thanks - we will! Ha, ha, ha!'

'Yah!'

Having hurled that monosyllable at the Famous Five, Billy Bunter rolled away, still gasping for breath. He left the Famous Five laughing. That Quelch would intervene in football matters was improbable: that he would intervene in favour of the school's worst footballer, still more highly improbable.

Harry Wharton and Co. certainly did not expect to hear from Quelch on the subject. They did not know what was working in the fat mind of the Greyfriars ventriloquist. Billy Bunter knew how!

CHAPTER 13

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

'MASTER Wharton—'

'Yes, Trotter.'

'Mr. Quelch's study, sir: Mr. Quelch wants to speak to you on the telephone, and he's 'olding on.'

'Oh! All right.'

Harry Wharton and Co. were in the Rag, after dinner, when the House page came in with that unexpected message. Having delivered it, Trotter departed: leaving the captain of the Remove and his friends surprised and puzzled. Some of them had noticed that Quelch had gone out with Hacker, after lunch: and so far as they thought of him at all, they supposed that they were done with him for the day, Saturday being a half-holiday. For what imaginable reason he could desire to speak to his Head Boy on the telephone, they could not begin to guess.

'What the dickens does Quelch want?' said Bob Cherry. Harry Wharton shook his head.

'Haven't the foggiest!' he answered. 'But I'd better go, I suppose.' And he went.

The receiver was off the telephone, when he arrived in Mr. Quelch's study. He picked it up, and spoke into the transmitter.

'Mr. Quelch - Harry Wharton speaking—'

A sharp, barking voice came back: a voice that Harry Wharton knew, or at any rate had no doubt that he knew. 'Wharton! Is that you, Wharton? You have kept me waiting, Wharton!'

'Sorry, sir - I came at once when Trotter told me—'

'I have been waiting several minutes. Mr. Hacker is waiting for me outside this call-box. You have wasted his time, as well as mine. Wharton.'

Harry Wharton breathed rather hard. Quelch did not sound in a good temper! And this, really, was a little unreasonable. However, the captain of the Remove answered quietly:

'You wished to speak to me, sir?'

'Yes. I forgot to mention it to you before I left the school. I understand that the Remove are playing in a form match this afternoon - with the Shell, I think.'

'Yes, sir,' answered Harry, in wonder. Quelch, though he often took a kindly interest in form games, was not precisely a Soccer 'fan': and why he should ring up, while out on a walk with Hacker, about a junior football match, was quite a mystery.

'Have you made up your team?'

'Oh, yes, sir: the list has been posted up some time.'

'I have not seen it. Is Bunter's name in it?'

'Eh?'

'Cannot you hear me, Wharton?'

'Oh! Yes! But—!'

'Then answer me. Is Bunter's name in the list?'

'No!' gasped Harry.

'And why not?'

'Bunter isn't much use at Soccer, sir. Not even in a pick-up game. He couldn't play in a form match.'

'You are not fair to Bunter, Wharton. I am surprised at this. I must say that I am also displeased - very much displeased indeed. I desire that every boy in my Form should have fair play in the form games, Wharton. Indeed I insist upon it.'

Harry Wharton stared blankly at the telephone, as the sharp voice barked from the other end, more sharply than ever. He remembered that Bunter had stated that he would appeal to Quelch. Apparently he had done so: and this was the result.

The barking voice went on:

'You hear me, Wharton? I insist!'

'But, sir,' stammered Harry, 'that fat slacker—'

'What? What did you say?'

'I—I—I mean Bunter, sir—'

'If you mean Bunter, Wharton, you had better say what you mean. You should know better than to use such expressions in speaking to your form-master.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! Sorry, sir - it slipped out—'

'Kindly do not allow any such expression to slip out again, Wharton, when you are addressing me.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! No, sir! But—but—'

'But what?' came a testy snap.

'But that fat - hem - I mean Bunter, sir - Bunter's no good at Soccer. He can't play footer for toffee—'

'For what?'

'I—I mean, he can't play at all, sir - it would be playing a man short, if I put Bunter in the team. I can't even understand why he wants to play this time specially. He's never been keen before.'

'He is keen now, as you express it, Wharton. It is your duty, as football captain in the Remove, to give him every encouragement.'

'Oh! Yes! Certainly, sir - in practice, or a pick-up game - but this is a form match, sir, and we want to beat the Shell if we can—'

'I think you misjudge Bunter, Wharton. I have no doubt that he will do the form every credit in a football match.'

"But—but—but he's just a dud, sir—' gasped Harry.

'A what?'

'I—I mean, he's no use at all in Soccer—'

'I have already told you, Wharton, to choose your expressions more carefully in addressing me, and not to indulge in schoolboy slang.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! Sorry, sir! But really, sir—'

'I trust, Wharton, that you are not intending to argue the matter with me, but that you intend to carry out my wishes - I may say, my instructions.'

Harry Wharton set his lips, hard.

If this was the result of an appeal by Bunter to the Remove master, it was clear that Quelch was coming down heavily on the side of the fat Owl.

Quelch's word, in the Greyfriars Remove, was law.

No Remove man hitherto had ever thought of arguing any point with Quelch. One glint from the gimlet-eyes would have stopped any argument before it had fairly started, if any fellow had ever attempted it.

Nevertheless, there was a limit. Lascelles was games-master: games were his business, not Quelch's. In intervening in football matters, Quelch was over-stepping another master's province. It was quite unlike him: for Quelch had none of Prout's fussy interfering ways. Yet now that was exactly what he was doing. Wharton hardly knew how to answer.

'Do you hear me, Wharton?'

'I hear you, sir!' stammered Harry. 'But—but—but I—I really can't play such a dud—I—I mean, I can't

play Bunter in a form match, sir - the Shell are a pretty strong team, sir, and if I played a dud—I—I mean if I played Bunter, we shouldn't have an earthly—'

'A what?'

'I—I mean, we shouldn't have a chance, sir. I'd be glad to help Bunter on in Soccer, sir, if he's really keen: but—'

'It appears, Wharton, that you have no regard for my wishes in the matter. Is that the case?'

'Oh, no, sir! Not at all, sir. But—'

'Understand this clearly, Wharton. I desire that Bunter shall play in the football match this afternoon. Answer me directly. Is he to play or not?'

Harry Wharton did not answer 'directly'. It was difficult to answer. It was almost on his lips to tell Quelch to mind his own business, and leave football matters to footballers. But that really was not an answer that any fellow could make to his form-master.

'Answer me, Wharton!' came an irritable snap. 'I can scarcely suppose that you are thinking of disobeying my express wishes. Answer me at once.'

Slowly, and with deep feelings, the captain of the Remove made up his mind.

'If—if—if you make a point of it, sir—' he stammered.

'I have said so.'

'Very well, sir: I will do as you wish.' Wharton's answer came slowly, reluctantly: but it came!

'Very good! That is all!'

Harry Wharton put up the receiver. With a grim face, he left Mr. Quelch's study, to return to the Rag: with unexpected and very disconcerting news for the Remove footballers.

He did not, naturally, notice that a study door a little further up the passage was ajar. He was quite unaware that a pair of little round eyes, behind a pair of big round spectacles, watched his back, as he went, from the door of Mr. Hacker's study - where there was also a telephone! He remained in happy ignorance of a grinning fat Owl: and Billy Bunter did not chuckle till he had disappeared. Then he did!

'He, he, he!'

Not till Wharton was quite safe off the scene, did the fat ventriloquist roll out of Hacker's study. He grinned as he rolled. That Two Pounds from Bunter Villa was as good as in Billy Bunter's pocket, now!

CHAPTER 14

ALL RIGHT FOR BUNTER!

'RUBBISH!' hooted Smithy.

'It's too jolly thick!' said Peter Todd.

'The thickfulness is terrific!' declared Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Bother Quelch!'

'Blow Quelch—!'

'That fat ass - rubbish—!'

'Forget it, Wharton.'

It was quite a hubbub, in the Rag. Seldom, if ever, had the Remove footballers been quite so excited about anything. What the captain of the Remove had to tell them, when he came back from Quelch's study, amazed them - but they were more angry and indignant than amazed.

'What the dickens does Quelch mean?' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'He's never interfered in the games before.'

'He's not going to interfere now!' bawled Smithy. 'What does he know about Soccer, anyway?'

'Not much, if he thinks Bunter any good,' said Harry. 'But he's made a point of it - and what could I do?'

'You could have told him where he gets off!' snapped Smithy. 'He's not games-master, and he can't butt in. You could have told him to stick to grammar and geography, and leave Soccer to fellows who know something about it.'

'Oh, don't be an ass!' said Harry, impatiently. 'Quelch is our beak, and we've got to respect him. I can't understand why he's barged in this time, but he has—'

'It's jolly thick!' said Johnny Bull, 'but—!'

'We shall have to stand it,' said Nugent.

'What cannot be cured, must go longest to the well, as the English proverb remarks,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Fancy Bunter - playing for the form!' said Squiff. 'Playing the Second Form at marbles is his mark.'

'I suppose Quelch thinks he hasn't had fair play,' said Harry. 'I wish he'd mind his own business: but—'

'Can't be helped!' said Bob.

'It's the same as playing a man short,' said Tom Brown. 'It's making Hobson's gang a present of the game.'

'Oh, draw it mild,' said Bob. 'A game's never lost till it's won. We'll beat the Shell all the same. If Bunter gets in the way, we can boot him out of it.'

'We'll boot him fast enough, if he gets in the way,' said Squiff. 'But—'

'But—!' said Ogilvy.

'I tell you, we're not standing for it!' exclaimed Vernon-Smith. 'Mean to say that you're going to scratch a man who can play, and put in that fat dud who can't?'

'Have I got any choice?' snapped Wharton. His own temper was not at its best, just then.

'All right, then,' said Smithy, savagely. 'If you're leaving a man out to make room for that fat chump, you can leave me out. I wouldn't be found dead in the team, with that dithering dummy.'

'Don't be an ass, Smithy,' muttered Tom Redwing.

'I mean it!' snarled the Bounder.

Harry Wharton breathed hard. His own feelings were deep. Quelch's intervention was unusual: unexpected: uncalled-for. But he felt that he had no choice in the matter. He had to bite on the bullet: and the Bounder's ebullition of temper was not helpful. He had to lose a man: but he did not want to lose his best winger.

'Look here, Smithy—!' he began.

'Take my name out, if you put Bunter's in!' snapped Smithy. 'I'm not going to be made a monkey of, if you fellows are. That's that!'

A fat figure rolled into the Rag. Billy Bunter blinked at the crowd of excited footballers, through his big spectacles.

'I say, you fellows!' he squeaked.

Quite inimical looks were cast at the fat Owl. In matters of Soccer, nobody ever even remembered Bunter's existence. Now they had to remember it.

'You fat ass—!'

'You dithering duffer—'

'How did you get round Quelch?'

'Boot him!'

'I say, you fellows, what's the row?' asked Bunter. It was the artful fat Owl's cue to know nothing of the latest development. 'Is anything the matter?'

'Yes,' answered Bob, 'you are!'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'You'll be wanted this afternoon, Bunter,' said Harry.

'What for?' asked Bunter.

'Football, fathead! Kick-off's at three, so turn up in the changing-room on time.'

Billy Bunter contrived not to grin. Evidently, his master's voice on the telephone had worked the oracle. Exactly how much he was 'wanted' in the Soccer match the fat Owl was fully aware. But that did not matter to Bunter. What mattered was the promised 'tip' from Bunter Villa.

'And don't let us down if you can help it, you fat ass!' said Bob.

'Think he could help it?' sneered the Bounder.

'I could play your head off, Smithy, and chance it!' retorted Bunter, disdainfully. 'Look here, Wharton, do you mean that you've made up your mind to play me, after all?'

'Yes, ass.'

'That's all very well,' said Bunter, loftily. 'It's pretty thick, I think, leaving it till the last minute like this. A fellow has a right to know whether he's wanted or not. I'm not at all sure that I shall play now.'

'You cheeky fat ass—!' roared Johnny Bull.

'Oh, really, Bull—'

'Look here, Bunter, you fat chump—!' exclaimed Bob.

'You can call a fellow names,' said the fat Owl, 'but I don't like this sort of shilly-shallying. I've offered to play, and been refused. Now Wharton tells me at the last minute that I'm wanted. I've a jolly good mind not to play at all.'

'Look here, Bunter,' Harry Wharton had a gleam of hope. 'If you'd rather stand out, it's all right. Quelch has asked me to play you, and I've said I would: but if you'd rather not—!'

'No fear!' said Bunter, promptly. 'I'm playing all right. I won't let you down, old chap. Now you've made up your mind to do the right thing, I'll back you up. Count me in.'

With that, the fat Owl rolled out of the Rag. The footballers were giving him almost wolfish looks. Really, Bunter was not quite safe in the Rag just then. He rolled away grinning: but he left no grins

behind him. Every other face was grim.

'So that's that, is it?' sneered Smithy.

'Yes,' said Harry. 'And if you mean what you said, Smithy—'

'Every word!' snapped the Bounder.

'Okay - you go out, and Bunter goes in, then!' said the captain of the Remove. 'I'm sorry, you chaps, but it can't be helped, and we've got to make the best of it - so for goodness sake, let's have no more palaver about it.'

The Bounder gave him a black look, and slouched away. And, in spite of Wharton's appeal, there continued to be quite a lot of 'palaver': and Mr. Quelch's ears certainly would have burned, could he have heard a tenth part of that 'palaver'. But though no doubt it afforded the Remove fellows some solace to let off steam, 'that' was 'that' all the same! It was all right for Bunter - if for nobody else!

CHAPTER 15

THE BITER BIT!

BILLY BUNTER grinned.

He was feeling fine.

Stretched comfortably, if not elegantly, in the armchair in No. 7 Study, the Owl of the Remove grinned from one fat ear to the other.

He had cause to grin. Everything was going his way. Complacently, he reflected what a jolly clever fellow he was. He was booked to play for the Remove - not on his merits as a footballer, for he hadn't any: but at least on his merits as a ventriloquist! No other fellow, Bunter was assured, could have thought up a scheme like this. No other fellow, in fact, could have got away with it: for only Bunter possessed the weird gift of playing ventriloquial tricks.

The fat Owl had never quite realized before how useful such a capacity for trickery might be. Now, evidently, it was coming in very useful. He had made Prout 'sit up': and what other fellow at Greyfriars had ever made a beak 'sit up' and escaped unscathed? He was going to make Quelch 'sit up' in his turn. In the meantime, he was going to bag that handsome 'tip' from Bunter Villa by playing for the form: whether Harry Wharton and Co. liked it or lumped it. His master's voice on the telephone had settled the matter for the captain of the Remove, who did not begin to dream that that voice had come from a fat ventriloquist, on Hacker's telephone in Hacker's study.

No wonder Billy Bunter grinned, till his grin seemed to extend almost round his fat head! No wonder he was feeling pleased with himself and with things generally.

There was perhaps just one fly in the ointment. Football was a form of exertion. It was a form of exertion that most fellows enjoyed: but no form of exertion whatever had any appeal for the fattest and laziest member of the Greyfriars community.

But Billy Bunter knew the answer to that one! He just was not going to exert himself. He was going to change for footer. He was going to roll on the football field with Harry Wharton and Co. He was even going to kick the ball, if by chance it came his way. But that was the limit. Any fellow who expected Bunter to chase after that ball, was going to be disappointed. Billy Bunter's little fat legs were not going to be exercised unduly. Not if Bunter knew it!

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter.

It did not occur to Bunter's fat brain that there was anything unscrupulous in all this. He would have been indignant at any such suggestion. Twenty centuries ago, Julius Caesar remarked 'id quod volunt credunt'. That certainly applied to Billy Bunter, of whom it could undoubtedly be said 'id quod vult credit' - he believed what he wanted to believe! Bunter's fat brain moved in mysterious ways its wonders to perform. The egregious fat Owl was quite satisfied with himself. In fact, self-satisfaction was his long suit.

Kick-off in the form match was at three. The third quarter sounded from the clock-tower.

Reluctantly, Billy Bunter contemplated stirring from the armchair.

He did not want to stir. An armchair was infinitely more attractive to him than a football field. But he had to get down to the changing-room if he was to play: and he could not fail to be aware that the footballers would not wait for him. If he did not turn up on time, they were not likely to look for him and round him up: unlikely even to give him a call. Only too gladly, in all probability, would they walk off without him, and leave him out of the game. Bunter was not chancing that. Reluctantly, but inevitably, he prepared to heave his extensive weight out of the armchair.

Footsteps came up the passage from the stairs. Bunter was far from expecting a call: so he was surprised when the door opened, and Herbert Vernon-Smith looked in. The Bounder stared across at the fat figure in the armchair, with a curling lip.

'You look like a footballer!' he said.

'Yah!' was the only reply Bunter could think of, to that.

'So you're going to play, are you?'

'I'm coming down to change now,' retorted Bunter: and with that, he heaved his plump person out of the armchair.

Vernon-Smith came into the study. His first proceeding there, was to give the fat junior a shove on a plump chest, which caused him to sit down in the armchair again, with a bump, spluttering for breath.

'Ooooh!' gasped Bunter. 'Wooogh ! Beast! Ooooh!'

'Sit there, you fat ass.'

Billy Bunter sat there-gasping. He did not intend to continue to sit there - he intended to go down and change for footer. But, it seemed, the Bounder of Greyfriars had other intentions.

He stepped back to the door. There, he jerked the key out of the lock, and jammed it into the lock outside. The gasping fat Owl witnessed that proceeding with indignant surprise.

'Look here, Smithy—!' he spluttered.

Smithy did not 'look there'. He did not waste a glance further on Bunter, or a word. He stepped out into the passage and banged the door after him.

Click!

Billy Bunter could hardly believe his fat ears, as he heard the key click in the lock outside the study. He blinked quite blankly at the door. The click was followed by a scrape, as the key was taken from the lock.

Footsteps receded down the passage. 'Beast!' gasped Bunter.

He heaved up from the armchair. He almost hurled himself at the door, and dragged at the handle.

The door did not open. That door was locked on the outside, and the Bounder, evidently, had walked off with the key in his pocket.

'Beast!' roared Bunter.

He dragged and dragged at the door-handle. But he dragged and dragged in vain. That door was immovable.

'Smithy!' yelled Bunter. 'Smithy! Come back, you beast! You jolly well come back and let me out. I've got to go down and change, haven't I? Come back with that key, Smithy.'

Only echo answered. There was no other reply to Billy Bunter's frantic yell. Smithy was gone.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He stood blinking at the door. He was a prisoner in his study. That indescribable beast, Herbert Vernon-Smith, had turned the key on him - and evidently did not intend to come back and let him out. Slowly, the fat Owl realized what it meant. Harry Wharton had obeyed his master's voice: the other fellows had, though with deep feelings, acceded - all but Smithy! Smithy had 'put paid' to it. Billy Bunter had thought up a scheme for wedging into the Soccer eleven. Smithy had thought up another, to keep him out! And it looked as if it was Smithy who was going to score. It was a case of 'the biter bit' - never a pleasant experience for the biter! That it was precisely what he deserved for his trickery, did not occur to Bunter. Neither would it have consoled him, had it occurred to him. He hammered on the door with a fat fist.

'Let me out!' he roared. 'Smithy, you beast - open this door! I've got to go down and change! Will

you let me out!

But answer there came none!

Bunter hammered and hammered. Smithy was not coming back: but somebody else might hear and come to the rescue. Few fellows, however, were likely to come up to the studies on a half-holiday, with a football match about to begin. The fat Owl hammered in vain.

And the minutes were passing. Harry Wharton had reluctantly admitted the fat Owl to the team. If he turned up on time, he had to play. But if the game started without him, there was no place for Bunter. Once the whistle went, all was up. Minutes were precious now - indeed moments! And in fact, in those very minutes, Harry Wharton and Co., in the changing-room, were wondering why Bunter did not roll in. Smithy, who could have told them, said nothing. Whether the fat Owl had forgotten, or whether his accustomed laziness had supervened, they did not know - but they hoped for the best! Whatever the cause of the fat Owl's absence, one thing was certain - a Soccer match couldn't wait for Bunter! Harry Wharton cast a last glance, from the door. There was no sign of Bunter, and he turned to Vernon-Smith.

'That fat ass isn't coming,' he said. 'Get into your things, Smithy - and jump to it.'

'Okay!' drawled the Bounder.

Smithy executed a lightning change. He smiled cheerfully as he went into the field with the Remove men. The whistle went: after which nobody even remembered the existence of William George Bunter. That fat youth, tired of hammering on the door of No. 7 Study, sprawled his plump person in the armchair again: with feelings that could not have been expressed in words, either in his natural voice or his ventriloquial one! The biter had been bitten: and that 'tip' from Bunter Villa was still a distant and unsubstantial mirage!

CHAPTER 16

CUT!

'I SAY, you fellows.'

'Oh, scat!' said five voices in unison.

'But I say, look at old Pompous!' chuckled Billy Bunter.

'Eh! What about Prout?'

'Just look!'

On Monday morning, after class, Harry Wharton and Co., in a cheery group in the quad, were talking Soccer. Having beaten the Shell handsomely, on Saturday, by two goals to one, they were looking forward with cheerful anticipation to the fixture with Felgate, now nearly due. On that subject Billy Bunter's opinion was not desired: still less was he desired to offer his services.

But, it seemed, it was not Soccer that interested the fat Owl at the moment. It was 'Old Pompous': otherwise Mr. Prout, master of the Fifth Form at Greyfriars.

The Famous Five were not in the least interested in Prout. However, as Bunter drew their attention to that pompous and portly gentleman, they glanced round.

Then they were interested. They even forgot Felgate and Soccer.

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bob Cherry.

'What on earth's up?' asked Nugent.

'Something is!' said Johnny Bull.

'The upfulness seems to be terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Harry Wharton did not speak: but he stared. Greyfriars fellows did not, as a rule, stare! But what the chums of the Remove beheld now was enough to make any fellow stare.

It was known all over the school, by this time, that there was some sort of 'rift in the lute' between Quelch and Prout. But this—!

Mr. Quelch had come out of the House, in hat and coat, evidently to go out for one of his walks before dinner. At the same time, Mr. Prout was coming up the path, so that it was unavoidable for the two masters to meet face to face. In normal circumstances there would, of course, have been nothing in that: but only too clearly, the circumstances were not normal now.

Prout, as he saw Quelch coming, slowed down, and stopped. His eyes were fixed on the Remove master. The expression on his portly face spoke volumes. Cold, contemptuous scorn could not have been more eloquently expressed, either in looks or words.

Quelch, evidently, noted it: and was seen to pause for a second. But it was only for a second. Then, with lips slightly set, he came straight on.

Prout remained immovable, fixing him with scornful eyes. A faint colour came into the Remove master's cheeks.

Having arrived at Prout, he stopped. Apparently, he was going to speak, undeterred by that scornful glare. Quelch, in fact, was puzzled. He was aware that the episode in Friardale Lane, the previous week, had left Prout annoyed. But that annoyance seemed to have deepened into positive aversion: why, the Remove master could not guess, knowing nothing of the exploit of a fat ventriloquist at Prout's study door.

Quelch felt that it could not go on. In Common-Room, if Quelch came in, Prout would elephantine out at once.

Everyone remarked on it. It was now quite a fruity item. in the unending gossip of Common-Room.

An icy barrier seemed to have grown up. Now Quelch felt that it was up to him to break the ice, if he could. The position really was becoming intolerable. As it happened, he had a subject to mention, in which Prout might be expected to be interested. So he stopped, to speak.

'One moment, Prout,' said Mr. Quelch, elaborately taking no heed of a hostile glare. 'I have been on the telephone to Inspector Grimes, at Courtfield. He tells me that the man described to him has been seen in the neighbourhood.'

No reply from Prout.

'The man who attacked you,' explained Mr. Quelch, 'and who subsequently would have attacked me, had not some boys of my form fortunately intervened. The man is known to the police. His name, it appears, is Jugson, known among his disreputable associates as Jimmy the Spiv.'

If Prout was interested, he did not reveal it. He stood like a portly statue, staring at Quelch without answering.

Quelch breathed rather hard. But he went on gamely. 'As the man appears to be still hanging about the neighbourhood, Prout, Mr. Grimes has every hope of laying him by the heels. I think we shall both feel somewhat relieved, when such a dangerous character is under lock and key.'

Quelch, like Brutus, paused for a reply. But he had no better luck than Brutus. There was no reply. He breathed a little harder, and a glint came into the gimlet-eyes. Prout neither moved nor spoke: he simply stared scornfully at the Remove master, ignoring his remarks.

A spot of colour deepened in Quelch's cheeks. Probably he was conscious of eyes upon this peculiar and embarrassing scene.



HE DELIBERATELY TURNED HIS BACK ON QUELCH AND WALKED AWAY

There were, in fact, a good many eyes on it. Not only the Famous Five, and the grinning fat Owl, were looking on. Quite a number of other fellows in the quad were glancing towards the two masters.

'Mr. Prout.' Quelch's voice was slightly raised. 'I was addressing you, sir!'

Prout remained dumb. He stared at Quelch, as at something that the cat might have brought in. That

was all.

Quelch breathed harder.

'Will you have the kindness to answer me, Prout?' There was a tremor in Quelch's voice: a tremor of suppressed anger.

Still Prout did not reply. But he got into motion. He deliberately turned his back on Quelch and walked away.

Mr. Quelch stood as if rooted to the ground, staring after him. His cheeks were quite red now. He had been 'cut': 'cut', in the quad, under staring eyes, by another member of the staff. It was an utterly unprecedented occurrence. It was a thing that had never happened before, and that really couldn't happen! But it had happened. Under a crowd of eyes, the Remove master had been 'cut' in open quad by the Fifth-form master! It was almost time for the skies to fall!

Then, in the dead silence, a sudden unmusical sound was heard. It was an irrepressible chuckle from Billy Bunter.

'He, he, he!'

Other fellows looking on were silent, almost breathless. Not so the fat and fatuous Owl of the Remove. This outcome of his ventriloquial exploits amused Bunter, and he signified the same in the usual way.

'He, he, he!'

The gimlet-eyes glittered round.

Harry Wharton and Co. assumed, as well as they could, expressionless faces, as if they had seen and heard nothing. But Quelch did not heed them. The glinting gimlet-eyes fixed on the grinning fat Owl. 'Bunter!' Quelch's voice was like a rasp.

Billy Bunter's grin vanished as if wiped away by a duster. The look on Quelch's face did not encourage grinning.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' stammered the fat Owl, in alarm. 'I—I—I wasn't laughing, sir—I—I—I didn't think it funny, sir—'

'Take five hundred lines, Bunter.'

'Oh, crikey!'

Mr. Quelch walked on towards the gates. The juniors, glancing after him, could see that his ears were burning. He walked quite quickly. No doubt, after that unprecedented scene in the quad, he was anxious to get out of the public eye as soon as possible. He disappeared out of the gateway.

'Well!' said Bob Cherry, with a deep breath, 'that takes the cake! That bags the biscuit! That jolly well walks off with the Huntley and Palmer!'

'Cheeky old pompous ass, cheeking our beak!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'Is Prout off his rocker, or what?' said Nugent. 'I say, you fellows—'

'Oh, scat, you cackling fat ass—'

'Five hundred lines!' gasped Billy Bunter. 'Did you hear him? Five hundred lines for nothing!' The fat Owl's fat voice fairly thrilled with indignation. 'Five hundred lines— Won't I jolly well make him sit up, and I jolly well know how, too—'

'Fathead!'

'Beast! Five hundred lines—!' gasped the fat Owl.

'An 'impot' of five hundred lines was likely to keep Billy Bunter busy for quite a long time to come. It was quite an awful prospect - for Bunter. But nobody else seemed to be particularly concerned. The Famous Five walked away, leaving the fat Owl to waste his indignation on the desert air.

CHAPTER 17

BUNTER GOING STRONG

'CHUNKLEY'S Stores.'

'Mr. Quelch speaking from Greyfriars School.'

'Oh, yes, sir: I know your voice, sir! Good morning, Mr. Quelch. What can we do for you, sir?'

Billy Bunter grinned over the telephone in Mr. Quelch's study.

If he had had any doubts about his imitation of his master's voice, that reply from Chunkley's Stores at Courtfield would have reassured him.

But he had no doubts. Billy Bunter might be a dud in all else, but he could do these things. Evidently, the man on the telephone at Chunkley's Stores had no doubt that it was Quelch speaking.

Quelch was out. With his own eyes and spectacles, the fat Owl had seen him go out after that scene with Prout in the quad. Quelch was safe at a distance, and the coast was clear.

For which reason, the Owl of the Remove was now in his form-master's study, grinning over the telephone there.

Billy Bunter was on the war-path.

Impunity, so far, had encouraged him. It was, so far as Bunter could see at least, as safe as houses.

And the 'impot' Quelch had given him for that ill-timed chuckle in the quad spurred him on.

A beak who made Bunter root through a dictionary on a half-holiday, who whopped him for pilfering biscuits, and who wound up by giving him five hundred lines, deserved all that Bunter could give him back-at all events in the fat Owl's opinion. A 'row' with Prout was something to go on with. But there was more to come! And it was coming now!

'Kindly take down an order!' said Bunter. The voice that rapped into the transmitter was Quelch's to the last tone. Quelch, had he been present, might have fancied that he was speaking himself!

The man at Chunkley's certainly fancied so. 'Certainly, sir,' came the reply.

They were accustomed, at Chunkley's, to orders from Quelch by phone. Generally his orders went to the Book or Stationery Departments, though on occasion he required other goods. This time, however, it was neither books nor stationery that Quelch was going to order.

'Can I rely upon delivery this afternoon?' inquired Bunter.

'Certainly, sir! Our afternoon delivery van will call at the school, sir.'

'Very good! Now please take the order. One dozen top hats—'

'Eh?'

'Do I not speak plainly?' rapped the fat ventriloquist.

'Oh! Yes, sir! But—'

'But what?' snapped Bunter.

'Did—did—did you say one dozen top hats, sir?'

'I did!'

'Oh! Very good, sir! One dozen top hats—yes, sir.'

That order - a very unaccustomed one - had evidently caused surprise at the other end. If Quelch had ordered a dozen copies of Todhunter's Algebra, or Dr. Smith's Larger or Smaller Latin Dictionary, or Liddell and Scott's Lexicon, it would not have caused surprise. But an order for a dozen top hats evidently did!

'They have my size in the hat department,' went on Bunter. 'One dozen top hats - got that?'

'Yes, sir! Quite so, sir. Is there anything else, sir?'

'One sack of potatoes.'

'Pip—pip—pip—potatoes?' The man taking the order at Chunkley's seemed to be afflicted with a stutter. 'Did you say pip—pip—potatoes, sir?'

A dozen top hats had surprised him. A sack of potatoes seemed to surprise him still more. Quelch had nothing to do with the house-keeping. That was Mrs. Keeble's province. It was the first time that Quelch's voice had been heard on the phone ordering potatoes.

'I said potatoes!' snapped Bunter.

'Oh! Very good, sir. One dozen top hats, size in the hat department, and one sack of potatoes. Quite so, sir.'

'And two dozen toy balloons: went on Bunter. 'Tit—tut—toy balloons, sir?'

'Precisely.'

'Oh! Yes! Very good, sir. Two dozen toy balloons, sir.'

Undoubtedly there was surprise, indeed astonishment, at the Chunkley end. What a form-master at Greyfriars could possibly want with a dozen top hats all at once, a sack of potatoes, and a bunch of toy balloons, was a mystery that nobody at Chunkley's could have solved.

However, they were accustomed, at Chunkley's, to taking orders as they came, and that order, unusual as it was, was duly booked.

'I require the balloons blown up ready for use,' added Bunter.

'Yes, sir! Two dozen toy balloons, inflated ready for use. Quite so. Will that be all, Mr. Quelch?'

'That's all!' grinned Bunter. 'To be delivered at the school this afternoon.'

'Yes, sir - our afternoon delivery van—'

'About three o'clock'

'Very good, sir! Our van will call at the school at approximately three o'clock, sir.'

'I require the goods to be delivered in my form-room.'

'Eh?'

'The goods are to be delivered in my form-room - the Remove form-room here. Is that clear?'

yapped Bunter.

'Oh! Quite, sir!'

'The house-porter will direct your van-man to my form-room. Please note particularly that the goods are not to be left anywhere else. They are to be delivered to me personally in my form-room. Is that understood?'

'Quite so, sir! The van-man shall be specially instructed, sir, to deliver the goods in your form-room, Mr. Quelch, as you wish, to you personally.'

'Thank you!' grinned Bunter.

He jammed the receiver back on the telephone.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter.

What precisely would be the effect on Mr. Quelch, of the unexpected delivery of a dozen top hats, a sack of potatoes, and a bunch of toy balloons, in the form-room during class, Bunter did not know - neither did he care! That call to Chunkley's could never be traced to him, and that was all that the wily fat Owl cared about.

Quelch, undoubtedly, would 'sit up'. He would be astonished - indeed astounded. Probably he would rush off to the telephone to inquire of Chunkley's what on earth they meant by it. No doubt he would be in a state of towering wrath. That would not matter, so long as the wrath was not directed towards William George Bunter.

The lesson, certainly, would be interrupted. That lesson was geography: and Billy Bunter disliked

geography almost as much as he loathed Latin. Little attention was likely to be given to geography, by either form or form-master, when Chunkley's van-man started in with the delivery of top hats, potatoes, and balloons! From every aspect, in fact, the prospect was satisfactory to Billy Bunter. No wonder he chuckled a fat chuckle over his form-master's telephone.

'He, he, he!'

However, he did not linger in Quelch's study to indulge his merriment. Now that he was through, the sooner he was out of that study the better. He blinked into the passage through his big spectacles to ascertain that the coast was clear, and rolled away grinning.

Generally, at that time of day, Billy Bunter's thoughts were concentrated on dinner. Now his thoughts went beyond that important function. He did not, of course, forget dinner: that was scarcely possible. But for once, even dinner took second place in his fat mind, as he happily anticipated what was going to happen in the Remove form-room that afternoon.

CHAPTER 18

THE MAN FROM CHUNKLEY'S

'MIND your step!' murmured Bob Cherry.

The Remove fellows hardly needed that warning.

One glimpse of Mr. Quelch's expressive countenance was sufficient to warn them to 'mind their step' in class that afternoon.

Quite often, Quelch's face was grim. Now it seemed at its grimmest. Harry Wharton and Co. and other fellows who had witnessed that extraordinary scene with Prout, could guess the cause. Quelch could scarcely fail to be disturbed and deeply incensed.

Not that Quelch was the man to 'take it out' of his form. Quelch was too just for that. In his most incensed mood, nothing would have induced him to act unjustly. But he looked like administering strict justice with an unsparing hand. It behoved every fellow in the form to be on his very best behaviour. It was not a propitious time for Bob Cherry to shuffle his feet, for Lord Mauleverer to yawn, for Skinner to project ink-balls, or for Billy Bunter to state that Poland was the capital of Russia. The vials of wrath would not pour without cause: but they were only too clearly ready to pour if required.

A gimlet-eye glinted over the Remove. Nobody wanted to catch it.

'Bunter!' It came like a bullet.

Billy Bunter jumped. His eyes almost popped through his spectacles at his form-master.

Quelch couldn't know anything: he just couldn't! How could he? But a guilty conscience easily takes alarm. That sudden rap of his name was quite terrifying to the fat Owl.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. 'Yes, sir! No, sir! It wasn't me, sir.'

'What? What do you mean, Bunter? What was not you?'

'Oh! Nothing, sir! I—I mean, anything, sir! I—I—I never—' stuttered Bunter.

'Do not be absurd, Bunter.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! No, sir.'

'Your face is not clean, Bunter. I will not permit such slovenliness in my form. Leave the form-room at once and wash your face, Bunter.'

'Oh! Yes, sir!' gasped Bunter.

There had been jam pudding at dinner. Bunter had had four helpings of it. He had had four because it was gone before he could annex a fifth. It had not occurred to Bunter to remove the outward and visible signs of the inward invisible jam pudding. His fat face was sticky. Bunter was no whale on washing, at the best of times. An extra wash seemed to him quite superfluous. Now he wished that he had at least drawn a sleeve across that stickiness. It might have escaped a gimlet-eye on a happier occasion. It did not escape it now!

'At once!' rapped Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Yes, sir. I'm going, sir.'

The fat Owl rolled out of the form-room. He rolled indignantly. Even Bunter did not like being sent out of class to wash! Still, it was a great relief that it was nothing worse! For an awful moment the fat ventriloquist had dreaded that he was found out! Even a wash was not so bad as that!

'Wharton!'

'Yes, sir,' said Harry, meekly. The captain of the Remove, certainly, was not likely to be sent out of the form-room to wash: but he wondered for a moment what was coming! Quelch would never be

unjust: but it was clear that he was going to be awfully, fearfully just!

'You may take out the map of Europe and set it on the blackboard.' That was all. Quelch's bark, in this case, was worse than his bite!

'Yes, sir.'

Harry Wharton crossed to the form-room cupboard, where that mysterious cat had mewed a few days ago, and lifted out the rolled-up map. There were several others stacked together, and one of them tumbled over as he lifted out Europe. A gimlet-eye glinted at him.

'Wharton! Kindly make an effort not to be so very clumsy.'

'Yes, sir!' gasped Harry.

'By gum, the old boy's in a tantrum today,' Vernon-Smith whispered to Tom Redwing. 'He doesn't often jump on Wharton.'

It was an unlucky Whisper. Quelch's ears seemed to be as sharp as his temper and his tongue, that afternoon. 'Vernon-Smith! Are you whispering to another boy?'

'Oh! No—I—I mean yes, sir,' stammered Smithy.

'Are you aware, Vernon-Smith, or are you not aware, that whispering in class is not permitted?'

'Yes, sir!'

'You will take fifty lines. Vernon-Smith.'

Smithy did not whisper again. Neither did anyone else. There was the deadest of dead silence, while Harry Wharton set up the map of Europe on the blackboard, and went back to his place.

Geography began, in a somewhat electric atmosphere.

Billy Bunter rolled back into the form-room, newly swept and garnished, as it were: all traces of the jam pudding gone. He blinked inimically at his form-master as he sat down. It would be like Quelch to pick on him, and expect him to know whether the Vistula was a river or a capital city or a mountain in South America: as if Billy Bunter cared which or what it was! But something was coming to Quelch!

Tap!

Geography was fairly under way: an unusually attentive form were acquiring geographical knowledge, when that tap came at the form-room door. Billy Bunter's eyes glistened behind his spectacles. He, at least, guessed what that tap portended.

Mr. Quelch turned his head, frowning at the door.

Quelch did not like interruptions in class. He objected to them very strongly. In his present mood, he was prepared to make that very clear to the interrupter.

The door opened. The chubby face of Trotter, the House page, appeared. Gimlet-eyes glinted at that chubby face.

'If you please, sir—!' began Trotter.

'Be brief!' snapped Mr. Quelch.

'Yessir! It's the man from Chunkley's, sir—'

'What?'

'The man from Chunkley's Stores, sir. I've showed him the way 'ere, sir, as he didn't know—'

Quelch's eyes, generally resembling gimlets, now resembled more those of a basilisk. They fairly flamed at Trotter.

'You utterly stupid boy!' thundered Mr. Quelch.

'Oh, sir!' gasped Trotter.

'If Chunkley's Stores are delivering goods at the school, Trotter, the goods should be delivered in the proper quarter. You are well aware of this, Trotter.'

'Oh, yessir, but—but the man said—'

'This is impertinence! You have interrupted the lesson here for no reason. Go away at once.'

'Yessir: but the man, sir—'

'Shut that door instantly.'

'Oh! Yessir! But the man said he had special orders to deliver the goods in your form-room, sir,' gasped Trotter, 'so I showed 'im the way, sir—'

'Nonsense!'

'That's what he said, sir, and it's wrote on his delivery-sheet, sir, so I've showed him 'er, and he's coming now, with the 'ats, sir—'

'The what?'

'The 'ats, sir—'

'Hats!' repeated Mr. Quelch dazedly. 'Did you say hats, Trotter?'

'Yes, sir, the top 'ats in bandboxes, sir, what you ordered - and 'ere he is now, sir!'

Trotter backed out at the doorway. He was quite disconcerted by Quelch's angry glare, and glad to get away. Into the doorway, from the corridor, marched another figure: that of a burly man, bulkily laden. He was carrying an enormous stack of bandboxes, which he seemed to have some little difficulty in managing.

Every face in the Remove form-room turned towards him. Every Remove fellow stared blankly at the man from Chunkley's and his burden. Mr. Quelch gazed at him dumbfounded.

He marched in. He peered at Mr. Quelch round that mountain of bandboxes.

'Mr. Quelch, sir?' he asked.

'Bless my soul! Yes: I am Mr. Quelch! But what—what—what—what—?' Quelch fairly stuttered.

'Ere they are, sir.'

'What—what—what—what—?'

'The 'ats, sir: one dozen top 'ats, to be delivered to Mr. Quelch personal, sir! And 'ere they are, sir.'

Quelch gazed at him. The Remove gazed at him. The carman set down the bandboxes, in two stacks of half-a-dozen each, on the floor of the form-room. Then he backed to the doorway, and disappeared. Henry Samuel Quelch and his form were left staring at the stacks of bandboxes.

CHAPTER 19

GOODS AS ORDERED

'STOP!' Quelch found his voice.

He almost shrieked.

But it was too late. The man from Chunkley's was gone. He was gone, though Quelch was not yet aware of it, for further goods from his van. Chunkley's van-man was on a long round, and had no time to waste. Having landed a dozen top hats, in bandboxes, he had gone back to his van for the sack of potatoes, which were also, according to his instructions, to be delivered to Mr. Quelch personally in his form-room!

'Stop!'

Mr. Quelch strode to the doorway, and out into the corridor. What this extraordinary occurrence could possibly mean, he could not guess, unless the man from Chunkley's was either intoxicated or insane. Whatever it might mean, that absurd stack of band boxes had to be taken away from his form-room. But the man from Chunkley's was not visible. Quelch stared along an empty corridor. There had been silence in the Remove room. But the moment Quelch was outside the door, there was a buzz of excited and amazed whispering.

'Top hats!'

'A dozen of them!'

'He, he, he!' chuckled Billy Bunter.

'Top hats by the dozen—!'

'Is Quelch going to wear them all at once?' asked Skinner.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Must be off his rocker,' said the Bounder.

'It's some mistake,' said Harry Wharton. 'Quelch can't have ordered a dozen top hats in a bunch—'

'Chunkley's wouldn't deliver them if they weren't ordered.'

'Well, no: but—'

'He, he, he!' chuckled Billy Bunter. 'Did Quelch look shirty? He, he, he!'

'The shirtfulness was terrific.'

'Look out - he's coming in.'

There was a rustle, as Mr. Quelch swept in from the corridor. Fellows who were grinning, composed their faces to seriousness on the spot. It was no time for grinning, to judge by Quelch's expressive expression.

'Wharton!'

'Yes, sir.'

'Kindly go after that carman, to his van, and tell him to come back immediately and remove these goods which have been delivered here by some absurd mistake.'

'Oh! Certainly, sir.'

Harry Wharton left his place, and went to the door.

He stepped out into the corridor. But there he stopped. The man from Chunkley's was visible again. He was coming up the corridor, bending under the weight of a large well-filled sack on his shoulders. The captain of the Remove could only stare. It seemed that the deliveries were not completed yet. There were more coming.

Quelch was frowning thunderously at the piles of band-boxes. But as Wharton stopped, outside the

doorway, the gimlet-eyes glittered round at him.

'Wharton! I have told you—!' Quelch almost bawled.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' gasped Harry. 'But he's coming back, sir—'

'Indeed! Then you may go back to your place.'

Harry Wharton went back to his place. There was a heavy tramp of feet in the corridor.

The carman reappeared in the doorway. He tramped in, with the sack on his shoulders. It was a heavy sack, and the carman seemed to feel its weight. He was breathing hard as he tramped in with it.

There was quite a bump, as he dumped it down. Two or three potatoes, escaping from it, rolled on the floor. 'My eye!' said the man from Chunkley's. He pushed back his peaked cap, and wiped his brow. 'That's 'eavy, sir.'

'What—what—' Quelch was stuttering again. 'What is it - what do you mean - what have you brought here—?'

'The taters, sir.'

'The what?' shrieked Mr. Quelch.

'The taters, sir! Sack of taters, sir, as ordered - sack of taters to be delivered to Mr. Quelch personal, and 'ere they are, sir.'

'Potatoes!' said Mr. Quelch, dazedly. 'Potatoes! Are you mad?'

'Wot?'

'Or have you been drinking?'

'Look 'ere, sir—'

'How dare you enter my form-room, in lesson-time, with a—a—a sack of potatoes?' shrieked Mr. Quelch. 'Take them away at once.'

The carman looked at him. He had looked quite a good-tempered man on his first appearance. Now he looked extremely surly: which perhaps was not surprising in view of Quelch's remarks. A man carrying out his duties according to instructions did not expect to be considered either insane or intoxicated.

'Praps you'll keep a civil tongue in your 'ead, sir!' he snapped. 'I ain't going to be talked to like that, sir, and you can lay to that.'

'Take that sack away at once.'

'Take it away?' repeated the man from Chunkley's, staring at him. 'My orders is to deliver it 'ere—'

'Nonsense! You are making some ridiculous mistake.'

'I ain't making no mistake about what's wrote down on my delivery paper, I ain't! Deliver to Mr. Quelch personal is what is wrote down 'ere. And there's the taters, delivered personal.'

'Take it away!'

'I've carried that sack in from my van, and it's a good step,' said the man from Chunkley's. 'Now you says, take it away agin, says you. That sack's 'eavy. Praps you'd like to try its weight! Take it away agin, says you! Not 'arf!' said the man from Chunkley's emphatically. 'If you've changed your mind about wanting them taters—'

'I have not changed my mind! I—'

'Well, if you ain't changed your mind, what's the blinking trouble?' demanded the carman. 'There's your spud.'

'I mean, I have not changed my mind - I mean that I did not give such an order - nothing of the kind - how can you be so utterly stupid as to imagine that a form-master in a school could order a sack of potatoes—?'

'Stoopid, am I?' said the man from Chunkley's. 'Look 'ere, sir! You're Mr. Quelch, ain't you? You said you was.'

'Yes, I am Mr. Quelch, certainly, but—'

'Then it's okay ! You're Mr. Quelch, what ordered them 'ats and them taters to be delivered to you personal, and if you've changed your mind about it, old gentleman, that ain't my business. My orders is to deliver the goods according to instructions, and I got no time to waste, neither. I got a long round to do, I 'ave, and I got to get going. There's your taters.'

With that, the man from Chunkley's turned to the doorway.

'Stop!' shrieked Mr. Quelch.

'Well, wot is it now?' snapped the carman, over his shoulder.

'I repeat that no order was given either for hats or for potatoes, and I will not allow them to be left here - they cannot and shall not remain in this form-room—'

'You can put 'em where you like, as they're yourn,' retorted the man from Chunkley's. 'Wot do I care? Nor I ain't got no time to chew the rag about it, neither - I got to get the rest of the goods.'

'What? What do you mean?'

'I means what I says, old gentleman. Praps you'll tell me next that you never ordered the balloons!' snorted the man from Chunkley's, obviously in quite a bad temper by this time.

'Balloons!' repeated Mr. Quelch, dizzily. 'Balloons?'

'Yus - balloons! I'm going to fetch 'em now from my van, and that's the lot, and I can tell you I'll be glad to 'ave done 'ere, too!'

The carman tramped out, with knitted brows, Quelch gazing after him almost like a man in a dream.

CHAPTER 20

BALLOONS FOR QUELCH

'BALLOONS!'

'Oh, my hat!'

'Great pip!'

'He, he, he!'

'Top hats – spuds - toy balloons - is Quelch off his chump?'

'Has he gone crackers?'

'The crackerfulness must be terrific.'

For once, Quelch was deaf to whispering in his form.

Most of the juniors were whispering: all of them staring. It was quite an amazing occurrence in a Greyfriars form-room. Some of the Remove seemed to think it amusing, too! Quelch, evidently, did not!

But he did not heed the buzz of whispering voices. His eyes - as well as all other eyes - were fixed on the man from Chunkley's, as he came back into the form-room. Having delivered a cargo of top hats and a sack of potatoes, the carman was now delivering goods which were, if possible, still more surprising. He tramped into the form-room with a huge bunch of inflated coloured balloons floating from a string. Two dozen toy balloons, blown up ready for use, made quite an imposing bunch. They bobbed and fluttered round the man from Chunkley's as he tramped in.

"Ere you are, sir!" grunted the man from Chunkley's. He extended the bunch to Mr. Quelch. The Remove master made no motion to take it. Quelch, certainly, had no use for a bunch of toy balloons. The time was long, long past, when Quelch had perhaps found such things entertaining.

"Ere you are!" repeated the carman, impatiently.

"Ere's your balloons. You taking these 'ere balloons?'

'Certainly not!' Quelch almost roared.

'Where do you want me to put them, then?' snapped the man from Chunkley's. 'I ain't standing 'ere 'olding them.'

'Take them away! Take them away at once! Go, and take all these ridiculous things with you!'

'My orders is to deliver these 'ere goods, not to take them away. If you've changed your mind, you silly old gentleman - you can settle that with the Stores. 'Ere you are!'

The bunch of balloons bobbed fairly under Mr. Quelch's nose. He smacked them angrily away.

Pop! pop! pop! pop! pop! pop!

Toy balloons were not built to resist vigorous smacks.

Half-a-dozen of them burst, popping and popping, as Quelch smacked them away.

'Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry.

'What larks!' chuckled the Bounder.

'He, he, he!' gurgled Billy Bunter.

'Oh, my eye!' exclaimed the carman. 'If that's the way you 'andles your balloons, sir, they won't last you long.'

'They are not my balloons!' shrieked Mr. Quelch. 'I repeat—'

'Look 'ere, sir, I got to get orf - you taking these 'ere balloons or not?' The carman thrust the remainder of the bunch under Quelch's nose again.

Smack! smack!

Pop! pop! pop! Pop!

Four more of the balloons disintegrated, popping. Evidently, Quelch was not taking delivery of those goods. 'Take them away!' thundered Mr. Quelch. 'Do you hear me? Take your rubbish out of this form-room! Do you hear?'

'I ain't deaf!' retorted the carman. 'I 'ear you all right, old gentleman— I could 'ear you as fur off as Courtfield, if you come to that. I can see myself taking back a lot of busted balloons, and telling the boss that the old gentleman has changed his mind and don't want no balloons to play with arter all! I don't think!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' came from the Remove.

This time Quelch seemed to remember the existence of his form. He looked round at a swarm of laughing faces, with a glare that the fabled basilisk might have envied, but never excelled.

'Silence! Every boy in the form will take a hundred lines! Silence!'

There was sudden silence!

Quelch turned back to the carman. He calmed himself, with an effort. It required an effort!

'Leave this form-room! Take all this rubbish with you. I shall complain of this to your employers. Now go!'

'You taking these 'ere balloons?'

'No!' shrieked Mr. Quelch.

'Well, I got to deliver the goods according to orders. 'Ere they are!'

The carman released the string. Balloons floated about the form-room. Then the carman produced paper and pencil.

'You sign 'ere!' he said.

'What?' gasped Mr. Quelch.

'You sign 'ere for the goods delivered—'

'I will do nothing of the kind!' hooted Mr. Quelch. 'Go!'

'Look 'ere, sir, goods has to be signed for as delivered.

I got to show this up at the Stores. You sign 'ere!'

'Go!' roared Mr. Quelch.

'Well, if you won't sign, you won't, and I shall 'ave to report according,' said the man from Chunkley's.

'Go!'

'I'll go, and glad! I've had enough of this 'ere, I can tell you. Looks to me as if I've got into a balmy bin—'

'Wha—a—a—t?'

'I says to my mate Bill, in the van, I says, what the 'oly smoke, I says, does a schoolmaster want with all these 'ere top 'ats, and spuds, and toy balloons, I says, and Bill says, says he, "Must be balmy", says Bill—'

'Go!' gasped Mr. Quelch.

'And I says to Bill—'

'Go!' shrieked Mr. Quelch.

He advanced a step towards the man from Chunkley's.

The Remove held their breath. It really looked, for a moment, as if Quelch was prepared to give the man from Chunkley's first-aid in getting through the doorway!

Fortunately, the man from Chunkley's, with a final snort of indignation, departed. Another snort was heard, as he tramped away down the corridor. Then he was gone.

Mr. Quelch was left breathing very hard and deep, in a state of mingled wrath and bewilderment. He was left also with a dozen top hats, a sack of potatoes, and the survivors of the bunch of balloons. He gazed at that assortment of goods: then he looked at a silent form.

'Wharton!'

'Yes, sir.'

'I have to go to the telephone, and shall leave you in charge here for a few minutes.'

'Very well, sir.'

Quelch rustled out of the form-room. The juniors did not need telling why he had to go to the telephone. Evidently he was going to talk to Chunkley's Stores about that unexpected and amazing delivery of goods in his form-room.

There was silence till the door had closed. Then there was a ripple of merriment.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Is this better than geography?' asked Bob Cherry.

'Just a few!'

'The betterfulness is terrific.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'He, he, he!' chortled Billy Bunter.

The fat Owl chuckled and chortled, and chortled and chuckled, till the tears came into his little round eyes behind his big round spectacles. Five hundred lines impended over Bunter: but undoubtedly he was giving Quelch something in return for those five hundred lines. The fat ventriloquist was getting his own back on Quelch - and a little over!

CHAPTER 21

WHO?

'CHUNKLEY'S Stores!'

Mr. Quelch was gripping the receiver, in his study, with an almost convulsive grip. He jabbed rather than dialled. The telephone rocked. It was a calm business-like voice that came back from Chunkley's. But Quelch's voice was neither calm nor business-like as he hooted into the transmitter. Seldom had the Remove master of Greyfriars been so deeply disturbed or so intensely exasperated. Lessons had been interrupted, by an absurd and ridiculous scene in his form-room. Chunkley's Stores were going to hear about this, with emphasis, and without delay.

'Mr. Quelch speaking from Greyfriars School. I have to make a complaint - a very serious complaint.' 'I am sorry to hear that, sir,' came the calm and polite voice from Chunkley's Stores. 'We receive few complaints, sir. We endeavour to give every satisfaction to our customers, especially, if I may say so, to a valued customer like yourself, Mr. Quelch—'

'Yes, yes, yes, but some absurd, some utterly ridiculous mistake, has been made with goods delivered here - some unaccountable and utterly absurd mistake. No such goods were ordered by me—'

'One moment, sir! Are you referring to the goods delivered today by our afternoon-delivery van—?'

'Certainly. An absurd collection of utterly ridiculous articles—'

'If the goods are not as ordered, sir—'

'No goods at all were ordered by me.'

'Eh?'

'Nothing whatever—'

'Excuse me, sir— I myself took the order, by telephone, this morning. I have it here now - one dozen top hats, size in the gentleman's hat department - one sack of potatoes, and two dozen toy balloons inflated ready for use - that was the order, sir—'

'Are you mad?'

'Wha—a—a—a—at?'

'If you received such an order - such an extraordinary order - it was not from me.' Quelch almost roared into the transmitter. 'Can you imagine for one moment, that I, a schoolmaster, could have any use for such a number of hats, for a sack of potatoes, for a bundle of toy balloons? Your own common-sense should have told you that no such order could have come from me. If you have indeed received so extraordinary an order, you have confused me with some other customer, and the goods have been delivered to the wrong address.'

'I admit, sir, that the order surprised me a little. I thought it a— little uncommon. But it is not for us, sir, to dictate to customers their choice of goods. As you ordered the top hats, the potatoes, and the balloons, and stipulated for this afternoon's delivery—'

'I did nothing of the kind!' shrieked Mr. Quelch. 'You are making some utterly absurd mistake.'

'There is no mistake in the matter. Mr. Quelch.' The voice from Chunkley's was very firm, and a little less polite. 'I myself took the order from you—'

'Certainly not from me.'

'Your name was given, sir—'

'My—my name?'

'Your name, sir.'

'Oh! Then that may account for this absurd mistake - no doubt you have some other customer of the same name, and—'

'Quelch is not a common name, sir! We have no other customer on our books of that name. sir. There is no such mistake in the matter.'

'Are you telling me that some person telephoned this ridiculous order in my name?' gasped Mr. Quelch. 'Bless my soul! Is this some trick - some practical joke? I have read of such things in the newspapers! Are you assured that this absurd order was given in my name?'

'I have the particulars here, sir! One dozen top hats, one sack of potatoes, two dozen toy balloons inflated ready for use, to be delivered to Mr. Quelch personally, in his form-room, at approximately three o'clock this afternoon—'

'Have you no common-sense. sir?'

'Eh?'

'Even if you received such an order, from some irresponsible trickster, how could you imagine, for one moment, that a schoolmaster could desire the delivery of goods in his form-room during class?'

'I was certainly surprised, sir, but—'

'You should have known at once that the call was an imposture - that it could not possibly have come from me—'

'As I knew your voice, sir—'

'What?'

'As I knew your voice, Mr. Quelch, I could hardly have any doubt in the matter. I have taken many orders from you, sir, and your voice is quite familiar to me. If you have forgotten giving the order—'

'I tell you I gave no such order.'

'Hem!'

'I repeat that I have not telephoned to you today at all.'

'Really, Mr. Quelch—!'

'Obviously you cannot have recognized my voice, as I have not telephoned—'

'Hem!'

'No doubt voices on the telephone are much alike—'

'Excuse me, sir, your own voice, if I may say so, is somewhat - hem - distinctive, and it is quite impossible that I could have failed to recognize it. There is no doubt, sir, that it was you who spoke to me on the telephone this morning—'

'I did not telephone!' shrieked Mr. Quelch.

'Hem!'

'At what time did you receive this call - if indeed you did receive it?'

'I could not say exactly, sir, but it was approximately about twelve-twenty-five or twelve-thirty—'

'Then that decides the matter!' hooted Mr. Quelch. 'At that time, sir, I was not here - I was out of gates, walking, sir, at a distance from the school - and did not return till some time later—'

'Hem!'

'I was not here - I certainly did not telephone - no order was given by me, and the rubbish delivered here must be taken away at once—'

'Hem!'

'Neither will the matter rest here,' barked Mr. Quelch. 'On your assurance, sir, that my name was used. I can only conclude that this is the work of some irresponsible practical joker, and that is a matter for the police to investigate. I shall immediately telephone to the police-station and report this matter for investigation. That is all!'

Mr. Quelch did not wait for another 'hem'. He slammed back the receiver, with a slam that made the telephone jump.

Then he stood staring at the instrument.

This was not, as he had supposed, some idiotic mistake at Chunkley's. That amazing order actually had been given, in his name. Some practical joker had been at work. He had, as he had said, read of such things in the newspapers, though certainly he had never expected anything of the kind to happen at Greyfriars. Such tricks on the telephone were not only irresponsible, and annoying, and exasperating. They were illegal. It was a matter for the police. But—!

But he was, on reflection, in no hurry to ring up Inspector Grimes on the subject. For it was borne in upon his mind that the unknown trickster was not some irresponsible member of the public: it was more probable - much more probable - that the offender was nearer home. That order had been given by some person who knew that he was accustomed to phoning orders to Chunkley's - who knew that he would be in class that afternoon at approximately three o'clock: who had, in fact, all the inside knowledge he needed for playing such a trick. That order had gone out on his own telephone, during his walk before dinner, and it was some Greyfriars boy-some member of his own form - who was responsible. It was, in fact, a Greyfriars 'rag'.

'Bless my soul!' breathed Mr. Quelch. He turned away from the telephone without dialling again. It was a 'rag' - a schoolboy rag! If that was so - and the more he thought it out, the more clearly he realized that it must be so - he certainly did not want a police-inspector on the scene.

Inspector Grimes was wanted to run down that bad character Jimmy Jugson, alias Jimmy the Spiv: but most assuredly he was not wanted to run down a practical joker at Greyfriars School!

That was a matter for Mr. Quelch to deal with: and the grim expression on Quelch's expressive countenance indicated that he would not deal with it very leniently!

But who was the culprit?

Some schoolboy had telephoned that order to Chunkley's, causing an absurd scene in the Remove form-room and interrupting lessons. The man at Chunkley's must have been utterly obtuse, to mistake a schoolboy's voice for a schoolmaster's. His assertion that he had actually recognized and known Quelch's voice was simply fantastic - palpably absurd!

But - who was the culprit?

Quelch did not know. He could not begin to guess. But he was going to know! And upon that culprit's head - when discovered - the vials of wrath were going to pour in ample measure. Rhadamanthus himself could never have looked quite so rhadamanthine as did Henry Samuel Quelch, when at last he left his study to return to the form-room.

CHAPTER 22

BUNTER AND A BUNDLE

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!'

'Look!'

'That fat villain!'

'Caught in the act!'

'The catchfulness is terrific!'

The Famous Five grinned, as they looked. It was rather amusing, in its way. Billy Bunter, at the moment, was quite unconscious of them - though they were all quite conscious of Billy Bunter. After class, the chums of the Remove had been thinking of Soccer. With the Felgate match coming along, they were giving plenty of attention to the winter game. But a drift of clouds from the sea portended rain: so there they were, coming up to the studies instead of heading for the changing-room. They had crossed the landing from the stairs, and were about to enter the Remove passage, when William George Bunter dawned on them.

Far up the passage, a study door opened. It was the door of Lord Mauleverer's study. As they had seen Mauly, only a few minutes ago, in an armchair downstairs in the Rag, they did not expect to see him emerge from his study. Neither did he! What emerged was a fat head, a fat face, and a big pair of spectacles.

The rest of Bunter did not immediately emerge. The fat Owl was blinking cautiously out into the passage, evidently to make sure that the coast was clear before he emerged.

He blinked cautiously to and fro. There was nobody in the passage - the coast was clear, so far as that went. But he did not blink the whole length of a long passage, and he remained unaware of a bunch of five juniors staring from the landing.

Satisfied, apparently, that it was 'all clear', the rest of Bunter followed the fat head, the fat face, and the spectacles, out of Mauly's study.

Five grinning juniors watched him from the landing.

Under Bunter's fat arm was a parcel, wrapped in a folded newspaper. The Co. hardly needed telling what was inside that folded newspaper. Obviously, the tuck-hunter of the Remove was 'at it' once more. How often Billy Bunter had been kicked for raiding other fellows' tuck, he could not have counted, without going into high figures. But kickings seemed to produce no more effect on Bunter, than water on a duck. The lure of tuck was irresistible!

The fat Owl came rolling down the passage, with the parcel under a fat arm. Then, suddenly, he became aware of five grinning faces, on the landing.

'Oh!' ejaculated Bunter.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' roared Bob Cherry. 'What have you got there, Bunter?'

'Oh! Nothing!' gasped Bunter.

'You've wrapped up nothing, in a newspaper?' asked Bob.

'Oh! Yes! No! I—I mean—it—it's only some books I'm taking back to the library. I say, let a fellow pass, will you?'

Billy Bunter would have rolled out of the passage on to the landing. But that was not a practical proposition, as the Famous Five lined up in front of him and barred the way.

'Hold on,' said Harry Wharton, laughing.

'Stand and deliver!' grinned Nugent. 'You fat sweep!' growled Johnny Bull.

'I—I say, you fellows, I'm in rather a hurry,' stammered Bunter. 'No larks, you know! You let a fellow pass.'

The fat Owl made an effort to push through. Bob Cherry gave him a playful push on a plump chest, and he tottered back. The parcel almost slipped from under his arm. He clutched it in time: but one article slipped out, and dropped on the floor. It was a dough-nut.

'Ow! Beast!' gasped Bunter. 'I say, lemme pass, blow you! I tell you I'm in a hurry—'

'Guessed that one!' agreed Bob.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Think we're going to let you walk off with Mauly's tuck?' hooted Johnny Bull.

'Tain't tuck in this parcel! It—it—it's only some boots I'm taking to be mended—'

'Oh, my hat! Boots as well as books?' asked Bob.

'I—I—I mean books—only some books I'm taking to be mended—I—I mean some boots I'm taking back to the library—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! Gerrout of the way!'

'Is that a boot or a book?' asked Bob Cherry, pointing to the dough-nut that had dropped from the folded newspaper.

'Oh!' Billy Bunter's eyes and spectacles shot round to the dough-nut. He clutched it up, and jammed it back into the folded newspaper. Unluckily, it dislodged another article: a tin of pineapple dropped out and banged on the floor. The fat Owl clutched at the tin: and two or three more dough-nuts scattered round him.

'What a collection of boots and books!' said Bob.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Gerrout of the way!' howled Bunter. 'If it's tuck, it's mine, ain't it, and you fellows can mind your own business.'

'You fat brigand,' said Bob. 'We all saw you come out of Mauly's study—'

'Oh! I—I just dropped in to speak to Mauly! That's all.'

'Did you speak to him in his study?' grinned Bob.

'Oh, yes, we had a chat. Now let me pass.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'What are you cackling at now?' howled Bunter.

'Mauly's down in the Rag, you fat Ananias—'

'Oh! Is he? I—I mean, I—I dropped into his study for a—a chat, but—but as he wasn't there, I—I came away! Now let me pass.'

'Right-about turn!' said Bob.

'Eh! Wharrer you mean?'

'Right about turn, and march! You're going to take that bundle back to Mauly's study, and we're going to see you do it!' explained Bob. 'Then we're going to boot you for pilfering Mauly's tuck. Get a move on.'

Billy Bunter got a move on: suddenly and rather unexpectedly. He did not right-about turn and march up the passage. He made a sudden and desperate rush to get through the bunch of juniors who barred his way. So sudden, and so weighty, was that desperate charge, that the fat Owl burst through the barrier, and tore out on the landing.

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped Bob Cherry. 'After him!'

'Collar him!'

'Boot him!'

'Boot him terrifically!'

The Famous Five rushed in pursuit. Billy Bunter did not often shine as a sprinter. But with a bundle of tuck at stake, the fat Owl, for once, imitated the hare rather than the tortoise. He fairly shot across the landing to the stairs, with five excited juniors whooping behind him.

'Stop!'

'Bag him!'

Clutching hands were almost upon the fleeing fat Owl, as he shot down the stairs. Generally, Bunter was slow on stairs, whether going up or down. Stairs told on Bunter. But this time he fairly whizzed. But it was a case of more haste and less speed. At the turn of the staircase, the hurrying Owl slipped, and rolled. He arrived on the middle landing in a yelling heap. The bundle landed on the old oak, and Billy Bunter landed on the bundle, and roared:

'Yaroooooh!'

'Man down!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Yaroooooh! Whooo-ooop! Wow! Oh, crikey! Yow—ow—ow—ow—wow!' roared Bunter, as he sprawled. 'I say, you fellows—wow! —you keep off—whoop-ow! wow!'

Another moment, and the Famous Five were all round the fat Owl as he sprawled on the middle landing. One moment more, and Bunter and his bundle would have been an easy capture. But Bunter's frantic roar had reached other ears-majestic ears! An angular form and a frowning face appeared on the lower stairs.

'Stop this instantly!' It was quite a fierce bark. And the Famous Five spun round to meet the glare of gimlet-eyes. They gazed at their form-master.

'Oh!' gasped Bob. 'Quelch—'

'Yow—ow—ow—ow!' roared Bunter. 'Keep off, you beasts! Wow! I say—wow! Yow—ow—ow—ow—wow!'

Mr. Quelch whisked up to the middle landing. Evidently, he was not in the best of tempers. The happenings of that day had not been soothing. The scene in the quad with Mr. Prout in the morning, and the extraordinary and exasperating episode in the Remove form-room that afternoon, had in fact had a most deteriorating effect on Quelch's temper. It was a most unfortunate moment for members of his form to attract his attention with a shindy on the staircase.

'Bunter! Are you hurt?'

'Yow-ow-ow-ow-ow-wow!'

It sounded as if Bunter was hurt!

'Get up at once.'

The fat Owl scrambled up, clutching his bundle. The gimlet-eyes glinted at five dismayed juniors.

'Wharton! Nugent! Bull! Cherry! Hurree Singh! This reckless horse-play on the staircase is quite intolerable. Go to your studies immediately, and write each of you a hundred lines of Virgil. Go! Not a word! Go!'

In silence, but with rather deep feelings, the Co. went.

Mr. Quelch stood frowning after them as they departed. Billy Bunter, still clutching his bundle, bestowed one blink on Quelch's back, and rolled away down the lower staircase. He grinned, as he rolled out into the quad. But he did not linger there. In the circumstances, a retreat to a safe distance was indicated. Whether Harry Wharton and Co. stayed in their studies writing their lines, or whether they looked for him again when Quelch was off the scene, Billy Bunter did not know:

neither did he care. Billy Bunter was safe out of gates, rolling away to devour his prey at his leisure under a shady tree in Friardale Wood. The Famous Five were welcome to hunt for him all over Greyfriars, if they liked: and the fat Owl couldn't have cared less.

CHAPTER 23

SPREAD FOR ONE!

'BLOW!'

Billy Bunter was annoyed.

It was, in fact, very annoying. Often and often, it had happened that the universe was not run wholly to Bunter's satisfaction. Now it was happening again.

For it had started to rain. Harry Wharton and Co. had seen it coming, and given Soccer practice a miss: but Billy Bunter, naturally, had not been thinking about the weather: his fat thoughts had been concentrated on his bundle, and getting to a safe distance with the same. In Friardale Wood he was at quite a safe distance: that was all right. But the rain that came pattering down on the footpath was far from all right: it was most uncomfortable. And the first drops that pattered were followed by heavier drops that splashed: and it was plain that there was going to be a downpour.

'Blow!' repeated Bunter, morosely.

He came to a halt on the footpath, blinking round him through his big spectacles. He was not looking for a shady spot now. Anxious as he was to sample Mauly's tuck, he did not feel disposed to sit down in the rain to sample it. What he wanted was a shelter from that beastly rain: and dripping branches afforded little cover.

'Blow!' said Bunter, for the third time.

He turned from the footpath, and pushed through draggled thickets. At a little distance from the path, he remembered, was the hut where old Joyce, the woodcutter of Friardale, stacked his logs and firewood. It was not much of a building: three walls, open at the end, and a slanting corrugated iron roof. It was not the spot that Bunter would have chosen: he would have preferred soft grass under a shady tree, but for the rain. But it had, at least, a sound roof: and a sound roof was what the fat Owl wanted now, to keep off the rain: even the bundle of tuck came second to that! Grunting morosely, he pushed through wet bushes, and reached the little glade where the woodman's hut stood.

He rolled in at the open end.

Old Joyce had evidently been busy in the wood of late, for the interior was almost filled with stacked logs and bundles of brushwood: stacked there to be carted away later. However, there was plenty of room for Bunter, and he rolled gladly in, out of the rain.

Patter, patter, patter, came the rain, on the corrugated iron over his head. It sounded to Bunter as if it was coming down in buckets-full. But he was out of it now: and he sat down on a log, landed the bundle of tuck beside him, and unfolded the newspaper. Then he almost forgot the rain. Several dough-nuts had been left, unavoidably scattered in the Remove passage at Greyfriars. But there remained six or seven of those attractive articles, a pot of jam, a bag of biscuits, and a cake: a tin of pineapple and a tin of peaches, and a packet of toffee. Probably Lord Mauleverer had intended that supply for a spread for several fellows. Now it was going to be a spread for only one fellow: who was, however, quite capable of dealing with it, to the final crumb.

Bunter began on the dough-nuts. They disappeared, one after another, at quite a remarkable rate. Then he turned his attention to the cake. A large chunk, in a fat hand, was half-way to a capacious mouth, when it suddenly stopped in transit. From outside the woodman's hut came a sound of footsteps, approaching.

'Oh!' breathed the fat Owl, in alarm.

He blinked through his spectacles at the open end of the hut. Someone was coming! If those beasts, Harry Wharton and Co., had followed, and tracked him down—! In his alarm, the Owl forgot even to munch the cake: that chunk, in his fat hand, remained half-way to his mouth: suspended, like Mahomet's coffin, in mid-air!

Then a figure appeared before his eyes and spectacles.

Certainly it was not one of the Famous Five. It did not bear the least resemblance to anyone of them. On that score, at least, it was a relief to Billy Bunter.

In other respects, it was not. The figure was that of a stocky, squat man, in dingy checks, with a bowler hat at a rakish angle, a hard face and sharp eyes that looked rather like a rat's.

Bunter gazed at him.

He tramped in, and stood shaking rain-drops from his dingy clothes, not for the moment noticing the fat junior sitting among the logs. Bunter's eyes almost popped through his spectacles at the man. He looked like one of the racing roughs at Wapshot: not the kind of man that any fellow would like to meet in a lonely wood. But that was not all. The fat Owl had no doubt that he could guess who the man was. There had been plenty of talk about Jimmy Jugson, alias Jimmy the Spiv, of whom Inspector Grimes of Court field was in search. Nobody knew whether he had left the neighbourhood or not. Now Billy Bunter knew that he hadn't! In deep alarm, the fat Owl realized that this was the man who had robbed Prout, who had attacked Quelch, and who was 'wanted' by the police! He sat as if transfixed dumb: while the squat man shook off rain-drops, and muttered some emphatic words about the weather.

Then, coming further into the hut, the squat man suddenly observed the fat schoolboy sitting on the log, staring at him. Evidently he had, like Bunter, come to the hut for shelter from the rain, not expecting to find anyone there. The unexpected sight of Bunter startled him, and seemed to alarm him for a moment. He stared at Bunter, and then round the hut, as if to make sure that no one else was there. Then he stepped towards the fat junior, with jutting jaw and threatening scowl. The hapless Owl sat paralysed, blinking at him.

'What are you doing 'ere, you bladder of lard?' snarled Mr. Jugson.

'I—I—I—' stuttered Bunter. 'I—I—I came in out of the rain - oh, crikey!'

'Anybody else 'ere?'

'No! Nobody!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I—I say, I—I'll go, if you like— I—I don't mind the—the rain—I—I'll go—' He tottered up from the log.

Billy Bunter would have been glad to go, even in the rain: and even without his bundle. All Billy Bunter wanted, just then, was to get safe away from that terrifying ruffian.

But that was not to be!

'Stick where you are!' snarled the squat man.

'But I—I say, I—I've got to get back to school—'

'Shut it!' A push on a plump chest caused Bunter to sit down on the log again, with a bump and a squeak. 'Stick there! I ain't going till the rain stops - and you ain't neither! I don't want no coppers around 'ere.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I—I say, I—I won't tell anybody I've seen you— I won't say a word—' He half-rose.

Smack!

'Yaroooooh!'

'Any more from you?' snarled Jimmy Jugson.

'Ow! wow! wow!'

Except for that howl of anguish, there was no more from Bunter. One hefty smack, which made his fat head ring, was enough for him. He sat and rubbed that fat head in terrified silence.



'WHAT ARE YOU DOING 'ERE, YOU BLADDER OF LARD?'

Jimmy the Spiv gave him no further heed. He stared out into the falling rain, muttered a few more emphatic words about the weather, and then sat down astride a log, and reached for Bunter's bundle. Perhaps it was Jimmy's tea-time, and he was glad of a free meal. At all events he proceeded to dispose of the whole supply that the voracious Owl had annexed from Lord Mauleverer's study. Billy Bunter's feelings as he watched the cake disappear, and after it item after item, would have been indescribable in words - if he had dared to utter any! But he dared not speak. He could only watch, in silent woe, as the cake went, and after it the biscuits and the jam. He nourished a faint hope that the pineapple and peaches might survive: being in tins. But Jimmy the Spiv hacked open those tins with a pocket-knife, and the pineapple and the peaches disappeared in turn. Only the packet of toffee remained: and that the rascal slipped into his pocket. All that was left to meet Bunter's mournful gaze was a crumpled newspaper and a sea of crumbs: the rest was gone from his gaze like a beautiful dream. The fat Owl had planned that Mauly's spread should be a spread for one! And that had gone according to plan - except that Jimmy Jugson, instead of Billy Bunter, was the one!

Having finished with the comestibles, the squat man lighted a cigarette. He smoked half-a-dozen, one after another, every now and then glancing out into the rain. Billy Bunter could only sit it out. The ruffian did not intend to let him depart, until he departed himself: he was not risking a word to 'coppers'.

But the awful ordeal was over at last: by this time, the rain was thinning out, and at length only a few drops were falling. Then Jimmy Jugson took note of Bunter's existence again.

He gave him a glare.

'You can 'ook it!' he said.

The fat Owl heaved himself up wearily from his log.

Apparently he was to go first: no doubt so that he could not note the direction taken by Mr. Jugson when he went.

"Urry up!" snapped Mr. Jugson. He added emphasis to that injunction, by lunging out with his foot,

which landed hard on the tightest trousers in the Greyfriars Remove.

'Wow!' roared Bunter. He hurried up!

It was a wet, weary, woebegone Owl that rolled in at Greyfriars, only just in time before Gosling shut the gates. And even then his woes were not at an end: for five fellows, in the quad, seemed to be looking out for him: and the hapless fat Owl, as he ran for the House, experienced for several minutes what it was like to be a Soccer ball. And even that was not all: for as he rolled breathless into the Remove passage, he met Lord Mauleverer: and Mauly kicked him twice before he escaped into his study and slammed the door.

CHAPTER 24

THE LAST WASP OF SUMMER

'BUNTER!' boomed Mr. Prout.

'Oh! Yes, sir.'

'Do not lounge about here in that idle manner.'

'Oh, really, sir—'

'Go away at once.'

Billy Bunter's little round eyes gleamed behind his big round spectacles.

That snap from Prout was, in Billy Bunter's opinion, quite uncalled-for. Prout, as usual, was an interfering old ass! Very much Billy Bunter would have liked to tell him so.

True, Bunter was lounging in an idle manner. But then, Bunter always did lounge, or loaf, or lean: and his manners and customs were invariably idle! It was no business of Prout's, who was not his beak. Neither did Bunter want to roll away, when his extensive weight was comfortably lodged against a sunny wall.

A bright and sunny morning had followed the rain.

Autumn was, on the whole, behaving itself. Harry Wharton and Co. were looking forward to a fine day on the morrow, when Felgate were coming over for football. Billy Bunter was, at the moment, also thinking of Soccer: not with any yearning to urge the flying ball, but on account of the promised 'tip' from Bunter Villa. That beast, Smithy, had 'dished' him on Saturday: but another chance was coming along on Wednesday. Leaning on the wall under Masters' windows, the fat Owl was meditating on that important matter after third school, when Prout's boom interrupted his meditations.

It was so pleasant and sunny a morning that Mr. Prout, after class in the Fifth, had brought his deck-chair out into the quad, and planted it under his study window. His glance fell very unfavourably on Billy Bunter.

He was not in a genial mood. He had seldom been genial, of late. His breach with Quelch made things uncomfortable all round. He had 'cut' Quelch in open quad. They were no longer on speaking terms. The whole staff gossiped about it. Prout's temper suffered in consequence. No doubt that was why he snapped at Bunter - much to the fat Owl's annoyance and indignation.

However, the fat junior moved at Prout's behest. Prout was a beak, if not his own beak. Unwillingly, and indignantly, Bunter detached his fat person from the wall, and moved along as far as Mr. Quelch's window. There he leaned again: not disposed to exert himself further.

Prout plumped into his deck-chair, and opened a newspaper. Then, glancing round again, he noted that Bunter was not gone.

He frowned at him portentiously over his newspaper. 'Bunter!' he boomed.

Billy Bunter blinked round at him. 'Eh! Did you speak, sir?'

'Go away at once, Bunter.'

Quelch's window, as usual, was wide open. If he was in his study, he must have heard Prout's boom. He was not likely to be pleased by hearing Prout snap orders at a boy of his form. Prout did not care whether he was pleased or not.

Billy Bunter breathed hard through his fat little nose.

He wasn't going to be ordered about by Old Pompous if he could help it. And the Greyfriars ventriloquist thought that he could help it!

Bunter gave a fat little cough.

Remove fellows might have guessed, from that, that a spot of ventriloquism was coming. But Mr. Prout was blissfully unconscious of the fat Owl's weird gift. He did not know what was coming till it came.

Buzzzzzz!

'Oh!' ejaculated Mr. Prout. He ceased to frown at Bunter, and stared round him for a buzzing insect. That buzz of a wasp sounded quite close to him: and he did not like wasps at close quarters. He waved his newspaper in the air, to drive the buzzing insect away.

Billy Bunter grinned. A buzzing wasp was easy work to the Greyfriars ventriloquist.

Buzzzzzz!

Prout, regardless of Bunter, brandished the newspaper.

It was late in the season for wasps: and late wasps were liable to be vicious. Prout did not want to be stung by the last wasp of summer!

Buzzzzzz!

'Bless my soul! Shoo! shoo! shoo!' gasped Mr. Prout. 'Where is that wasp? I cannot see it - but it sounds quite close. Bless my soul! Bunter, can you see that wasp?'

'Just behind you, sir!' chirruped Bunter. Ventriloquialism came more easily than veracity to the fat Owl.

'Oh!' Mr. Prout whirled round, brandishing the newspaper. 'Bother the wretched insect! I cannot see it - can you see it now, Bunter?'

'Just behind your neck now, sir.'

Prout whirled round again. His newspaper described wild circles in the air! His plump face was growing red with exertion. But the buzzing had ceased, and he hoped that the troublesome wasp was gone.

'Look out, sir!' exclaimed Bunter. 'What—what? Can you see the wasp, Bunter?'

'It's settled on your collar, sir—'

'On my collar? Bless my soul!'

'Just behind your ear, sir—mind it doesn't crawl into your neck, sir.'

'Ooooh!' gasped Mr. Prout. He fairly shuddered at the thought of that wasp crawling into his neck.

'Shall I knock it off, sir?' asked Bunter.

'Yes, yes, yes!' It was not easy for Prout to deal with a wasp on his collar behind his ear. 'Take this newspaper - quick! quick! Knock it off my collar at once, Bunter.'

'Yes, sir.'

Billy Bunter was willing - more than willing - to oblige.

He grabbed the newspaper and came behind Prout. He swiped at the back of Prout's portly neck. Swipe!

Had a wasp been there, that hefty swipe would certainly have terminated its career. No wasp was there: but Prout's portly neck was there - and the roar that came from Prout, as the swipe landed, woke the echoes of the quadrangle.

'Oh!' roared Prout.

'That's done it, sir—'

'You stupid, clumsy, foolish, insensate boy,' spluttered Mr. Prout, rubbing the back of a plump neck with a plump hand, and glaring at Bunter as if he could have bitten him. 'You clumsy, stupid young rascal - wow! I have a great mind to box your ears - wow!'

'Oh, really, sir! You asked me—' protested Bunter.

'I did not ask you to deal me a violent blow!' hooted Mr. Prout. 'This is intentional impertinence! I shall box your ears, Bunter.'

Billy Bunter backed away in haste. It had been quite a pleasant experience to land that swipe on Prout. But it looked as if something less pleasant was to follow. But as a large plump hand rose for a smack at a fat head, a frowning face appeared at Quelch's open window, and the Remove master's sharp Voice barked:

'Mr. Prout!'

Prout paused. His angry glare was transferred from Billy Bunter to Billy Bunter's form-master.

'Kindly control your temper, Mr. Prout,' barked Quelch. 'I will not permit you, sir, to lay a finger upon a boy of my form.'

'This boy, sir - this impertinent boy—' gurgled Prout.

'I heard all that passed, sir, and you have no occasion to blame Bunter, who did as you requested—'

'I—I—he—he—!'

'I was only knocking off the wasp, sir,' squeaked Billy Bunter.

'Quite so! You had better go, Bunter. Mr. Prout does not seem to be in a very reasonable mood at the moment,' said Mr. Quelch.

'Sir!' boomed Prout.

'Sir!' yapped back Quelch.

'You are impertinent, sir!' boomed Prout.

'And you are ridiculous, sir!' barked back Quelch.

'Mr. Quelch—!'

'Mr. Prout!'

Billy Bunter rolled away. He grinned as he rolled.

The sound of a slam followed him. Quelch had shut his window - with emphasis, cutting short the unseemly altercation. Prout was left glaring at the shut window, breathing wrath and indignation. It was quite a while before the ruffled Fifth-form master settled down in his deck-chair again with his newspaper - happily troubled no further by the last wasp of summer!

CHAPTER 25

AWFUL!

'WHARTON!'

'Oh!'

His master's voice, at that moment, rather startled Harry Wharton. It was really the last voice that he wanted to hear, just then.

He had lines for Quelch: and, properly speaking, those lines should have been already delivered in his form-master's study. At the very least, he should have been sitting at his table transcribing the deathless verse of Virgil, getting it ready for delivery.

Instead of which, he was standing at his study table, unwrapping a parcel. A parcel from home, naturally perhaps, interested a schoolboy more than Latin lines. After class there had been a spot of Soccer: but Harry, not quite forgetting his lines, had left his friends on Little Side, and come up to the study. He was about to begin on his impot when Trotter brought the parcel in. Virgil immediately took second place, while he gave his attention to that parcel.

It was really worth attention. That kind old lady at Wharton Lodge, his Aunt Amy, had packed it with a liberal hand. There was a large plum cake, and quite a number of other attractive things. It looked like quite a handsome spread for the Famous Five, when the other fellows came in hungry after football in the keen air. Sorting out those attractive things, the captain of the Remove rather forgot the lines. He was reminded of them by the sharp voice that barked in at the open door.

He set his lips a little as he looked round. No doubt Quelch wanted those over-due lines.

Nevertheless, it was a little unusual for Quelch to be so very sharp about it. But of late, a Sheffield blade had had nothing on Quelch for sharpness. The trouble with Prout, and the ridiculous and exasperating affair with Chunkley's, had given a very keen edge to Quelch's temper. It behaved his form to walk warily: and Wharton, in the matter of those lines, had certainly been unwary.

'Yes, sir!' stammered Harry.

'Have you done your lines?'

'I—I'm just going to, sir.'

'That will not do, Wharton! Follow me to my study.' Harry Wharton stared at the doorway. It was odd for Quelch to call into the study without looking in. However, an order from Quelch was an order from Quelch: and Wharton, with rather deep feelings, abandoned that attractive parcel from home, and went to the door.

In the passage, he stopped - and stared!

Quelch, apparently, had lost no time after calling into No. 1 Study. He was not visible in the passage. Only one person was visible there - Billy Bunter, leaning on the wall, with a lurking grin on his fat face.

Harry Wharton paused - and looked at him, with a sudden suspicion.

'Did Quelch pass you, Bunter?' he asked.

'Eh! Oh! Yes! Looked in a temper, too!' said Bunter. 'I say, you'd better hurry after him, old chap - he looked quite shirty.'

Wharton gave the fat Owl a long look: and then cut along to the landing at a run. No. 1 Study, the first in the passage, was quite near the landing: and Quelch might have disappeared round the corner in those few brief moments. But he was not on the landing: and a glance over the banisters revealed that he was not on the stairs. And Harry Wharton, with a glint in his eyes, cut back into the

Remove passage. Billy Bunter was rolling into No. 1 Study - but his roll was suddenly halted, as an angry hand grasped the back of his collar.

'Wow!' gasped Bunter.

'You fat sweep!' roared Wharton.

'Ow! Leggo!' Bunter, wriggling, blinked round in alarm at the captain of the Remove. 'Ooh! I—I say, why haven't you gone after Quelch? I say, he will lay it on, if you keep him waiting. Leggo!'

'You fat spoofer! Quelch hasn't been here at all, and here's something back for your fatheaded ventriloquism.'

Bang!

'Yaroooooh!'

A fat head contacted an oak door. The contact seemed to pain Billy Bunter. He roared.

Bang!

'Ow! wow! Leggo!' yelled Bunter, frantically. 'It wasn't me— wow! I never saw Trotter bringing that parcel up— wow! — and if you think I was after your parcel. I can jolly well say— ow! wow! wow! Whooop!'

Bang!

Thrice the fat head contacted hard oak. Billy Bunter had been eminently successful with his ventriloquism, so far as Quelch and Prout were concerned: but once more it failed to pay dividends in the Remove. Harry Wharton, having 'tumbled' to the fat Owl's trickery, made it quite painfully clear to Billy Bunter how little his peculiar gift was appreciated in his own Form.

'Ow! wow! wow! wow!' roared Bunter. 'Will you leggo? Wow! My napper! I tell you it wasn't me, and it was only a joke too— just pulling your leg, old chap—wow! I never knew you had a parcel, and I wasn't after it— wow— will you leggo my neck, you beast? Wow!'

Bump!

Having banged the fat head thrice, the captain of the Remove twirled Bunter into the passage, where he bumped and rolled and roared.

'Now cut, you fat villain—'

'Yow—ow—ow—ow—ow!'

'I give you one second, before I boot you.'

That one second was enough for Billy Bunter. He scrambled up and flew. He vanished up the Remove passage as if on the cinder-path.

Harry Wharton, breathing rather hard, went back into his study. He had very nearly been taken in by that masterly imitation of his master's voice: and, had he gone down to Quelch's study, little would have remained of Aunt Amy's parcel by the time he returned. However, that parcel had escaped the fat depredator: and Billy Bunter was probably too busy rubbing a fat head, to think of any more ventriloquism for some time to come.

But the incident reminded Harry Wharton that he had better lose no more time with his lines. He pushed the parcel aside, and sat down at the study table with pen and paper, and Publius Vergilius Maro propped open against the cake, and started on his imposition.

He had fifty lines to do, from the Sixth Book: from 'sic fatur lacrimans' to 'adflata est numine quando'—unless he chose to add an extra one to complete a sentence - which was perhaps improbable!

Sitting at the table, transcribing line after line, he worked rapidly, anxious to get through, and to get that imposition to Quelch before trouble accrued.

But he was fated to be interrupted. He had travelled as far as 'Teucros vocat alta in templa sacerdos' when there was a step in the passage, and a sharp voice barked in at the door.

'Wharton!'

The captain of the Remove, sitting with his back to the door as he scribbled, did not trouble to look round this time. He answered over his shoulder, nothing doubting that it was the fat ventriloquist at his tricks again: and happily unaware that Mr. Quelch was looking into the study.

'Get out!' he snapped.

'What? What?'

'Clear off, you silly fathead!'

'What? Wharton, how dare you?'

'Oh, pack it up, you silly ass!' exclaimed Wharton. 'If I get up to you, I'll bang your silly head on the door! I've no time to waste on you, you burbling chump.'

Mr. Quelch, in the doorway, gazed at the back of Harry Wharton's head, dumbfounded. He did not, perhaps, expect a boy of his form to be pleased, when he came up to inquire after over-due lines. But most assuredly he had never dreamed of a greeting like this.

'Wharton!' he gasped.

'Shut up!'

'D—d—did—did you say shut up, Wharton?' stuttered Mr. Quelch.

'Yes, I did,' came back over Harry Wharton's shoulder, 'and if you don't clear off, you burbling, babbling bandersnatch, I'll come out to you, and boot you up the passage.'

'Bless my soul!'

For a long, long moment, Mr. Quelch gazed at the back of Wharton's head. Wharton, unheeding, hurried on with his lines. Then the Remove master, with thunder in his brow, strode into the study, and grasped the junior by the back of his collar.

'You silly idiot!' yelled Wharton, as the pen flew from his hand, scattering blots. 'By gum, I'll burst you all over the Remove - you silly, footling, foozling fathead - OH!'

He broke off suddenly.

The grasp on his collar hooked him off his chair. He whirled round, to behold, not William George Bunter, but Henry Samuel Quelch. His eyes popped at Quelch's face, as black as thunder. Like Pyrrhus's sable arms, it did the night resemble.

'Oh!' gasped Harry Wharton. He realized that this time it was not the fat ventriloquist pulling his leg. It was Henry Samuel Quelch in person! Quelch had, after all, come up for those lines! Not for a moment had Harry Wharton doubted that it was Bunter again. But it was not Bunter again - it was Quelch! The hapless junior gazed at him in horror. He tottered against the table, as Quelch released his collar. It was an awful moment!

'Oh!' he repeated, gasping. 'Is—is—is it you, sir? Oh! I—I—I—'

'Wharton!' It was a peal of thunder. 'Wharton! How dare you—!'

'I—I—I—'

'I came here for your lines, which should have been brought to my study an hour ago—!'

'I—I haven't quite finished them, sir—'

Quelch dismissed that with a gesture. Lines were a trifle now. He continued as if the junior had not spoken.

'—and you have chosen to address me with unexampled impertinence - with the most audacious insolence—'

'Oh! No. sir! I—I—I—'

'—in such words, Wharton, as I could never have dreamed of hearing from a boy of my form—'

'I—I—I didn't know it was you, sir—I—I—I never knew—I—I wouldn't have spoken to you like that,

sir— I never saw you, sir, when I spoke—I—I—'

'What? Whether you saw me or not, you know my voice. I presume!' thundered Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Yes! No! Yes! But—but—but—' stuttered Wharton. He gasped for breath. 'I—I thought it was a fellow playing a trick, sir—'

'Nonsense!'

'I—I did really, sir—I—I thought it was a silly ass—I—I mean a—a fellow, playing a trick imitating your voice—'

'Nonsense!'

'But really, sir—really and truly—'

'That will do, Wharton! You will hardly expect me to credit so foolish and absurd an excuse—'

'But, sir, really—'

'I repeat that that will do! You will follow me to my study. I shall administer such a punishment for this unexampled, this outrageous impertinence, that I trust you will never indulge in anything of the kind again. Not a word more! Follow me.'

Mr. Quelch did not stay to listen to more. He swept out of the study like a thundercloud. Harry Wharton was left staring after him, overwhelmed with dismay. For several minutes he stood there, in an overwhelmed state. Then slowly - very slowly - he left the study, to follow his form-master.

CHAPTER 26

LUCK!

Buzzzzzz!

Mr. Quelch uttered a sound resembling a snort. The buzz of the telephone-bell was extremely unwelcome at that moment. He gave the offending instrument a stare that was almost a glare. He was standing by the table in his study. His face was set and grim. His eyes were glinting. He had selected his stoutest cane. That cane was going to have more than customary exercise. Mr. Quelch was angry - and like the prophet of old, he felt that he did well to be angry! And the object of his wrath was, for once, his Head Boy, of whom hitherto Quelch had had quite a high opinion. True, he had awarded Wharton lines, for a slip in construe. Quelch had no favourites. And he had been prepared to double that impot, as a penalty for unpunctuality. But that was all in the day's work, so to speak. There was no excuse - none whatever - for the amazing impertinence with which he had been greeted in No. 1 Study. 'Six' of the very best was indicated: indeed, Mr. Quelch was feeling rather like making it sixteen, if not sixty! Seldom or never had he been so deeply offended and exasperated. And the fact that the junior was slow in obeying his behest to follow him to his study, added an edge to the wrath that was already almost at boiling point.

Buzzzzzz!

That irritating buzz drew a look from Mr. Quelch which, if looks could have done damage, might have put the telephone out of action on the spot!

However, he laid down the cane, and picked up the receiver - or rather, snatched it up. If this call came from some parent concerned about his boy in Quelch's Form, that parent was likely to get an impression that his boy's form-master had very short and sharp manners! The Remove master fairly barked into the transmitter:

'Well?'

'Chunkley's Stores—' came a familiar voice. Quelch had heard that voice only the day before. And he did not want to hear it again. Indeed the mere name of Chunkley's, after that ridiculous scene in his form-room, was to Quelch rather like a red rag to a bull.

'Well?' he barked again.

'Speaking from Chunkley's Stores, Courtfield—'

'Kindly come to the point.'

'Is that Mr. Quelch?'

Quelch very nearly snorted into the transmitter. He refrained from snorting: but he snapped.

'That is an absurd question. You know my voice perfectly well. Kindly do not waste my time: I am a busy man.'

It was not a polite reply. But Quelch was not in a polite mood. And it did seem to him an absurd question, from a person who had taken orders from him on the phone dozens of times. He had neither time nor patience to waste on a person who asked absurd questions.

'Oh! Yes,' came back.

'Quite! But—'

'But what?' rapped Mr. Quelch, impatiently.

'But in view of the extraordinary misunderstanding yesterday, sir, I wish to be assured to whom I am speaking—'

'You are speaking to me.'

'Yes, yes, but you will recall, sir, that you have explicitly stated that you did not telephone yesterday, giving an order, although I most certainly recognized your voice—'

'Nonsense.'

'What? What did you say, sir?'

'I said nonsense, and I repeat, nonsense,' said Mr. Quelch, grimly. 'You could not have recognized my voice, sir, when it was not I that spoke. You must have made a mistake which I can only describe as extremely stupid.'

'Really, Mr. Quelch—'

'I have come to the conclusion, sir, that that call was a prank, a practical joke, by some schoolboy. You should have known that it was not a schoolmaster speaking.'

'As it was your own voice, sir, quite familiar to me—'

'It was not my voice!' Quelch almost roared.

'Very well, sir. I must of course accept your statement, but if it was not your own voice, it was a remarkably accurate imitation of it—'

'Absurd!'

'Perhaps we had better not argue the point, sir. I have rung up respecting the goods that were delivered at the school yesterday, and of which you refused to take delivery—'

'Well?'

'The goods have now been collected by our van, sir. But some of the articles were returned in a useless and damaged condition. The balloons—'

'Balloons!' breathed Mr. Quelch.

'A number of the balloons were destroyed, sir, when they were delivered in your form-room at Greyfriars as instructed—'

'No such instructions—'

'These, sir, will be charged to your account. I trust that you have no objection. The other goods are taken back, but the balloons—'

Mr. Quelch breathed very hard over the telephone. He was strongly inclined to notify Messrs. Chunkley that he would not pay a single penny, on an order that he had certainly not given. Still, it was a fact that he had smacked those balloons not wisely but too well.

'What is the amount?' he snapped.

'Nine shilling and sixpence, sir.'

'Very well,' said Mr. Quelch, in a grinding voice. 'The matter is under investigation: and if it proves that that absurd order was given by some boy here. I will allow that sum to be charged to my account.'

'That is all, sir - thank you—'

'On a future occasion, I trust that you will exercise sufficient intelligence not to mistake a schoolboy's voice for a schoolmaster's,' added Mr. Quelch. 'Such a mistake is absolutely inexcusable - it implies a degree of careless inattention for which no excuse can be found: and your suggestion that my voice could be imitated, to such an extent as to deceive any person familiar with it, is simply fantastic. I have never heard of anything so absurd—'

Mr. Quelch broke off suddenly.

Even as he was speaking, it came into his mind that, absurd or not, he had heard that very thing, only a matter of minutes ago, in No. 1 Study in the Remove!

That sudden recollection gave him quite a jolt. He stood staring at the telephone, very much startled. Was it possible?

As he stood speechless, the voice came through from Chunkley's again, in an extremely dry tone: 'I can only say, sir, that if the order yesterday was not given by you, it was given in a voice so exactly like your own that anyone might have been deceived. But as the matter is now settled, sir, we need discuss it no further. Good afternoon, Mr. Quelch.'

Slowly, Mr. Quelch replaced the receiver on the hooks. He stepped back to his table. But he did not pick up the cane he had laid there. His brow was wrinkled in thought-startled thought. What the man at Chunkley's stated seemed fantastic. But it was borne out by what Harry Wharton had said in No. 1 Study. Was it possible—? Was there in the Greyfriars Remove, some young rascal who had the trick of imitating a voice? That would account for the Chunkley affair, and it would account for what had happened in No. 1 Study. Was it possible?

Tap!

'Come in!' said Mr. Quelch, in quite a subdued voice. Harry Wharton came in. He entered Quelch's study as Daniel might have entered the lion's den. He had a faint hope that Quelch might listen to him, and accept his explanation. But the hope was very faint. He fully expected that Quelch's first words would be 'Bend over!— as probably they would have been, but for that telephone-call from Chunkley's. But in the last few minutes, Quelch had been given much food for thought.

He did not utter the dread words. He scanned the junior's face without speaking. Wharton, rather puzzled, was the first to speak.

'Will you let me explain, sir—?'

'You may do so, Wharton.'

'I assure you, sir, that I did not know it was you at my study door. I'd never have spoken as I did. I thought it was a silly fellow playing a trick to bother me,' said Harry.

There was a pause. Wharton waited, puzzled, but considerably relieved. Quelch seemed to be in a very unexpectedly reasonable mood. For a long, long moment he scanned the junior in silence. Then he spoke, quietly.

'Very well. Wharton! I accept your explanation. I recommend you to be more circumspect on another occasion. You may go.'

'Thank you, sir'

The door closed on Harry Wharton. He walked away scarcely able to believe in his good luck. Mr. Quelch was left in a grim and very thoughtful mood. He knew now that there was a member of his form who had the extraordinary trick of imitating a voice. The man at Chunkley's had mistaken the trickster's voice for Quelch's— Harry Wharton had mistaken Quelch's for the trickster's. That much was clear now. But who was it? No doubt the young rascal's trickeries were known to other fellows in the form: but that was not a source of information that Quelch could tap. He would have disdained the mere idea of encouraging any boy to inform against another. That route to a discovery was barred. But he had to make the discovery. In deep, concentrated thought, Quelch turned over in his mind the name of almost every fellow in his form as a possible 'suspect'.

But there was one name that did not even occur to him. That was the name of William George Bunter. Not for one moment could he have imagined that the fat, fatuous, obtuse Owl of the Remove was the man he wanted! He did not think of Bunter at all. And so long as he did not think of Bunter, it was highly improbable that he would discover the Remove fellow who was such an adept in imitating his master's voice!

CHAPTER 27

QUID PRO QUO?

'HARRY, old chap—'

'You fat villain!'

'Oh, really, Wharton—'

'Get out!'

'But I say, old fellow—'

'Hand me that dick, Franky.'

Evidently, Billy Bunter was not 'persona grata' in No. 1 Study in the Remove. His recent exploits as a ventriloquist had not added to his popularity in that study.

In fact, as he rolled in, Harry Wharton looked— as he felt— very much disposed to help him out again, with an application of shoe-leather to his tight trousers.

The fat Owl was rolling across to the armchair. But as Frank Nugent, grinning, handed the Latin dictionary to Harry Wharton, he ceased to roll. It seemed judicious to remain nearer the door. So he remained - with a wary eye open for the dictionary.

The Remove had come up to the studies for prep.

Wharton and Nugent, in No. 1, were sitting down to their books. Bunter did not seem to be bothering about prep, for the moment. More important matters were on his fat mind.

'Going?' asked Harry, taking aim with the dictionary. Bunter was not going: but he prepared to dodge.

'Prep, fathead!' said Frank Nugent.

'Oh, blow prep,' snapped Bunter, irritably. 'Look here. Wharton, it's about the Soccer tomorrow.'

'What about the Soccer?' Harry Wharton stared. 'If you can't help wagging that shoulder of mutton you call a chin, why not wag it about something you understand?'

'Glad you're interested. Good-bye.'

'My name's not in it,' hooted Bunter.

'Oh, my hat! Is that what you've barged in to say?'

'Yes, it jolly well is.'

'Well, now you've said it, buzz off.'

'You jolly well know what happened on Saturday!' exclaimed Bunter. hotly. 'I was down to play for the Remove—'

'Only because Quelch butted in. and ragged me into it,' answered Harry.

'He, he, he!'

'Well, what are you he—he—he—ing about, you gurgling gargoyle?'

'Oh! Nothing! But I say. I was down to play, only that beast Smithy locked my study door, and I couldn't.'

'Good old Smithy!'

'Rotten trick, keeping a footballer out of a match!' exclaimed Bunter indignantly. 'You ought to have been jolly well down on him for it. You would have, if it had been anybody else—'

Harry Wharton laughed. Certainly, keeping a footballer out of a match would have been a tremendously serious matter, had that footballer been anyone but William George Bunter. In the actual circumstances, however, the general opinion in the Remove was that Smithy had, so to speak, deserved well of his country: an opinion in which the captain of the form fully concurred.

'Quelch shouldn't have butted in,' said Harry. 'I had to play up - but Smithy thought of a way out, good luck to him.'

'He won't have a chance next time!' snorted Bunter.

'Not at all - as there isn't going to be any next time.'

Now roll away - I'm getting tired of holding this dick.'

'Look here, I was done out of that match on Saturday, but it will be just as good if I play tomorrow—'

'That's a large size in "ifs",' said Harry. 'You fat chump, I don't know what's made you fancy all of a sudden that you want to play Soccer: but if you mean it, I'll give you a chance in a pick-up some time. Can't chuck away the Felgate match to please you. Now hook it.'

Billy Bunter breathed hard through his fat little nose.

He was quite determined, if he could by hook or by crook, to play Soccer for the Remove, and bag that handsome 'tip' that waited for him at Bunter Villa. That was the beginning, middle, and end, of all that mattered: Soccer itself being a very secondary consideration. Whether Greyfriars beat Felgate, or whether Felgate beat Greyfriars, hardly weighed in the balance against two solid 'quid's' to expend in tuck.

But, while prepared to gain that important end by any means that came to hand, the fat Owl realized that his trick on the telephone was a doubtful proposition for a second shot. It had worked once. It might not work a second time. But he had another card to play.

'Look here, Wharton—' he recommenced.

'Didn't you hear me say hook it?'

'Beast! I mean, look here, old chap! I should have played for the form on Saturday but for that rotter Smithy. Then it would have been all right. But if you play me tomorrow—'

'Shut the door after you.'

'Well, look here, what about a quip prop quop?' asked Bunter.

'Eh?'

'A quip prop quop. I suppose you know enough Latin to know what that means?' snapped Bunter, scornfully.

'Is it Latin?' gasped Wharton.

'Better not let Quelch hear you asking that!' jeered Bunter. 'Of course it's Latin - it means a fair exchange - something for something - a quip for a quop, you know—'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled Wharton and Nugent simultaneously.

'Well, what are you cackling at?' demanded Bunter, glowering at the two hilarious juniors through his big spectacles. 'If you don't know enough Latin to know what a quip prop quop is—'

'Ha, ha, ha! Perhaps you mean a quid pro quo!' suggested Wharton. 'But if that's what you mean, what the dickens do you mean by it?'

'Well, one good turn deserves another,' said Bunter. 'That's what I mean by a quip prop quop. You play me in the Felgate game tomorrow, old chap, and I'll stand a stunning spread in the study after the match! What about that?'

Billy Bunter blinked inquiringly at the captain of the Remove. Harry Wharton gazed back at him, blankly.

To Billy Bunter's fat and fatuous mind, a stunning spread in a study far outweighed anything in the football line. Compared with it, a Soccer match was as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine. Bunter had no doubt that this was a very tempting offer indeed.

'Mind, I mean it!' he said. 'I shall be in funds - after the game. I'm getting a jolly good tip from my pater - two whole pounds! That will run to a topping spread. We'll have a couple of those big plum

cakes at the tuckshop—'

'Oh, my hat!'

'And three kinds of jam,' went on Bunter. His little round eyes glistened behind his big round spectacles at the prospect. 'And ham sandwiches—'

'You fat chump—'

'And jam-tarts, and éclairs, and meringues—'

'You howling ass!'

'Oh, really, Wharton! I mean every word!' declared Bunter. 'I can tell you, it will be the spread of the term. You two can come, and bring your pals. More than enough all round. That's what I mean by a quip prop quop. I play in the Felgate match, and you - yaroooooh! '

Whiz!

The Latin dictionary flew.

Thud!

It landed on a fat chin. Billy Bunter roared as it landed, tottered, and sat down, with a bump that almost shook No. 1 Study.

'Ow! wow! Beast! Wow! Yaroooooh!' roared Bunter.

'Now travel—'

'Owl wow! wow!'

'The ink pot's coming next.'

Billy Bunter did not wait for the inkpot. The door of No. 1 Study slammed after a fleeing fat Owl.

Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent were left laughing - after which they started on prep.

In No. 7 Study, Billy Bunter did not bother about prep.

While Toddy and Dutton worked at the table, Billy Bunter sat in the armchair and rubbed a fat chin, breathing wrath and indignation - and, his munificent offer of a quid pro quo having proved a ghastly frost, making up his fat mind that another spot of telephonic ventriloquism was indicated. It remained to be seen how it would work out.

CHAPTER 28

AT IT AGAIN!

'HENRY looks shirty!' murmured Bob Cherry.

Bob was very careful indeed that that murmur did not reach the majestic ears of 'Henry'.

'So does Prout!' murmured Nugent.

'Pair of shirty old geezers!' said the Bounder.

'He, he, he!' from Billy Bunter.

Billy Bunter was amused. Some of the other fellows were grinning.

The little scene that was passing under their eyes was quite unusual. Masters at Greyfriars School might have their likes and dislikes. They might discuss one another with a spot of acid now and then. Wiggins and Twigg might agree that Prout was very, very long-winded. Quelch might remark to Hacker that Mr. Capper should really be a little more strict in his Form. Prout might mention to Lascelles that Hacker had a sharp tongue, indeed quite bitter at times. But when they met, in Common-Room or elsewhere, manners were generally impeccable. Anything like an open breach was uncommon: indeed unknown, till now. The breach between Prout and Quelch was quite a new phenomenon.

It had gone on for days. It was remarked and commented upon. It had gone from bad to worse. Dozens of fellows had seen Prout 'cut' Quelch in the quad on Monday. Since then they had not exchanged a word, except in the incident of the last wasp of summer on Tuesday morning. Then Prout had used the word 'impertinent' to Quelch: and Quelch had come back with the word 'ridiculous'. They had steered clear of one another since then: the rest, as Hamlet remarked, was silence!

But now—!

On Wednesday morning, a bright and cheery autumn morning, the Remove had gathered as usual at their form-room. Quelch had not yet appeared, when Mr. Prout rolled into the offing, on his way to his form-room. Then, a moment later, Quelch materialized, coming from the other direction.

Face to face in the corridor, the two masters reacted in quite different ways. Prout's plump face registered majestic scorn. Days had passed since the awful words 'Pompous old ass' had penetrated his study door. But they lingered in Prout's ears and in his memory. His dignity had been mortally offended. Like Juno in the Aeneid, he nursed within him an incurable wound.

Quelch, on the other hand, unaware of that incurable wound, was as much puzzled as exasperated by Prout's attitude. He really could not make out what was the matter with Old Pompous. Under the cheery influence of a sunny morning, he decided to make one more attempt to break the ice.

Checking the impulse to frown back at Prout's scornful look, he contrived to smile.

'Good morning, Prout!' he said, quite genially: just as if there had never been a shadow of trouble between them.

It was the olive-branch, if Prout had chosen to accept it. But Prout did not so choose. He gave Quelch an icy look.

'Did you address me, sir?' he inquired, in a voice that might have come from the deepest depths of a refrigerator. 'I did, Mr. Prout.'

'Then pray refrain from doing so, sir!'

With that, Prout elephantined onward. He left Quelch standing rooted. It was then that Bob Cherry remarked that 'Henry' looked 'shirty'. Undoubtedly 'Henry' did! 'Shirty', indeed, was a mild

description of the glance he cast after Mr. Prout.

For a long moment, Mr. Quelch stood: then, as if suddenly aware of his form, he turned towards them. Every vestige of a grin died away in the Remove. The gimlet-eyes were glinting in a way that was far from encouraging anything like a grin.

In dead silence. Quelch let in his Form. The juniors took their places in quite a subdued mood. It was like Billy Bunter to drop a book, and, in grabbing after it, to knock his head on a desk, and utter a howl.

'Wow!'

'Bunter!'

It might almost have been the bark of a mastiff.

'Oh! Yes, sir! I—I knocked my head, sir—'

'Take fifty lines.'

Billy Bunter's eyes gleamed behind his spectacles.

Lines were accumulating on Bunter, rather like the leaves in Vallombrosa of old. And if that was the beginning, it was plain that the Remove were not going to enjoy that lesson!

It was English History. On the subject of the annals of his native land, Billy Bunter's fat mind was more or less of a blank. What he did not know about English History would have filled large volumes: into not a single one of which would Bunter ever have desired to blink.

It would be like Quelch, in his present mood, to ask Bunter questions, and insist upon correct answers - or else—!

Only too probably, he might fly off the handle, if Bunter told him that Wellington commanded at the Battle of Bannockburn, or Lord Montgomery at Waterloo: or that the Spanish Armada was some variety of tropical fish!

Bunter resolved to get in first, as it were.

Lessons at school couldn't be avoided. They fall, like the rain and the hail, alike upon the just and the unjust. But delay was something. Every minute gained was so much to the good, from the point of view of a fat slacker who had a deeply-rooted objection to learning anything at all. And recent success urged the fat ventriloquist to try it on again.

A little fat cough was heard in the form-room.

Quelch did not heed it. But several fellows glanced round at Billy Bunter, with warning looks. Harry Wharton and Co. had not forgotten the mysterious cat in the cupboard! They guessed that something in the ventriloquial line was coming. Bunter was 'at it' again!

'You fat ass!' whispered Johnny Bull, hurriedly.

'Chuck it.'

'Bull!' came a rap.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' stammered Johnny.

'You are whispering to Bunter. Take fifty lines.'

There were no more warning whispers to the fat Owl.

Warning looks were wasted on him. Billy Bunter was on the war-path!

Mr. Quelch was proceeding to deal with the reign of Charles the Second. The Merry Monarch did not have the effect of making the Greyfriars Remove merry! They gave their form-master attention - almost painful attention. Nobody wanted to get Quelch's 'rag' out - unless Bunter did.

'If you please, sir—!' squeaked Bunter, suddenly.

'Do not interrupt me, Bunter.'

'Yes, sir! No, sir! But, sir—'

'Be silent!'

'Oh! Yes, sir! But somebody's tapping at the door, sir.'

Mr. Quelch frowned. He had heard no tap at the door. Possibly it had been a faint tap, and the music of his own voice had drowned it!

He frowned at the door. He was reminded of the visit of the man from Chunkley's. The Remove were reminded of it also: and all eyes turned on the door, to which the fat Owl had so artfully drawn attention.

Sad to relate, everyone in the form-room would have welcomed an interruption, with the solitary exception of Henry Samuel Quelch. Nobody had noticed a tap at the door excepting Bunter - if Bunter had! But nobody, at the moment, guessed that that was the fat Owl's artful trick to fix general attention upon the quarter from which a spot of ventriloquism was to come.

'Come in!' rapped Mr. Quelch, testily.

The door did not open. But a voice came: a fruity rumble familiar to all ears, which could only have come from Mr. Prout, or from a ventriloquist who had practised it up in the studies. And if that fruity voice did not come through the door, everyone but Bunter had the impression that it did.

'Mr. Quelch! Are you there, Mr. Quelch?'

Quelch set his lips. After that affront in the corridor, he did not want to hear anything from Mr. Prout. He was in no mood now for olive-branches. He was feeling extremely tart: not to say tartaric! 'Certainly I am here, Mr. Prout, taking my form!' he snapped. He almost bit off the words. 'Kindly do not interrupt me, sir.'

'Pah! Jackanapes!'

'Wha—a—a—at?' Quelch stuttered.

'Jackanapes!' came the fruity boom. 'Pah! Jackanapes!'

Mr. Quelch stood transfixed, staring at the door. A breathless form stared at it. Quelch seemed paralysed. A pin might have been heard to drop.

'Jackanapes!' breathed Mr. Quelch, quite dazedly. 'Jackanapes! Upon my word! Jackanapes!'

It was almost unbelievable. Prout, apparently, had stepped out of his form-room, to hurl that epithet through the Remove door. Quelch stared at the door quite blankly, for some moments, as if doubting whether he had heard aright. He was not thinking of English History now. The reign of Charles the Second had come to a sudden stop - considerably to the satisfaction of a fat member of the form.

Then Mr. Quelch woke to life, as it were. Amazed, but more angry than amazed, his face crimson with indignation, he strode across to the door, and dragged it open.

'Mr. Prout—!' Quelch actually bawled.

Prout was not there! But the door of his form-room was near at hand, and Quelch could only suppose that he had stepped back into that apartment. Bristling with indignant wrath, Quelch strode down the corridor to the Fifth-form room, and hurled the door wide open, with a bang.

CHAPTER 29

UNPRECEDENTED!

'COKER!'

Grunt!

'How often, Coker, have you made this absurd mistake?'

Grunt!

'A junior boy, Coker, even a boy in the Remove, would scarcely mistake the present perfect plural for the infinitive.'

Another grunt from Horace Coker. Coker of the Fifth cared about as much for the present perfect plural, with the infinitive thrown in, as Bunter of the Remove did for the annals of his native land. Prout was not genial that morning. His temper, as well as Quelch's, was wearing thin. And even in the best of tempers, he might have found Coker of his form a little trying. Tubb of the Third, or Dicky Nugent of the Second, couldn't have supposed that 'amavere' was the infinitive. But Horace Coker was capable of supposing practically anything.

'Such obtuseness,' boomed on Prout. 'Such carelessness - such inattention - really, Coker, I hardly know how to deal with you.'

Bang!

It was a sudden and startling interruption. The form-room door opened so suddenly, and so forcefully, that it flew wide, and banged against the wall. That sudden crash startled Mr. Prout, and startled all the Fifth Form. It came, perhaps, as a welcome relief to Coker, who had certainly heard all he wanted to hear about present perfect plurals and infinitives.

'What—!' gasped Mr. Prout. 'What—who—what—!'

His eyes bulged at an angular figure in the doorway.

All the Fifth stared at Mr. Quelch. Why the Remove master had burst into the Fifth-form room like a thunderbolt, was an amazing mystery. It was still more amazing why his expressive countenance registered a wrath compared with which the celebrated wrath of Achilles was merely a passing zephyr.

'Sir!' Quelch almost shouted. Seldom, if ever, was Quelch excited. But he was excited now. His face was crimson. His eyes flashed. 'Sir! This is intolerable - intolerable, sir!'

'Mr. Quelch— what— what—!' stuttered Prout.

'I will not tolerate it, sir! Do you understand? Or are you so foolish, sir, so fatuous, sir, as to imagine that such impertinence could be tolerated by any member of the staff, sir!'

Prout goggled at him.

The Fifth Form gazed on, blankly. A 'row' between two masters was quite an unprecedented occurrence at Greyfriars. For the first time in history, a Greyfriars form was treated to that extraordinary spectacle.

'I am aware, sir, that for some reason unknown to me, you have chosen to adopt a hostile attitude,' barked Mr. Quelch. 'That, sir, is a matter of indifference to me - of the most complete indifference, sir! But I will not allow you, sir, to shout opprobrious epithets through the door of my form-room, sir!'

'Wha—a—a—at?'

'Have you no sense of propriety, sir? Have you no regard for what the boys will think of your extraordinary conduct, sir? Every boy in my form, sir, heard you at the door. Every one of them, sir,

heard the opprobrious epithet you applied to me, sir! What do you mean by it, sir?'

'Oh, gum,' whispered Coker to Potter. 'Has old Pompous been slanging Quelch?'

'Looks like it!' whispered back Potter. 'They've been cat-and-dogging for days! What a game!'

'Mr. Quelch,' Prout gasped. 'Kindly control your temper, sir! If you are alluding to my remark in the corridor—'

'I am not alluding to your remark in the corridor, sir! That, sir, I regard with the indifference and contempt that it deserves. I am alluding, sir, to the offensive epithet that you uttered - I should say shouted through the door of my form-room, sir—'

'Are you wandering in your mind, Mr. Quelch?'

'What?'

'I have been nowhere near the door of your form-room, sir—'

'Mr. Prout!'

'Nowhere, sir! And if I had,' boomed Prout, 'if I had, sir, I should certainly not have descended, sir, to the use of opprobrious expressions, sir, neither should I have addressed you through a door.'

'You did—'

'I did not, sir! It is not my custom, sir, to address a person in insulting language through a door, sir, whatever may be your own custom, sir, in that respect.'

'My own, sir! Do you imply, sir - do you venture to imply - that I have ever done anything of the kind?' bawled Mr. Quelch.

'I do not imply it, sir! I state it as a fact, sir!' boomed back Prout. 'I will not enter into an altercation on the subject, sir. It is beneath my dignity, sir. Kindly leave my form-room.'

'I will leave your form-room with pleasure, sir, but first—'

'That will do, Mr. Quelch.'

'It will not do, Mr. Prout. First, I must express my contempt, sir, my utter contempt, for your childish exhibition of hostility at the door of my form-room. Second, I must warn you that, if there should be any repetition of such conduct, sir, I shall place the matter before the headmaster.'

'There can be no repetition, sir, of what has never occurred!' roared Mr. Prout. 'If you really fancy, Mr. Quelch, that I called through the door of your form-room—'

'Fancy, sir! What do you mean by fancy?'

'I mean what I say, sir! If you really fancy that such an occurrence occurred, I can only conclude, sir, that you have been drinking—'

'Wha—a—a—t?'

'Drinking, sir!' boomed Prout. 'That is the only way, sir, in which I can account for it: and a similar suspicion, sir, occurred to me one day last week, sir.'

'Sir!' gasped Mr. Quelch. 'If you are in your senses, Mr. Prout—'

'I am quite in my senses, Mr. Quelch, though I am driven to doubt whether you are quite in yours,' boomed Prout. 'In any case, sir, I will not allow this shocking scene to be prolonged. Leave my form-room.'

'Mr. Prout, you will apologize for your words—'

'I will do nothing of the kind, Mr. Quelch. I am prepared to repeat them! To repeat them, sir.'

'I will not tolerate—'

'Leave my form-room, sir.' Mr. Prout took hold of the door-handle, preparatory to shutting the door on Quelch. 'Kindly go, sir! I am about to shut the door, sir! Go!'

'You will apologize, sir—'

Thud!

Prout shut the door.

It shut on Mr. Quelch, within the doorway. There was a distinct thud as it contacted him. The Fifth Form, staring on, hardly breathed. Prout was actually banging the door on Quelch!

What happened next was still more startling. Before the door could latch, it flew open again, under a forceful shove from outside. This time it banged on Mr. Prout. It banged hard, taking the plump gentleman quite by surprise.

'Oh!' gasped Mr. Prout as he tottered.

Bump!

Prout sat down.

'Oh!' gasped all the Fifth.

Receding footsteps were heard in the corridor. Quelch was gone. Prout sat and spluttered for breath. Potter and Greene rushed out of form to give him a helping hand up. 'Bless my soul!' gasped Mr. Prout. 'Bless my soul!'

Latin, in the Fifth-form room, was rather desultory, after that exciting interlude. Coker, at least, was glad to hear no more about present perfect plurals and infinitives.

In the Remove form-room, there had been a buzz of voices and a ripple of laughter. It faded into dead silence, as Mr. Quelch swept in like a thundercloud. One blink at his expressive features decided Billy Bunter that there had better be no more ventriloquism that morning! Quelch had quite a model form for the remainder of that lesson. Every fellow in the Remove breathed more freely when, at last, it ended, and they escaped for break.

CHAPTER 30

IN OR OUT?

'SEEN Quelch?'

Billy Bunter asked that question, after dinner. He asked it of one fellow after another. His fat brow wore a worried look.

On a fine, clear autumn afternoon, a half-holiday, it was as good as certain that Quelch would go out on one of his 'grinds'. But as good as certain was not good enough for Bunter, considering what he had in view. Bunter had to be quite, quite certain about it: beyond the shadow of a doubt.

'Seen Quelch, Skinner?'

'No, and don't want to.'

'Seen Quelch, Smithy?'

'Blow Quelch.'

'Seen Quelch, Mauly?'

'Yaas!'

'Oh, lor'! Hasn't he gone out?'

'Haven't the foggiest.'

'If you've seen him, he can't have gone out—'

'Might have - it's an hour since I saw him—'

'You silly ass!' howled Bunter. He did not want to know whether Lord Mauleverer had seen Quelch an hour ago. It was Quelch in the present tense that interested him.

It was the Felgate match that afternoon. Having scored a miss in baulk, as it were, on Saturday, Billy Bunter was hoping for better luck on Wednesday. Harry Wharton having turned down that proposition of a 'quid pro quo', there was nothing for it but another spot of ventriloquism - if it would work! But obviously it could not work unless Quelch went out.

The matter was urgent. That handsome 'tip' from Bunter Villa depended on it. That, of course, outweighed any other imaginable consideration. It was no wonder that Billy Bunter wore a worried look. Had Quelch gone out, or hadn't he?

He was not in his study. Bunter had ascertained that fact by looking into it. Had Quelch been there, he would have explained his visit by telling his form-master how sorry he was that he had not yet finished those lines. But as Quelch was not there, he had no occasion to express that sorrow. Next he looked into Common-Room, with the same excuse ready if Quelch was there. But Quelch was not there. Prout was there, reposing in an armchair after lunch: Prout was dozing, and did not notice the fat face looking in at the door. Prout generally dozed after lunch. Bunter gave him one blink, and departed to seek elsewhere, and to ask every fellow he met whether he had seen Quelch.

'I say, you fellows.'

The fat Owl rolled up to a cheery group in the quad.

Harry Wharton and Co. were looking very merry and bright. Class, with Quelch, that morning had not been exhilarating. But class was over, and Soccer was coming: and life seemed distinctly worth living to the chums of the Remove.

'They've got some good men,' Bob Cherry was saying.

'That chap King is a goal-getter—'

'He won't get past Johnny in goal,' said Harry Wharton.

'Not if I can help it!' agreed Johnny Bull.

'I say, you fellows—'

'They've got a good goalie too,' said Bob. 'Chap named Warren - he knows how to keep the leather out—'

'I say, you fellows—'

'It won't be a walk-over,' said Harry. 'But I rather think we shall pull it off.'

'The thoughtfulness is terrific,' agreed Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh, with a nod of his dusky head.

'I say, you fellows,' yelled Bunter, in exasperation. 'Will you shut up about footer for a minute, and let a chap speak?'

Harry Wharton laughed.

'What is it?' he asked. 'Are you going to offer your help to beat Felgate? Declined without thanks! Now roll away.'

'I say, have you seen Quelch?'

'Lots of times.'

'Oh, don't be a silly ass!' hooted Bunter. 'Have you seen him since tiffin? Know whether he's gone out or not?'

'I don't know, and couldn't care less.'

'Well, I want to know,' yapped Bunter. 'He usually goes for a grind on a half-holiday. He's not in his study or Common-Room - I've looked. Nobody seems to have seen him since tiffin. He must have gone out.'

'What the dickens do you want Quelch for?' asked Bob. 'Most of us had enough of him in form this morning.'

'Oh! I—I don't want him—'

'You're looking for him because you don't want him?'

'Oh! Yes! No! I—I mean—' stammered the fat Owl.

'Well, what do you mean, if you happen to mean anything?' inquired Bob.

'Oh! Nothing.'

The Famous Five stared at him. Evidently, Billy Bunter was anxious to know whether Quelch was in or out: though why, was a mystery to them.

But at that moment, two figures in hat and overcoat emerged from the House. One was the lean figure of Mr. Quelch. The other was the somewhat tubby form of Mr. Wiggins. Quelch, evidently, was going out for his usual 'grind', in company with the master of the Third: and his recent invisibility was quite simply explained by the circumstance that he had been chatting with Wiggins in Wiggins's study, till the Third-form master was ready to start.

'If you want Quelch—!' began Harry Wharton.

Looking past Bunter, the Famous Five had a full view of the two masters coming out of the House. Billy Bunter, having his back to the House, did not see them, naturally having no eyes in the back of his head.

'I don't want him,' interrupted Bunter, hastily. 'Nothing of the kind. It doesn't matter to me whether Quelch is gone out or not, of course. Still, I suppose he must be gone, as nobody's seen him about.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

As Quelch and Wiggins were coming down the path behind Bunter, that remark struck the Famous Five as funny, and they laughed. Billy Bunter blinked at them morosely.

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at,' he snapped. 'Of course, I don't care a bean whether Quelch is gone out or not, but the bony old sketch usually goes out—'

'Shut up, you ass!' breathed Harry Wharton.

'Shan't! Quelch is a bony old sketch—'

'Bunter!'

'Oh!'

Billy Bunter was wont to move to slow motion: very slow motion. But if he had been a humming-top, well wound up, he could not have spun round faster than he did, at the sound of that sharp and angry bark behind him. He goggled at Henry Samuel Quelch.



'BLESSED IF I SEE ANYTHING TO CACKLE AT'

'Bunter! How dare you? I heard you—'

'Oh, crikey!'

'You disrespectful, impertinent—'

'I—I—I—I didn't!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I—I—oh, lor!' I—I never said you were a bony old sketch, sir! I—I mean —I—I—I don't think you're a bony old sketch, sir, like some of the fellows do—'

'Silence! Bunter, I shall cane you severely, for your impertinence—'

'Oh,lor!'

'You will come to my study, when I have returned from my walk! I shall cane you severely.'

'Oh, crikey!'

Mr. Quelch walked on, frowning, with Mr. Wiggins.

Billy Bunter blinked after him, and then blinked at the Famous Five, who were grinning.

'Beast!' he mumbled.

'You asked for it, old fat man,' said Bob.

'The askfulness was terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter.'

'Yah!'

Billy Bunter rolled away disconsolate. The prospect of dropping in at Quelch's study for a whopping was extremely unattractive. That unattractive prospect weighed on Bunter's fat mind.

But there was, so to speak, balm in Gilead. He had now learned what he was so anxious to know: Quelch had gone out. The coast would be clear for the fat ventriloquist. Whether the same chicken, as it were, would fight twice: whether the captain of the Remove, called to the telephone by his master's voice, would fall for it a second time, Bunter could not feel sure. But at any rate he was going to try it on. That handsome 'tip' from Bunter Villa was coming his way, if by hook or by crook

the fat Owl could so contrive it.

There was plenty of time before Felgate were due to arrive. And in quite good time, Billy Bunter blinked down the corridor on which Masters' Studies opened. He wanted to borrow a phone: and he had no doubt about the phone he was going to borrow. He remembered that he had left Prout dozing in the armchair in Common-Room. Prout's telephone was indicated. And, blinking cautiously round him like a very wary owl, the fat junior rolled along to Prout's study, and tiptoed in.

CHAPTER 31

CAUGHT IN THE ACT!

MR. PROUT frowned.

He was annoyed.

After lunch - and Mr. Prout liked an ample lunch - a plump middle-aged gentleman naturally liked a gentle doze in a comfortable armchair.

Brisk lads like Harry Wharton and Co. of the Remove, might be thinking of Soccer. Hefty fellows like Coker of the Fifth, or Wingate of the Sixth, might think of pushing out a bike, or boxing in the gym. A lean and active gentleman like Mr. Quelch might enjoy a long tramp across country. Mr. Prout, like Gallio of old, cared for none of these things. Prout was not brisk, he was not hefty, and he was not lean - far from it! Prout preferred to sink his plump person into a well-padded armchair and doze. He had done so, in Common-Room, as Billy Bunter had seen. But he was not in Common-Room now. He had been disturbed there. Common-Room, being common to the whole staff, Prout could not reasonably expect to keep it to himself. Several masters had come in: as why should they not? Prout, unwilling to move, had tried to doze on. But the acid tones of Hacker, the squeaky voice of Monsieur Charpentier, with two or three others added, made it quite impracticable. So Prout had, at length, heaved himself up, and left Common-Room: elephantining down the corridor to his study.

There, in his own quarters, he could bank on quiet and repose.

Having shut the door, he rolled round the table, to the armchair that stood before the fireplace. He plumped down into that armchair, leaned his plump person against the high back, and closed his eyes once more.

He dozed gently.

But he was not asleep. It was only a light doze: and the sound of his door opening, a little later, caused his eyes to open also.

Then he frowned.

Really, it was annoying. Idle chatter - all talk except Prout's own was idle chatter - had driven him out of Common-Room. But it seemed that there was no peace even in his own study. Some thoughtless person was coming in to disturb him.

And that person had not even tapped at the door!

Whoever it was, was treating Prout and his study quite unceremoniously.

Prout was very much inclined to rise to his feet, and glare over the back of the armchair at the intruder. He refrained from doing so, chiefly because he did not feel like heaving up his weight.

To his surprise, he heard the door close again: though other sounds revealed that the intruder was inside the study. Soft footfalls - just as if somebody was tiptoeing - moved across towards the window, near which the telephone stood on a small table. Then Prout understood, as he heard a receiver jerked off the hooks.

Someone had come into his study to borrow the phone: obviously unaware that he was in the room. The high back of the armchair was several inches above the bald spot on Prout's head. Whoever it was at the phone, he could not see Prout, any more than Prout could see him. There was a whirr of dialling.

Prout was annoyed. He did not want to be disturbed: and this had disturbed him. Still, he was an obliging gentleman: and did not object to another member of the staff stepping into his study to use the telephone. The frown faded from his plump visage. All he wanted now was that that member of

the staff, whoever he was, should put his call through, and go, and leave him to repose.

And then—!

Then Prout almost doubted his plump ears, as he heard a voice speaking into the transmitter. It was a voice which, in the recent circumstances, he could never have dreamed of hearing in his study: a voice which, in the Remove, was often compared to a bark!

'Mr. Quelch speaking!'

Prout sat almost petrified.

Quelch!

After all that had happened, after 'Pompous old ass' at his study door last week, after that unprecedented scene in the Fifth-form room only that morning, that man, Quelch, had the audacity, the effrontery, to walk into his study and use the telephone!

To any other member of the staff Prout would not have objected. To that particular member of the staff he did object, most strenuously. Quelch, with whom he was not on speaking terms: Quelch, who had actually pushed him over with his form-room door - Quelch!

As he sat, surprised, angry, his plump face reddening with resentment, a voice came back on the phone. It reached the plump ears in the armchair.

'Yessir! Trotter 'ere, sir.'

If Prout had been surprised before, he was astonished now.

Quelch had a telephone in his own study: yet he had stepped in to use Prout's. That might have meant that his own instrument was out of order. But this - what could this mean?

He was not making a call outside the school. He must have dialled a Greyfriars number, as Trotter had answered the call.

Why, in the name of all that was incomprehensible, should Quelch want to speak to the House page by telephone?

'Please call Master Wharton to the telephone, Trotter.'

'Yessir.'

'Tell him to come at once, as there is something I intended to say to him before I went out, but it slipped my memory.'

'Yessir.'

'Tell him I have no time to lose, as Mr. Wiggins is waiting outside this call-box.'

'Yes sir.'

'Lose no time, Trotter.'

'I'll go this minute, sir, if you'll 'old the line.'

Then silence.

Prout sat glued in his armchair, wondering whether he was dreaming.

Quelch - at any rate, Quelch's voice! - had stated, as plainly as language could state, that he was phoning from a call-box: when actually he was phoning on Prout's phone in the school! Was he out of his senses?

And he had sent Trotter to fetch Harry Wharton to the phone - evidently his own telephone in his own study!

It was utterly amazing! It was quite incomprehensible!

Prout could have fancied that he was asleep and dreaming this!

But he was not asleep - and he was not dreaming! He was astonished, amazed, puzzled, perplexed - and extremely annoyed. Quelch's actions were absolutely unaccountable. But he was not going to carry on those unaccountable actions in Prout's study, with Prout quiescent in his armchair. Nothing

of the kind! Prout heaved himself up from that armchair, and glared over the back of it at the figure at the telephone.

Then he very nearly fell down!

Actually, he could not believe his eyes. He passed a plump hand over them, and stared again. His eyes bulged. He felt like the victim of some extraordinary hallucination.

For the figure at the telephone was not Quelch's!

It was a much shorter, and very fatter, figure. It was not Quelch. It was a member of Quelch's form! It was Billy Bunter!

It had been Quelch's voice - there was no doubt about that. But it was Bunter at the phone!

Quelch was not in the room at all. Billy Bunter was! There was Bunter, with the receiver to a fat ear.

It was - it could only be - Bunter who had been speaking on the phone!

Prout gazed at him. He stared at him. He glared at him. He goggled at him. The ghost of Banquo at the feast did not startle Macbeth more, Mercury dropping from the sky did not startle the pious Aeneas more, than the sight of Billy Bunter at his telephone startled Mr. Prout.

Billy Bunter was grinning over the telephone.

He was playing Saturday's trick over again, and so far, all had gone well. In a few minutes Wharton would be in Quelch's study, listening to his master's voice as before. It was safe as houses - with Prout dozing in Common-Room. It had not occurred to Bunter's fat brain that perhaps Prout was no longer dozing in Common-Room!

So far from dozing in Common-Room, Prout was standing and staring at him over the back of the armchair!

For the moment, Bunter remained unaware of him. He did not look round. And the astounded Prout only stared at him, dumb.

But that did not last.

Prout, overwhelmed with amazement, had to collect his startled mind. But he collected it. It was not Quelch - it was Bunter - at the phone - and by some extraordinary trick, Bunter had imitated his master's voice, deluding Prout into the belief that it was Quelch speaking - evidently deluding Trotter also. Not Quelch at all! Bunter! Prout found his voice. When he found it, he used it with energy. A sudden roar apprised Billy Bunter that he was not, as he had fancied, alone in Prout's study.

'Boy!'

Bunter jumped.

The receiver dropped from his fat hand.

'Boy! Bunter! You young rascal!' roared Prout.

'Oh, crikey!'

Billy Bunter's little round eyes looked like popping through his big round spectacles, as he blinked at the Fifth-form master.

He was not alone in Prout's study. Prout was there!

The fat Owl had never dreamed that he was there! But there he was - glaring at Bunter over the back of the armchair. Like a basilisk, he glared, and like the cannon at Balaclava, he volleyed and thundered!

'Bunter! You young rascal, what does this mean?

How dare you play this trick in my study? What does this extraordinary trickery mean? Upon my word! What does it mean? What? What have you to say?'

'Oh, lor!'

gasped Bunter. That seemed to be all he had to say! He goggled at Prout. He was caught - fairly caught - caught in the act - caught in the very act! His game was up. Harry Wharton would not

listen to instructions in his master's voice when he came to the phone in Quelch's study - there was no more phoning for Bunter. There was no Soccer for Bunter: and that 'tip' from Bunter Villa was further off than ever. The fat ventriloquist had tried it on once too often! In utter dismay, he goggled at the red and wrathful face of Prout.

He was rooted to the floor.

But he became suddenly uprooted, as Prout came round the armchair. On a previous occasion, Quelch had intervened to save his fat ears. But there was no Quelch to intervene now. Guessing what was coming - it was an easy guess - Bunter bolted for the door.

Smack!

'Yaroooooh!'

Prout was able to deliver only one, before Bunter had the door open, and charged into the corridor. But it was quite a good one. A fat head was ringing and singing as the fat Owl fled down the corridor like a hunted hare.

CHAPTER 32

BAD FOR BUNTER

'OH!' gasped Harry Wharton.

'Ooooh!' spluttered Billy Bunter.

They met suddenly and unexpectedly. And they met with such a crash, as caused Wharton to stagger back, and Billy Bunter to roll spluttering on the cold, unsympathetic linoleum.

Harry Wharton, called to the telephone by Trotter, was coming to Mr. Quelch's study to take the call. He was not in a happy mood. What Trotter had told him, sounded like Saturday over again, and he could not help wondering uneasily whether it was 'more of the same' from Quelch - as it certainly would have been, but for the fat Owl's ill-luck in Prout's study.

Wharton had almost reached Quelch's door, when another door further up the corridor flew open, and a fat figure bolted out. That fat figure bolted down the corridor so suddenly, and so rapidly, that Harry Wharton had no time to dodge it. He hardly glimpsed Bunter before Bunter crashed into him.

'Oh!' gasped Harry. 'You mad ass - oh!' He staggered against the wall, which saved him from falling.

'You potty hippopotamus - oh!'

'Ow! wow! Oh, crikey! Ow!' spluttered Bunter, as he sprawled. 'Ow! Beast! Oh, jiminy! Wow!

Ooooh!' Billy Bunter sat up breathlessly. The shock had winded him, and almost winded the captain of the Remove. He groped for his spectacles, and set them straight on his fat little nose, and panted, and panted, and panted. Harry Wharton glared at him.

'You potty porpoise—'

'Ooooh! Wow! Wooooh!'

'What are you rushing about like a mad rhinoceros for?' howled the captain of the Remove.

'Oooogh! Ow! Gooooh! Wooooooh!'

'You fat, frabjous, footling frump—!' Harry Wharton broke off, suddenly. From the doorway from which Bunter had charged, emerged another figure - that of Mr. Prout, master of the Fifth.

Prout swept down the corridor rather like a hurricane.

He towered over the fat Owl gasping on the floor. Harry Wharton stared at him. Apparently Bunter had been in a spot of trouble in Prout's study. However, Wharton had that telephone - call to think of, and he turned to Quelch's door.

'Wharton!' boomed Prout.

'Yes sir!' Harry paused, with his hand on the door-handle.

'Stop! Do you know anything of this?'

'Of what, sir?'

'Of this trickery on the telephone - this unheard of, this extraordinary - this unparalleled trickery—!' boomed Prout.

'Eh? Oh! No! What—?'

'Your name was mentioned—'

'I don't understand, sir! But please excuse me now - I have to take a call in my form-master's study—'

'Stop!'

'Mr. Quelch is holding the line, sir—'

'Mr. Quelch is not holding the line, Wharton.'

'But he has rung up from a call-box, sir, to speak to me - Trotter's just called me to the phone, sir—'

'Mr. Quelch has done nothing of the kind. I see that you were no party to this - you have been deluded—'

'To what, sir?' asked Harry, bewildered.

'Your form-master is not on the telephone, Wharton.

He has not rung up from a call-box. It was this boy - this—this—this Bunter—' Prout glared at a sprawling, spluttering Owl.

'Eh?'

'It was Bunter—'

'Bunter?'

'Yes, Bunter! He had the impudence - the audacity - the unparalleled effrontery - to use the telephone in my study, and to speak in his master's name - it was Bunter who told Trotter to call you—'

'But—but—!' gasped Harry.

'Most extraordinary of all, he was able, by some amazing trick, to imitate the voice of Mr. Quelch! I myself supposed that it was Mr. Quelch speaking, until I saw Bunter at the telephone—'

'Oh!' Harry Wharton began to understand.

'Most extraordinary - I have never heard of such trickery - such unprecedented, such unparalleled trickery—'

'Oh!' repeated Harry, as it dawned on him. He knew more about the fat ventriloquist's tricks than Mr. Prout did. 'Bunter—you—' The look he gave the sprawling Owl was as alarming as Prout's.

'Quelch hasn't rung up - it was you, pulling my leg - by gum, I'll—'

'Stop!' roared Prout, as Billy Bunter squirmed to his feet, and he reached out a plump hand to grasp him.

Bunter did not stop!

He dodged that plump hand, and bolted.

What the result was going to be, now that he was found out, the fat ventriloquist did not know.

Neither was he thinking of it at the moment. His one thought was to get out of Prout's reach.

'Stop!' boomed Prout.

Anyone who had seen Billy Bunter at that moment might have fancied that he had a chance in the School 100 yards. Never had his uncommon weight been propelled at such a speed.

Prout lumbered after him in vain. But there was a swifter pursuer on his track than the portly Prout.

Harry Wharton was not going to Quelch's telephone, now that he knew how the matter stood. There was no call to take from Quelch. He shot after the fleeing Owl like an arrow from a bow.

Billy Bunter was well ahead as he charged out into the quad. But shortage of wind supervened. A grasp on the back of his collar, and knuckles grinding into the back of a fat neck, brought him spluttering to a halt.

'Ow! Leggo!' yelled Bunter, frantically.

'You fat villain—'

'Ow! It wasn't me,' gasped Bunter. 'I—I say, old chap, it wasn't me - leggo my collar! It—it—it wasn't me—'

'It wasn't you, when old Pompous heard you—'

'Oh! Yes! I mean no! I—I expect he went to sleep and - and dreamed it,' gasped Bunter. 'Besides, I never knew he was in the study at all. I—I thought he was in Common-Room when I phoned—I—I mean, I—I never phoned, and I never phoned on Saturday either—'

'Saturday!' gasped Harry Wharton.

'Yes—no—oh, crikey - leggo!' spluttered the fat Owl.

'I keep on telling you that it wasn't me, and it was only a lark, too. Only a lark, old chap.'

'It was you phoned on Saturday, and I thought it was Quelch giving me orders—'

'Oh! No! I never went to the phone on Saturday at all—I—I was in the tuck-shop when I phoned from Hacker's study - I mean when I never phoned at all—ow! wow! wow! Leave off kicking me, you beast! Wow!'

Harry Wharton released the fat Owl's collar. But that was only to put in some active foot-work. He understood it all now. That phone call from Quelch on Saturday had been very surprising and unexpected. But it was explained now - now that he knew that it had come from the fat ventriloquist. And evidently another like it had been coming, had not the artful Owl been interrupted. If the captain of the Remove had been kicking for goal, his foot could not have landed more energetically than it landed on the tightest trousers at Greyfriars School.

Thud! thud! thud!

'Ow! wow! Yarooooooh!'

Thud! thud! thud!

Half-a-dozen quite good ones landed, before the fat Owl escaped. Then Harry Wharton, still a little excited but much relieved in his mind, went back to the changing-room to rejoin his friends. When Felgate arrived, a little later, a wriggling fat Owl had the pleasure - or otherwise - of seeing the Remove team go into the field - without him, and oblivious of his fat existence. Sadly and sorrowfully, he realized that his remarkable gift of ventriloquism was a chicken that would no longer fight: and that that 'tip' from Bunter Villa would never, never materialize at Greyfriars. And even that was not the worst - for what was going to happen, when Quelch came in, and heard from Prout? The Greyfriars ventriloquist had ventriloquized not wisely but too well: and the prospect before him was simply awful!

CHAPTER 33

ALL UP WITH BUNTER!

'QUELCH—!'

'Prout!'

Mr. Quelch barked that name. He stared at a plump face and a portly figure in the armchair in his study: and his look resembled that of Roderick Dhu, on the occasion when dark lightnings flashed from Roderick's eye!

The Remove master had come in from his walk. He came into his study, and was about to remove his overcoat, when he beheld Prout. He had not expected to find anyone in his study - least of all the Fifth-form master. And that he was not pleased to see him there, was only too evident.

'My dear Quelch—!' Apparently it was the olive-branch! But Quelch wanted no olive-branches from a person who had, as he believed, applied to him that extremely derogatory epithet, 'jackanapes'.

'Jackanapes' lingered in Quelch's memory, like 'Pompous old ass' in Prout's.

'Sir! I did not expect to see you here - kindly leave my study!' barked Mr. Quelch.

'Please allow me to explain - I have waited here for some time—'

'There is nothing to explain, sir. Kindly go.'

'There must be an explanation, sir!' said Mr. Prout, firmly. 'I fear that I have been deluded, sir, by a most impertinent boy playing a most extraordinary trick. Did you know, sir, that in your form there is a boy who has a very odd and remarkable trick of imitating voices?'

Mr. Quelch started a little. The affair of Chunkley's had made him aware of that fact. Some young rascal in the Remove, he knew, had assumed his master's voice. So far he had made no progress in discovering the identity of that young rascal.

'I have lately become aware of it, Mr. Prout,' he snapped. 'But I quite fail to see how it concerns you in any way: and I repeat—'

'It does concern me, sir, for since I discovered that that boy is able to imitate your voice so exactly as to deceive my ears, sir, I doubt whether it was you, as I supposed, who came to my study door last Friday—'

'What?'

'And called opprobrious epithets through the door, sir—'

'Mr. Prout!'

'I had no doubt at the time, Mr. Quelch, that the voice was yours—'

'Goodness gracious!'

'I remember that that boy was in the passage when I looked out. But I did not, of course, think of him for one moment in connection with the occurrence - I had no doubt that it was your voice—'

'Mr. Prout!' Quelch gasped. 'I had no idea of this - how could I even dream of such an occurrence? I presume, sir, that I need hardly assure you that I did no such thing. I came nowhere near your study on Friday, and certainly never called through your door - most assuredly not! Is it really possible that such a trick was played?'

'It certainly was played, sir, if it was not you—'

'I have said that it was not I.'

'Quite, quite! Of course I accept your assurance, Quelch: but at the time I could not think otherwise, and I was deeply offended, sir - very deeply offended. Now that my eyes have been opened, sir, I regret - I very much regret - that in my resentment, I acted as I did in the quadrangle on Monday. I

apologize, sir.'

Quelch stood looking at him. He was no longer understudying Roderick Dhu. Dark lightnings had ceased to flash from his eye! That young rascal in the Remove - whoever that young rascal was - was the cause of the trouble. Prout, evidently, had had his leg pulled, like the man at Chunkley's.

'I was very seriously offended. Mr. Quelch! I had no doubt - no doubt at all - but now that I know that I was deluded—'

'I understand, sir! I quite understand that such a deception must have given deep offence. But I am bound to say, sir, that is very little extenuation of your unexampled act this morning, sir, in calling through the door of my form-room, sir, such an epithet as "jackanapes"—'

Prout jumped.

'I sir!' he gasped.

'You sir!' barked Quelch.

'Is that what you fancied, sir, when you came to my form-room? Bless my soul! I told you then, sir, and I tell you again now, that I did nothing of the kind!' bawled Prout.

Quelch blinked at him.

'Mr. Prout! You called—'

'I did not!'

'It was your voice - I did not see you, as the door was shut - but it was your voice - oh!' Quelch broke off suddenly. Light flashed on his mind. 'Bless my soul! Was that another trick? If my voice was so successfully imitated, yours may have been also. Can that be it?'

'It must be so, if you think you heard—'

'I certainly heard! And I had no doubt that the voice came through the door from the corridor. I must have been mistaken - no doubt because Bunter had drawn my attention to the door—'

'Bunter!'

'Yes. Bunter heard, or thought he heard, a tap at the door—'

'The young rascal!' boomed Prout.

'Really, Mr. Prout—'

'It is Bunter, sir, who is responsible for the trickery that has caused all this trouble, sir—'

'What?'

'I have not told you yet, sir, how I discovered the facts.

It was through hearing Bunter - Bunter, sir - at my telephone, speaking in tones which I had no doubt were yours, sir, till I saw him—'

'Bunter!' repeated Mr. Quelch, almost dazedly. 'I was aware that some boy in my form was playing such tricks - but Bunter! - that utterly stupid and obtuse boy Bunter - is it possible?'

'It was Bunter, sir!' boomed Prout. 'And I trust, sir, that you will deal with him in such a way, sir, as will impress upon him that such tricks must not be played, sir, on members of the staff in this school, sir.'

Quelch's lips set.

There was no doubt that he was going to deal with that trickster, when discovered, in a quite impressive manner. He had not been able to discover who it was. Prout had made the discovery for him. The rest was up to Quelch: and that setting of his lips indicated that the rod would not be spared.

'I shall deal with him, Mr. Prout. You need have no doubt on that point. The boy is due in my study now - I told him to come here when I returned, but he has not come. I will send for him.'

Mr. Quelch stepped to the window and looked out.

He was about to call to some junior in the quad to send Bunter to his study. But he did not need to do so. The gimlet-eyes fell on a fat figure and a fat face, and a big pair of spectacles glinting back the autumn sunshine.

'Bunter!'

The fat Owl was at some distance. But he heard that call. Almost anyone at Greyfriars might have heard it. It was almost a roar.

Billy Bunter blinked round.

He blinked at the set, stern face at Quelch's study window. He blinked at a plump visage beside it.

Blinking at Quelch and Prout, together in the study, the hapless fat Owl felt his fat knees knock together. The fat ventriloquist had called the tune: now the time had come to pay the piper!

He could read, in Quelch's expressive face, what was coming, now that his form-master was wise to his trickery. Seldom, if ever, had Quelch's face been so expressive. Seldom, if ever, had his ire been so deep and deadly.

It was not only the Chunkley prank, though that had been outrageous. More serious than even that, was the trouble with Prout. Prout had been 'edge-wise' over the affair with Jimmy Jugson: but that would have blown over - but for what had followed. It was through Bunter that Prout had 'cut' him in the quad - it was through Bunter that he had made that scene in the Fifth, actually pushing Prout over with the door of his own form-room - and goodness only knew what might have come next, had not the young rascal been found out. But he had been found out now: and justice - the strictest, sternest, grimmest justice, was the next item on the programme. Billy Bunter could read in Quelch's face how extremely strict and stern that justice was going to be! It was all up with Bunter!

'Do you hear me, Bunter?'

Bunter did not answer. He only blinked.

'Come to my study at once, Bunter.'

'Oh, lor!'

'Immediately!' thundered Mr. Quelch.

'Oh, crikey!'

'This instant, Bunter.'

Bunter did not stir. It seemed as if his little fat legs refused to carry him towards the House - and what awaited him there. He stood blinking at the faces at the window.

Mr. Quelch breathed hard. It needed only this - disobedience added to the young rascal's many other offences. Leaving Prout at the window, Mr. Quelch whisked out at the door. As the mountain would not come to Mahomet, Mahomet was going to the mountain, so to speak. Only seconds later, Quelch was in the quad, striding towards Bunter.

Seconds more, and a grasp on Bunter's collar would have marched him in to his door! But— Bunter jumped back.

Quelch's grasp missed by inches. A clutching hand had swept the empty air.

'Bunter!' gasped Mr. Quelch. 'Stop!'

If Quelch's face had been a little less expressive, Bunter might have stopped. As it was, he did not. Under the wrathful and astonished eyes of his form-master, he darted out at the open gateway. He did not stop to think. His one dominating idea was to keep out of that clutch. That, at the moment, was all that mattered. Quelch, his face more expressive than ever, followed him, with rapid strides. This was really the limit!

'Bunter!' It was like a peal of thunder behind the fat Owl, and Billy Bunter cast back a terrified blink at a face that was as alarming as that of the fabled Gorgon: or a little more so.

It was too alarming for Bunter! He did not wait for Quelch's rapid strides to diminish the distance between them. He whizzed out of the lane into the wood, and disappeared from sight among the trees.

'Bunter!' Quelch actually bawled.

Billy Bunter certainly heard. But following the example of the ancient gladiator, he heeded not. Answer there came none! And Mr. Quelch, with a look on his face that the fabled Gorgon might have envied but never beaten, plunged into the wood after him.

CHAPTER 34

UNEXPECTED AGAIN!

'OH, crikey!' gasped Billy Bunter.

He had stopped to take breath. He needed it. He leaned on a tree-trunk and gasped and gasped. But it was said of old that there is no rest for the wicked! From a short distance - a terribly short distance - came a rustling sound in the thickets. Then a calling voice: 'Bunter!'

'Beast!' moaned Bunter. 'Come back at once, Bunter.'

Nothing was more unlikely than that Billy Bunter would come back. His one desire was to increase the distance between himself and Quelch - certainly not to diminish it - not while Quelch was in his present mood, at all events. He detached himself from the tree-trunk: but it was only to scuttle deeper into the wood.

'Bunter! You stupid, disobedient boy! Come back this instant! Your punishment will be very severe for this! Bunter!'

Severe punishment did not sound attractive! The fat Owl scuttled on, but he could still hear the rustling of twigs and the calling voice. It could only be a matter of minutes before the clutching hand had him. The fat Owl headed for the old Woodcutters' hut, where Jimmy the Spiv had enjoyed that spread for one, a couple of days ago. He had a wild idea of hiding among old Joyce's stacks of logs and brushwood, leaving Quelch to hunt for him as long as he liked.

He panted up to the open end of the hut. Then he gasped:

'Oh, lor!'

He blinked into the hut. It was empty! Had it still been stacked with brushwood and logs, the hapless fat Owl might have found a hide-out. But evidently old Joyce had cleared the hut since Monday. Nothing remained but a few scattered twigs on the earthen floor.

There was no hide-out for Bunter.

He did not roll into the hut. He would only have been cornered there, and inevitably clutched. And as he stood gasping and blinking, his master's voice came once more to his fat ears.

'Bunter! Now—'

He blinked round - at Quelch! Quelch, his look more Gorgonic than ever, was striding from the trees into the little glade where the woodcutter's hut stood. Quelch had him now!

But had he?

There was hardly a run left in the little fat legs. Quelch was striding at him with outstretched hand. At any other time, Billy Bunter would no more have thought of clambering up on the roof of that hut, than he would have thought of missing his dinner or swotting at Latin. But desperate diseases, as the poet has told us, require desperate remedies! Billy Bunter made a jump, and a frantic clamber: and somehow, he hardly knew how, sprawled on the slanting corrugated iron roof, a minute ahead of Quelch.

He was out of reach as Quelch arrived. But there was no further flight for Billy Bunter! He was brought to bay, as it were.

'Oooogh! Oh, crikey! Oooogh!' gurgled Bunter.

It was somewhat precarious on a slanting roof. Billy Bunter squatted there, and blinked down at Quelch, taking every care not to roll off. A bump on the earth would have been bad enough: bumping into Quelch's clutches would have been worse.

Quelch gazed up at him.

'Bunter!' Quelch spoke calmly, with the calmness of intense anger. 'Bunter! Come down at once.'

'I—I—I say, sir—!'

'Descend immediately!'

'But I—I—I say, sir—'

'Cannot you understand, Bunter, that your punishment will be all the more severe, for the trouble you are giving me?' barked Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Yes! No! But—but—but it wasn't me, sir—!' babbled Bunter.

'What?'

'I—I—I wasn't in Mr. Prout's study at all, sir. He never heard me at the telephone, and—and I wasn't speaking like you, sir—I—I—I couldn't do it, sir—I—I—I'm not a ventriloquist at all, sir—I couldn't bark like you, sir—I mean I couldn't speak like you, sir, or like Prout either, sir—it—it—it's all a mistake, sir—'

'You foolish, obtuse, untruthful boy—'

'Oh, really, sir! I—I never went near Prout's study, sir—I—I—I expect Old Pompous dreamed it, sir - you know what an old donkey he is, sir—it—it wasn't me at all, sir—'

'Come down from that roof!'

'But—but it wasn't me, sir!' moaned Bunter. 'I—I wasn't at Prout's phone, sir—I was in the tuck-shop when Prout caught me in his study, sir—I—I mean—'

'Will you descend at once, Bunter?'

'Oh! Yes! No! It wasn't me, sir, I was up in my study doing my lines, sir - I mean I was in the tuck-shop—'

'I command you to descend from that roof this instant, Bunter.'

'I—I—I hope you can take my word, sir. I was in the tuck-shop doing my lines - I mean - oh, crikey!' Billy Bunter broke off, with that sudden ejaculation, as another figure appeared from the trees, into the little glade.

Looking past Mr. Quelch, as Quelch stood staring up at him, Bunter's eyes popped at the new arrival on the scene.

It did not need a second blink, to recognize Mr. Jimmy Jugson, alias Jimmy the Spiv. Billy Bunter remembered only too well the racing rough who had annexed his bundle of tuck, in that very hut.

'Bunter—!' Quelch's voice came like the grinding of a saw.

'Oh, crikey! Look out, sir—'

'What! Bunter, if you do not descend this instant—'

'Look out!' yelled Bunter.

Quelch as good as had him! Quelch was going to march him in, and administer the whopping of his life. He was booked for the most tremendous whopping that had ever been handed out at Greyfriars School. Nevertheless, as the racing rough came running from the trees, Bunter yelled that warning. The bitter enmity and malevolence in the ruffian's face were not to be mistaken. Bunter, for the moment, forgot the most important person in the universe - William George Bunter! - and yelled that frantic warning.

'Boy! What do you mean? What—?'

'That man - he's coming - look out!' shrieked Bunter.

Quelch, for a moment stared up at him blankly. But the excitement in the fat face, and the fat pointing hand made him turn his head. He turned - to find himself face to face with the racing rough.

'Oh!' gasped Mr. Quelch.

The next second, he was spinning backwards, in the grasp of Jimmy the Spiv. He crashed on his back,

and Jimmy's knee was planted on his chest, pinning him down, and, Jimmy's vicious face grinned down at him, gloating.

'Gotcher this time!' grinned Jimmy.

It was only too true! There was no doubt about it - Jimmy the Spiv had got him, this time!

CHAPTER 35

ONLY BUNTER!

BILLY BUNTER blinked down from the roof of the woodcutter's hut, his eyes almost popping through his spectacles.

Quelch, on his back in the grass, pinned down by a sinewy knee, was helpless: at the mercy of the ruffian who, a week ago, had gone down under the swipe of his walking-stick.

Billy Bunter's fat brain almost swam, as he blinked down at the startling scene.

Jimmy Jugson did not heed Bunter. The fat junior squatting on the slanting roof of the hut, was no more to him than a fat fly clinging there. He had nothing to fear from Bunter. He concentrated on Quelch.

'Gotcher!' he repeated.

'You rascal!' panted the Remove master. He heaved under the ruffian, in an effort to throw him off. But that effort was unavailing.

On his feet, with his stout walking-stick in his hand, he could have dealt with the racing rough, as he had dealt with him before. On his back, with that knee pinning him to the earth, he had no chance.

'Gotcher!' grinned Jimmy, again. 'I been 'anging round long enough, old covey, looking for a chance like this 'ere! I've 'ad my eye on you more'n once, but there was always some other covey along with you, and that stick of yours under your arm. But this time I gotcher.'

Quelch heaved again — again in vain!

'I got a lump on my 'ead, where you swiped me with that stick of yours. I'd 'ave had you the next day, if them schoolboys hadn't turned like they did. You won't 'andle a stick on a covey this time, Mister Schoolmaster, nor there ain't a crowd of schoolboys to barge in neither. I gotcher.'

Mr. Quelch, panting, cast an almost wild glance round the little glade. Quite near the school as it was it was quite solitary. There was no help at hand - no hope of help.

He would have given much for a glimpse of Harry Wharton and Co. just then. But Harry Wharton and Co. were playing Soccer on Little Side at Greyfriars. If only old Joyce had been at his hut, the old woodcutter would have given him what help he could. But the hut was vacant. Inspector Grimes and his constables were keeping official eyes open for Jimmy Jugson: but those official eyes were nowhere near the spot. There was no one at hand - no one but the fat Owl perched on the roof of the hut: and certainly there was no help to be expected from Billy Bunter.

The fat Owl could not help.

Even had he had the nerve to intervene - which was very doubtful - he could have done nothing. One smack from Jugson's hefty fist would have knocked him out. Billy Bunter was of no more use than a fat rabbit would have been.

A knuckly fist was brandished over the Remove master's upturned face.

'You got it coming!' said Jimmy Jugson, between his discoloured teeth. 'They won't know you at your school, Mister Schoolmaster, when I'm through with you. You got it coming!'

Mr. Quelch clutched at a hairy wrist, as the blow descended. He stopped it. Jimmy the Spiv wrenched savagely to free his wrist. It could last only moments.

The Remove master, with a shudder, realized that he had to take what was coming to him.

Bunter blinked down at them with a horrified blink. He could not help! Gladly he would have helped, if he could. Harry Wharton or Bob Cherry, or many another Greyfriars fellow, would have jumped down, regardless of risk, to do what they could: Bunter would gladly have done so, but he just

couldn't.

He could do nothing—nothing!

But could he not?

Suddenly, like an inspiration, it flashed into his fat mind. There was something that he could do - which no other fellow at Greyfriars could have done!

And as it flashed into his mind, he acted on it at once.

He gave the fat little cough that the Remove fellows knew.

Billy Bunter's ventriloquism had landed him in a sea of troubles. It had landed him where he was now. But now it came as a resource - as the only resource in that extremity.

If it worked - and why should it not? It had worked hitherto only too well! The Greyfriars ventriloquist could produce almost any voice he liked. If it worked it would save Quelch from those hammering fists. He was going to try it on, at any rate.

Bunter gave a sudden shrill yell.

'Help! This way, Inspector Grimes! Come round the hut - this way!'

And that shrill yell was immediately followed by a deep voice, as unlike Bunter's squeak as chalk is unlike cheese. 'We're coming! Get round the hut, men, quick, and get him before he can get away.'

'Quick!' shrieked Bunter.

'Hurry!' came the deep voice. 'Hurry! Seize that man!'

Mr. Quelch, of late, had had some experience of Billy Bunter's ventriloquism. But as that deep voice sounded in his ears, no thought of ventriloquism occurred to his mind. To him it meant that Inspector Grimes was at hand, and that Bunter had seen him from the roof, and yelled to him. It meant that help was at hand, and had almost reached him.

Still less was Jimmy the Spiv likely to suspect ventriloquism! No such idea could occur to him. To Jimmy, as to Mr. Quelch, Bunter's yell, and the deep voice that followed, meant that Inspector Grimes was almost upon him - and that he had not a second to spare if he was to escape the grasp of official hands.

And he did not spare a second.

He had wrenched his wrist loose. The knuckly fist was lifted for a blow. But that blow did not descend. Jimmy Jugson jumped away from Quelch as if the Remove master had suddenly become red-hot, and raced away from the hut.

He did not waste a fraction of a second looking back.

He ran like a hare and vanished in the trees. And he did not pause for breath till he had put a good quarter of a mile between his frowsy person and the woodcutter's hut.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter, as he watched the ruffian vanish. It had worked!

Mr. Quelch tottered up.

He was breathless, panting. As he panted, he looked round for Inspector Grimes. He was surprised that the Courtfield inspector had not yet appeared from round the hut. But the inspector did not appear. He was not, in fact, likely to appear. He had been audible: but as there was nothing more of him than a ventriloquial voice, he was not likely to become visible!

'Mr. Grimes!' called out Quelch. There was no answer.

More and more surprised, Mr. Quelch, having recovered his breath a little, moved round the hut to look for him. He walked round the hut, and reappeared with bewilderment in his face.

Billy Bunter grinned. Quelch's bewilderment rather amused the fat ventriloquist. Evidently, Quelch had not 'tumbled' yet.

'Bunter!' Quelch looked up at him. 'Can you see Inspector Grimes from where you are?'

'He, he, he!'

'Bless my soul! Bunter! Are you laughing, Bunter?'

'Oh! No, sir! I—I was only coughing, sir,' gasped Bunter. 'But—but old Grimes - I mean Inspector Grimes - he ain't here, sir - he hasn't been here at all—'

'What? I heard you call to him—'

'That was only gammon, sir—'

'It was what?'

'I—I—I mean, that was only to make that brute think the bobbies were coming, sir, to scare him off—'

'Bunter! What do you mean, Bunter? I heard Inspector Grimes call out - I expected to see him every moment - that was why that ruffian darted away so suddenly—'

'It was me, sir.'

'You!'

'Only me, sir. I thought - I mean I knew - that it would scare that brute off, sir, and - and it jolly well did! Look how he bolted! It—it was only my ventriloquism, sir.'

'Ventriloquism!' repeated Mr. Quelch, blankly.

'Yes, sir! It wasn't old Grimes - he ain't been here at all - it was my ventriloquism, sir! I—I—I'm pretty good at it, sir.'

'Bless my soul!'

Mr. Quelch gazed at that hopeful member of his form. He assimilated this slowly.

He was already aware of the fat Owl's ventriloquial trickery: the affair of Chunkley's, the episode of Prout's study, and the opprobrious word 'jackanapes' at his form-room door - he had had recent and quite ample evidence of it. It had roused his deepest ire. It had determined him to administer such a lesson to the fatuous fat Owl, that the last thing he would ever think of indulging in again would be ventriloquism. But now—!

'You! It was you, Bunter!'

He had to realize that it was so. There was no sign of a 'bobby' anywhere near the woodcutter's hut. It was only a voice from which Jimmy Jugson had bolted: and that voice, it was clear, was the voice of the fat ventriloquist.

'Only me, sir - and—and I scared him off, sir!' Billy Bunter blinked down hopefully at his form-master.

'It was me, sir - me all the time, sir!'

Billy Bunter, to do him justice, had thought, at the moment, only of saving Quelch from hammering fists. But he was thinking further now. Could Quelch, after that, carry on?

Bunter hoped not!

'I—I—I scared him off, sir, because—because I—I like you so much, sir—'

It was like Bunter to over-do it.

'That will do, Bunter.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! But—but—'

Mr. Quelch drew a deep, deep breath.

The young rascal, with his disrespectful trickery, deserved the most condign punishment. There was no doubt about that. But—but it was most unpleasant to think of what would have happened, if that ventriloquial voice had not scared off Jimmy Jugson!

Could Quelch, after that, march Bunter in, to bend over under his stoutest cane?

Luckily for Bunter, Quelch felt that he couldn't. There was a long, long pause.

Quelch spoke at last.

'Bunter! In the circumstances, I shall pardon you!

But take warning - let there be no repetition of your disrespectful pranks.'

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

'That is all!'

With that, Mr. Quelch turned and walked away. Billy Bunter grinned after him from the roof of the hut. He clambered down grinning. He grinned his way back to the school. It was all right, after all, for Bunter, and he felt like grinning - and he grinned from one fat ear to the other.

CHAPTER 36

JUST LIKE BUNTER!

'AUT spumantis apri cursum clamore prementem - with clamour pressing pursuit of a foaming boar—'

'That will do, Wharton! You will go on, Bunter.'

'Oh, crikey!'

'What? What did you say, Bunter?'

'Oh! Nothing, sir! I—I'm just looking for the place, sir—'

'Do not waste time, Bunter.'

'Yes, sir! No, sir! I—I'm just—just going on, sir.'

Tap!

That tap at the door of the Remove form-room came as a boon and a blessing to Billy Bunter.

The Remove were in form; in the cheery autumn morning Harry Wharton and Co. looked as cheery as the morning: not so Billy Bunter. Billy Bunter was a little apprehensive.

Mr. Quelch had given him a look when the lesson began. It was only a look: but it was expressive. It made the fat Owl realize very clearly that he was not in his form-master's good books.

He had been pardoned for his many offences. That was over and done with, and Quelch was not the man to rake it up again. But—!

But it behoved the fat junior to walk warily. Quelch might forgive, but he could not be expected to forget! He was likely to have a very sharp eye on Bunter - and a very keen ear for any more ventriloquial tricks. Nor was he likely to go easy with a fat slacker who had been too busy sitting in an armchair to bother about prep!

Billy Bunter blinked dismally at 'Sic Venus, et Veneris contra sic filius orsus: which came next, and wondered what it might mean, if indeed it meant anything at all.

That tap at the door saved him, for the moment at least.

The door opened.

Quelch frowned round. The interruption did not please him as it did Bunter. But as a stout form and a rubicund face appeared in the doorway, the frown immediately vanished, to be replaced by a smile - quite a cordial smile! He was on the best of terms with Prout now.

'My dear Quelch—!' boomed Prout.

'My dear Prout—!' said Mr. Quelch.

Some of the Remove fellows grinned. Quelch and Prout had been 'cat and dog' for days. This was a change! Evidently, that rift in the lute had been repaired!

'I am interrupting you, my dear fellow—'

'Not at all, Prout - not at all!'

'But I thought you would like to hear the news I have just received - Inspector Grimes has telephoned that that dangerous character - Juggins, I think his name is—'

'Jugson?' said Mr. Quelch.

'Yes, that is it, Jugson: the inspector has telephoned that he is now in custody. He was seen lurking near the school, by Police-Constable Tozer, and immediately taken into custody, and is now at the police-station at Courtfield. I thought you would like to know at once, Quelch.'

'Certainly, certainly, my dear Prout. I am very glad indeed to hear it. Thank you, Prout. It was very good of you to come here and tell me.'

'Not at all, my dear fellow.'

The door closed on Prout.

The gimlet-eye returned to Billy Bunter.

It had been a welcome interruption-to Bunter! But it had been disappointingly brief. Bunter was for it again ! Quelch, no doubt, was glad to hear that that unpleasant person, Jimmy the Spiv, was in custody. But he dismissed Jimmy the Spiv at once and concentrated on Bunter.

'Go on, Bunter.'

'Yes, sir! Oh, dear! I—I mean - oh, crikey! Sic Venus—er—er—er—'

'If you have not prepared this lesson, Bunter—'

'Oh, yes, sir! I—I was swotting at it like anything, sir, in the study—I—I wasn't sitting in the armchair, sir, and Toddy didn't tell me I'd better do some prep, and—'

'Go on at once.'

'Yes, sir! Sic Venus - Venus was sick—'

'WHAT! ' Quelch almost shrieked.

'Ha, ha, ha!' came from the Remove. Even Bunter, if he had thought a little, might have known that 'Sic Venus' meant 'Thus Venus'. But thinking was not much in Bunter's line. This, however, was unusually rich, even from Bunter, and there was a ripple of merriment in the form.

'Silence!' hooted Mr. Quelch. 'Bunter—!'

'Is—is—isn't that right, sir?' babbled Bunter. 'Venus was sick—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Silence in the form! Bunter, you have not prepared this lesson. You are an incorrigibly idle boy, Bunter. Unless you construe that passage correctly, Bunter, you will write out the lesson a hundred times. Now proceed!'

Billy Bunter blinked despairingly at Virgil.

Gladly he would have proceeded. But whatever Publius Vergilius Maro might have meant, was an impenetrable mystery to him.

But he had a resource.

Evidently - to Bunter - this was the moment for a spot of ventriloquism! A cat in the cupboard had saved him once. Another cat in the cupboard might save him again! That Quelch was now 'wise' to his ventriloquial tricks, and extremely unlikely to be taken in, did not for the moment occur to Bunter's fat brain. It was said of old that fools rush in where angels fear to tread!

Bunter did not proceed. Instead of that, he gave a fat little cough. Harry Wharton and Co. stared round at him as they heard it. They wondered whether even Bunter was ass enough to try it on with Quelch again.

He was!

'I am waiting, Bunter!' said Mr. Quelch, in a voice like a filing saw.

Miaooooou!

A loud and prolonged 'mew' sounded in the Remove room.

Mr. Quelch gave quite a jump. For one moment, he was deceived.

'What—what—?' ejaculated the Remove master.

'It's a cat, sir—!' gasped Bunter.

'What?'

'It's in the cupboard, sir—'

'Wha—a—a—t?'

Miauuuuuuuoo!

The mew was repeated.

Mr. Quelch did not turn towards the cupboard. It was only for one moment that he fancied that it was a cat. This time he did not think of searching the form-room for an imaginary cat - he turned to his desk. From that desk he picked up a cane.

'Bunter!' Quelch's voice was not loud, but deep.

'Yes, sir! Shall—shall I—I let that cat out of the cupboard, sir?'

'Bunter! Stand out before the form.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! But, sir—'

'Stand out this instant.'

Billy Bunter rolled out, in deep apprehension. His apprehension was well-founded. Quelch swished the cane.

'You must learn, Bunter, that the form-room is no place for foolish pranks. I shall endeavour to impress that upon your mind, Bunter. You will do well to remember it! Bend over that desk, Bunter.'

'Oh, crikey!'

Whop! whop! whop!

'Wow! wow! wow!'

Whop! whop! WHOP!

'Yaroooh!'

Quelch laid down the cane. Mercifully, he let Bunter off that construe. Bunter, after those whops, was really in no state to deal with Virgil. It was a sorrowful and suffering Owl that wriggled and wriggled through the remainder of that lesson. Other fellows carried on: while the fat Owl, like the young man of Hythe who sat down on a scythe, did nothing but wriggle and writhe. And it was likely to be a long, long time, before any more ventriloquism was heard from Bunter the Ventriloquist!

The next book in

THE BILLY BUNTER SERIES

will be

BUNTER THE CARAVANNER

