

BILLY BUNTER BUTTS IN



FRANK RICHARDS

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By
FRANK RICHARDS

Illustrated by
R.J. MACDONALD

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A BUZZING CIRCLE SURROUNDED THEM
"GO IT, SMITHY," SHOUTED A DOZEN VOICES

CHAPTER 1

ROUGH LUCK!

"BUNTER!"

"Oh!" gasped Billy Bunter.

There was a cheery buzz of voices in the Rag, which was interrupted by that sudden bark from the doorway.

About two dozen Remove fellows were nearly all talking at once.

Harry Wharton and Co., in a group in the big bay window, were discussing the coming cricket match with Carcroft. Vernon-Smith and Tom Redwing were discussing a trip to Hawkscliff on the following afternoon, which was a half-holiday. Squiff and Tom Brown and Ogilvy were mapping out a bike run. Skinner and Snoop and Stott were debating the chances of Blue Fox in the two-thirty. Peter Todd was telling Billy Bunter that if he didn't get his lines done, he would hear from Quelch. Billy Bunter was requesting Peter to lend him a hand with those lines. Mr. Quelch, as he paused at the open doorway and looked in, heard something like Babel on a small scale.

"They've got a jolly good bat—man called Vane-Carter—."

"They haven't got a bowler like old Inky—."

"If we start after dinner, we shall be up at Hawkscliff by three—."

"Round by Lantham, and home by Courtfield Bridge—."

"Quelch said tea-time, you fat chump—."

"Oh, really, Toddy! If you'd lent a pal a hand, as I've asked you five or six times—."

"Price of the Fifth thinks him jolly good, I know that—."

"We'll beat Carcroft all right—."

"We're at the top of our form—."

"Might go round by Redclyffe Hill—."

But sudden silence fell as the Remove master looked in, and spoke, or rather barked, the name of the fattest member of his form.

Skinner, who had made the remark about Price of the Fifth, felt a momentary tremor. He did not want his form-master to learn that he was interested in the two-thirty on Thursday. Very much indeed he didn't.

But if Quelch had noticed the remark among a dozen others, it conveyed no special meaning to his mind. His eyes fixed on a fat figure sprawling in an armchair.

"Bunter!" he repeated.

"Oh! Yes, sir!" Billy Bunter heaved his weight out of the armchair, and stood blinking at his form-master, through his big spectacles, in dismay.

Billy Bunter had a hundred lines on hand. Those lines were due for delivery at tea-time. It was past tea-time now. Ever since class, Bunter had been thinking of getting going on that imposition. But laziness had supervened, and he got no further than thinking about it. Now, as Toddy had warned him, he was going to hear from Quelch.

"You have not brought me your lines, Bunter," barked Mr. Quelch.

"I—I—I was just going to, sir," stammered Bunter, "I—I'm going up to my study to fetch them, sir."

"Oh!" Quelch's brow, which was frowning, relaxed, "If you have written the lines, Bunter—."

"Oh, certainly, sir! I—I mean, nearly—not quite—I—I had to come down for tea, sir—I was just going up to finish them—."

Mr. Quelch gave the fat Owl of the Remove a very penetrating look. Never had Quelch's eyes seemed so like gimlets to the distressed Owl. They seemed almost to bore into Bunter.

"Very well, Bunter," said Mr. Quelch, after a brief pause, "I shall expect you in my study in a quarter of an hour. If you do not bring me your completed imposition, you will be caned."

"Oh, lor! I—I mean, yes, sir!" gasped Bunter.

The Remove master rustled on, and disappeared.

"Beast!" breathed Billy Bunter, when Quelch was gone, "I say, you fellows, who's going to help me with those lines?"

"You fat ass," said Harry Wharton. "Cut up to your study and get them finished. You've got a quarter of an hour."

"Oh, really, Wharton! I can't do a hundred lines in a quarter of an hour! Nobody could!" protested Bunter.

"A hundred lines!" repeated the captain of the Remove.

"You told Quelch you'd nearly done them."

"Well, I had to tell him something, or it would have been whops!" exclaimed Bunter. "I couldn't tell Quelch I hadn't started them, could I?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"He jolly well looked as if he didn't half-believe me, either," added the fat Owl, indignantly. "Doubting a fellow's word, you know! Quelch all over!"

"You fat chump—!"

"But I say, if I don't take them to his study in a quarter of an hour, he will jolly well know I haven't touched them," said Bunter, anxiously. "It's all your fault, Toddy—."

"Mine!" ejaculated Peter Todd.

"Yes, yours," said Bunter, warmly. "You jolly well know that I asked you to do them half an hour ago, and if you'd done them, I should have fifty to show up, anyhow, and that might keep Quelch quiet—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at," snapped Bunter. "I say, Harry, old chap, you're twice as quick at lines as I am. I'm rather slow, you know—."

"More than rather," agreed Harry Wharton.

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

"Well, you can do them three times as quick as I can, Harry, old fellow. And you can remember how the rotten Latin is spelt, without looking at it three or four times, you know. You're so jolly clever, old chap—."

"Thanks," said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"I mean it, dear old fellow. I'm not just buttering you because I want you to help me with my lines—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wish you fellows wouldn't cackle every time a fellow opens his mouth," exclaimed Bunter, peevishly. "Quelch has got to have those lines. You come up and help me, Wharton—I'll do some, you know. I—I'll do as many as I can, while you do the rest. You're so jolly clever at it, you know—cleverest chap in the Remove, and chance it—."

"Fathead!"

"Beast! I-I mean, dear old fellow—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cackle!" exclaimed Bunter, bitterly. "I'm going to get whopped, and all you fellows can do is to cackle. If Quelch finds out that I haven't touched those lines, he will make out that I was fibbing. You know him! It will be six!"

Billy Bunter gave a sort of anticipative wriggle, as if he could already feel his form-master's cane in contact with the tightest trousers at Greyfriars School.

"Oh, all right, you fat ass!" said Harry Wharton, resigning himself to his fate, as it were. "Come on, and we'll get through if we can."

"Oh, good!" said Bunter. His fat face brightened, "Hurry up, old chap! Come on."

Billy Bunter rolled out of Rag quite briskly. For a couple of hours Bunter had contemplated getting on with those lines, without making a move. But the near prospect of "six" from Quelch's cane spurred him on. Harry Wharton followed him into the passage. There was no doubt that if Bunter, after stating that his lines were nearly done, did not show them up on time, his form-master's cane would come into action, as undoubtedly he deserved for his untruthfulness. Still, a fellow did not want another fellow to get "six" if he could help him out.

"Look here, what about the cricket?" called out Johnny Bull, as Wharton followed Bunter. "We were going down to the nets."

Harry Wharton paused for a moment in the doorway. "You fellows cut along," he answered. "I'll join you when I'm through."

"Don't let Quelch spot your fist," said Frank Nugent.

"That's all right! I can scrawl and blot and smear like Bunter, if I try very hard," answered Harry.

"I say, come on!" came an impatient squeak from the corner of the passage, as Billy Bunter blinked back through his big spectacles. "What are you stopping to jaw for, Wharton? You're wasting time."

Harry Wharton hurried on, and joined him at the corner. Bunter gave him an indignant blink.

"If you're jolly well coming to help me with my lines, you jolly well hurry up," he grunted. "Want me to get six?"

"Shut up, you fat ass!" breathed Harry. Bunter had not observed that, just round the corner, Mr. Quelch had stopped, and was speaking to Prout, master of the Fifth. Harry Wharton sighted him there, but not in time to check the flow of the irritated fat Owl's eloquence. Bunter did not shut up. Shutting up was not much in his line, anyway.

"Wasting time jawing cricket, when a chap's got a whopping coming!" yelled Bunter. "We've none too much time to get a hundred lines done between us, and—oh, crikey!"

Bunter did shut up, as he saw Quelch. But he shut up rather too late. The gimlet-eyes turned on the two juniors. Billy Bunter blinked at Quelch, with his own eyes almost popping through his spectacles. Harry Wharton crimsoned. Helping another fellow with his lines was, from a junior schoolboy's point of view, a good turn. In the eyes of authority it had rather a different aspect. Never had Quelch's speaking countenance looked grimmer.

"Bunter!" Quelch's voice sounded like the filing of a saw.

"Oh, lor!"

"Go to my study, and wait for me there, Bunter."

"Ow!"

Bunter rolled dismally away. The gimlet-eyes fixed on the captain of the Remove, who stood crimsoned and dumb.

"Wharton! It appears that you were going to assist Bunter in writing out his imposition! Is that the case?"

It was a true bill, and there was nothing for Harry Wharton to say, excepting "Yes, sir!"

"This is not what I should have expected of you, Wharton! You are my Head Boy, and you should know better."

Wharton had nothing at all to say to that. He was feeling inclined to kick himself, and still more intensely, to kick Bunter. He said nothing.

"As it appears that you have so much time on your hands that you are prepared to write lines for other boys in the Remove, Wharton, you may write me a Georgic!" said Mr. Quelch, grimly. "I shall expect it by tea-time tomorrow. That is all!"

Still in silence, and breathing hard, the captain of the Remove walked back to the Rag. Mr. Quelch resumed his conversation with Mr. Prout. In his study, a quaking fat Owl had to wait ten minutes for Quelch to arrive. And it was a sad and suffering Owl that rolled away, squeaking, after six of the very best!

CHAPTER II

BILLY BUNTER ASKS FOR IT!

"HARRY, old chap—!"

Harry Wharton did not heed. Certainly he heard the fat squeak behind him, but, like the ancient gladiator, he heard but he heeded not.

He was standing by the big window on the study landing, looking out into the sunny quad. On that sunny afternoon, most faces at Greyfriars were sunny too, but Harry Wharton's was dark and clouded.

Below him, in the quad, four figures in flannels could be seen heading for junior nets, Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. With the Carcroft match coming along, the Remove cricketers were very keen, and Wharton as keen as any man in the form. But with a Georgic to do, he had to cut nets that afternoon, and his friends had had to go without him. A Georgic was a rather tremendous imposition, so tremendous, in fact, that it showed how deeply Mr. Quelch was displeased with his Head Boy. Even with the morrow's half-holiday at his disposal, the unlucky junior had plenty to do, to get it done on time, and he had gone up to the studies to make a start without delay. But he stopped on the landing and stood looking morosely from the window, more than half inclined to let it slide, and join his friends at the nets.

The fact was that Wharton, as well as Quelch, was angry, and both, like the ancient prophet, considered that they did well to be angry.

From Quelch's point of view, it was quite a serious matter for one fellow to do lines for another. It was all the more serious in the Head Boy of his form, who was expected to be more meticulous about keeping the rules, than less responsible fellows. So Quelch was justly wrathful.

From Wharton's point of view, it was making a mountain out of a molehill. He admitted that the rule was all right, nevertheless, Quelch knew that fellows often did help one another with an impot. Caught at it, a fellow expected the chopper to come down, a hundred lines would have met the case. Quelch had given him a Georgic, and the briefest, Georgic perpetrated by that great poet P. Vergilius Maro ran to over five hundred. Five hundred lines for doing a fat and fatuous fathead a good turn was, in the opinion of all the Remove, "thick"—and it seemed very thick indeed to the victim.

The Co., in flannels, passed out of sight below, but Wharton continued to stare moodily from the window, with a dark brow and in a rebellious mood. Two Fifth-form men passed on the path below, in eager conversation,

Hilton and Price of the Fifth. The window was wide open, and some words uttered by Price floated up to the junior's ears.

"Four to one, old man! And—."

Wharton's lip curled, as the seniors passed on. He wondered what Mr. Prout would have said, had he heard that. Prout did not know many things about those members of his form, that a good many fellows could have told him. The plump and pompous Prout would probably have been quite surprised, to learn that fellows in the Fifth were deeply interested in a "gee-gee" at four to one!

"Harry, old fellow—!"

Billy Bunter squeaked in vain. The captain of the Remove continued to look from the window without turning his head.

In the circumstances, it would have been wise of the fat Owl to steer clear of the fellow whom he had landed a Georgic. But fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

As Harry Wharton neither answered nor looked round, the fat Owl rolled nearer, and jammed a fat thumb into his ribs to draw his attention.

"Oh!" gasped Wharton. He looked round, then.

"Deaf?" asked Bunter, irritably. "I've spoken to you twice."

"That's twice too often—clear off, you fat fozzler," snapped the captain of the Remove. "You've got me a Georgic, you burbling bandersnatch. Get out."

"Yes, I know," assented Bunter. "I heard the fellows talking about it in the Rag. But what about my lines?"

"Your lines?" repeated Harry, staring at him.

"I've still got them to do," explained Bunter. "I think Quelch might have let me off the lines, as he gave me six swipes. But he didn't! He said that he caned me for untruthfulness—me, you know! Making a fellow out to be a liar! That's the sort of justice we get here."

"You howling chump—."

"Oh, really Wharton! He said I've got to do the lines all the same, and hand them in before prep. Well, what about it?"

"Better roll along to your study and do them. Give me a rest, anyhow."

"You said you'd help."

"What?"

"You jolly well know you did!" exclaimed Bunter, hotly. "Didn't you jolly well say you'd help—."

"You burbling bloater, I've got over five hundred to do myself—."

"Yes, I know! But keep to the point, old chap," urged Bunter. "You said you'd help me with my lines—."

"After you mentioned it to Quelch?" inquired Harry Wharton. "You blithering ass, if I did as much as a syllable, Quelch would spot it, after you've put him wise."

"Well, I'll chance that," said Bunter. "I expect it will be all right! Come along to my study and let's get going."

"I'm going to my own to do a Georgic."

"I wish you wouldn't keep on talking about something else when I'm talking about my lines," exclaimed Bunter, irritably. "For goodness sake try to keep to the subject. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Not!"

"Well, I think it's pretty thick, to let a fellow down, after offering to help him," said Bunter, scornfully. "If that's what you call playing the game, Harry Wharton—."

"You blethering, blithering, burbling bloater—."

"You can call a fellow names," said Bunter, with a sniff. "But it's pretty mean to back out like this! Not the sort of thing I would do! Look here, you help me with my lines now, and I'll help you with your Georgic to-morrow, if—if I have time. There!"

"Are you going to roll away, or are you waiting to be kicked?" exclaimed the captain of the Remove, his patience apparently exhausted.

"Oh, really, Wharton—."

"Buzz off, you bloated bluebottle."

"Look here, will you do fifty?" urged Bunter.

"No!" roared Wharton.

"Well, what about twenty?"

"Get out!"

"Beast! Of all the rotters," said Bunter, with deep and thrilling indignation. "Telling a fellow you'd help him with his lines, and then backing out and letting him down! If that's the sort of fellow you are, Wharton, I can jolly well say—yaroooooh!"

Billy Bunter broke off, with a yell, as the exasperated captain of the Remove grasped him by the collar. Wharton's patience seemed to have run out, which was, perhaps, not surprising.

Tap!

The fattest head in the Remove established contact with the wall. It was not a very hard tap, but it elicited a yell from Billy Bunter that woke all the echoes of the study landing, and of the studies for quite a distance.

Hilton and Price, coming up the stairs, glanced round at the two Removites. Cedric Hilton shrugged his slim shoulders, and Stephen Price sneered. Taking no further notice than that of the proceedings of such inconsiderable microbes as Lower boys, the two seniors walked on to the Fifth-form studies.

Tap!

"Yarooooop!" roared Bunter, at the second tap.

"Wow! Leggo, will you? Wow! Stoppit! Whoooooop!"

Tap!

For a third time, Billy Bunter's fat head tapped on the wall. The celebrated Bull of Bashan could not have excelled the roar uttered by the Owl of the Remove.

"Yarooooooh!"

"Stop that, Wharton!" came a sharp rap.

Harry Wharton looked round quickly. He had taken no notice of Hilton and Price of the Fifth, but he had to take notice of Wingate of the Sixth, the captain of Greyfriars. Wingate had come up the stairs, almost on the heels of the Fifth-formers, and was about to cross the landing, when he stopped, and rapped out sharply at the captain of the Remove.

"Ow! wow! Make him leggo!" roared Bunter. "I say—wow! Ow! Ooooh."

Harry Wharton released the fat Owl's collar, flushing crimson. Really, Bunter was not damaged, his frantic yells were quite uncalled-for, and he had been extremely exasperating. It was intensely disconcerting to Harry Wharton, to be rapped at by a prefect, as if he had been some bullying fellow like Bolsover major, ragging a smaller fellow.

He did not speak, but his look was very expressive.

Billy Bunter wriggled away, and bolted into the Remove passage, still yelling. The Greyfriars captain gave Wharton a grim look, and walked on to the Fifth-form studies. Harry Wharton was left on the landing, breathing very hard.

He made a step towards the Remove studies—and stopped. That incident had put the lid on, as it were. He was too thoroughly angry, exasperated, and disgruntled to tackle that Georgic. Instead of heading for No. 1 Study, he went down the stairs. Five minutes later, in flannels, with a bat under his arm, he joined the junior cricketers at the nets.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" called out Bob Cherry. "You've turned up, then."

"Looks like it."

"But what about that Georgic?" asked Frank Nugent, rather anxiously.

"Nothing about it at present."

"But Quelch—."

"Oh, bother Quelch!"

And that was that!

CHAPTER III

WINGATE'S WARNING

CEDRIC HILTON stretched his elegant limbs on the settee under the window in his study in the Fifth, leaned his handsome head back lazily on a cushion, and groped in his pocket for a cigarette. Stephen Price stood with his hands in his pockets, propped up against the study table, facing him, an eager look on his narrow face and in his shifty eyes. Price was deeply and intensely interested in the topic they had been discussing in the quad, of which Wharton had heard a few words at the landing window. Hilton was mildly interested, and a little bored. He dabbled in racing matters, with Price, but he did not share his pal's greed for gain, perhaps because he had plenty of money, of which Price had very little.

"Four to one, and a dead cert, Cedric," said Price. "Blue Fox is a gee to put your shirt on."

"I'd rather keep mine on my back," drawled Hilton. "I know your dead certs, Pricey. The last one ran away with a packet."

"I tell you there's no doubt about Blue Fox. I've had information," said Price. "As good as straight from the horse's mouth. He will simply romp home at Wapshot on Thursday—."

"Jolly good-natured of the bookies to give you four to one against a gee that's goin' to romp home," murmured Hilton. "Must be philanthropists."

"Oh, don't be an ass, if you can help it," snapped Price. "It hasn't got out yet, but I can tell you that the starting-price will be short, on Thursday—they'll wind it by then. I shouldn't wonder if he runs at odds on. Just at present we can get four to one. It's the chance of a lifetime."

"O.K. Go in and win," said Hilton. "Best of luck, old boy. Got a match?"

Price bit his lip.

"I'm short of cash," he admitted. "The last go cleared me out. But I want to have a fiver on Blue Fox. That will set me right on my feet again. I can see Joey Banks to-day or to-morrow, and fix it. But—."

"But there's a shortage of fivers, what?" grinned Hilton.

"Well, yes, you see—."

"Then you'll have to put your shirt on him," said Hilton, lazily. "And if he runs away with your shirt—!"

"Oh, talk sense!" muttered Price. He gave his elegant and volatile friend an almost evil look. Hilton knew where Price hoped to raise the necessary fiver, in the remote—the very remote—eventuality of Blue Fox failing to get first past the post. But he seemed quite uninterested.

"No good talkin' sense to a fellow who's got a dead cert," drawled Hilton. "He wouldn't understand."

"Joey Banks will take the bet, of course," said Price.

"That's all right. But—if I had bad luck, I should have to be ready with the fiver. Not that there's any real chance of that. I've got a winner."

"So you had last time," assented Hilton. "Let's see—did he come in tenth or eleventh?"

"Blue Fox will come in first, with the whole field lengths behind him," snapped Price. "I know that."

"Then it's a safe bet, and you needn't worry about havin' to pay Joey anythin', what?"

Price breathed very hard. He was about to speak again, when there came a tap at the study door, and it opened. The cigarette in Hilton's slim fingers disappeared into his pocket as if by magic. He was glad that he had not lighted it, when he saw that the newcomer was Wingate of the Sixth.

Price gave the Greyfriars captain a sidelong look. He disliked Wingate intensely, and feared him a good deal, and never felt quite comfortable under his clear, steady, eyes. Hilton, however, gave the Sixth-form man a cool nod and pleasant smile, as if pleased to see him.

"Trickle in, old man," he said, urbanely. "You don't often honour this study with a call, Wingate. Take a pew."

"I'll stand," said Wingate, curtly. "I've come here to say a few words, chiefly to Price."

"About the cricket?" asked Price.

"I shouldn't be likely to talk cricket to you, Price! I've come here to give you a tip!"

"I don't quite understand—."

"I'll make it clear! I'm head-prefect, and when fellows kick over the traces, it's my duty to nail them, if I can. It's not a pleasant duty, and I'd rather see a fellow run straight, than nail him and have him up before the Head."

Price's heart beat uncomfortably. He was well aware that the captain of Greyfriars had long had a doubting eye on him, but this was putting it with unexpected plainness. He wondered, for a dismayed moment, whether he might have been spotted at the back gate of the Cross Keys, or dodging into the Three Fishers from the tow-path. Price took many risks, in his career as a "sportsman", but he had not the courage of his misdeeds.

"There's been talk," went on Wingate, "about Greyfriars' men having been seen in places out of bounds for this school. The other day I myself saw a Greyfriars' cap over the fence at the Cross Keys. I don't know whose head it was on—."

"Not mine!" drawled Hilton.

"No, the fellow would have been about Price's height," said Wingate.

"I suppose I needn't say that I've never been near the place," said Price.

"You needn't! You were out of gates at the time."

"I daresay fifty other fellows were."

"Oh, quite! It's only one more item in a long list," said Wingate. "I'm not accusing you, Price—I'm warning you that I've got my eye on this study. I don't want a row, and I don't want to see a fellow up for the sack, even a fellow who's no credit to his school, and if you take my tip and run straight, the matter ends here and now. But—."

"Is there a but?" smiled Hilton. Price did not speak.

"Yes! I've got the matter pretty clear in my own mind, but I can't act without plain proof, and I don't want to act at all if it can be helped. I'm warning you, Price, that the prefects have an eye on you, and that if you carry on as I've reason to believe you've been carrying on, you can look out for bad trouble. If I nail you, you go up to the Head, and you know what that means. Take that as a tip, and mind your step!"

With that, and without waiting for a reply, the Greyfriars captain swung round, and walked out of the study.

Price pushed the door shut after him. He was breathing hard, and his sallow face was pale and venomous. Hilton gave a low whistle.

"That's a tip straight from the geegee's mouth, Pricey, if you like," he said. "You'd be wise to take that tip."

"He can't know anything," muttered Price.

"My dear man, he knows it all from A to Z," said Hilton, coolly. "He'd rather see you toe the line than take the long jump, that's all."

Price shrugged his narrow shoulders.

"I don't care what he knows, so long as he can't fix anything on me," he retorted. "And I mean to be careful. I'm not losing this chance of getting straight by a win on Blue Fox, I know that, I've got to see Joey Banks to fix it up."

Hilton sat up, and stared at him, from the settee.

"Don't be a fool, Pricey! I tell you, Wingate knows, and it's jolly decent of him to warn you off in time. Give Joey Banks a miss."

"I tell you, it's a dead cert."

"So's the sack, if Wingate nails you."

"Hang Wingate!" snarled Price.

"Hang him as high as Haman, if he'll let you." Hilton shrugged his shoulders. "If you go on with this, Pricey, you're askin' for it."

"You're backing out, because that Sixth-form fathead came here and blew off steam?" sneered Price.

"Right out!" assented Hilton. "For the next week or two, Pricey, I'm goin' to walk as delicately as jolly old Agag. And if you've got the sense of a bunny rabbit, you'll do the same."

"I tell you Blue Fox will romp home—."

"You'll be rompin' home yourself if Wingate nails you!"

"Oh, rats!"

"He means business—."

"I'm not losing this chance," said Price, obstinately. "I shall get a chance of seeing Joey Banks tomorrow—lots of opportunities on a half-holiday."

"Better keep in gates, and play cricket for once."

"I'll watch it," sneered Price.

"O.K.," drawled Hilton, lazily. "Though you bray a fool in a mortar, yet will not his folly depart from him, what? Have your own way, and give me a match."

And Cedric Hilton lighted his cigarette, and dropped the subject. Price was uneasy, and a little scared, but he was going on. Four to one in fivers on a horse that was absolutely certain to romp home was too big a chance to miss, and the only outcome of Wingate's warning was to make Price of the Fifth doubly and trebly wary—but he was going on all the same.

CHAPTER IV

TOEING THE LINE!

"ROTTEN!" said Bob Cherry.

"The rottenfulness is terrific!" sighed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Putrid!" agreed Johnny Bull.

Frank Nugent was silent, his look uneasy. The expression on Harry Wharton's face was rather disquieting to his best chum.

The Famous Five were gathered in No. 1 Study, on Wednesday afternoon. Harry Wharton had gone up to the study with his friends, not very willingly. He had a Georgic on hand, due to be handed in to his form-master before tea. He was not quite sure that he was going to spend a half-holiday writing out that Georgic. Three of his friends took it for granted, as a matter of course, but Frank was a little worried.

That afternoon the Famous Five were to cycle over to Highcliffe, to visit their friends, Courtenay and the Caterpillar. Obviously, only four of them would be able to go, if Wharton did his Georgic. There was no hope of getting through much before tea-time. The previous day, Wharton had chosen to go down to the nets, instead of starting on his task, and the whole of it remained to be done.

He stood in the study, with his hands in his pockets, and a dark look on his face. Frank Nugent sorted out Virgil, and propped that great poet against the inkstand, in readiness. The Co. were going to see Wharton started, before they went. But he seemed in no hurry to start.

"Bother that fat ass Bunter," said Bob. "I'll kick him, if you like, before we go, old chap."

"Keep an eye open for Wingate, if you do," said Wharton, sarcastically. "I tapped the fat frump's head yesterday, and Wingate ragged me for bullying."

"Oh!" said Bob, rather uncomfortably. "Bother the fat ass! It's tough to have to stick in doing lines on an afternoon like this."

"I'm not so sure I'm going to stick in doing lines," answered the captain of the Remove, coolly. "I'm thinking of biking over to Highcliffe, as arranged."

"Oh!" said Bob, again, still more uncomfortably.

"My esteemed and ludicrous chum—!" murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"You've got that Georgic to do, old chap," said Johnny Bull.

"I know that!"

"It's tough," said Bob. "But no good hunting for trouble with Quelch. He came down jolly heavy, but beaks do, at times."

"No good hugging a grievance, you know," said Johnny Bull.

Wharton's eyes glinted.

"Who's hugging a grievance?" he inquired, icily.

"Aren't you?"

"Quelch knows as well as we do that fellows help one another with impots," said Harry. "He has to be down on it as a beak, but five hundred lines for doing a silly ass a good turn is rather over the odds."

"Not for Head Boy of the form," said Johnny, shaking his head. "One of us would have got off with a hundred, but you're Head Boy. Head Boy's supposed to be more responsible than other fellows."

"Is there anything particularly wrong in Head Boy helping a fat chump to keep out of a whopping?"

"That isn't the point! Quelch doesn't look at these things as we do—if he did, he wouldn't be much of a schoolmaster. Have a little sense," urged Johnny. "What's the good of a beak giving a chap lines, if another chap writes them for him? All very well if you're not spotted. But if you are, you must expect to take your gruel. Why shouldn't you toe the line, like any other chap?"

Harry Wharton's lips set hard.

Johnny Bull was right, no doubt. But his sage remarks were not precisely tactful, addressed to a fellow already feeling resentful and rebellious.

"So you think I ought to squat down in the study, and write that Georgic?" asked Harry.

"Of course I do."

"Then I don't agree! I'm going to bike over to Highcliffe, and Quelch can whistle for his Georgic."

"That's rot," said Johnny Bull.

"Thanks!"

"And if you want to know what I think—."

"I don't particularly!"

"Look here—."

"My esteemed Johnny," murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Speech is silvery, but silence is the bird in the bush that makes Jack a dull boy, as the English proverb remarks."

Johnny Bull grunted. Solid common sense was Johnny's long suit, but it did not always have the effect of pouring oil on the troubled waters.

"If you fellows are ready to start—," added Harry.

"We're not starting for Highcliffe, till you've started on that Georgic," said Bob. "You can't play the goat like Bunter. You're Head Boy—."

"I've had that from Johnny."

"Well, now you're getting it from me," said Bob, determined to be good-tempered. "It's rough luck, but we have to take the rough with the smooth. You can't flout Quelch by going out for the afternoon, just as if what he said doesn't matter."

"It doesn't, particularly."

"If you'd started on that Georgic yesterday—," began Johnny Bull. More solid common sense was coming, but the captain of the Remove interrupted it.

"As it happens, I didn't," he said.

"I know you didn't! But if you had, you'd have got through in time to join us at Highcliffe. So you see it's your own fault."

Harry Wharton breathed hard.

"Shut up, Johnny, old man," muttered Nugent.

"I'm talking sense," said Johnny.

"You always are," said Bob. "Now I'll give you a tip, old bean. Whenever you feel like talking sense, put a sock in it."

"We're wasting time here," remarked Harry Wharton.

"Yes, get going on that Georgic, old chap."

"I think I've mentioned that I'm going out on my bike."

Bob Cherry, in his turn, breathed hard. But Bob's good humour was unlimited, and he was not going to let his chum land himself in a row, if he could help it.

"Now, look here, old chap," he said. "I know it's tough, and I know you feel sore, but Quelch will go off at the deep end, if you cut without handing in that rotten Georgic—."

"I don't care!"

"Your pals do," said Bob. "There's old Franky with a face as long as a fiddle already—."

"Oh, rot!" said Nugent, colouring.

"Rot!" said Harry, but the frown on his brow relaxed. "Look here, if you fellows think I ought to do the rotten thing, I'll stick in and do it. I'll kick Bunter afterwards for landing me in it."

He pulled a chair to the table, and sat down. Frank Nugent's face brightened. If that face had not been, as Bob expressed it, as long as a fiddle, it had certainly been very uneasy and troubled. But now it cleared.

"It's rotten," he said. "But—."

"O.K.," said Harry, lightly. "Come to think of it, I'm not frightfully keen on a row with Quelch! You fellows cut off, and I'll grind."

"Good man," said Bob, and four fellows left the study, leaving Harry Wharton to "grind." His face was clouded, but he had made up his mind to "toe the line", and he was toeing it!

CHAPTER V

NO HELP FROM BUNTER!

"POOR old chap!" said Billy Bunter, commiseratingly.

He blinked in at the doorway of No. 1 Study.

Harry Wharton did not look up. His eyes gleamed for a moment over Book I of the Georgics. It was rough luck to stay in, on a half-holiday and a golden afternoon, transcribing weary, almost endless, Latin lines. But compassion from William George Bunter was no comfort—rather the reverse!

Bunter rolled in.

His fat face registered sympathy. Perhaps it was sympathy that had brought him to the study, or perhaps he had other motives. Anyhow, he rolled in.

"How are you getting on with it, old fellow?" he inquired.

There was no answer, save the scratch of a pen. Wharton had enough to do, without wasting time on conversation with William George Bunter.

He had already been at work a couple of hours—long, weary, hours. Starting at "Quid faciat laetas segetes," he had gone resolutely on, line after line, determined to get his lengthy task over and done with. He was, as Bunter had observed, a quick worker, but the task seemed almost endless, and never had the beauties of Virgilian verse been so utterly wasted on any schoolboy. Line after line, scores of lines, hundreds of lines, and still the end was far off.

Perhaps every now and then he regretted that he had given in to his chums, and "toed the line." Never had the open air seemed to call him so insistently. But he had said that he would do it, and he was going to do it, and he kept grimly on. And he did not want interruptions, especially from the fat Owl who had landed him in this spot of bother. Bunter had never been so superfluous.

But Billy Bunter never realised when he was superfluous. He stood blinking at Wharton's bent head, through his big spectacles, apparently puzzled by receiving no reply to his remarks.

"Fed up with it, old chap?" he asked. No answer.

"Deaf?" inquired Bunter.

Wharton seemed deaf. He scribbled steadily on, as regardless of Bunter as of a buzzing fly.

"I say, I'm speaking to you, Wharton," hooted Bunter. "If that's what you call civil, I jolly well don't, see?"

Wharton looked up, at last, in great exasperation. "Get out!" he snapped.

"Oh, really, Wharton—."

"Do you want me to bang your head on the wall again, you fat ass?"

"You'd jolly well better not let Wingate see you," chuckled Bunter. "You looked a pretty ass when he called you to order yesterday."

Harry Wharton's brow darkened, and he half rose.

But he sat down again. Billy Bunter was hardly worth kicking.

"Look here, you burbling fat chump," he said, "I've got a big impot to write, before I can get out, and no time to waste. Clear off!"

"I suppose that's what you call grateful, when a fellow's come in to offer to lend you a hand with it," said Bunter.

"Eh! What?"

Harry Wharton almost forgot his Georgic, for a moment, in his surprise. Certainly it had never occurred to him that Bunter had come there to help. If he had, it marked a sudden change in his manners and customs.

"You want to lend a hand with this Georgic?" ejaculated Wharton.

"Well, why not?" said Bunter. "You make out that it was my fault you got it—"

"It was your fault, you burbling fathead."

"Well, then, why shouldn't I help?" said Bunter. "Suppose I did a hundred. That would be a help, wouldn't it?"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Do you think Quelch would take your scrawl for my fist?" he asked. "Thanks—if you mean it—but it wouldn't work."

"Oh, that's rot," said Bunter. "I'll make my fist a bit like yours—near enough, anyway. I'll do the last hundred, see? Quelch won't read the beastly thing through from end to end. All a beak wants is lines. The fact is, Harry, old chap, I think it's up to me," said the fat Owl, firmly. "You've got landed in this because you were going to help me yesterday—well, one good turn deserves another, and I'm going to help you to-day."

Harry Wharton looked at him, without speaking. He was almost too surprised to speak. This was utterly unexpected, from Bunter.

"Quelch wouldn't notice a hundred—or, say fifty," said Bunter, moderating his transports, as it were. "Perhaps it would be safer to make it fifty. I'll do fifty for you, old chap. What?"

"If you mean it—!" said Harry.

"Of course I mean it," exclaimed Bunter, warmly. "Think I've come here to talk out of the back of my neck?"

"Well, you landed me in it, and it's only fair," said Harry. "I daresay fifty would go in with the rest, but you'd have to be careful."

"I'll be as careful as anything, old fellow. Trust me."

"O.K. then. Go ahead if you like," said Harry. "You begin at 401—at 'nebulae magis' ... Here's a pen, and here's a sheet of paper, and there's a chair."

"Right-ho, old fellow."

Billy Bunter pulled a chair to the table, and dipped a pen in the ink. He blinked at the Georgic through his big spectacles, and then blinked at the captain of the Remove, who was already scribbling again. He did not seem in a hurry to begin.

"I say, old chap—."

"Cut on, and don't jaw," said Wharton, "I've got a lot to do."

"Oh, really, you know—do listen to a chap," said Bunter, peevisly. "There's something I want to mention."

"Well, what is it?" asked Harry, impatiently.

"I think I told you I was expecting a postal order to-day," said the fat Owl, blinking at him across the table.

"What?"

"A postal order—."

"You silly ass!"

"What I mean is, it hasn't come," explained Bunter. "I hardly know why—it's from one of my titled relations, you know. But there's been some delay in the post—leave off scribbling for a minute, and listen to a chap, will you?"

"No!"

"Beast! I mean, the postal order's for five bob," said Bunter. "It's certain to come to-morrow. What I want is this—you lend a fellow five bob, and take this postal order when it comes! Is it a go?"

"No!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—."

"Shut up and let me get on."

"If you're going to be mean about a measly five bob, Wharton, you can't expect a fellow to stick in a study on a half-holiday helping you with your lines," said Bunter, warmly.

"What?" exclaimed Wharton.

"I mean to say, a fellow expects a fellow to be pally, when a fellow's helping a fellow," argued Bunter. "Fair play's a jewel."

"You fat, frabjous, footling, fizzling fathead!" roared Wharton. "Go and eat coke! Buzz off, you bloated bluebottle."

It dawned upon the captain of the Remove why William George Bunter had made that generous offer to help with him his lines. Bunter, as usual, was on the make!

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed the fat Owl, indignantly. "Talk about an ungrateful tooth being sharper than a serpent's child! I come here to help you with your lines, and all you can do is to call a

fellow names! If you jolly well think I'm going to do your lines when you won't cash a fellow's postal order, you're jolly well mistaken, see? I'll watch it!"

Billy Bunter laid down the pen, and rose from the chair. Harry Wharton looked across the table at him, in deep and intense exasperation. He had no time to waste, and he had allowed Bunter to waste his time, and it transpired that all Bunter was after was the cashing of his celebrated postal order. He picked up the Virgil from which he had been transcribing the first Georgic, and took aim.

Billy Bunter made a jump for the door.

Whiz!

Bump!

Virgil landed on fat ribs, and Billy Bunter sat down on the floor of No. 1 Study, with a bump that almost shook it. He roared as he landed.

"Yoo-hooooop!"

"Now get out, you fat villain—."

"Ow! wow! Beast! I'm jolly glad you've got a Georgic!" yelled Bunter. "I jolly well wish Quelch had given you a couple! Wow!"

"The inkpot's coming!"

"Beast!"



BILLY BUNTER MADE A JUMP FOR THE DOOR

Billy Bunter squirmed through the doorway, and disappeared. Virgil seemed to have been enough for him, and he did not want the inkpot to be added to that great poet. The fat Owl vanished, and Harry Wharton, having fielded Virgil, resumed scribbling, grinding on wearily to the end of his weary task without assistance from Billy Bunter.

CHAPTER VI

NOTHING DOING!

"HERE, Wharton!"

Harry Wharton glanced round, not very patiently.

He was pushing out his boat, on the school raft, when Price of the Fifth called to him.

His task was done, and a whole Georgic, from "Quid faciat" to "neque audit currus habenas" handed in to his form-master. Quelch's face had been rather grim when he received it, and Wharton's grim when he left the study, neither pleased with the other. But he was free at last, at all events, and able to get out of doors, for a spot of fresh air and exercise after a weary afternoon at lines. His friends had not yet returned from Highcliffe, and the captain of the Remove went down to the Sark, to clear away the cobwebs, as it were, by a pull on the river.

There were several fellows about the boat-house, among them, Price of the Fifth. Harry Wharton did not even notice him, till, as he was pushing out his boat, Price came across and spoke to him.

"Well?" said Harry curtly.

He could not imagine what the Fifth-form senior wanted with him. He had nothing to do with a senior form, and all he knew of Price was in that senior's disfavour. Neither was he after his dismal afternoon, in the best of tempers. Still Price's manner was civil, and he answered with more or less civility.

"Going down the river?" asked Price.

"Yes."

"As far as Friardale?"

"Yes."

"I'll steer for you, if you like."

"Thanks, I don't need a steersman."

Price's narrow eyes glinted for a moment. It was rather a concession, for a Fifth-form man to be so civil to a Lower-fourth junior, but Harry Wharton's replies could hardly have been more curt and dry.

But if Stephen Price had a strong impulse to smack that junior's face, he restrained it. His eyes glinted, but his lips smiled.

"Well, look here, I can't find Hilton, and I want a run on the river," he said. "Give me a lift in your boat, will you?"

Put like that, it was scarcely possible for Wharton to refuse. He disliked Price, and despised his dingy ways of which the juniors knew more than Mr. Prout knew. And certainly he did not want Price's company. Still, there was such a thing as civility, and he nodded a reluctant assent.

"Right—ho—jump in," he said.

Price jumped in, and the junior pushed off. The Fifth-form man sat in the stern, and Wharton put out the oars the boat gliding away down the current of the Sark.

Harry Wharton was feeling tired, dissatisfied, and disgruntled, but the fresh air on the river, and the pull at the oars, did him good, as he had anticipated, and in a few minutes his face was quite cheery. He was even prepared to answer Price amicably, if the senior had anything to say, little as he liked him. But Price, apparently, had nothing to say. He sat in the stern seat, watching the green grassy banks, immersed in his own thoughts, probably not unconnected with Blue Fox at four to one in the two-thirty! If he chose to be silent, the junior was quite satisfied to be silent also, and not a word was spoken, as the boat glided down the river, till Friardale Bridge came in sight in the distance.

Then Price stirred, glancing at the bank, where a fence ran at the back of the tow-path, with a gate in it. Harry Wharton's eyes followed his glance. Wharton knew that gate, it was the back gate of the Cross Keys, an insalubrious establishment strictly out of bounds for Greyfriars' men, but with which a good many fellows knew that Price of the Fifth was well acquainted.

"Pull in to the bank, will you?" said Price, speaking for the first time since they had started.

Harry Wharton looked at him. "Pull in to the bank?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"What for?"

"I want to get out, of course," answered Price, impatiently. "I'd rather walk for a bit."

Harry Wharton's face set hard. He knew now why Price of the Fifth had asked for that lift in his boat. He had wanted a lift, as far as the back gate of the Cross Keys, no further than that. Wharton was by no means a suspicious fellow, but this was altogether too palpable.

What Price did was no business of Wharton's, and he was not in the least interested in the dingy proceedings of the black sheep of the Fifth. But to be made use of, for the furtherance of those dingy proceedings, was quite another matter.

He did not know that, the previous day, Price had had a grim warning from the head prefect of Greyfriars, and that that warning had made him uneasy, and doubly and trebly wary. But he did know, as he could not help knowing, that Price had chosen this method of getting to his surreptitious destination, in order to throw dust into any eyes that might be watchful.

Wharton did not pull in to the bank as requested. He pulled steadily on, and Price stared at him angrily and impatiently.

"I asked you to pull in to the bank," he rapped.

"I heard you," answered Harry.

"Well, pull in."

"I'm pulling on."

"I tell you I want to land."

"You should have told me that at the boat-house," answered Harry Wharton. "You said you wanted a run on the river. You're getting it."

"Well, now I want to get out."

"Get out if you like! You'll find it rather wet."

Price set his teeth.

"You young cub! What do you mean? Do you think you can cheek me, because I asked for a lift in your boat? Pull in at once."

"Rats!"

"Do you want me to smack your cheeky head?"

"Go it, if you want me to push you over with an oar. I'm not stopping at the Cross Keys," said Harry Wharton, contemptuously. "You rotter, do you think I don't know your game? I suppose this means that the pre's are getting wise to you, and you daren't go to that show by Friardale Lane, or across the fields. So you're making use of me. If Wingate or Gwynne or Sykes, or old Prout, saw you in a boat with me, they wouldn't guess you were going pub-crawling. Do you fancy you're going to make use of a decent fellow like that? I'll land you where I picked you up—on the school raft!"

"You'll land me on the tow-path here," hissed Price.

"Guess again!"

"Will you pull in to the bank?"

"Nothing doing!"

"You cheeky young cub—."

"Oh, cut that out, you rotter," snapped Wharton. "I started out to pull as far as Friardale Bridge, and I'm going to. Then I'm going to turn back, and pull to Greyfriars. If you want to get out of the boat before then, you'll swim. You won't make use of me to get out of bounds without being spotted by the prefects."

Price sat glaring at him, almost panting with rage.

He had, as Wharton said, intended to make use of the captain of the Remove. Even Wingate, suspicious of him as he was, would not have suspected that he was heading for the Cross Keys, in company with Harry Wharton. It was quite a simple device to pay his urgent visit to Joey Banks, without danger of detection, watchful as Wingate had become. Landed at that spot, he had only to cut across the tow-path and whip in at the gate, a matter of seconds. He did not know, and did not care, whether the junior guessed his intention, certainly he had not expected Wharton to take this line. He made a move to rise.

"If you won't pull in—," he snarled.

"No 'if' about it," retorted Wharton. "I won't!"

"Then I'll make you."

Price started towards the junior. Harry Wharton was watching him, and in the twinkling of an eye, an oar whipped in from the water, and jammed on Price's chest. He staggered over, and sat down with a bump that made the boat rock wildly and ship water. A wave of the Sark washed over Price's trousers as he sat, drenching him to the skin.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Oh! You young rotter-oh!"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Try again!" he said, coolly. "Look out, if you capsize the boat! You're not much of a swimmer, Price."

"I—I'll smash you!" panted Price.

"Get on with it."

Price struggled up, in a pool of water. The boat was still rocking wildly, and he fell, rather than sat, in the stern seat.

Harry Wharton slipped the oar in the rowlock again, and pulled—with a wary eye on the Fifth-form man. He was pulling on, and Price could do what he liked about it, if he chose to risk capsizing the boat, that was his own look-out.

But Price did not choose to risk capsizing the boat.

One drenching was enough for him. His trousers were soaked, and dripping with water, and he did not want to dip bodily into the Sark.

He sat and glared at the junior, with a glare that was positively ferocious. But he was evidently thinking no further of making him pull for the bank.

Harry Wharton pulled on, till, near the bridge, he swept the boat round, and then pulled back up the Sark for the school. As they repassed the back gate of the Cross Keys, Price made a movement. But he thought better of it, and sat silent and scowling till the school raft was reached.

There he clambered out of the boat, giving the captain of the Remove a black and bitter look. "I'll remember this," he muttered.

"Do!" said Wharton, politely.

Price tramped away, his wet trousers clinging to his legs, his shoes squelching water. He was badly in need of a change, and he went in to get one—in the worst temper ever. And while he was towelling himself dry, he had to think out some other method of getting in touch with Joey Banks—unless he was to miss the golden opportunity of backing a "gee" that was going to romp home at four to one.

CHAPTER VII

NO BIKE FOR BUNTER!

"You fat villain!" roared Harry Wharton.

"Oh!" ejaculated Billy Bunter.

He spun round in the bike-shed, startled. Harry Wharton was the very last person Bunter wanted to see, at that moment, as he was engaged in lifting down Wharton's bicycle from the stand!

He blinked at an angry face through his big spectacles. "I—I say, Smithy said you were gone on the river," he stammered. "I—I asked him if he'd seen you, and—and—."

"What are you doing with my bike?"

"Oh! Nothing, old chap! I—I was just looking at it! I—I'm not going to—to ride it down to Friardale, old fellow."

"You're not, you fat brigand!" snapped the captain of the Remove. "And I've a jolly good mind to boot you round the bike-shed!"

"Beast!"

Wharton, evidently, had been just in time to save his bike.

He had put up his boat, after the pull on the river, and come in, expecting to find his friends returned from Highcliffe. But the Co. had not yet turned up, and he went into hall for a rather late tea, and then, as his friends had still not returned, he decided to push out his bike, and meet them on their homeward way. It was getting near lock-ups now, and he had no doubt of falling in with them somewhere on the Courtfield road. Had he left it a few minutes later, no bike would have been available.

Why Billy Bunter, just on lock-ups, wanted to bike down to Friardale, was rather a mystery. But evidently he did, and, equally evidently, he preferred a good machine to his own battered and dilapidated old crock.

"I say, old chap." Bunter eyed Wharton warily through his spectacles, and spoke in his most persuasive tone. "I say—."

"Go and eat coke."

"But I say, you're not going out, just on lock-ups," urged Bunter. "I say, you might lend a chap your jigger. I've got to get down to Friardale and back before lock-ups, and there's a puncture in my bike—"

"Walk it!" suggested Wharton.

"Beast! I mean, I couldn't do it in the time, old chap! I don't want to be late for roll. Quelch might ask where I'd been."

Harry Wharton about to wheel his machine out, paused, and stared at the fat Owl. Price of the Fifth had been going out of bounds, in Wharton's boat—if he could have contrived it. This sounded as if Billy Bunter too was going out of bounds—on Wharton's bike!

"You frumptious chump," said Harry. "What would it matter if Quelch asked you where you'd been?"

"Well, I don't want to get into a row, you know. If it came out—."

"If what came out?"

"Oh! Nothing!" said Bunter, hastily. "I'm not going out of bounds. Nothing to do with you if I was, I suppose. I don't want any pi jaw from you, Harry Wharton. Look here, lend me your bike, old chap! I shan't be more than a quarter of an hour—I haven't got to go quite as far as Friardale."

Harry Wharton gave a start.

Bunter, plainly, was bound for some destination, which would land him in a "row" if it came to his form-master's knowledge. And if he was going "not quite so far as Friardale," it looked as if that destination was the Cross Keys, which was on the hither side of the village. Harry Wharton was feeling strongly inclined to boot the fat Owl, but at the same time he was concerned for him. If the fat and fatuous Owl was thinking of following in the footsteps of the Bounder, or of Price of the Fifth, he needed a restraining hand.

"Where are you going, Bunter?" asked Harry, quietly.

"That's telling, old chap."

"You fat ass—."

"Don't ask a fellow questions," said Bunter, independently. "I suppose a chap can go where he likes without asking you. Not that I'm going to a pub, you know. I—I'm just going for a—a spin, if you'll lend me your bike—."

"You're going to a pub!" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"Oh No! Haven't I just said that I'm not? I'm going down to Uncle Clegg's at Friardale, that's all, to get some—some doughnuts. Look here, are you going to let me have that bike?"

"No!"

"Then you can go and eat coke," snapped Bunter. "I'll jolly well borrow Russell's and chance it."

"You won't," said Harry.

"Eh! Why won't I?" demanded Bunter.

"Because if you bag any fellow's bike, but your own, I shall kick you."

"Beast!" roared Bunter. "I tell you mine's got a puncture. I couldn't get back for lock-ups on it. I tell you I'm in a hurry."

"In a hurry to get to the Cross Keys?"

"Yes—I mean, no! How did you know I was going to the Cross Keys?" asked Bunter, blinking at the captain of the Remove in astonishment. "I jolly well know that Price hasn't told you anything about it."

Wharton jumped.

"Price!" he ejaculated.

"He wouldn't say anything to you—he knows you're pi!" said Bunter, scornfully. "I say, Harry, old chap, did you know Nugent was waiting for you in the study? He—he asked me to tell you—."

"Nugent hasn't come back from Highcliffe yet."

"Oh! Hasn't he? I—I mean Smithy! Smithy asked me to tell you he wants to see you—something about the Carcroft match—. He's waiting for you in the Rag now—."

"Smithy can wait."

"Well, look here, you can't keep Quelch waiting," said Bunter. "Quelch wants you in his study—I've just remembered that he told me to tell you. He—he ain't satisfied with your Georgic! You'd better cut off, old chap—you know what Quelch is like when he's kept waiting."

"He will have to wait, all the same."

Billy Bunter glared at the captain of the Remove, with a glare that might have cracked his spectacles.

"Look here, you beast, I'm going to borrow Russell's bike, and you're not going to stop me," he hooted.

"I'll stop you fast enough, if you put a paw on it," said Harry.

Harry Wharton leaned his machine on the stand, and turned to Bunter, with a grim expression on his face. The mention of Price's name had given him an inkling of how matters stood. It would have been astonishing enough if Billy Bunter had been going to the Cross Keys on his own account. But it was not on his account. It was on Price's account. The black sheep of the Fifth had been unable to make use of Harry Wharton, but he had had more success with the fat and fatuous Owl.

"Has that Fifth-form cad asked you to take a message to that den, Bunter?" asked the captain of the Remove, very quietly.

"Find out!" retorted Bunter.

"I'm going to find out," said Harry. "You're not going out of this bike-shed till I know."

"Why, you cheeky beast!" howled Bunter, in deep indignation. "Think you can bully me? If Wingate catches you at it again—."

"Never mind that! If that cad is getting a Remove man—and a fool like you—mixed up in his shady rot, he's going to be stopped," said Harry. "You howling ass, don't you know that you'd be flogged, and might be sacked, if you were caught going into that rotten show?"

"Catch me getting caught!" said Bunter, derisively. "I'm wide! Besides, I ain't going in—I can hand in a note at the back door without going in."

"You've got a note to take for Price?"

"Oh! No! Nothing of the kind! Price never gave me a note, and never said it was for Joey Banks, and never promised me a bag of doughnuts for taking it, or—or anything of the kind! I haven't seen Price to-day. He never spoke to me in the Cloisters—I haven't been in the Cloisters at all, and Price wasn't there either. I'm simply going for a spin—I mean, I'm going to Uncle Clegg's—and I'm in a hurry—."

"Give me that note!"

"Give you Price's note!" ejaculated Bunter. "I'll watch it! He told me very specially not to let anybody see it, and I'm not going to."

"Give it to me!"

"Shan't!" hooted Bunter. "Besides, I haven't got a note! What do you want it for, anyway?"

"I'll tell you," said Harry. "I'm going to take it back to Price, and tell him what I think of him. Now give it to me at once."

"Shan't!" yelled Bunter.

"If you'd rather I banged your silly head on the wall—."

"Beast! Leggo! If you bang my head, I'll—yarooooop! Wow! Stoppit! I—I'll give you the note if you like, you beast!" howled Bunter. "Wow! Oh, crikey! Here it is, you beast—wow! Wow!"

It was a plain envelope, without address, that Billy Bunter jerked from his pocket and handed over. He did not want to hand it over, but the contact of his fat head with the wall of the bike-shed was too much for Bunter. Harry Wharton crumpled it into his pocket. That note was not going to Joey Banks at the Cross Keys, it was going back to Price of the Fifth.

"Ow! wow! wow! wow!" howled Bunter, rubbing his head. "Ow! wow! I've a jolly good mind to tell Wingate—ow! ow! I've a jolly good mind to go straight to Wingate, and say-yow-ow-ow-ow-wow! Oh, my napper! wow!"

"What's all this row?"

Two Sixth-form men pushed machines into the bike-shed, Wingate and Gwynne. Wingate glanced at Harry Wharton's set, angry face, and then at Billy Bunter, rubbing his fat head and howling, and then at Wharton again. His face became grim.

"Wharton!" he rapped. "Well? Are you bullying Bunter again?"

"Don't talk rot!"

"What?" gasped Wingate.

It was probably the first time in the history of Greyfriars, that a junior of the Lower School had told a Prefect of the Sixth-form not to talk rot! The Greyfriars captain seemed hardly able to believe his ears.

"Wow! ow! wow!" howled Bunter.

"Did—did—did you say don't talk rot, Wharton?"

Wingate almost stuttered.

"Yes, I did."

"And what do you mean?" roared the Greyfriars captain.

"Just what I say."

Wingate breathed hard.

"Go to my study, Wharton, and wait for me there!"

"Pleased!" said Wharton, coolly. And he walked out of the bike-shed. He left two great men of the Sixth staring after him, and Billy Bunter still rubbing his fat head and yelping, but somewhat comforted by the prospect of what the beast was undoubtedly going to get in Wingate's study.

CHAPTER VIII

NOT "ON!"

STEPHEN PRICE leaned back in the armchair, in his study in the Fifth, and blew a little cloud of smoke from his cigarette. There was an expression of satisfaction on his narrow, furtive face. His little problem of getting "on" for the two-thirty was solved, or, at all events, Price had no doubt that it was. It was a great relief to the sportsman of the Fifth. Having selected so promising a "gee" as Blue Fox, a "dark horse" that was going to leave the field standing, Price had no doubt that on the day of the race the odds would shorten considerably, the starting-price couldn't be anything like four to one. But he was "on" in time, his note, delivered at the back door of the Cross Keys by a Remove fag, would do the trick, he was safe now for the handsomest win in his sporting career. If, improbably, Blue Fox failed to get home, he would have to borrow a fiver from Hilton to settle Mr. Banks, but he gave that hardly a thought. He was, he fancied, a fellow who could spot winners, and a succession of losers had not disabused him of that idea.

The cigarette disappeared suddenly from his mouth, as the study door opened. But it was replaced, as he saw that it was Hilton coming in.

Hilton strolled across to the window. Hilton, if not Price, had taken Wingate's warning to heart, and he had been playing cricket that afternoon, he was still in flannels, as Price noted with a sneer. From the healthy colour in his cheeks, he looked as if he had derived more benefit from cricket, than Price was deriving from his cigarette.

"Had a good game?" asked Price, his thin lip curling.

"Oh, quite!" drawled Hilton. "You should have come along, Pricey. It would do you good." He stretched himself on the settee under the window.

"Something better to do."

"More ass you, old man! If you've been anywhere near the Cross Keys or the Three Fishers, you can expect to hear from Wingate. He was out on his bike this afternoon, and I fancy he had his eyes open."

Price shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not afraid of Wingate," he snapped.

"I am!" said Hilton, lazily. "I should just hate to be walked in to the Head and bunked. I can tell you that our respected head-prefect has got his teeth into this, and that our best guess is to play a safe game. Cricket for me, for the next week or two."

"I'm on," said Price, unheeding.

"Then you've seen Joey?"

"No! I know enough to go in when it rains," sneered Price. "Wingate won't get anything on me. I've got a message through to Joey Banks. It's all right, he's got it by this time."

"How the jolly old dickens did you get the message through?" asked Hilton, sitting up and staring at him. "You weren't fool enough to phone, surely?"

Price laughed. "Hardly!"

"Then how—?"

"Easy enough! I've tipped a fag to take a note."

"Oh!" Cedric Hilton's careless face became very grave. "I say, that's rather a rotten trick, Pricey—sendin' a fag to a show like that—might land the poor little beast into a fearful row—. And if they spotted him, and got hold of your note—."

Price laughed again.

"Nothing in the note to damage me, if they did," he answered. "I'm not exactly a fool, Cedric. I know my way about."

"It's over the limit," said Hilton. "You shouldn't have—."

"Rubbish!"

"You're rather a rotter, Steve, old man," said Hilton.

"Thanks! Have a smoke?"

Hilton shook his head, and sat frowning. Price watched him with a sneering grin. He threw away the stump of his cigarette, and was about to light another, when there came a sudden interruption.

There was a knock, or rather a bang, at the door, and it flew wide open. Price jumped to his feet, startled, and Hilton stared round angrily. Harry Wharton came into the study.

Price gave him almost a deadly look—Hilton a stare of angry surprise.

"You cheeky young ruffian!" exclaimed Hilton. "What the dooce do you mean by bargin' in like that?"

"I've something for Price," answered Harry.

He drew a crumpled note from his pocket. Crumpling it further, he lifted his hand, and pitched it into Price's face. It tapped the Fifth-form man's nose, and fell at his feet.

"That's the note you gave Bunter to take to the Cross Keys, Price," said the captain of the Remove. "I've brought it back to you, you rotter!"

"Oh, gad!" ejaculated Hilton.

"This afternoon," went on Wharton, while Price stood almost gibbering with rage, "you tried to get a lift in my boat to that den. Now you've tipped Bunter to take a note there. I've taken it from him, and brought it back to you. You ought to be sacked from the school, you worm. A lot you cared what you might land that fat fool in. Well, I've put paid to it! There's your precious note—you can walk down to the Cross Keys with it yourself, if you want to get it there. You worm!"

"Oh, gad!" repeated Hilton.

Price stared at the crumpled note, lying on the carpet at his feet. He realised that he was not "on" after all! That note had not reached Joey Banks at the Cross Keys—there it was, lying on his study carpet! The fact that it had been flung contemptuously in his face, troubled Price less than the knowledge that he was not "on", that he was losing that chance of a lifetime!

"You—you—you—!" he stuttered, hardly able to speak. He clenched his hands almost convulsively, and came across the study towards the junior.

Harry Wharton faced him quite fearlessly. He was a Lower School junior, and Price a Fifth-form senior. But he was fit as a fiddle, hard as nails and Price was a weedy, seedy, slacker. He was more than ready for the Fifth-form sportsman.

His hands came up in a flash, his eyes gleaming over them and, as Price rushed, he met him with left and right. And it was Price who staggered back from the encounter, pitching back heavily against the study table.

"Oh, gad!" said Hilton, for the third time.

"Come on, you cur," said Harry Wharton, between his teeth.

"Get out of my study," muttered Price, hoarsely.

"Glad to," answered Wharton, contemptuously. "It's not the study any decent fellow would want to step into, if he could help it."

"Get out!" breathed Price.

The captain of the Remove tramped out of the study, and shut the door after him with a bang. Price was left rubbing his chin with one hand, and his nose with the other, and Hilton grinning, apparently amused by that sudden spot of excitement in his study.

CHAPTER IX

A RIFT IN THE LUTE!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"

Bob Cherry's cheery roar woke the echoes of No. 1 Study, as his ruddy, cheerful face looked in at the door.

He tramped in, followed by Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

It was close on lock-ups when the Co. came in, and not seeing anything of Wharton below, they came up to the study to look for him. They found him there.

He was standing by the window, looking out into the quad, but as his friends crowded into the study, he turned, and glanced at them.

One look at his face was enough to make the cheery expression die away on Bob's, and to bring an anxious look to Frank Nugent's. It needed only one glance to see that things had not gone well with their chum during their absence.

Harry Wharton's face was dark and set, and there was a smouldering glint in his eyes. What had happened, his chums could not guess, but it was very clear that something had.

"Oh!" said Bob, uncomfortably. "Anything up, old man?"

"Nothing special," answered Harry.

"Trouble with Quelch?" asked Nugent, quietly.

"Quelch! No."

"You did your Georgic?" asked Johnny Bull.

"Oh, yes."

"Then what's the row?"

Harry Wharton did not reply for a moment. His friends eyed him uneasily, and Johnny Bull gave a faint, but audible, grunt. They had come back from Highcliffe in cheery spirits, after tea with Courtenay and the Caterpillar, and a bike ride and it was rather disconcerting to find their chum in this mood. It dashed their cheerfulness, and made them, perhaps, feel slightly impatient.

"Anything happened, Harry?" asked Nugent.

"Well, yes."

"Give it a name, old bean," said Bob. "If you're not in a row with Quelch—."

"I've had six from a pre."

"What on earth for?" exclaimed Bob.

"Nothing!"

"Oh!" said his four friends, all together.

"Unless doing my duty as Head Boy of the Remove is something," added Wharton, sarcastically. "Otherwise, nothing! I was just thinking out how to get back on him, when you fellows came in."

"Don't be an ass," said Johnny Bull, with another grunt. "You can't get back on a pre. Thinking of punching his nose?"

"No!" You can't punch a pre without getting sacked, and I'm not looking for a train home. There may be other ways—such as shipping his study—."

"Bit risky to rag in the Sixth," said Bob.

Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't want you fellows to mix in it," he said. "I'm not taking six for nothing, pre. or no pre. But you had better steer clear."

"Look here, if that bully Loder—."

"It wasn't Loder."

"Even Loder has to have an excuse for handling his ash," said Johnny Bull. "But if it wasn't Loder, who was it?"

"Wingate!"

"Wingate! exclaimed all the Co., blankly.

"Yes."

Johnny Bull gave a still more expressive grunt. Bob's face set a little. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh frowned slightly. Even Nugent frowned. It was possible, if not probable, that Loder of the Sixth might have given a junior six for "nothing." But it was neither possible nor probable that Wingate had. If the captain of Greyfriars had a fault, it was that he was disposed to be a little too easy-going, and to let offenders off lightly. Even when he administered "six" to a junior for his sins, it was seldom such a six as Loder or Walker or Carne handed out. That he had caned any fellow for nothing was simply not a fact, as all Wharton's chums knew without hearing any details—and as, indeed, Wharton himself would have realised, had he been in a less savagely resentful mood.

"So Wingate whopped you for nothing?" said Johnny Bull, breaking a rather painful silence.

"I've said so."

"You can say so till you're black in the face, but you won't get any man at Greyfriars to believe it," growled Johnny.

Wharton's eyes flashed.

"Hold on," interposed Bob, before the angry words could leave the lips of the captain of the Remove. "Let's hear what happened. If Wingate whopped you for nothing, I suppose he fancied there was something. Wingate might make a mistake like anybody else. Is that it?"

"Oh, yes, he fancied that I was bullying Bunter," said Wharton, bitterly. "He fancied so yesterday, and he fancied the same again to-day. I told him not to talk rot."

Four fellows jumped.

"You told the captain of the school not to talk rot!" gasped Bob.

"Why not, when he was talking rot?"

"And you call that nothing?" asked Johnny Bull.

Wharton shrugged his shoulders again, a shrug that had a somewhat irritating effect on his friends.

"Look here," said Bob. "Let's get this clear. What put the idea into Wingate's head, anyway?"

"Bunter was yelling because I'd banged his silly head on the wall of the bike-shed, when Wingate and Gwynne came in with their jiggers. I couldn't very well tell why I banged it."

"Why not?"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Price of the Fifth had got him to take a note to a bookie at the Cross Keys. I banged his head to make him hand it over. Think I could tell a prefect that I was stopping the fat fool from going out of bounds to a pub?"

"Hardly!" agreed Bob. "But—"

"But I needn't have butted in—is that what you mean?" asked Wharton, sarcastically. "I could have let that fat idiot get mixed up in Price's dingy rot, and flogged or sacked if he was spotted. This afternoon you were reminding me that the Head Boy is responsible. Think Quelch would expect his Head Boy to let Bunter carry on with it?"

"Of course not! That cad Price ought to be jolly well kicked," said Bob. "You had to interfere, of course."

"Glad you can see that much," said Harry, drily.

"Sure you got it right?" asked Johnny Bull. "Price is a rotten outsider, as lots of fellows know, but getting a fag to take a message to a bookie in a pub is pretty thick, even for Price."

"The thickfulness is terrific," murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I imagine I had it right, as Bunter handed over the note when I banged his head," answered Wharton. "I took it back to Price in his study, he was there, with that yawning fool Hilton, and I gave it to him. To be exact, I crumpled it and pitched it into his face."

"Oh, my hat! Wasn't there a row?"

"Not very much," said Wharton, carelessly. "Price isn't much of a man for scrapping, and Hilton only sat and stared, like the brainless ass he is. Price couldn't worry any fellow who could use his hands. But—I couldn't punch Wingate as I did Price. I had to take six from a pre."

Bob Cherry rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"You shouldn't have cheeked Wingate," he said.

"You couldn't explain, without getting Bunter into a fearful row, and you couldn't do that. But there was no need to cheek him, so far as I can see."

"That isn't very far, is it?"

"What?"

"Wingate asked me if I was bullying Bunter again. I told him not to talk rot. I'd have made the same answer to Quelch, if he'd asked me such a question. And I'll make him sorry somehow for that six."

"That's rot!" said Johnny Bull.

"The rotfulness is terrific, my esteemed and ridiculous chum," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, shaking his dusky head.

"My dear chap—!" said Bob.

"For goodness sake—!" muttered Nugent.

Herbert Vernon-Smith looked in at the open doorway. "Haven't you fellows heard the bell?" he asked. "It's calling-over. Oh!" The Bounder glanced from face to face. "What's the row?"

"Oh, nothing," said Bob, hastily.

"Nothing at all," said Wharton, satirically. "I've had six from Wingate, for nothing, and my pals are advising me to take it like a lamb. I'm not going to. That's all!"

With that he walked out of the study, involuntarily wriggling a little as he went. The "six," apparently, had been severe. His friends, with rather expressive looks, followed him, and they went down to the hall together, but not in the usual cheery crowd. For once, there was something like a rift in the lute.

CHAPTER X

A WILFUL MAN WILL HAVE HIS WAY!

"LOOK here, old chap—."

"Aeneas scopulum interea—."

"What?"

"—conscendit—."

"Harry—."

"—e omnem prospectum—." Harry Wharton continued reading aloud, as if he did not hear. "Late pelago petit—."

Frank Nugent compressed his lips.

"What does that mean?" he asked, quietly.

"Aeneas ascended a high rock and looked round all over the sea," answered Harry Wharton.

Frank Nugent was a very patient fellow, as sometimes he needed to be, with a chum whose temper had in it an element of uncertainty. But he looked now nearly at the end of his patience.

They were at prep in No. 1 Study. There had been a long silence. That Harry Wharton was still bitterly indignant and resentful his chums were only too well aware. The accusation of bullying had probably hurt him a good deal more than the "six", but the six had been severe enough, and it had been, in his opinion at least, unjust and undeserved. He had acted as his form-master, and indeed as Wingate himself, would have expected him to act, in preventing Bunter from taking Price's note to the Cross Keys and he had been rewarded with six of the best. And the fact that his friends did not see eye to eye with him added to his resentment, and had the effect of rousing his stubbornness, of which there was a good deal in him. All the Co. were concerned, and a little uneasy, Frank Nugent most of all. But when he broke the long silence in the study, he found that Wharton's mood had hardened rather than softened in the time that had elapsed.

He sat looking across the table at his chum, breathing rather hard. Wharton quietly went on with his prep.

"Do you mean that you don't want me to speak?" asked Frank, at last.

"You asked me a question, and I answered it."

"You know that I was not asking for a translation."

"Well, we're supposed to be translating," said Harry. "It's prep, you know. Quelch would expect us to be concentrating on our work, wouldn't he? And you know I'm Head Boy, and bound to feel my responsibility."

Nugent bit his lip.

"I wasn't asking for sarc," he snapped.

Wharton looked up from Virgil at last.

"Look here, Frank, it's no good talking. I did right this afternoon, as you know as well as I do, and I was whopped as if I'd done wrong. I'm not going to take it. You don't agree with me, the other fellows don't! Well, then, all you've got to do is to leave me alone."

"We've been pals too long for me to think of leaving you alone when you're bent on making a fool of yourself," said Nugent, tartly.

"Do you think I ought to have let Bunter go with that note from Price?"

"No!"

"Do you think I ought to have told a prefect that I was stopping him from taking a message to a bookie at a pub?"

"No!"

"Well, then, what was I to do, but what I did? And I had to bend over and take six for doing it," said Wharton, with smouldering eyes. "And to be called a bully, into the bargain."

"If Wingate had understood—."

"He might have given me credit for not being a bully like Bolsover, or throwing my weight about like Coker of the Fifth," said Wharton, bitterly. "Instead of that, he gave me six."

"He wouldn't have, if you hadn't cheeked him."

"I don't call it cheek to tell a fool not to talk rot, even if the fool happens to be a prefect."

"Well, if you don't call it cheek, any other fellow would," said Nugent. "The Lower Fourth can't talk to the Sixth like that. It was a rotten misunderstanding, but the real trouble was—" He paused.

"My fault, of course?"

"It was because you couldn't keep your temper," said Frank. "I know what you were feeling like, but you shouldn't have answered Wingate as you did. That was why you got the six, not because you banged Bunter's silly head."

"I'd make the same answer again."

"I suppose it's no use talking—."

"None at all."

"But look here, old chap, do try and forget all about it," said Nugent, earnestly. "Wingate's a jolly good fellow, and you like him as much as all the fellows do, really. Wash the whole thing out."

"I'm going to—."

"Oh, good!"

"—when I've levelled things out. Not before."

"Look here—."

"Anthea si quem jactatum—."

"Wharton!"

"—vento videat Phrygiasque—."

"That will do!" said Frank Nugent, his own eyes glinting. "I'll say no more about it, and if you choose to make a fool of yourself, go ahead and do it."

"Thanks."

Nothing more was said in No. 1 Study. Usually the two worked in concert at prep, now each worked on his own, in silence. When prep was over, Frank Nugent rose and put away his books, and, still in silence, went to the door.

There was a heavy tramp in the passage, and the door flew open, and Bob Cherry's ruddy face looked in.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" boomed Bob. "Coming down you fellows?" Bob, apparently, had forgotten that there had been a spot of friction or perhaps he had made up his mind to forget.

"I'm going down," said Frank, and he passed Bob and went out of the study. Harry Wharton made no move to follow.

"Oh!" said Bob, with great discomfort. "I—I say, you haven't been rowing with Franky, have you, old chap?"

"Not in the least," answered Harry. "Nothing to row about, is there? We can look at a thing different ways, without a row."

Bob looked at him.

"I suppose that means that old Franky has been talking sense to you," he said.

"I daresay he thought so. It seemed rot, to me."

"Well, look here, if you're still thinking of getting on Wingate's track for that six—."

"I am."

"Then you're a silly ass!" said Bob, bluntly.

"Thanks."

Bob gave him another look, and then followed Nugent down the passage. There was electricity in the air, as it were and Bob, at all events, was not going to "row."

Harry Wharton stood in the study, his brow darkening.

Evidently Bob's opinion was the same as Nugent's and he did not doubt that Johnny Bull and the nabob would take the same view. His friends were against him and it did not occur to him, at the moment, that four heads might be wiser than one.

Johnny Bull looked into the study, and the dusky countenance of Hurree Jamset Ram Singh looked in over his shoulder.

"Franky gone down?" asked Johnny.

"Yes."

"Anything up?"

"No."

"You look as if something was."

"Not at all."

Wharton's replies were not exactly uncivil, but they were very curt. Johnny Bull looked at him hard, and the nabob frowned a little.

Johnny did not speak again for a moment. He was a direct and plain-spoken youth, with little use for subtleties. He seldom or never spoke without thinking, but having done his thinking, he would speak what he thought, not always with happy results. He pondered for a moment or two, and then said,

"Does that mean that you're in the sulks?"

Harry Wharton crimsoned.

Indignation, resentment of injustice, and an angry determination to "get level," did not appear to him in the light of "sulks." It was extremely unpleasant to hear his frame of mind so described.

But he checked an angry answer, and turned away, to put a book on the shelf. Johnny stared at the back of his head.

"My esteemed Johnny—!" murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Well, I think it's rot!" said Johnny.

Then Harry Wharton looked round.

"Mind going and telling somebody else what you think?" he inquired.

"What?"

"You see, I'm not in the least interested."

"Look here—!" began Johnny Bull, in a voice that had a strong family resemblance to that of the Great Huge Bear.

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh slipped his arm into Johnny's, and led him away before he could get further.

"My esteemed and absurd Johnny, a still tongue shows that silence is golden, as the English proverb remarks" he murmured. "The least said, the sooner the mendfulness is terrific."

Johnny grunted expressively, but allowed himself to be led away. Harry Wharton did not follow. But he was not left alone in the study for long. Herbert Vernon-Smith stepped in a few minutes later.

"On your own?" he asked, glancing round.

"Looks like it."

"Not sticking up in the study are you after prep?"

"I'm thinking something out."

The Bounder grinned.

"Such as getting level with a pre. for handing out six?" he asked.

"Perhaps!"

"I fancied so! Are your pals backing you up?"

"You can ask them."

"I won't take the trouble, I can guess. Look here Wharton." The Bounder, not usually much concerned about other fellows, spoke earnestly, and his tone was friendly. "Look here, you're on a bad break. You've got your back up, and you're goin' to push into trouble you can't handle. What's the good?"

A shrug of the shoulders was the only reply to that.

"We're not pals," added Vernon-Smith, "but if you asked me, I should give you the same advice that I can guess they've given you."

"I haven't asked you."

"Hoity-toity! If that means that you'd rather I minded my own business—."

"Right on the wicket!"

"O.K. A wilful man will have his way," said the Bounder, lightly and he joined Redwing in the passage, and they went down the stairs.

A minute or two later, Lord Mauleverer passed the open doorway, and paused to look in. No doubt his lordship had heard a rumour in the Remove that all was not as usual with the generally united Co. But one glance at Wharton's face was enough for Mauly and he passed on without speaking. Harry Wharton shut the door.

All the Remove had gone down, after prep, when Wharton left his study. He went slowly downstairs, but he did not head for the Rag.

CHAPTER XI

IN WINGATE'S STUDY

WINGATE of the Sixth, standing by the window of the Prefects' Room, in the light, was clearly and distinctly visible to anyone looking in from the dusky quadrangle. It did not occur to the captain of Greyfriars that anyone, out of the House at that hour, was looking at him from the shadows. But someone was, a junior with a set face, set in a look of sullen resentment that was very unusual. And Harry Wharton, having satisfied himself that Wingate was in the Prefects' Room, and could not, therefore, be in his study, moved on silently in the shadows to the Sixth-form study windows.

In the Rag, his friends were wondering rather uneasily where he was, and what he might be doing. Johnny Bull concluded that he was "sulking" in his study, the simple word "sulks" explaining the whole thing to Johnny's simple and direct mind. Bob Cherry and the nabob hoped that he was merely keeping out of their way for a time, after the rather sharp exchange of words that had taken place. Frank Nugent felt most uneasy of all, remembering his chum's reference to "shipping" Wingate's study, in retaliation for that undeserved "six." So reckless an act meant certain trouble, if that was Wharton's intention, and if he carried it out. More than once, Frank was tempted to go up again, and reason with his disgruntled chum. But he knew that it was futile, in Wharton's present mood, and he did not want to risk a quarrel. As a matter of fact, he would not have found Wharton there had he gone up.

It had been easy enough for Harry Wharton to drop from a back window unseen and unnoticed. His absence was not likely to be noted till the bell rang for dormitory.

He intended to be back, and chatting with the other fellows in the Rag, long before then. What he had mapped out would not take long. It was most likely that Wingate would be in the Prefects' Room at that hour, and a glance from the quad ascertained that he was. Unless for any reason he went to his study, the junior had a clear field.

It was a fine night, but dark. That suited the junior stealing softly through the shadows outside the House. He did not want to be spotted from a window, and many windows were lighted, and not all of them curtained. Angry and determined as he was, it was unpleasant to think of Mr. Quelch's gimlet-eye falling upon him, at an hour when no junior was allowed out of the House.

The window of Wingate's study, in the Sixth, was wide open, when Wharton stopped beneath it, and there was no light in the room. His enterprise could hardly have been made easier.

He did not hesitate for a moment. He clambered on the broad stone sill, swung himself in, and dropped into the study.

It was dark in the quad, but darker in the study, but he could see his way about. A fellow did not need much light to "ship" a study.

There were few fellows who would not have hesitated to "ship" the study of the captain of the school. Even the Bounder, wild and reckless as he was, would have thought twice and thrice, and four times, before he ventured upon anything of the kind. Wharton did not even think of hesitating. He was going to "rag" that study as thoroughly as ever a junior study had been ragged at Greyfriars. But he paused, as he was about to step away from the window, at the sound of a voice from the quad.

"Did you see someone, Capper?"

It was the booming voice of Mr. Prout, the master of the Fifth. Apparently Prout was taking an evening stroll in company with the Fourth-form master.

Harry Wharton caught his breath. It had not occurred to him that "beaks" might be out of the House and he realised that he had had a narrow escape of running into Prout and Capper. Evidently they were walking on the path under the study windows, and Prout fancied that he had seen somebody. Mr. Capper's answer came as a relief to the junior in the study.

"No—I saw no one, Prout!"

"I am almost sure I saw someone, Capper! But no one appears to be here. Yet I am sure—almost sure—."

Wharton, keeping carefully out of sight, peered from the window. The two masters had come to a stop, not more than a couple of yards away, and the portly Prout was peering about him in the gloom.

"No boy would be out of the House at this hour, Prout—after preparation," said Mr. Capper.

"No! I suppose not! But—."

Prout continued to peer. He was not satisfied and for some minutes he remained where he was, peering and frowning. Harry Wharton waited impatiently for him to go. He could not get on with the "shipping" operation with two masters within hearing of any sound from the open window of the study. .

They moved on at last.

But Wharton's relief lasted only a moment. Hardly had Prout and Capper disappeared, when the door-handle of the study turned, and the door opened. Wingate's voice was heard from the passage.

"Hold on a minute, Gwynne."

Harry Wharton's heart gave an unpleasant jump. There had been every chance that Wingate, in the Prefects' Room, would remain there till the time came for him to see lights out in the junior dormitory—and the intended ragger had banked on it. Instead of which, here he was, at the door of his study.

Had he switched on the light and entered, he could not have failed to see the junior standing there, by the open window. Wharton's face set savagely and doggedly. He expected immediate discovery—and the inevitable result. But, to his surprise, Wingate did not reach for the lighting switch and turn it on. Apparently he was not coming into the study. He remained in the doorway, waiting for Gwynne, coming along from his own study further up the passage, to join him.

Wharton hardly breathed.

He was prepared, with dogged hardihood, to face what was coming to him, if the Greyfriars captain found him there. But if there was a chance of getting clear undiscovered, he was ready to make the most of it. He backed, silently, closer to the open window.

The light from the passage streamed into the study.

But it did not reach as far as the window. Wingate, if he glanced in, could not see him, unless he turned on the study light.

There was a chance, at least, of dropping from the window, unseen, though at the risk of being spotted by Prout and Capper, who could not be far away, and one of whom, at least, was peering about suspiciously. But a single sound would certainly have drawn Wingate's attention, he had to escape without a sound, if he was to escape at all. He moved very cautiously.

"What is it, old man?"

It was Gwynne's voice. He stopped in the passage.

The hapless junior's heart beat very unpleasantly. If they came into the study, his game was up, and he did not want another "six" from an ashplant wielded in a vigorous hand. But they did not come in.

Wingate was leaning on the door-post, his hands in his pockets, a thoughtful frown on his brow. Obviously he had no suspicion that anyone was in his study.

"Just a minute, that's all," he said. "Something I had to say."

"Trot along and say it in the Prefect's room old bean—I'm just going there—."

"It's not for everybody to hear."

"Oh! All right! Fire away!"

"About to-night," said Wingate, in a low voice. "It's got to be settled, one way or the other. You know, from what I've told you, that it's practically certain—but every fellow's entitled to the benefit of the doubt—."

"Precious little doubt in this case," answered Gwynne, very drily.

"I know—I've got to make sure, though. We saw nothing of him this afternoon, at either place, either the Cross Keys, or the Three Fishers. If he's got anything on for the Wapshot races to-morrow, he may have taken warning and chucked it. I hope so."

"Some hope!" said Gwynne, in the same dry tone.

"You don't think so?"

"No."

"We've got to get it clear. This can't go on," said Wingate, savagely. "I've got my duty to do as a prefect, and a prefect's duty is to nail a man who kicks over the traces. I've got to do it, and I'm going to do it. If he breaks out to-night, we're going to get him, and have done."

"That means keeping an eye open up to a pretty late hour."

"Any other way?"

"Not that I know of."

"Well, I'm not going to bed till twelve, Gwynne. Up to twelve I shall be sitting in the dark on the dormitory landing."

"You might miss him in the dark."

"You'll be on the study landing below, in case I do."

"Oh, howly mother of Moses! And me losing my beauty sleep!" sighed Gwynne.

"It can't be helped, you lazy old slacker! And—."

Every word had come distinctly to Harry Wharton's ears, in the study, as he clambered silently, with infinite caution, into the open window. He could not venture to move quickly, the slightest sound would have betrayed him. Slowly, soundlessly, he climbed out of the window, and what Wingate said further was lost to him, as he dropped from the sill to the earth.

There he stood, for a few moments, glancing about him.

Prout and Capper were gone by that time, and the coast was clear. Quickly, he cut away in the shadows. There was a sarcastic smile on his face as he went. Wingate was on the trail of some breaker of bounds, and would not be in his study that night. Sixth-form studies at Greyfriars were bedrooms by night, but up to midnight, Wingate would not be there. That meant that the coast would be clear for a ragger, the "shipping" of the study was only postponed.

CHAPTER XII

NO CHANGE!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"

Bob Cherry tried to infuse the usual cheery note into that friendly hail, not wholly successfully, as Harry Wharton strolled into the Rag.

The Co. chatting in a group in the bay window, were not in their cheeriest mood that evening.

There had been no quarrel, certainly. But undoubtedly there was something of a rift in the lute.

The strain of stubbornness in Harry Wharton's character which his good sense and good temper generally kept well in check, seemed to have taken the bit between its teeth, as it were, and bolted with him.

His friends were glad to see him appear in the Rag, late as it was, and close on bedtime. But they hardly knew whether or not to expect the "marble eye" from him when he came. Which was an uncomfortable, and somewhat irritating, state of affairs.

Many glances were turned on Harry as he came in.

It was already noted in the Remove that the Famous Five were not on their accustomed cordial terms. Fellows who liked them were sorry to see it, there were others, like Skinner and Co. who were amused. Most were more or less interested, for the Famous Five filled a very large place in the life of the form.

Skinner winked at Snoop and Stott, who grinned. Billy Bunter gave the captain of the Remove an inimical blink through his big spectacles, and murmured "Beast!" Tom Brown and Squiff, Peter Todd and Lord Mauleverer, eyed him curiously. The Bounder smiled at Tom Redwing, who looked grave. Other fellows watched him and the Co., wondering if a "row" was on.

But if anyone expected to read anything in Wharton's face, there was nothing to be read there.

His look was quite normal, his manner casual. If his feelings were deep, they were well hidden.

He glanced round as he came in, and, as Bob Cherry hailed him, strolled across to the group in the bay window, in quite the usual friendly way.

"Had a good time at Highcliffe this afternoon?" he asked, casually.

Frank Nugent's clouded face cleared, and Bob's brightened. A cheery grin came over the dusky countenance of the nabob of Bhanipur. Even Johnny Bull, who had his own opinion—a strong one—of fellows who sulked, was conscious of relief, and looked amicable.

It was in fact, a relief to all the Co., to find that the sharp words that had been exchanged, had made no difference. They hoped, too, that Wharton, having had time to think over his reckless project, had come to a more reasonable frame of mind. It looked like it.

Certainly they were not likely to guess that, only ten minutes ago, he had been in Wingate's study, with the fixed intention of "shipping" it, and that that intention was only postponed. Neither did he intend to tell them anything about it.

Wharton had been doing some thinking, though not on the lines that they hoped. He had resolved that his "feud" with Wingate of the Sixth should not make any difference between him and his friends. As they could not agree on the subject, the least said was the soonest mended! He was going his own stubborn way, regardless of their disapproval, but there was no need of a "row."

"Topping!" Bob Cherry answered Wharton's question in his cheeriest tones. "They were sorry you couldn't come along, old fellow."

"The sorrowfulness was terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"It was rotten," agreed Wharton. "But Quelch wanted his Georgic, and wouldn't be happy till he got it. It was a real stinker, but I'm glad I put it through, now. What's the good of a row with Quelch?"

"Hear, hear!" said Johnny Bull.

In a moment, they were chatting cheerfully in quite the old way. Frank Nugent, once or twice, stole a quiet glance at Wharton's face. He was not feeling quite easy in his mind. He hoped, from the bottom of his heart, that his chum was not still thinking of that wild idea of retaliation on the captain of

Greyfriars. But he could not feel sure. Wharton, certainly, did not look as if any such thought was lingering in his mind.

Skinner gave Snoop a look of disgust.

"Nothing up there, Snoopey," he murmured.

It was quite a disappointment to the amiable Skinner.

A spot of trouble in that usually happy circle would have amused and entertained him.

However, Skinner had another and more important matter to occupy his mind. Price of the Fifth was not the only sportsman who was interested in the two-thirty at Wapshot on the morrow. Skinner and Snoop joined Vernon-Smith, and Tom Redwing moved away as they began a low-tone discussion, in which the name of "Blue Fox" recurred rather often.

Harry Wharton glanced across at the three, with a faintly sarcastic smile.

From what he had involuntarily heard in Wingate's study, he knew that the prefects were on the trail of some breaker of bounds, and that a watch was to be kept that night. Who the culprit was, he did not know, it might have been Price of the Fifth, or Angel of the Fourth, or some other fellow of whose manners and customs he had never heard. But it was possible that the suspected fellow was a Remove man, in which case it was quite likely to be the Bounder, who had more than once come under suspicion.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! There's the jolly old bell!" exclaimed Bob Cherry.

It was the bell for dorm. There was a general move.

Lord Mauleverer slowly detached himself from his armchair, Billy Bunter heaved his weight out of another. The Famous Five headed for the door in a cheery little crowd. But as they went out, Harry Wharton left his friends, and touched Herbert Vernon-Smith on the elbow. The Bounder looked round at him, inquiringly.

"I tell you I heard Price of the Fifth say to Hilton that you could put your shirt on him—" Skinner was muttering, but he shut down at once as the captain of the Remove came into the offing.

"Just a word, Smithy, old man," said Harry.

"Two if you like," answered Smithy.

"I thought I'd mention that I happen to know that the pre's are on the prowl to-night, Smithy," said Harry, in a low voice.

The Bounder gave a little start.

"How do you know?"

"Well, I know! It's official."

"Sure?"

"Quite! A tip straight from the horse's mouth," said Wharton, rather sarcastically. "You can bank on it."

Vernon-Smith laughed.

"Thanks for the tip," he said.

"You gave me a spot of advice in my study after prep, Smithy—."

"Not much use to you, I fancy."

"None at all!" said Wharton, coolly. "But I'll give you a spot of advice in return, useful or not. You know what I think of your racing stunts—."

"Sort of! Speech may be taken as read!"

"But I wouldn't like to see you sacked, all the same—."

"Thanks."

"Well, any man playing the giddy ox to-night stands the healthiest possible chance of going up to the Head in the morning, and catching an early tram home," said Harry. "That's the lot."

Without waiting for a rejoinder, he walked on, and rejoined his friends in the passage, leaving Herbert Vernon-Smith looking very thoughtful. If the Bounder of Greyfriars had any reckless plans for that night, as very probably he had, he abandoned them on the spot.

In the Remove dormitory, where Wingate of the Sixth saw lights out, Harry Wharton did not even glance at him. Judging by appearances, he had forgotten all about that "six" in Wingate's study. And Frank Nugent, who had a rather uneasy eye on him, felt that there was, after all, no cause for uneasiness. He sat on the edge of Wharton's bed to take his boots off, by the side of the captain of the Remove.

"It's all right now, isn't it, old chap?" he whispered.

Wharton glanced at him.

"All right? Of course. Why not?"

"I mean, you've chucked up that idea about Wingate—?"

Wharton did not answer.

"You have, haven't you?" asked Frank, his uneasiness reviving as his chum did not speak.

"Not in the least," answered Harry, curtly. "But—look here—."

"What's the good of talking?"

"But—."

"Why not agree to differ? Doesn't old Inky say that the least said, the sooner the cracked pitcher goes to the well?" said Harry, laughing.

Nugent compressed his lips.

"Oh! All right!" he said, and he left his chum's side, and no more was said. Wingate put out the lights, and the Remove were left to slumber. But there was one of them, at least, who did not think of sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

DESPERATE MEASURES

STEPHEN PRICE, of the Fifth Form, sat up in bed, peered round him in the dark, and listened. The dim glimmer from high windows, falling on his face, showed it pale and harassed, yet set obstinately. Faintly through the night, from the distant clock-tower, came the chime of eleven. At that hour, all Greyfriars slept, unless a master chanced to be up, in his study.

Seldom, indeed, did an intended breaker of bounds leave it so late. But Wingate's warning weighed on Price's mind, and he had left it as late as he could, to make assurance doubly sure. He could not leave it later, for Joey Banks, at the Cross Keys, though he certainly did not keep early hours, was not likely to be up after midnight. And Price had to see Mr. Banks.

It was his last chance of getting "on" for the two-thirty on Thursday. Only by the cunning device of getting a lift in Harry Wharton's boat, had he dared approach the Cross Keys during the day—and that device had failed him. His second attempt to "get through," by sending Bunter of the Remove with a note, had failed also, owing to Wharton's intervention. Only one resource remained—to get out of the school after lights out, and creep away in the dark like a thief in the night. And that Price had resolved to do.

It was risky—the risk made the perspiration start on his forehead, when he thought of it. He had done it before, and he had done it easily, but circumstances were altered now that he was under direct suspicion, the risk was doubled and trebled. And the penalty, if he was caught, was overwhelming. "Breaking out at night" was too serious an offence to be pardoned, it meant leaving Greyfriars. Price thought of the possible interview in his headmaster's study, of standing before the steady eyes of Dr. Locke, and hearing his sentence pronounced, and he cringed as he thought of it.

A more courageous fellow than Price might have backed out of the enterprise. With Price, obstinacy and greed supplied the place of courage. He was certain—absolutely certain—that he had picked a winner this time. Blue Fox for a fiver, at four to one, meant twenty pounds for him—a large sum for an impecunious fellow like Price. He owed money right and left, a result of his sporting speculations from which he failed to derive a lesson. Twenty pounds would see him clear, with cash in hand to carry on the racing game, it was a chance that he could not think of losing. Risk or no risk, he was going.

But he sat listening and peering for long minutes before he crept quietly out of bed. He argued the matter in his scared mind. After all, what was the risk? He had done it before, successfully, more than once. True, Wingate suspected him, and would lose no chance of nailing him, but Wingate would be fast asleep at eleven o'clock. Prout, his form-master, had had a doubtful eye on him, but Prout was snoring at that hour. It was safe as houses, really—if only his nerves would keep steady.

But they would not. His hands were shaking as he dressed himself silently in the dark. A faint sound from the next bed made him start. It was only Hilton turning his head on his pillow. The Greyfriars Fifth were fast asleep, up and down the long dark dormitory there was a sound of regular breathing, with an occasional snore from Coker. Price finished dressing, and slipped on a pair of rubber shoes, his heart beating unpleasantly, but his obstinate mind made up.

There was a sound again from Hilton's bed. Again Price started, and stared at the dimly-seen handsome face on the pillow. And he gave another start, as he discerned that Hilton's eyes were open.

He stood quite still. He did not want any man in the Fifth to know that he was breaking out that night, he had not said a word about it even to his own pal. But Hilton knew now, even in the gloom, Price could see that Cedric Hilton's eyes were on him, with a mocking glimmer in them.

"Pricey!" It was a faint whisper.

"Quiet!" breathed Price. He was in dread of other fellows awakening.

Hilton lifted himself on his elbow, and looked at him.

He could see that Price was in a funk, and Price could see the half-amused, half-contemptuous curl of the lip of the dandy of the Fifth.

"You're goin'?" murmured Hilton.

"Quiet!"

"You're a fool, Pricey."

"Will you shut up?" hissed Price.

"You haven't forgotten what Wingate said yesterday—."

"Shut up, will you?"

"He meant every word, old man. He's after you to get you, if he can, and if he gets you, you go up to the Head to be bunked. For goodness sake, Pricey, don't be such a fool."

Price did not answer, he only gave the speaker an evil look. Even a whisper had risk, and Price almost hated Cedric Hilton at that moment. He was savagely and obstinately bent on his enterprise, but his nerves were in a twitter. He would willingly have dashed his knuckles into Hilton's handsome face, to keep him quiet.

"It's all bunk," went on Hilton, a lazy drawl even in his whisper. "You've backed losers enough to know that, Pricey. You're not on a cert—you're on a chance—and you're a fool not to see it."

At that, Price felt that he quite hated Cedric Hilton!

The merest hint that his precious winner might let him down, roused all the evil and bitterness in him—and then was a good deal of both.

"Will you keep quiet, you fool?" he breathed. "I'm going! Do you want to tell all the form, and make it the talk of the games study?"

"Oh, all right! Have your own way—I've told you you're a fool! Look out for pre's on the prowl."

"At this time of night—fool!"

"I wouldn't be sure. You know what Wingate is like, when he gets his teeth in. Go back to bed, Pricey, and chuck it."

"Hold your silly tongue," hissed Price.

Hilton laughed softly, and laid his head on the pillow again. He had done his best, without expecting much in the way of results. He did not care very much.

But the whispering, faint as it was, seemed to have reached other ears. There was a sound of stirring, and Potter's voice was heard,

"What's that? Somebody up?"

Hilton remained quite silent. Price trembled almost like a leaf in the wind. Potter lifted his head and glanced round in the gloom.

"I heard something." This was Greene's voice. "Is somebody up?"

"Coker's snore perhaps!"

"Shouldn't wonder."

To Price's immense relief, Potter and Greene settled down again. He had been in dread that a match might be struck, which would have revealed him, standing fully dressed by his bed.

But all was silent again, and there came no further whisper from Hilton. Price crept away to the door, silent in his rubber shoes.

He was infinitely cautious. There was no sound, as the door opened, and closed behind him.

He stood in the dark corridor, his heart beating, his eyes wary as a rat's, his ears keen to listen. But all was dark and silent and still.

Softly, he crept down the corridor towards the dormitory landing.

After all, it was easy enough. He had but to creep silently down the stairs in the dark, drop from the lobby window, and steal away. No one would see him or hear him—and who could suspect his absence? He told himself again that nothing but nerves was the matter, all was safe.

The dormitory landing was very dark. He had to cross it to the staircase, passing the end of the long settee that stood by the landing balustrade. He could not see it in the dark, but he knew exactly where it was, he could have made his way blindfold. The knowledge that masters' rooms were near at hand—Prout's, Quelch's, and Capper's—gave an edge to his nervous uneasiness. But they were all fast asleep—he had nothing to fear.

If he made any sound crossing the landing, it was very slight. He did not know that keen listening ears were close at hand, even if he had heeded Hilton's warning that pre's might be on the prowl, he could not have guessed that a prefect was sitting in the dark on the long settee, watching and listening, angry and annoyed by the task he had to perform, but grimly determined to carry it through. If he thought of Wingate, he supposed him to be fast asleep, at that hour, in his study on the ground floor.

All was silent—till he had almost reached the staircase. Then there was a sound, that caused the blood to rush to his heart. It was a faint sound, but it meant that someone was there—that he was not alone in the dark. In that terrifying instant, he knew that he was watched, that he was discovered, that that was caught, and his heart almost died within him.

He had no time to think—to act—to dodge or run!

Even as he stood there palpitating with sudden terror, a grasp was laid on him, a powerful grasp that closed like iron on his shoulder.

"You rotter!" It was Wingate's voice, in low contemptuous tones. "I've got you! I fancy I know who you are—but I'll see in a moment."

Price's hands clenched convulsively.

There was no courage in him. But there was a desperation that amounted to ferocity. He was like a cornered rat. Caught—the Head's study—the sentence of expulsion—the train home—it all flashed through his tormented mind at that moment. Hardly knowing what he did, in his desperate terror, and hardly caring, he struck. If there was a chance—if there was the remotest chance—if there was the ghost of a chance—of getting out of this, he did not care by what means he got out. With all the force of his arm, with all the strength he could muster for the blow, he struck and his clenched knuckles crashed on Wingate's jaw, in an upper-cut that sent the captain of Greyfriars, powerful as he was, spinning backwards.

There was a crash on the dark landing, and a loud crack, as the back of Wingate's head struck hard oak. Price, free of his grasp, bolted like a frightened rabbit, back to his dormitory. Even in that frantic moment he was conscious of surprise that no sound, no cry, came from Wingate, but he did not know that the crash of his head on the hard oak floor had stunned the captain of Greyfriars, and that he lay, for the moment at least, senseless.

All he knew was that he was loose from that iron grasp, and had a chance. It was hardly a matter of seconds before he was in his dormitory, breathlessly tearing off his clothes, and plunging into bed. He was not thinking of Joey Banks and the Cross Keys, of Blue Fox and a fiver at four to one, now. He was thinking only of escaping the dire consequences of what he had done. He was shaking like an aspen, as he pulled the blankets over him.

"Pricey!" It was a whisper from Hilton's bed. "You—."

"Quiet! For mercy's sake, quiet." Price's whisper was choked and husky. "Quiet, or I'm for it."

Hilton did not speak again. The rest of the Fifth were fast asleep, and Coker's snore came through the silence. Price, in almost an agony of funk, lay with sleepless eyes staring into the dark.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE DARK!

"HARRY!"

Harry Wharton's lips set.

Quite unaware that another Greyfriars fellow, at the same time, was doing the same thing, he had slipped from his bed as the chime of eleven died away in the night, and dressed quickly and quietly in the dark.

Not for a moment had his determination flagged. But he was glad that his friends were fast asleep. Nothing that they could have said would have influenced him, and he did not want remonstrance, contention, and angry words. He had been unjustly punished, and he was going to hit back, that was fixed in his stubborn mind.

But all his friends were not asleep, as that whisper from Frank Nugent's bed revealed. Nugent, at least, was awake.

He sat up in bed, peering at Wharton's shadowy form.

"Harry!" he repeated.

"Well?"

"You're getting out—."

"Well?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Better not bother your head about it."

"Is it anything to do with Wingate?"

"Guess!"

"I knew you had something in your mind. Harry, don't be a mad fool! You'll be sorry for this when you've got over your temper—."

"Only my temper at fault?" asked Wharton, mockingly.

"Chiefly, at any rate. Will you tell me what you are going to do?"

"I don't mind, if you're curious. I told you I was going to ship Wingate's study, for giving me six for nothing. I'm going to do it. Now go to sleep, and leave me alone."

Nugent uttered a startled exclamation. He stared blankly at the captain of the Remove in the shadows.

"You're out of your senses, I think! Do you imagine that you can rag in Wingate's room without waking him—and if he catches you at it—."

"Wingate's not in his room."

"It's past eleven—he must be—."

"You see, I happen to have inside information," drawled Wharton. He did not trouble to lower his voice, careless whether other fellows awakened or not. There was none of Price's shrinking funk about him. He would have preferred to go on his way quietly, to avoid argument, but he did not care if every man in the Remove knew what he intended to do. "Wingate's up till twelve to-night," he went on. "If you want to know where he is, he's sitting on the dormitory landing in the dark, keeping watch for some rotter who's going to break out."

"I don't see how you know that—."

"I know all the same."

"On the dormitory landing!" repeated Frank. "Then you'll have to pass him, to go downstairs. If he's on watch, as you say, do you fancy you'll pass him without being caught?"

"Quite! The man he's watching for doesn't know, and may walk right into his hands. But I do know—and I shall take jolly good care to give him a wide berth. He won't be sitting on the floor, I suppose, when there's a settee on the landing." Wharton laughed. "I shall go round by the masters' doors, and get to the stairs from the other side. He won't hear me, in my socks. Anything more you want to know?"

"Harry! Don't go—."

"I'm going."

"Even if you get through all right, there will be a fearful row if Wingate's study is shipped—."

"I know that!"

"It will mean a Head's flogging, if it comes out—."

"Very likely."

"I suppose it's no use talking to you.—"

"None at all," answered Harry Wharton. "You may as well go to sleep and forget all about it. I'm going—."

"More fool you!" came another voice, that of Johnny Bull. Nugent had been speaking in whispers, but Wharton's careless voice had a wakened quite a number of fellows.

"My esteemed and idiotic Wharton—!" came a murmur from Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"For goodness sake, chuck it, old man," came Bob Cherry's voice. "Don't be such a mad ass!"

"You're asking for it, Wharton," said Vernon-Smith.

"Begging for it," said Peter Todd.

"Wharton, old man—," said Squiff.

"Bad form, dear man, to rag the captain of the school," came from Lord Mauleverer "Not done, you know!"

"Look here, Wharton—!" said Tom Brown.

"Is the whole form sitting up and taking notice?" asked Harry Wharton, sarcastically. "You fellows will be losing your beauty sleep for nothing. Hadn't you better go to sleep again?"

"Oh, I'll go to sleep," said the Bounder. "But you're a mad ass, and if you were a pal of mine, I'd turn out and hold on to your ears to stop you making a fool of yourself."

"By gum, that's not a bad idea," said Bob Cherry.

"Look here, Wharton—."

"Sorry—I've no more time to waste," answered Wharton, politely. "Wingate gave me six for keeping that fat fool Bunter out of mischief, as I was bound to do as Head Boy of the form. I'm going to ship his study in return. That's that! And you can think what you like about it—it won't worry me."

"It will come out—," said Bob.

"You'll go up to the Head—!" said Johnny Bull.

"Ten to one Wingate will nail you, if he's sitting out on the landin' as you think," said the Bounder.

"My esteemed and fatheaded Wharton—;"

"Look here, yon mad ass—."

Six or seven fellows were speaking at once. But there was no answer from Harry Wharton. Silent in his socks, he had glided away to the door, and was gone.

"Harry!" called out Nugent, anxiously.

"He's gone," said Smithy.

"Hunting for trouble," muttered Bob.

"It's a rotten trick," growled Johnny Bull. "Wingate whopped him for lip, and he knows it as well as we do. I'm going to sleep."

But it was not easy for Harry Wharton's friends to sleep. They were impatient with him, and angry with him, but they were anxious too, and anxiety outweighed other feelings. They knew, too, that later, when the time of cool reflection came, Wharton would regret a hasty action prompted by passionate resentment. But there was no help for it now.

For the time, at least, Harry Wharton was stubbornly set on his purpose, and indifferent to the opinion of his friends. He slipped quietly from the dormitory and shut the door after him, shutting in the buzz of voices. Quietly, making no sound in his socks, he cut away down the corridor to the dormitory landing.

Few fellows would have cared to venture there, knowing that a Sixth-form prefect was on the watch in the dark. But, knowing that Wingate was there, and easily guessing where he was likely to be, Wharton had no doubt of being able to avoid him, and slip by unseen and unheard in the dark.

But he was very careful. As he reached the end of the corridor, he paused, to peer about him and listen. At the same moment, to his astonishment, the sound of a voice came to his ears.

He did not catch the words, but he knew that it was Wingate's voice. He caught his breath. Wingate was speaking—someone else was there—. He stood quite still, his heart beating, as he listened.

Suddenly, from the dark landing came the sound of a heavy fall, and a sharp crack as a head struck hard oak. Wharton gave a violent start, the blood thrilling to his heart. What was happening there in the dark?

He listened. It seemed to him, for a second, that he heard the sound of swift running feet, but he could not be sure. If there was such a sound, it died away at once, and there was dead silence.

What had happened?

Someone had fallen—he was sure of that. But there was no sound—he strained his ears to listen, but could hear nothing. What could have happened?

Then from the dead silence and darkness, came a low sound, a sound that almost curdled his blood. It was a low, faint moan.

"Good heavens!" breathed Wharton.

Someone had fallen—someone was hurt—was it Wingate? Who else could it be? As that certainty flashed into his mind, all bitterness, all resentment, all vengeful feelings, vanished, as if they had never been. He ran forward across the dark landing, his only thought to help the fellow who lay there in the dark, faintly moaning. He stumbled over an unseen form that was stretched on the floor, and lost his balance. From the darkness a sudden grasp was laid on him, and he was dragged over.

"You rascal!" It was Wingate's voice, husky and broken. "You knocked me out—but I've got you—." The captain of Greyfriars dragged himself to his knees, with reeling brain, but with his grasp on his prisoner like that of a steel vice, "I've got you, you rascal!" Then he shouted, "Gwynne! Do you hear me? Come up—get a light—Gwynne!"

There was a sound below the staircase.

"You calling, Wingate?" Gwynne's voice came from the distance.

"Come up! Get a light!"

"Coming!"

"Wingate," panted Harry Wharton. Hardly knowing what he did, he struggled to get free. "I—let me go—I—."

Wingate did not answer, but his grasp did not relax.

There was a sound of hurried feet on the stairs, as Gwynne ran up from the study landing, and the light was switched on. And in the sudden blaze of light, the two prefects stared at the prisoner struggling in Wingate's grasp. Both of them expected to see Price of the Fifth. But it was not Price of the Fifth that they saw—it was Harry Wharton, of the Remove.

CHAPTER XV

GUILTY

"WHARTON!" breathed Wingate.

"Wharton!" repeated Gwynne.

Both of them stared at the junior, in amazement.

Neither had doubted that, if any Greyfriars man was caught breaking out that night, it would be Stephen Price, of the Fifth. They could hardly believe their eyes as they saw Harry Wharton.

Wharton, in his turn, was staring at Wingate's face, now that the light was on. That face was white as chalk, and there was an ugly black bruise on the chin. He knew now why Wingate had fallen—he had been knocked down in the dark, and it was plain that a hard and heavy blow had been struck. But by whose hand, Harry Wharton had not the faintest idea. There was no one on the landing, but himself and the two Sixth-form men. Whoever had struck that blow, must have vanished immediately Wingate went down.

"You!" said Wingate. A spasm of pain crossed his white face. His head was aching horribly from the crack on the oaken floor, and his jaw was almost numbed. "You! You young rascal!"

"A junior—!" said Gwynne.

"A junior—but he packs a good punch, and I've had the benefit of it," said Wingate. "I suppose he thought he would get clear in the dark. But he stumbled over me, and I grabbed him. I'd never have believed it otherwise. You young hooligan—."

"Are you mad?" panted Harry Wharton. "I never touched you—."

"What?"

"I can see you've had a knock! I heard you fall, and ran to help—."

"You heard me fall, and ran to help!" repeated Wingate, blankly. "Good gad! You lying young rascal, you knocked me out when I collared you—."

"I did not—."

"That will do," snapped the captain of Greyfriars, roughly. "Gwynne, you'd better call Quelch, as this young rascal is in his form."

"You're hurt, old man," said Gwynne, with an anxious look at his friend.

Wingate passed his free hand over his bruised chin. "Yes, I'm hurt," he said. "It was like the kick of a mule. Never mind that—I'll hand this young rascal over to Quelch, and get down to my room. Call him, will you?"

"O.K."

A moment more, and Gwynne was tapping at Mr. Quelch's door. Wingate released Harry Wharton's shoulder, and stood leaning against the balustrade, his face almost twisted with pain. He had been through it severely. Between the jolt on his jaw, and the crack of his head on the hard oak, he was feeling utterly knocked out and almost sick. His eyes glinted at the junior who, as he did not dream of doubting, had struck that blow in the dark.

Harry Wharton stood where he was, his brain in a whirl. Someone unknown had knocked Wingate out, and Wingate believed that it was he. Indeed, in the circumstances, he could hardly believe anything else. Wharton's denial seemed to him the most palpable of falsehoods. He had grasped, as he believed, the unseen fellow who had struck him down, and the light had revealed that it was Wharton of the Remove. Wharton was there, and no one else was there, and the matter could hardly have been plainer.

"Wingate!" panted Harry, "I did not—I did not—."

"That's enough."

"I heard you fall—."

"I've no doubt you did, after giving me that jolt. Don't try to spin me a silly yarn like that—keep it for the Head, when you go up to be sacked to-morrow," said Wingate, scornfully.

"I tell you—."

"You can tell Quelch—and the Head! Pack it up now."

Mr. Quelch, in dressing-gown and slippers, came across the landing, followed by Gwynne. There was a startled look on the Remove master's face. He glanced at Wharton, and then fixed his eyes on Wingate, almost in horror.

"Wingate! You have been hurt—what—?" he exclaimed.

"I've had a knock, sir—rather a hard one."

"I do not understand this! Why are you here at all—at this hour of the night? What is this boy doing out of his dormitory?"

"I had some reason to believe that a senior man was intending to break out to-night, sir, and I was waiting here for him," answered Wingate. "Gwynne was on the lower landing. But it was this boy of your form who came, and I collared him in the dark—and he knocked me over."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"I was quite knocked out for a moment, but I came to as he stumbled over me, and collared him again," said Wingate. He was speaking in perfect good faith. He had no doubt that he had been knocked out for only a moment, and was quite unaware that he had been unconscious for a full minute.

Mr. Quelch's eyes turned on Wharton. Never had they seemed so much like gimlets, and never had his face looked so grim.

"Wharton! You—"

"I did not touch Wingate, sir!" Wharton's voice wait steady. "He thinks I did, I suppose—but I did not."

"What? what? You have no doubt, Wingate—?"

"There is no doubt at all, sir. He knocked me out when I collared him, in the dark, and I collared him again when he stumbled over me. I was holding him when Gwynne ran up and put on the light."

"That leaves no doubt in the matter," said Mr. Quelch.

"It's not true, sir—," said Harry.

"What? You do not dare to cast doubt on Wingate's word, Wharton?" thundered Mr. Quelch.

"I don't mean that, sir! I mean that Wingate is mistaken! Somebody must have hit him in the dark, but it was not I."

"You are here, Wharton! You have been caught on the spot. Wingate appears to have been watching for a senior boy, but it was you he caught. Why are you out of your dormitory at all?"

"I—I—," Wharton stammered.

In the disastrous turn that affairs had taken, the hapless junior realised his folly only too clearly. From the bottom of his heart, he wished that he had listened to the wiser counsel of his friends. A stubborn obstinacy had led him on—to this!

He was there, on the spot! But for his own folly, he would have been in bed in his dormitory. But he was there—and his mere presence there condemned him.

"Well?" rapped Mr. Quelch.

"I—I was going down—," stammered Harry.

"Do you mean that, you were going to break bounds at this hour of the night?"

"No! No! Nothing of the kind. I—I—."

"Will you answer me directly, Wharton—if you have anything at all to say?" rapped Mr. Quelch.

"I—I was going down to Wingate's study, sir." There was nothing for it but to tell the whole story now. He had to explain why he had left his dormitory in the middle of the night.

"To Wingate's study!" repeated Mr. Quelch, "and why?"

"I was going to ship it," said Wharton, desperately. "Wingate gave me six for nothing, to-day, and I was going to ship his study. I knew that he wasn't there to-night and—and so—so there would be nobody there and—and—."

"I fail to see how you can have known anything of the kind, Wharton. Wingate can have told you nothing of his intentions. What do you mean?"

"I heard something by accident that he said to Gwynne this evening, sir, and so I knew that he would be up here and nobody in his study. That was why I was going down."

Wingate gave a start.

"You knew I was here?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I did."

"And you came out of your dormitory, knowing that I was here on the landing?"

"Yes."

"And you came specially to give me this, in the dark?" asked Wingate, passing his hand over his bruised chin "Is that it?"

Wharton panted.

"No! No! No! I tell you I never touched you—I never dreamed of such a thing. You fancied that I was bullying Bunter to-day—are you fool enough to fancy that I would hit a man in the dark?" exclaimed Wharton, passionately.

"I know what you did!"

"I did not—."

"This boy is in your form, Mr. Quelch," said Wingate. "I leave him to you. I must go down and bathe this bruise."

With that, the captain of Greyfriars went down the stairs, leaving the matter to Quelch. Wharton gave his form-master an almost beseeching look.

"Mr. Quelch, you believe me—?"

"How am I to believe you, Wharton? Say no more—what you have to say must be said to Dr. Locke when you come before him in the morning. It is impossible for me to believe a word you say."

Harry Wharton drew a deep breath, and his face set. "Very well, sir," he said, quietly. "Am I to go back to my dormitory?"

"No!" snapped Mr. Quelch. "After what you have done—."

"I have done nothing."

"Do not bandy words with me, Wharton!" said Mr. Quelch, raising his voice.

"I am bound to tell you the truth, sir."

Quelch breathed hard.

"I order you to be silent," he said. "You will not be allowed to rejoin your form, Wharton—it is no longer your form. You will be locked in the punishment-room for the remainder of the night, and taken before your head-master in the morning, and—I have not the slightest doubt—expelled from the school. Now follow me!"

The junior, with a dark and sullen face, followed him.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FINISH?

"THE ass!"

"The fathead!"

"The obstinate chump!"

"The terrific duffer!"

It was not often that the members of the Famous Five of Greyfriars alluded to one of their number in such terms. Now, sitting up in bed, they were stating what they thought of their leader. Four members of the Co. were, in point of fact, utterly out of patience with Harry Wharton. Their anxiety for him gave an edge to their angry annoyance.

Every fellow in the Remove was awake now. Even Billy Bunter's snore had ceased to rumble, and the fat Owl was blinking from his pillow, and listening with his fat ears. It was a very unusual spot of excitement, at such an hour of the night.

"He's almost certain to be caught," muttered Frank Nugent. "If it's true that Wingate's on the watch—."

"I suppose Wharton knew, as he said so," said Bob Cherry. "Blessed if I see how he knew—."

"That's right enough," said Vernon-Smith. "Wharton tipped me that the pre's were on the prowl, before we came up to dorm. He must have heard something. Must be a mad ass to chance it, knowing that the pre's are up."

"They're after somebody," said Peter Todd. "You perhaps, Smithy."

The Bounder laughed.

"If they're after me, they won't make a catch," he answered. "When Wharton gave me that tip, I made up my mind that it was me for my little bunk to-night. Pity he hasn't as much sense."

"Oh, he's had six!" said Skinner. "Other fellows get six, without doing a song and dance. But when his Highness gets six, it's time for the skies to fall."

"Oh, shut up, Skinner," growled Bob.

"There'll be a fearful row to-morrow, if he really ships Wingate's study," said Squiff.

"No 'if' about it," chuckled Skinner. "His Highness has got his royal back up, and that's that."

"If Wingate's really on the landing, ten to one he'll grab him," said Tom Brown. "May march him back here any minute."

"Oh, Wharton's the man to punch his head, if he lays a finger on him," said Skinner. "The trouble is that the pre's don't understand what a V.I.P. our form-captain is."

"He, he, he!" from Bunter.

"Do you want my pillow, Skinner?" roared Bob Cherry.

"Thanks, no."

"You'll get it, if you don't shut up."

"Good heavens!" muttered Frank Nugent, his face quite pale. Skinner's suggestion almost made his blood run cold. "Wharton wouldn't be fool enough—mad enough—."

"Isn't he fool enough for anything, when his silly back's up?" growled Johnny Bull. "Goodness knows what will happen if he runs into a pre."

"Oh, rot," muttered Bob Cherry, uneasily.

"The rotfulness is terrific, my esteemed Johnny."

"I say, you fellows, serve him jolly well right if he gets copped!" squeaked Billy Bunter. "He banged my head—."

"Bother your silly head, you fat ass."

"Oh, really, Cherry—."

"What about bolstering Bunter?" asked Bob. "It was that fat frump who started all the trouble."

"Beast!"

"They can't have copped him yet, at any rate," said Ogilvy. "If they get him, they will march him home."

"To go up to the Head in the morning," said Johnny Bull. "I wonder if he'll tell the Head not to talk rot, as he did Wingate."

"Oh, draw it mild, old man," said Bob.

Snort, from Johnny Bull. He was quite out of patience with the captain of the Remove, and made no secret of the fact.

"A fellow has to toe the line at school," he grunted. "Why can't Wharton toe the line as well as any other chap?"

"Much too important a person!" sighed Skinner.

"Oh, shut up, Skinner."

"I suppose he's in Wingate's study now, ragging it right and left." said Johnny. "Well, it's a rotten trick. Wingate's all right, even if he may make a bit of a mistake sometimes. Doesn't Wharton ever make mistakes?"

"Not much good slanging him, old chap! Let's hope he won't be nailed."

"Serve him right if he was."

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here comes somebody! That can't be Wharton!" exclaimed Bob, as a tread was heard in the corridor without.

"Sounds like Quelch!" muttered the Bounder. "Oh, gad—if Quelch is up—."

There was a hush of the buzzing voices in the Remove dormitory. That tread in the corridor obviously could not be Harry Wharton's, it was not the captain of the Remove returning. It sounded like a master's tread. A glimmer under the door told that the light had been switched on in the corridor. The juniors waited breathlessly for the door to open.

It opened, and all eyes fixed on the angular figure that appeared in the doorway.

"Quelch!" breathed Frank Nugent. His heart was like lead. Quelch's visit to the dormitory, at that hour, could only mean that he knew.

Mr. Quelch, with a grim set face, stepped in, and turned on the light. Footsteps shuffled after him, and the Remove fellows expected to see Harry Wharton follow him in. But it was not Wharton who appeared, it was Trotter, the House page, rubbing his sleepy eyes. The juniors could only stare. Quelch's visit hardly surprised them, it meant that Wharton was caught. But why the House page had been called up at that hour, was quite a mystery to them.

Mr. Quelch pointed to Wharton's empty bed. "Lose no time, Trotter," he said.

"Yessir," mumbled Trotter. He went towards Wharton's bed.

The Remove master glanced up and down the dormitory. Everyone was awake, and hardly a fellow thought of affecting slumber. The grim frown intensified on Quelch's expressive face.

The juniors watched him, in silence. Only Frank Nugent ventured to break the silence. His anxiety for his chum was overpowering.

"Has—has anything happened, sir?" he stammered. Mr. Quelch glanced at him.

"Yes, Nugent, something has happened," he answered. "No doubt all of you were aware that Wharton was out of his dormitory."

"Yes sir! But—but isn't he coming back?" stammered Frank. Trotter was loading himself with bedclothes from Wharton's bed, which did not look as if Harry Wharton was coming back.

"He is not coming back, Nugent."

"But—but—sir—. What has happened?" gasped Nugent. Only too clearly something had happened, more serious than merely breaking dormitory bounds, or even than "shipping" a prefect's study. "What has Wharton done, sir?"

"Wharton has struck the Sixth-form prefect who caught him out of his dormitory, and caused him serious hurt. Whether he left his dormitory with that actual intention, or whether he struck the blow in attempting to escape, is not yet known. He will come before the head-master in the morning."

"Oh!" gasped Frank.

"Where is he now, sir?" stammered Bob.

"He is now in the punishment-room, Cherry, where he will remain until he comes before his head-master."

"But, sir," almost groaned Nugent. "Wharton couldn't have meant—."

"You need say no more, Nugent."

No more was said. Trotter, laden with the absent junior's bedclothes, evidently intended to make his bed in the punishment-room, left the dormitory. Mr. Quelch turned off the light and followed him, and the door closed.

The Bounder gave a long, low whistle. "So that's it!" he said.

"He must have been out of his senses," muttered Bob, miserably. "He knows jolly well that it's the sack for punching a pre."

"What did I tell you?" said Skinner, airily. "Any common mortal who lays a finger on the Great Panjamdrum—."

"Another word from you, Skinner, and I'll get out and smash you!" said Bob Cherry, between his teeth.

There was nothing more from Skinner.

"It's the finish," muttered Nugent. "It's the sack—it can't be anything else. Oh, if we'd only stopped him in time—!"

"We couldn't," muttered Bob.

It was long before the Remove were asleep again. And when the others, at last, slept, there was one who remained awake. Frank Nugent was thinking of his chum in the punishment-room, and of the morning, when the gates of Greyfriars were to close behind him for the last time, and he could not sleep. His weary eyes were still sleepless when the sun gleamed in at the high windows, and the rising-bell rang in the bright morning.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MORNING AFTER!

"HEARD about young Wharton—?"

"Punched a pre—."

"Copped breaking out at night—."

"Jolted Wingate on the jaw—."

"That cheeky young Remove tick—."

"Wingate gave him six, and he caught him, in the dark and hit him—."

"Old Wingate, you know—."

"It's the sack—."

"Serve him right!"

"Yes, rather! But what a nerve—."

"Wingate's got a bruise as big as an egg—."

"Young Wharton—."

"A Remove kid, you know, punching a pre—."

It was all over the school in the morning. Everyone knew, and everyone was talking about it. The name of Harry Wharton, of the Remove, was on every tongue. Opinions varied as to what actually happened. Some supposed that the junior, suddenly caught, had hit out wildly, merely in hope of making his escape. Others suspected that the act had been quite intentional, a punch in the jaw in return for a whopping. Whichever was the true explanation, there was no doubt about the outcome, all were agreed upon that. It was the "sack" for the Lower boy who had punched a Sixth form prefect.

That Harry Wharton had not administered that punch at all, did not occur to a single mind, even among his closest friends.

Wharton, locked up in the punishment-room, could not tell his own story, and the master and prefects to whom he had told it did not believe a word of it, or think it worth any consideration whatever. To Mr. Quelch, and to Wingate and Gwynne, it seemed nothing but the most palpable fabrication. He had been caught in the act, and proof could not have been plainer. No one else had heard what the accused junior had to say for himself, so far. All they knew was what Mr. Quelch had said in the dormitory, and it did not occur to any fellow for one moment that there was any doubt in the matter.

Four fellows in the Remove were looking dismal and despondent that morning. They knew, or supposed that they knew, what their chum had done, and knew what the result must be. They were even doubtful whether they would see him again before he left the school. He did not appear at prayers or at breakfast, and they wondered whether he was to be sent away while the Remove were in form.

It was difficult even for his own friends to find anything to say for him. What he had done was utterly outside the limit, and there was no defence to be made. The most charitable view was that he had lost his head and hit out without thinking, when the prefect's grasp fell on him in the dark. But few could take that view, for every man in the form knew that Wharton was not the fellow to lose his head and act on an impulse of terror.

Whatever he had done, he had done knowing what he was doing. And what he had done, everyone knew, or supposed that he knew.

Quelch's face was at its grimmest that morning. Comments on the episode by other members of the Staff were gall and wormwood to Quelch. No master could like an expulsion in his form, and it was taken for granted that Wharton was to be expelled. And Wharton had been his trusted Head Boy, in whom he had reposed confidence. What had happened was a reflection on his judgment, for certainly a fellow who had to be expelled for such an act was not what his form-master had believed him to be.

Not a voice was raised in the hapless offender's favour.

His own friends could find little or nothing to say for him, and other fellows were loud in condemnation. Wingate was easily the most popular fellow at Greyfriars—nobody but one disgruntled

junior had any fault to find with him. If the victim had been Loder of the Sixth, some excuse might have been found, in the Remove at least. But there was no imaginable excuse for a fellow who had knocked Wingate out. And it was, as Skinner was careful to point out, a dirty trick to hit a fellow in the dark. Harry Wharton, with all his stubbornness and his passionate temper, had never been known to be guilty of a "dirty trick", but there was no one to gainsay Skinner. What he had done, he had done!

It was the one topic at Greyfriars. Fellows of all forms discussed it. Coker of the Fifth demanded of Potter and Greene what Greyfriars was coming to, when fags started punching the faces of Sixth-form prefects. But there was one fellow in the Fifth-form who heard the startling news with very different feelings. Only Hilton, in that form, knew that Price had been out of his dormitory in the night, and he had wondered what had caused him to come scuttling back like a frightened rat. Price had told him nothing, but now that he knew what had happened in the night, there was a deep and uneasy doubt in Hilton's mind.

Price had disappeared after breakfast, and Hilton had to look for him. He found him slouching by himself in the old cloisters. Price was apparently disposed to keep out of the public eye at present.

"Oh, here you are, Price," said Hilton, when he found him at last. "I've been looking for you."

Price gave him a furtive look.

"The bell hasn't gone yet," he said.

"Never mind the bell. What did you do out of the dorm. last night, Price?" asked Hilton, abruptly. He watched the pasty, furtive face as he spoke.

"Nothing."

"You've heard what's happened, I suppose, and you know that they've got young Wharton of the Remove for it."

"I've heard something about it." Price spoke as indifferently as he could. He did not mean to trust even Hilton with the truth, if he could help it.

Price had been utterly amazed, when he heard that they had "got" Wharton of the Remove for what had happened in the night. He could hardly understand it, but he was very quick to realise how very fortunate it was for himself.

The evidence against Harry Wharton was overwhelming and conclusive, and it seemed an amazing spot of luck to the wretched fellow who had dreaded to be suspected.

Price was not likely to concern himself about anything that might happen to Wharton of the Remove. It was Wharton who had stood between him and his coup on Blue Fox, Wharton who had stopped the note he had sent by Bunter, Wharton who had flung that note in his face, and punched his face after that. His feelings towards the hapless junior could not have been more bitter.

Hilton watched his face, doubtful and uneasy.

"From what I hear, young Wharton knew where Wingate was, and came out of his dormitory on his track," remarked Price. "I suppose he expected to dodge away, but Wingate got him—."

"It looks like it," said Hilton, slowly. "But—."

"Well what?"

"Was it Wharton who knocked Wingate out?" muttered Hilton.

"I suppose so."

"They'll sack him, Price."

Price's eyes gleamed. If they sacked the junior who had punched his face in his own study, Price at least would not mourn his departure.

"Everyone knows that a fellow's sacked for punching a pre," said Price, lightly. "I suppose the young ruffian knew the risk he was running."

"But did he?"

"I suppose he did. From what I hear, Wingate grabbed him in the act."

"Yes, that's what they say. But—." Hilton paused, and looked very hard at his friend. "Look here, Pricey, you went out to get down to the Cross Keys, to see Joey Banks about a horse. You came scuttling back under a minute, and never went out at all. Well, what happened?"

Price breathed rather hard, but he answered coolly. "Nothing happened. I heard somebody on the landing in the dark, and guessed that pre's were on the prowl, after what Wingate said to us the other day. I cut back to dorm, and chucked it."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"You were simply shaking with funk, when you got back. I wondered what could have happened. Look here, did anythin', Price?"

"Only what I've told you."

"It looks a clear case," muttered Hilton, uneasily.

"Young Wharton was on the spot, and he must have had a reason for being there. It looks—"

"Did you see anything of what happened?"

"Nothing at all. I found that somebody was up, and chucked it. It must have been later that Wharton came looking for Wingate—."

"It can't have been. It happened just after eleven o'clock. It was turned eleven, when you went out. Look here, Price, what happened must have happened while you were out of the dorm, or jolly near it."

"Well, I saw nothing of it. There's the bell."

They left the cloisters together, in silence. Hilton had not put his suspicion into words, but he had made it clear enough. He was friendly with Price, but he knew him too well to place much reliance on his word. Why had Price been palpitating with terror when he scuttled into bed, if he had done nothing? Yet, according to what was said, Wharton had been caught in the act, and if that was so, it cleared Price. He must have been on the spot, at or near the time, but if Wharton had been caught in the act—and everyone was saying so—! Hilton hardly knew what to think.

Price gave him a sidelong look, as they walked to the House.

"Not a word about my being out of the dorm last night," he muttered. "I don't want to get mixed up in this."

"I imagine not," said Hilton, drily.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll tell you, Price. It's fixed on young Wharton, and it looks a clear case—but if they knew that another man had been on the spot, a good many fellows might think that Wingate grabbed the wrong man in the dark."

"That's rot!"

"I hope so!" said Hilton, in the same dry tone, and no more was said, as they went into the House.

CHAPTER XVIII

"NOT PROVEN!"

"WHARTON!"

"Yes, sir."

"You are now to be taken before your head-master."

"Very well, sir."

"Follow me!" said Mr. Quelch.

Harry Wharton, in silence, followed him.

Third school was going on at Greyfriars. The Remove were up to Monsieur Charpentier for French, with one fellow missing from his place. That fellow, in the opinion of most of the form, was likely to continue missing. Few of the Remove expected, or hoped, to see Harry Wharton still at Greyfriars when the form came out.

Wharton himself realised how unlikely it was. He had had plenty of time to reflect, and to realise the disastrous position in which he stood. And he was too clear-headed and sensible not to realise, also, that it was largely due to his own fault. His manner was very quiet and subdued.

At the door of the head-master's study, Mr. Quelch paused. He, too, had had time to reflect, and what had seemed so clear and certain the previous night, did not seem quite so absolutely certain since. There was, at least, a spot of doubt in his mind, founded perhaps unconsciously on an unwillingness to believe that he had been so mistaken in the junior that he had trusted.

"Wharton!"

"Yes, sir!"

"I advise you to be frank with your head-master, and to tell him the exact truth about last night's Occurrence."

Wharton coloured.

"I shall tell Dr. Locke the truth or nothing, sir," he answered.

"Is it your intention, Wharton, to repeat to Dr. Locke the statement you made to me last night?"

"Of course, sir."

Mr. Quelch compressed his lips.

"No possible credence can be attached to such a statement Wharton" he said. "You must be aware of that."

"My friends will believe me, when I tell them," answered Harry, steadily. "I hope that my head-master will, if you do not."

Mr. Quelch looked at him. His eyes, often compared in his form to gimlets, seemed almost to penetrate him. Wharton met his gaze steadily.

"It is for your head-master to judge!" said Mr. Quelch, at last, and he tapped at the door and led the junior into the study.

Harry Wharton was cool and collected. But he felt an inward tremor as he stood before Dr. Locke.

The head-master sat at his writing-table, his kind old face very grave. His calm clear eyes, fixed on the junior, standing somewhat downcast before him.

Wingate of the Sixth was standing by the table. In the sunlight from the window the dark bruise on his chin showed up very plainly. He gave the junior one grim glance. So far as the prefect was concerned, Wharton was condemned already. His only hope was in his head-master.

"Here is the boy, sir," said Mr. Quelch.

He stood back, perhaps relieved that the affair was out of his hands. The evidence against the boy was clear, and could not have been clearer, and yet a lingering doubt troubled his mind.

"Wharton!" The Head's voice was calm and slow and clear. "I have been apprised of the happenings of last night. For the offence of striking a prefect there is, as you are well aware, only one punishment—expulsion from the school. Have you anything to say?"

"Yes, sir! I did not touch Wingate."

"Mr. Quelch has informed me that you deny the act," said Dr. Locke. He frowned a little. "You do not, I presume, venture to cast doubt upon a statement made by my head-prefect?"

"No, sir! Wingate made a mistake."

The colour deepened in Wharton's cheeks, as he caught a glance of contempt from the Greyfriars captain. Wingate, certainly, did not believe that he had made a mistake.

"Wingate!"

"Yes, sir."

"Please repeat to me exactly what occurred."

"I was on the dormitory landing, sir, when Wharton passed me in the dark—."

"I did not!" interjected Wharton.

"You will be silent, Wharton, while Wingate is speaking. You will be allowed to speak in your turn," said Dr. Locke. "But one moment, Wingate! I understand that it was completely dark on the landing."

"Quite dark, sir—it was past eleven."

"Then you did not see Wharton?"

"I could see nothing, sir—I heard him, and—."

"Then you had better say that someone passed you in the dark," said the Head. "Up to that point, you did not know that it was Wharton."

"No, sir, but afterwards—."

"We will come to that in due course," said the Head urbanely. "So far, you were aware of some unseen person on the landing, and Wharton was not in your mind at all?"

"I had not even thought of him, sir."

"Very good. Some unseen person passed you," said the Head. "And then—?"

"I collared him in the dark, sir, and he struck out, and knocked me out. My head hit the floor, and I must have been stunned for a moment. Then he stumbled over me, and I caught hold of him. I called to Gwynne, who ran up from the lower landing, and turned on the light. It was Wharton I had hold of. Gwynne called Mr. Quelch, and I handed the junior over to him."

The Head listened attentively, though evidently he had heard it all before. His brow was thoughtful, and he seemed to be considering—though what there was to consider, in so plain a case, was quite lost on Wingate, and perhaps on Mr. Quelch. After a pause, he spoke.

"Wharton! You have heard what Wingate has said. What have you to say?"

"It did not happen as Wingate says, sir. I know he thinks it did, but it did not," said Harry.

"You will give me your own version of what happened."

"I came out of my dormitory, sir. I had just reached the landing, when I heard a fall. I know now that it must have been Wingate falling. I did not know what was happening, and I listened, and heard a moan. Then I knew that somebody must be hurt, and I ran forward to help, and stumbled over Wingate—. I could not see him in the dark. He caught hold of me."

Wharton spoke quietly and steadily. The contemptuous disbelief in Wingate's face did not discourage him. With the corner of his eye, he could see the pondering look on Quelch's face, as if the Remove master were trying to think whether this could possibly be true. But his eyes were on his head-master, in whose calm wisdom lay his only hope.

"Wingate! Do you think that what Wharton states is possible?"

"No, sir."

"You are sure that when you caught hold of him, you had caught hold of the unseen person who struck you down?"

"Yes, sir."

There was no hesitation about Wingate's answers. He was quite certain of what he said.

"How long was it before Gwynne ran up and turned on the light?"

"Only a few moments, sir."

"You saw no one else on the landing?"

"There was no one else sir."

"Only Wharton?"

"Only Wharton, sir."

Dr. Locke's eyes fixed on the junior again.

"You were out of your dormitory, Wharton, at a forbidden hour. You have explained to your form-master that your intention was to go down to Wingate's study knowing that he was not there, and perpetrate some lawless damage in the room."

Wharton coloured deeply. That, certainly, was not how it had presented itself to his own mind! He stammered a reply.

"I—I did not mean—I mean—I was going to ship the study—. I have told Mr. Quelch so—."

The Head interrupted his stammering.

"It was with that intention that you left your dormitory?"

"Yes!" faltered Harry.

"Then it appears that, if you are indeed innocent of what is laid to your charge, it is only your own wilful and malicious Intention that has placed you under such strong suspicion," said the Head, sternly.

Wharton was silent. It was true, and he had nothing to say.

Yet there was a glimpse of hope in his head-master's words, which seemed to imply that the charge was, in fact, only a matter of strong suspicion, not of certainty, as it seemed to Wingate and perhaps Mr. Quelch. There was some doubt, at least, in Dr. Locke's mind.

"Wingate," said the Head, after a long pause, "you have told me that you lost consciousness for a moment when your head struck the floor. You are sure that it was only for a moment?"

"I suppose so, sir, as Wharton had not had time to get away before I had hold of him."

The Head gave a faint cough.

"But if your assailant was not Wharton—."

"It was Wharton, sir."

"Let us suppose, for one moment, that it was not," said Dr. Locke, patiently. "In that case, if your unconsciousness lasted more than a few moments, there was opportunity for your assailant to escape before the junior came on the scene."

"I suppose that's possible, sir."

"You do not think so?"

"No, sir."

"The possibility must be taken into account," said Dr. Locke, slowly. "You, Wharton, cannot say that you saw or heard anyone else on the landing?"

"No, sir! I couldn't see anything at all. I fancied I heard a sound like someone running, but I couldn't be sure."

Wingate's lip curled. There was no glimmer of doubt in his mind. The young rascal had knocked him down, and he had been "out" for a moment, then he had grasped the fellow who had struck him. Nothing could have been more certain to him. No one else had been on the spot, and it seemed to Wingate that his head-master was splitting straws. It did not seem so to Mr. Quelch, however. His face was very thoughtful.

Wharton's heart was beating uncomfortably.

He knew that Wingate expected him to be "sacked" on the spot. Quelch had had the same expectation, though he knew that Quelch was troubled in his mind. He hardly expected anything else himself. But it was evident that the Head, weighing the matter carefully, and considering it from every angle, saw a spot of doubt in the apparently overwhelming case against him. There was a brief silence in the study.

The Head broke it.

"I shall consider the matter further," he said. "For the present, Wharton, you may go. You will go to your study and remain there for the present."

The junior felt a weight roll from his heart and mind.

"Yes, sir," he answered, quietly.

And he left the study. He was not out of the wood, by any mean, but the head-master, at least, was taking time to consider the matter, if he was not judged innocent, at least he was not condemned as guilty. It was, in fact, something like the Scottish verdict of "Not Proven", and whether Harry Wharton was to remain at Greyfriars, or leave the school in disgrace, was still on the knees of the gods!

CHAPTER XIX

NOT GONE!

"I SAY, you fellows."

"Blow away, Bunter."

"Oh, really, Cherry—."

"Kick him!" growled Johnny Bull.

Billy Bunter blinked indignantly at Johnny, through his big spectacles. Bunter was unconscious of any reason why he should be kicked. Bunter only wanted, as usual, to know.

The Greyfriars fellows were out after third school. By that time, they knew, Wharton must have seen the Head, and heard his sentence, whatever it might be. That it was the "sack" they could hardly doubt, that was taken for granted on all hands. And as nothing was to be seen of Wharton, it looked as if he had gone already.

Four faces, generally as bright as any at Greyfriars School or anywhere else, were deeply overclouded. Even the Co. could find nothing to say in defence of what their chum had done, or was believed to have done. But that made little difference to their feelings on the subject. If Wharton was gone, if he had been sacked and turfed out of the school, it was a stunning blow to his friends, whatever he might have done to deserve it.

Billy Bunter, at such a moment, was not wanted. But only too often did Billy Bunter butt in where he was not wanted.

"Look here, do you fellows know?" he demanded.

"I've looked everywhere, and I think Wharton's gone. I suppose he must have been sacked, after cracking a prefect's jaw—."

"Buzz off, you fat ass!"

"Well, I'm sorry for the chap," said Bunter. "I rather feel this, you know, if you fellows don't."

"You terrific ass—!"

"He had a beastly temper, I know," went on Bunter. "I've often wondered how you stood him, in the study, Nugent."

"Will you shut up?" said Frank, between his set lips.

"Well, you know he had a rotten temper," said Bunter. "Banging a fellow's head, and chucking a book at him when a fellow offered to help him with his lines, and all that. But, look here, Nugent, now that Wharton's gone—."

"We don't know yet that he's gone, you burbling dummy," growled Bob Cherry.

"Oh, he's gone all right," said Bunter, cheerfully. "The Old Man couldn't let him off, after what he did. Now he's gone, Nugent, what about me coming back to the study?"

"What?"

"You know I used to be in No. 1 Study before Wharton came. We got on all right," said Bunter, blinking at him. "I'm not keen on sticking in No. 7 with Toddy—he's jolly mean about the food. Selfish, you know. Only yesterday he jabbed me with a cricket stump because I ate all the sardines. He said he wanted some. That's Toddy!" Bunter shook his head sadly. "Greedy, you know! I'll come back to No. 1 if you like, Nugent, now that ill-tempered beast is gone. Rather a pleasant change for you, after Wharton, what?"

Why Frank Nugent grabbed Bunter's collar, and banged his fat head on the trunk of an ancient elm, Bunter did not know. But he knew that Nugent did! It was quite painful.

"Yarooooh," roared Bunter. "Wharrer you think you're up to? Leggo my neck! Beast!"

"Now boot him," said Johnny Bull.

Billy Bunter did not wait to be booted. He jerked his fat neck away, and departed in haste. The Co. were left to a dismal discussion.

"I—I suppose he's gone," said Bob. "They'd turf him out while we were in class, without a fuss."

"The gonefulness is terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, dismally. "It is preposterously rough luck."

"He asked for it, as hard as he could," grunted Johnny Bull.

Nugent's eyes glinted. Whether Wharton had "asked for it" or not, all he felt was the loss of his best chum.

"You can pack that up, Bull," he snapped. "He was the best chap in the Remove, whatever he may have done when he lost his temper. If you're going to run him down like the others—."

"Steady the Buffs!" murmured Bob Cherry. "Ragging won't mend matters."

"I said that he asked for it, and you know he did, as well as I do," said Johnny Bull, calmly. "But I'm as sorry as anyone that he got what he asked for. He was my pal as well as yours, Nugent."

"It doesn't seem possible that he's gone—that we shan't see him in the study again." There was very nearly a break in Nugent's voice. "I—I can't get it down. Look here, we've got to know. I'm going to ask Quelch."

He went into the House, and his friends followed him. Vernon-Smith, in the doorway, called to them as they passed.

"Wharton gone?"

"We don't know yet," answered Bob.

"Looks like it," said the Bounder. "It had to be the sack after what he did. It would have been pretty tough for him, if he'd stayed on—with every man in the school down on him."

"His pals aren't down on him," snapped Nugent.

The Bounder gave him a stare.

"Pals or not, you can't stand for what he did," he answered. "If he'd stayed on, he'd have been sent to Coventry. Knocking a man out in the dark is a bit over the limit, Nugent. I know I wouldn't touch him with a barge-pole."

"You're such a particular fellow, aren't you, with your betting and smoking and pub-crawling," flashed back Nugent, savagely. "If any man in the Remove ought to be sent to Coventry, it's you, Vernon-Smith. You ought to have been sacked half a dozen times over."

"Here, come on, old chap," said Bob, catching Nugent's arm, "no good rowing with Smithy."

Nugent snatched his arm free. The most peaceable fellow in the Remove, the fellow who never quarrelled with anybody, seemed to be hunting for trouble. He made a step nearer the Bounder, his hands clenched.

"You rotter! You're not fit to black Wharton's boots whatever he may have done. It's like you to pile on a man when he's down."

Vernon-Smith stepped back. It was not like him to keep his temper under provocation, but he could guess what Harry Wharton's best chum was feeling like—indeed, it was plainly to be read in Frank's pale harassed face—and he was not without feeling himself.

"I've only said what every man in the Remove is saying, Nugent," he said, quietly, and with that he walked away.

Nugent glanced after him, apparently inclined to follow him up and force a quarrel. But Bob caught him by the arm again, and fairly dragged him into the House.

"Come on, old chap," he said. "We've got to see Quelch, and find out what's happened."

"No good rowing about it, anyhow," said Johnny Bull.

"I'll row with any fellow who's got anything to say against Wharton," snapped Nugent.

"That means all Greyfriars," grunted Johnny. "Look here—!"

"Oh, come on," exclaimed Bob, and he dragged Nugent on to Mr. Quelch's study. He tapped at the door, and opened it.

But the study was vacant. The juniors looked into it, and remained in a group at the doorway.

"Is Quelch still with the Head?" muttered Bob. "They must have got through with Wharton before this. Better wait, I suppose."

They waited at the study door, in a downcast group.

Mr. Prout passed them, gave them an inquiring stare, but they did not heed Prout. It was ten minutes before Mr. Quelch appeared, coming along to his study with a grim and thoughtful brow. He glanced at the four.

"What is it?" he asked. "What do you want here?"

"We want to know about Wharton, sir," answered Frank. "Has—has—has he gone?" He could not keep his voice from faltering.

"No!"

"Oh!" gasped Frank. That, at least, was a relief.

"Will—will you tell us what—what is going to be done, sir? Is he going to be—to be—?" He could not utter the word.

Mr. Quelch gave him a sharp look. But what he read in the junior's face disarmed him, and he answered almost gently,

"The matter is not yet decided, Nugent. Dr. Locke is taking time to consider it. That is all I can tell you."

"Where is Wharton now, sir?"

"He was sent to his study. I have no doubt that he is there now."

Mr. Quelch passed into his study and shut the door, leaving the four juniors staring at one another.

"Then—he's not gone!" breathed Bob.

"That means that there's a chance for him still," muttered Nugent. His face had brightened.

Johnny Bull shook his head

"Blessed if I see it," he said. "They can't let him off, after what he did—. I don't make it out."

"He's still here, at any rate," said Bob. "Let's get up to the study. He can tell us how things are!"

Nugent was already heading for the stairs. The four Juniors hurried up to the Remove studies, and found Harry Wharton in No.1.

CHAPTER XX

A SPLIT IN THE CO.

HARRY WHARTON stood by the window in No. 1 Study, looking out into the quad.

His face was darkly clouded.

What was going to happen, he did not know. He was judged neither innocent nor guilty. The Head did not feel that a drastic punishment could be administered, while there was an element of doubt in the matter, and the Head, at least, believed that there was an element of doubt.

He was not "sacked", yet to stay on at Greyfriars, under such a cloud, was far from a pleasant prospect. Who would believe his version of what had happened that night? Wingate, a fair-minded fellow who would never willingly have done any man wrong, believed him guilty. Other fellows, it was fairly certain, would take the same view as the captain of Greyfriars. It was not merely an escapade, a reckless act like "shipping" the captain's study, it was a brutal and cowardly action of which he was accused—a savage blow struck in the dark. What would the fellows think of him, and who would believe that he had never struck the blow?

Only his friends. That was a comfort to his mind—his friends, at least, would believe him and trust him. He had only to tell them what had happened, and all would be well in the Co., at least. That he had brought this trouble upon himself, by the reckless indulgence of a passionate temper, he was ready to admit. But he had not done what he was believed to have done, and his friends, at least, would take his word on that without question. That was the only spot of light on a dark horizon.

He could see groups of fellows in the quad, in animated discussion, and he could guess the topic—himself! Now that the school was out, he would have sought his chums, but the Head had bidden him remain in his study, and he had to remain there, matters would hardly be improved by disobedience to his head-master. He had to wait, he supposed, till the Head's consultation with Quelch was over, and apparently it was not over yet.

He wondered why his friends did not come up. But he reflected that they did not know that he was there, very likely they supposed that he was gone already. He left the window, crossed to the door, and looked out into the Remove passage, to see whether any Remove man was about, by whom he could send word to the Co.

Ogilvy was coming up from the landing, and he called to him.

"Here, Oggy—."

Ogilvy gave him a stare.

"You still here?" he exclaimed.

Wharton coloured.

"Yes!" he answered, shortly. "You can see me, I suppose."

"What are you doing here, then?"

"What the thump do you mean?"

"Everybody thinks you're gone. Aren't you sacked?"

Wharton's lips set. Evidently Ogilvy took it for granted that he was "sacked," and that that was as it should be.

"Sorry—no!" said Harry, ironically.

"You're sticking on here?"

"Quite."

"You won't find it pleasant," said Ogilvy, and with that, he walked on to his study, went in, and shut the door.

Harry Wharton, with a set face, crossed back to the study window, and stood moodily staring out. He had always been friendly with Ogilvy, a fellow whom anyone must have liked and respected. But Oggy, evidently, wanted to have nothing to do with him now.

The colour burned in his cheeks. If this was a sample of what he had to expect, the prospect was bleak. But his friends would stand by him—he clung to that.

There was a tramp of feet in the passage, and he turned from the window, with an eager face. Frank Nugent came hurriedly into the study, and Bob Cherry tramped in after him, followed by Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. Never had the captain of the Remove been so glad to see them. But as he looked at their faces, the momentary brightness died out of his own. They had come to him, and they were going to stand by him, but he could read in their faces what was in their minds. They, like Ogilvy, and no doubt the rest, believed that he had done the rotten thing. They were going to stand by him, in spite of it, but they believed it. His face changed, and grew cold and hard.

"Harry!" exclaimed Nugent. He came eagerly across the study. "We've just heard from Quelch that you're here—."

"A bit of a surprise for you, I expect," said Wharton, carelessly. "Ogilvy thought I was gone, I suppose you had the same idea."

"Well, yes, as we saw nothing of you when we came out—."

"Well, I'm not gone," said Harry, in the same careless tone. "It isn't even certain that I'm going."

"Quelch said that the Head was taking time to consider—."

"That's it," assented Wharton. "The old boy is taking his time about it. I hope the verdict will be in my favour."

"We all hope that," said Nugent, quietly.

"Thanks."

"The hopefulness is terrific, my esteemed Wharton."

"Thanks again."

Bob Cherry opened his lips, and closed them again, staring at Wharton. He could see that Wharton was in a bitter and mocking mood, though what was the matter with him now, honest Bob could not guess.

"If you get off, Wharton, every fellow here will be jolly glad," said Johnny Bull. "Nothing to get your back up about, that I can see. I suppose you know that fellows expect a man to be sacked for what you did."

"Not in the least!"

"You don't?" ejaculated Johnny.

"Not at all."

"Well, that's rot," said Johnny Bull. "The whole school's taken it for granted that you'd be in the train home before this."

"They seem to have taken too much for granted," said Harry, lightly. "Sorry to disappoint so many people all at once, but I've no idea whatever of catching a train for home."

"Well, if the Head lets you stay, it's jolly good news," said Bob.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Why shouldn't he?" he asked. "I'm a Greyfriars man, fairly good in class, not bad at games, and my fees are paid. Why shouldn't I stay?"

The Co. looked at him blankly.

Judging by his words, he attached no importance at all to the circumstance that he had knocked a Sixth-form prefect out in the dark, that the captain of the school still bore very visible signs of crashing knuckles on his face. If that was his view, he was not likely to find any Greyfriars man to share it.

"Blessed if I can make you out, Wharton," said Bob Cherry, at last. "Everybody expected the Head to come down on you like a ton of bricks."

"Why?"

"Why!" repeated Bob, blankly. "Did you say why?"

"Yes, I said why?"

"Well, if you don't know why, it's no good me telling you," said Bob, rather gruffly. "If you think that a Lower School fellow can go about punching prefects' faces, and nearly cracking their nuts, you've got something to learn."

"Harry—!" began Nugent.

"Well?"

"We all know that you never meant to hurt Wingate as you did. Some of the fellows think that you went out of the dorm specially to get him in the dark, but we know that's all rot—."

"Some of the fellows think that, do they?" said Wharton. "Well, it's a free country—they're welcome to think what they like."

"We know that's rot," said Johnny Bull, "but we'd better have this clear, Wharton."

"By all means," said Wharton, agreeably, "let's have it quite clear. You haven't heard a word I might have to say—you haven't asked me what happened—you've made up your minds without that. Go ahead and get it clear."

"All the school knows what happened," said Johnny. "We're sticking to you just the same, but if you fancy we're going to stand up for what you did, you've got another guess coming. Every man at Greyfriars is down on what you did, and we as much as anyone else. If it had been a bully like Loder, or a meddling ass like Walker, there might be some excuse, though that would have been pretty thick, but to knock out a splendid chap like Wingate, in the dark too, was a rotten thing to do, and if you can't understand it, it's just because you won't, and don't choose to."

Wharton's lip curled.

"That's putting it clear!" he assented. "You were always the man to put things clear, Bull. You fellows all think the same?" he added, with a glance round at the other members of the Co.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Oh, cough it up," said Wharton. "What's the good of beating about the bush? Bull's put it clear—do you agree with him or not?"

"Well, yes," said Bob. "If you want it plain, I do, for one. We do think it was rotten, if you want it plain."

"And you, Hurree Singh?"

"The beatfulness about the esteemed bush is not the proper caper," said the nabob of Bhanipur, quietly. "The rottenfulness was terrific."

Wharton's eyes fixed on Nugent.

"Let's hear what you think about it?" he said. Nugent did not speak. He could not understand his chum's strange mood. His friends were standing by him, in spite of all, but surely he did not expect them to approve of an act of which a hooligan might have been ashamed?

"Dumb?" asked Wharton.

"Look here, what's the good of talking?" said Nugent, restively. "We're sticking to you, whatever the other fellows think—"

"Bull wants to have it clear! So do I. Will you say plainly whether you think I have acted rottenly or not?"

Nugent flushed.

"You know I do," he snapped. "I can't make you out. I could hardly believe you'd done such a rotten thing when Quelch told us, in the dormitory. But it was rotten, and you know it as well as I do."

"That's that, then," said Harry.

He stood looking at his friends, for a long moment.

Then, with his hands in his pockets, he strolled carelessly to the door.

"The Head told me to stay in this study, he remarked, "but he can't want me to stay here for ever. I think I'll ask Quelch." He paused in the doorway, and glanced back, with a bitter sneer on his lips. "Just a word—and we needn't trouble to speak to one another again. I never touched Wingate last night. Somebody else knocked him out, and I stumbled over him on the landing, and he grabbed me thinking that I was the man. You can believe me or not as you choose—it cuts no ice with me either way"

He walked out of the study, and along the passage to the stairs, leaving dead silence behind him in the study.

CHAPTER XXI

BARRED!

LORD MAVLEVERER stood on the House steps with his hands in the pockets of his elegant trousers, his face as usual, calm and placid, the picture of lazy ease. But Mauly's eyes were very keen, as he watched what was going on in the quadrangle quietly and attentively.

There were plenty of fellows in the quad, among them Harry Wharton, captain of the Remove. That he was still at Greyfriars caused a good deal of surprise and, in some quarters, something like resentment. But if he was still there, it was plain to the most unobservant eye that he was not there on the old footing.

He could not have failed to be aware of it. But his face expressed nothing. Whatever his feelings might have been like, they were hidden under a mask of casual carelessness. There was no frown on his brow, no cloud on his face. He simply looked like a fellow who was sauntering till the bell should ring for class, without any special care on his mind.

But if Wharton's face expressed nothing, other faces expressed much.

Squiff, Tom Brown, Peter Todd, and Ogilvy stood in a little group. As Wharton passed near them, all four looked at him, turned their backs, and walked away. A hundred eyes, at least, were on Harry Wharton at the moment. But, so far as those eyes could see, he had not even noticed the action of Squiff and Co. He strolled sedately on, unmoved.

Skinner, Snoop, and Stott, made it a point to pass him on the path. They made it a point to turn up their noses as they did so. It was sheer satisfaction to the slackers and wasters of the Remove to have, for once, the upper hand of a fellow who, they knew, despised them. But if they expected sneering looks to draw an angry word from him, or a flush to his face, they were disappointed. Wharton glanced at them carelessly, without interest, as he might have done at any other time, and passed on regardless.

Bob Cherry, Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Singh, were standing in a little group near the House, not looking happy. Mauleverer noticed that Wharton did not come anywhere near that group, though they were looking towards him.

He passed Bolsover major, who gave utterance to a loud snort, which apparently fell on deaf ears. Hazeldene, coming hastily out of the school shop, almost ran into him, stopped, coloured, and went back into the shop.

Then Russell, Wibley, Micky Desmond, and Monty Newland came along. They passed Wharton within a few yards, with averted faces, deliberately taking no notice of his existence.

Lord Mauleverer's placid countenance, as he watched, grew a little clouded. Harry Wharton, captain of the form, once as popular as any fellow in the Remove, was being cut on all sides. The Head had let him off, but his own form were not letting him off.

From the tuck-shop, Wharton turned, and sauntered back towards the House. He passed a good many of the Remove fellows—Morgan, Kipps, Elliott, Mark Linley, Dick Penfold, Fisher T. Fish, and all of them looked the other way. Apparently there was not a man in the Remove willing to speak to Harry Wharton.

Fellows in other forms, too, were giving him grim looks.

Temple, Dabney and Co. of the Fourth, Hobson and Hoskins and Stewart and other Shell fellows, stared at him scornfully or aggressively. Coker of the Fifth gave him a thunderous frown, and said to Potter and Greene, loud enough for the junior to hear,

"That's the putrid little tick that knocked Wingate out! What's the Old Man doing, letting him stick on here? What?"

Wharton was seen to pause, for a second. But he walked on again, with an indifferent face. He had to stop, when, near the House, Herbert Vernon-Smith planted himself directly in his path, heedless of a tug Tom Redwing gave at his arm.

"You're still here, Wharton!" said the Bounder. Wharton nodded.

"I suppose you know that the whole school expected you to be sacked."

Wharton smiled.

"The unexpected sometimes happens," he answered. "The whole Remove has expected you to be sacked, Smithy, but you're still here, smokes and pub-crawling and all."

The Bounder flushed crimson. Certainly, if Harry Wharton had been in danger of the "sack" that day, Smithy had been in danger of it a dozen times or more.

"Well, I've never hit a man in the dark, at any rate," he said, "and if you think you can get by with a dirty trick like that, I can tell you you're making a mistake."

"You ought to know all about getting by with dirty tricks," agreed Wharton, "you've got by with a good many, Smithy."

"If you stay on, you'll be barred by the Remove," snapped the Bounder. "No decent man wants you here."

"Have the decent men asked you to speak for them?" inquired Wharton. "You don't include yourself among them, surely?"

Vernon-Smith clenched his fists. He seemed to be getting rather the worse of the war of words, and to be disposed for more drastic action. But Redwing dragged at his arm, and pulled him away. Wharton, quite unconcerned, sauntered on.

There was a movement among the Co.

"Come on, you chaps," said Bob Cherry, in a low voice.

The four walked directly towards Wharton. He changed his direction slightly, as if to avoid a meeting. But they were not to be eluded, and they stopped, in a bunch, directly in front of him.

"Look here, Wharton—!" began Bob.

"May I pass?" asked Wharton, quietly.

"We want to speak to you, Harry," muttered Nugent.

"The want is entirely on your side, then."

"My esteemed and idiotic Wharton—" murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, while Johnny Bull gave an expressive grunt.

Harry Wharton stared the four in the face, for a moment, swung round on his heel, and walked away with his back to them. They were left staring after him with reddened faces.

The process of "cutting" was evidently not all on one side in the Remove. The rest of the form had cut Wharton, and he, in his turn, cut the four who had been his nearest and dearest friends.

Lord Mauleverer knitted his brow a little, as he watched that last little scene. After a few moments' thought, he descended the steps, and walked away in the direction Harry Wharton had taken. The captain of the Remove glanced round, at a touch on his elbow.

"Well?" His tone was not exactly hostile, but evidently he expected no better from Mauleverer than from the rest of the form.

Mauleverer smiled faintly.

"I shouldn't call it well," he remarked. "Pretty rotten state of affairs, if you ask me, old bean."

Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

"Would you mind tellin' a fellow somethin'?" asked Lord Mauleverer.

"Why I'm still here, do you mean?" asked Wharton, sarcastically. "It's because the head-master doesn't quite think me the rotter that the Remove fellows do. Anything else?"

"That isn't what I was goin' to ask."

"Well, give it a name, then."

"Have you any idea who punched Wingate last night?"

Wharton stood silent, looking at him. In all his form, everyone had taken the matter for granted, even his own familiar friends. Lord Mauleverer was popularly supposed, in the Remove, to be all known kinds of an ass. But Mauly, it seemed, had not taken it for granted like the rest.

"You don't think that I did, Mauly?" asked Harry, at last.

Mauleverer shook his head.

"No! I was a bit knocked out when Quelch told us in the dorm last night, but after thinkin' it over, I could see that it was all rot. I shouldn't believe you if you told me you did it, I should think you were wanderin' in your mind or somethin'."

Wharton laughed.

"You're the only man in the Remove of that opinion, Mauly," he said.

"Yaas! At present," admitted Mauly. "You see, the thing seems to speak for itself—clear as daylight if there's anythin' in evidence. But evidence, of course, is only bunk." Mauleverer shook his head again. "A chap doesn't do what it isn't in him to do, and it's not in you to do a thing like that. So I've not much use for the evidence."

"A Daniel come to judgment," said Harry, laughing.

"It was some fellow who was scared out of his seven senses when Wingate grabbed him, and hit out not carin' what damage he did," said Lord Mauleverer. "You're rather an obstinate ass—."

"What?"

"And you've got a rotten temper when you let it rip," continued Lord Mauleverer, calmly. "But you're not that sort of person. You were a wrong-headed ass to dig up a feud with Wingate, and a fool to go out of the dormitory to ship his study, but that was all. You never hit him in the dark. You can't blame him for thinkin' that you did, as you practically begged for it—still, you never did it."

"Thanks."

"But," went on Mauleverer, "somebody did! Got any idea who it was?"

"Not the foggiest."

"Not a Remove man," said Lord Mauleverer, thoughtfully, "they were all in the dorm when Quelch came in. Man in some other form. Sort of chap who'd act like a frightened rat in a corner. Might be able to put salt on his tail, what?"

"I don't see much chance. Whoever it was, he'll keep it pretty dark, and there's no evidence against anybody but a fellow who never did it," added Wharton, sardonically.

"Well, things come out," said Mauly. "I suppose it isn't much use givin' you a word of advice—." He paused.

"Probably not! But I'll hear it all the same."

"Well, what's the use of rowing with your friends?" said Mauleverer. "Jolly good chaps, and—."

"I haven't any friends in the Remove, unless you're one, Mauly. Friends are fellows who stand by a man when he's down." Wharton's face set hard. "Don't say anything more about that."

"Not a word," agreed Mauly. "Never was a man for buttin' in."

"And look here, old chap," said Harry, more gently, "you're a good fellow to speak to me as you've done, and you've got more horse-sense than all the rest of the form put together, but the Remove are going to bar me, and if you stand by me, you'll very likely get barred too. You'd better leave me alone, Mauly."

"Borin' you?" asked Mauleverer.

"No you ass! But—."

"Well, I'm stickin' to you, so long as you don't find me a bore," said Lord Mauleverer. "Perhaps we'll root out who it was punched old Wingate, between us—. Two heads are thicker than one, you know. Hallo, there's the bell! Comin' in?"

They went in together. And Harry Wharton, with all his stubborn pride, was glad enough that there was one fellow, if only one, who believed in him, and stood by him, when he was so thoroughly and utterly down on his luck.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

"PREP!" said Johnny Bull.

"Blow prep!" growled Bob Cherry.

"The blowfulness is terrific, my esteemed Johnny," murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Frank Nugent did not speak. His eyes were fixed on a junior coming across the landing from the stairs.

Remove fellows were coming up to the studies for preparation. Among them was Harry Wharton, one of a crowd, but as much alone as if he had been in a desert. He did not seem to care, or even to notice it. His face seemed to express nothing whatever.

The Co. on the landing, watched him as he came. If Johnny Bull was thinking of prep, his comrades certainly were not.

The breach in the once happily-united Co. was deep, and seemed complete. Not a word, and hardly a glance, had been exchanged between Harry Wharton and his former friends. If they were willing to heal the breach, he, assuredly, was not. Like Pharaoh of old, he had hardened his heart.

"Come on," muttered Bob, as the captain of the Remove passed the group.

He made a step forward, with Nugent and the nabob, and Johnny followed more slowly. Harry Wharton, without even a glance, passed on, into the Remove passage, went in No. 1 Study, and shut the door.

"He, he, he!"

That fat cachinnation came from Billy Bunter, who had watched the little scene through his big spectacles, and seemed to derive entertainment from it.

Bob looked round. The expression on his face was enough for William George Bunter. The fat Owl bolted up the passage and into No. 7 Study, like a fat rabbit into a burrow.

Other fellows went on to the studies, leaving the Co. alone on the landing. Johnny Bull expressed his feelings with a grunt.

"What about prep?" he inquired.

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

"Are we sticking here till a pre. asks us what we're doing out of our studies in prep?" further inquired Johnny.

"We're sticking here till we've decided what to do," growled Bob. "Look here, we can't go on like this."

"It's rotten," muttered Nugent.

"The rottenfulness is preposterous. But the esteemed Wharton has his back terrifically up!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, dismally.

"And no wonder," said Frank.

"Oh!" grunted Johnny. "We're to blame, are we? Did we ask Wharton to play the fool last night, and land himself in the soup? We were ready to stick to him, after what he did—."

"He did nothing," said Frank. "He told us this morning what had happened. Don't you believe him?"

"It wants some believing," answered Johnny.

"That's rot," said Bob. "Wharton would no more tell lies than he would pick pockets, and you know that as well as we do, Johnny. It's awfully steep—but it's true."

"It's true," said Frank. "We never knew what had happened, and could only take what Quelch said—he had no doubt about it, and we supposed he knew what he was talking about. But—."

"Wingate got the wrong man in the dark, and Quelch could only go on what Wingate told him," said Bob. "We never dreamed—."

"We couldn't guess all that, I suppose," grunted Johnny.

"The guessfulness was not possible," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, shaking his dusky head.

"We ought to have," said Frank, quietly. "It was a rotten thing that was done—a dirty trick. We ought to have known—."

"Well we couldn't" said Bob. "And even now we know we can't expect other fellows to swallow it, if we do. We're believing what Wharton said, simply because he's our pal—not because it sounds likely."

"I know! But—we hadn't heard what he had to say, and never thought of asking him. We took it all for granted, after what Quelch said, and never even fancied that Wharton might have a different version. He thinks we've let him down—and so we have."

"I don't see it," said Johnny. "I believe what Wharton said, if you come to that, though I don't expect anybody else to believe a word of it. But he brought the whole thing on himself with his silly temper, and he's only got himself to thank. He wouldn't have been on the spot at all if he hadn't gone down to ship Wingate's study—a rotten cheeky thing to do. If a fellow asks for it, it's up to him to take what he asks for, without doing a song and dance about it."

There was solid common sense in Johnny's view. But it was not very helpful in present circumstances.

"Well, look here," said Bob. "Wharton's got his back up and he's got some reason—but he couldn't expect us to guess what nobody else will believe even he's told. He wants his friends round him now more than he ever did before, and it's up to us to take the first step."

"We've taken it, and he's turned his back on us," grunted Johnny Bull. "I'm a bit fed up."

"Well, let's take it again—another view of his back won't hurt us an awful lot!" said Bob. "Come on."

"Oh, all right!"

The four juniors went into the Remove passage, and stopped at the door of No. 1 Study. Frank Nugent opened the door.

Harry Wharton was seated at the study table, with Virgil propped open against the inkstand, and a pen in his hand. He had started prep. But he paused in his work, and glanced up, with a steely glance, as his former friends appeared in the doorway. Then he rose to his feet.

"Are you coming in, Nugent?" he asked.

"Isn't it Nugent's study?" growled Johnny Bull, as Frank flushed, and made no reply.

"Certainly! Nugent can come into his own study if he likes, of course. I'll take my books along to another study."

"All the studies open to you, I suppose?" said Johnny, sarcastically.

"Shut up, Johnny," murmured Bob.

"Rats!" retorted Johnny.

"Not at all," said Harry. "Only one, I believe. But that one will suit me." He began to gather up his books.

"Oh, don't be an ass, Wharton!" exclaimed Bob. "Look here, we've come here to speak to you—."

"Thank you for nothing."

"We want to say—."

"I'm not interested in what you want to say."

"I'll say it all the same," said Bob. "First of all we believe what you told us—that it wasn't you who knocked old Wingate out last night. You know that Wingate thinks it was—."

"I don't think I'm accountable for what Wingate, or any other fool, may think."

Bob Cherry breathed hard.

"You can't blame him for thinking so," he said. "Any fellow would have thought so in the circumstances. Quelch had no doubt about it—."

"Dear old Quelch!"

"Well we had to take what he said. We supposed he knew. Are you going to blame us for that?"

"Not in the least! Why shouldn't you?"

"Then what's the trouble?"

"Is there any trouble?"

"What the dickens do you mean?" exclaimed Johnny Bull, testily. "If you mean that you want a row, say so plainly."

"But I don't want a row," answered Wharton, mildly. "All I want is to be left alone to get on with my prep."

"If that means that you want us to leave you alone—."

"Have you really guessed that at last?"

"Well, you won't have to ask me twice," said Johnny Bull, grimly. "I believe what you told us, though it sounds as silly as any of Bunter's lies. If that's not good enough for you, you can keep your silly back up as long as you like, and it won't worry me."

With that, Johnny Bull marched out of the study, and went up the passage. Three members of the Co. remained, looking very uncertain.

"If you really mean that, Wharton—!" said Bob, at last.

"I mean what I say, quite often."

"Let it go at that then," said Bob. "Come on, Inky."

He walked out, and the nabob, after a moment's hesitation, followed him.

"Harry, old chap—!" said Nugent, miserably. Wharton gave him a hard look.

"I'm Harry to my friends—if I have any," he said. "Wharton to you."

"We've been friends a long time, said Frank.

Wharton laughed.

"Until the pinch came," he said. "Look here, Nugent, what's the good of talking balderdash? Do you know what I was thinking, in this study, before you came up this morning? I was thinking that whatever the Head did, whatever Quelch thought, whatever other fellows believed, my friends would stand by me, and never believe for a minute that I'd done a rotten thing for which any fellow ought to be kicked out. And you came up to tell me that you were sticking to me—although I'd done it! It never crossed your minds that I might have something to say—that there might be a mistake—it was settled that I'd done a rotten, beastly, cowardly thing—hitting a man in the dark and knocking him out. A thing that even a blackguard like Smithy wouldn't have done, or even a rat like Skinner! If that's what your friendship is worth, you can keep it."

"But—!"

"Oh, let's have done," said Wharton, impatiently. "Look here, this is our study, but we can't use it together. If you want it, I'll go along and ask Mauly to take me in. If you don't want it, I'll stick here—you've got plenty of friends to take you in, if I haven't. It's for you to say."

Frank Nugent did not say a word. In silence, he gathered his books for prep, and left the study with them under his arm. The door shut after him, and Harry Wharton was left alone.

CHAPTER XXIII

COMING TO BLOWS!

SMACK!

It rang through the Rag almost like a pistol-shot. Another day had passed, but the strange position of Harry Wharton, captain of the Remove, was unchanged. Nothing had come from the Head, if he was still "considering," his considerations had as yet produced no result. In the form-room, Wharton went on as if nothing had happened, but it was noted that Quelch, who was expected to be down upon him with a very heavy down, treated him much the same as before, and he was still Head Boy of the form. That position, in a Greyfriars form, had little or nothing to do with a fellow's place in class, it approximated to that of a head-master's praepostor, and everyone had expected Wharton to be turned out of it.

But he was not turned out, Quelch had said nothing on the subject. If his gimlet-eyes dwelt sometimes very keenly on Harry Wharton, it was with a not unkindly look.

In the form Wharton was practically an outcast. He had spurned the overtures of his former friends, and they were not renewed. No other fellow wanted anything to do with him, with the single exception of Lord Mauleverer. Fellows like Squiff, and Tom Brown, and Mark Linley, and Redwing, were quietly distant, but not uncivil. Fellows like Skinner and Snoop liked to make themselves as offensive as possible. Vernon-Smith was the most aggressive of all, probably because his nature was aggressive, and perhaps because, as some fellows suspected, he saw a chance for himself if Wharton should be turned out of the captaincy of the Form. That step was already being discussed in some of the studies, though nothing had come of it so far. Obviously the present state of affairs could not continue indefinitely.

What Wharton himself thought about it all, nobody knew. He had wrapped himself in pride as in a garment. His face expressed nothing at all. Seemingly he was content to inhabit a study alone, to which other fellows never came, to walk in the quad by himself, to get a spot of practice at the nets by batting to Lord Mauleverer's somewhat erratic bowling. Whatever he might have felt, nothing would have induced him to give a sign. Even the uncertainty of his fate, upon which the headmaster had not yet decided, did not seem to affect him in any way. To all appearance, he was sufficient unto himself, and content to let the rest of Greyfriars go its own way, unregarded.

The passionate temper that had been his undoing, seemed to be unusually well in check. If a hiss reached his ears as he went down a passage, he seemed deaf. If a fellow shrugged his shoulders, or curled his lip, he seemed blind. If Billy Bunter gave him a blink of scorn through his big spectacles, and turned up his fat little nose even further than Nature had intended it to go, he smiled. His old friends could only wonder whether there was a volcano smouldering under the ice, as very likely there was.

It seemed, however, that there was a limit to that quiet self-restraint, and it was Skinner, unfortunately for himself, who stepped over the limit. After tea on Friday, Harry Wharton strolled into the Rag, with his hands in his pockets, his face sedate and indifferent as usual. A good many fellows wondered that he had the nerve to show his face there, in the circumstances, but Wharton assuredly had no intention of shrinking from the public gaze.

A hiss from somewhere was audible as he came in, Wharton, as usual, deaf to it. Vernon-Smith gave him an aggressive stare, but he did not seem to see the Bounder. Bolsover major uttered a loud and expressive snort, but he seemed unaware of Bolsover's existence. Skinner, generally a fellow of very little account in the form, felt for once that he had the support of all, feeling strong in numbers, as it were. Thus emboldened, Harold Skinner ventured further than prudence dictated.

"That rotter's still here!" he said, to Snoop. "What's the Old Man thinking about, I wonder! Is Greyfriars a home from home for hooligans?"

Harry Wharton turned round to Skinner. His manner was perfectly calm, but the glint in his eyes gave Skinner a qualm, and he rather wished that he had not spoken.

"Were you calling me a rotter, Skinner?" asked Wharton, his voice quite soft.

"You know I was," answered Skinner, sullenly.

"Quite!"

The smack followed.

Wharton's open hand came across Skinner's startled face, with a loud crack, and Skinner staggered, spluttering.

"You—you—you rotter!" he gasped. "You—." Wharton pushed back his cuffs.

"If you call a fellow fancy names, you must expect to back up your tongue with your hands, Skinner," he said, as softly as before. "I'm ready, if you are."

Skinner, his pasty face burning where the smack had landed, stood looking at him, panting. There was a general stir in the Rag, and the fellows gathered round. Vernon-Smith pushed forward, and Skinner was glad enough for the Bounder to take the lead. The prospect of standing up to the captain of the form in combat made him feel quite faint.

"Look here, Wharton—!" blustered Vernon-Smith.

"Looking!" said Harry, calmly.

"Are you going to smack every fellow's face who calls you a rotter?"

Harry Wharton nodded. "Every one!" he answered.

"Then you can begin with me," exclaimed Vernon-Smith. "Rotter!"

"Rotter!" roared Bolsover major.

Harry Wharton stepped towards the Bounder. There was no chance of a smack, Smithy's hands were up like lightning. The next moment they were fighting.

A buzzing circle surrounded them. Bob Cherry and Co. were in the Rag, but they did not join the circle, they remained looking on from a distance, with glum faces.

"Go it, Smithy," shouted a dozen voices. It was easy to see on which side the Remove fellows' sympathy lay.

Herbert Vernon-Smith was "going" it. He was a good fighting-man, hard as nails, and always ready for trouble. He believed that his cause was good, though the Bounder was not the fellow to care much whether his cause was good or not. He was going to beat Wharton if he could. But, as it transpired, he couldn't. Hardly a minute passed when the Bounder went down, sprawling on his back on the floor of the Rag.

Tom Redwing ran to him. He helped his chum up, and Smithy leaned on him, panting. He was a little dizzy from the crash, but Smithy was not the man to give in.

"Help me off with my jacket, Tom," he muttered.

"Look here, Smithy—" said Redwing, uneasily.

"Shut up, you fool, and help me off with my jacket."

Redwing peeled off the jacket. Wharton removed his own, and threw it on the table. Then they faced one another again. Hazeldene shut the door. Beaks and prefects were not wanted on the scene, just then.

"Look here, hold on while I get the gloves," called out Squiff.

"Rot!" snapped the Bounder.

And he came at the captain of the Remove, his eyes gleaming, his teeth set. Harry Wharton met him with left and right. The Bounder was a good man with his hands, and could take punishment, and nothing would have induced him to yield so long as he could stand. But he was not, in point of fact, a match for the captain of the Remove, and Wharton was fighting with a steady, grim, ruthless determination, spurred on by all the anger and indignation that had hitherto been so carefully suppressed.

His set face was soon showing signs of damage, but he did not seem to feel it. Heedless of every blow that got home, he pushed the attack, driving the enraged Bounder before him, Smithy forced to give more and more ground, till at length he brought up against the wall, panting with rage.

There, at length, he rallied, and fairly hurled himself at his adversary, only to be met by a crash on the jaw that spun him off his feet.

He landed hard and heavy on the floor. Redwing, with a troubled face, raised him up, but the hapless Bounder could hardly stand. Wharton stepped back, dropping his hands, and waited.

Twice, thrice, the infuriated Bounder made an effort to pull himself together, and carry on. But he could not, and in fact he would have fallen again, but for Redwing's supporting arm.

"You can't go on, Smithy," whispered Redwing. "Chuck it, for goodness sake."

The Bounder gave him an evil look.

"I'm not licked," he muttered. "Think I'm going to let that rotter knock me out as he did Wingate? I'm goin' on."

"You can't, old fellow."

"Oh, shut up," snarled the Bounder.

He made one more effort, tottered, and would have fallen, had not Redwing caught him in time. Then even Vernon-Smith had to realise that the fight was over, and that he was beaten. He gave Wharton one look, a fierce and bitter look, and allowed Tom Redwing to lead him out of the Rag. The door closed on them.

Harry Wharton stood breathing hard. The fight had told on him, too, though far from as severely as on the Bounder. Every eye was on him, coldly or inimically, there was no one to rejoice in his victory. He did not seem to care. For a couple of minutes, he stood, recovering his breath, and dabbing a stream of red from his nose. Then he looked round, and met Bolsover major's hostile glare.

"Your turn now, Bolsover," he said.

"What?"

"Are you ready?"

"More than ready, you rotter!" snorted Bolsover, and he threw his jacket to Skinner, and pushed up his cuffs.

Then Bob Cherry, at length, pushed in.

"Look here, this won't do!" he exclaimed. "Don't be a fool, Wharton—you can't scrap with two fellows one after another."

"Mind minding your own business, Cherry?" asked Wharton.

"You cheeky fathead—."

"Stand out of the way!"

"You'll be licked, you fathead, and you're asking for it."

"That needn't worry you."

Bob, with a knitted brow, stood back. Harry Wharton faced up to his second adversary, and the burly Bolsover came on rather like a bull at a gate. They were fighting hammer and tongs, when the door opened, and Wingate of the Sixth walked into the Rag.

CHAPTER XXIV

CALLED TO ORDER!

"STOP that!"

Wingate's voice rapped out sharply.

There was a breathless hush in the Rag. The fight ceased at once, Wharton and Bolsover major dropping their hands, and staring round. The Greyfriars captain came towards them with a grim and frowning brow. The dark bruise on his chin showed up very plainly. It was upon Harry Wharton that his grim frown was concentrated.

"So you're fighting!" he snapped.

"Quite!" said Harry, coolly.

"I've just seen Vernon-Smith; looking as if he'd been knocked out in a prize-fight. Your handiwork, I suppose?"

"Right in one," said Harry, with the same coolness. It was not exactly the manner in which a Lower School boy was expected to reply to a Sixth-form prefect. Wingate's eyes glinted at him. With his jaw still aching from the crash of knuckles, and no doubt in his mind that those knuckles had been Harry Wharton's, he was not likely to be in a patient mood with that troublesome junior.

"You're captain of your form, and Quelch's Head Boy," he said, "and you're fighting in this room, with bare knuckles. And one fight isn't enough for you—you're going on. I needn't ask who was to blame. You seem to be hunting for trouble all round."

"Not at all," answered Harry. "But if you've made up your mind about it, it's no use for me to say anything."

"Not much use, certainly, when I can't believe a word you say!" snapped Wingate, scornfully. "I'll ask somebody else." He looked round at the crowd of staring faces. "Who started this row?"

"Oh, I'll tell you," exclaimed Harry, as the other fellows stood silent. "You started it, Wingate."

The Greyfriars captain gave quite a jump.

"What the dickens do you mean, if you mean anything?" he snapped.

"You started it, by grabbing the wrong man in the dark the other night," answered Harry. "If you hadn't made that mistake, there wouldn't have been any row here."

Wingate looked at him. He seemed speechless for a few moments. Bob Cherry gave his friends a sort of hopeless look, and Johnny Bull grunted.

"Is he the man to ask for it?" he murmured.

"The awfulness is terrific."

Harry Wharton did not seem to think that he was "asking" for it. He stood facing the Greyfriars captain, his manner perfectly cool, almost nonchalant.

"So I made a mistake, did I?" said Wingate, at last.

"You did!"

"I caught you in the very act—and made a mistake!"

"You did not catch me in the act—and you made a mistake," answered Wharton, deliberately. "I never touched you that night—and the man who did is laughing in his sleeve all this while."

"Oh, crikey!" came from Billy Bunter, while the rest stared in silence.

"You're keeping that up, are you?" said Wingate, slowly.

"It happens to be true."

"I think the whole school has made up its mind how true it is," said the Greyfriars captain, contemptuously. "So it boils down to this—you're fighting fellows in your form, one after another, because they're down on you for what you did, as any decent fellows would be."

"For what I did not do!" corrected Wharton, gently.

"And nobody in your form is to tell you what he thinks of you, without having a fight on his hands. Is that it?"

"Just that!"

"Well, that isn't quite it," said Wingate, grimly. "I happen to be head-prefect at Greyfriars, and Lower boys have to toe the line to a prefect's orders, though you don't seem to be aware of it. And I order you, here and now, to keep clear of fighting in your form. Is that clear?"

Wharton did not answer.

"I'll make it clear," said Wingate, in the same grim tone. "You've got your orders, and you'll do exactly as you're told. If I hear of you mixed up in a fight again, I shall report you to the Head, and you'll be up for a flogging. Why you've not been sacked, I can't make out—but so long as you're here, you'll toe the line. Look out for a Head's flogging next time I hear of you in a scrap. That's all for now."

With that, and without waiting for a reply, if Wharton had been disposed to make one, the Greyfriars captain turned, and walked out of the Rag.

Harry Wharton stood silent, breathing hard. Bolsover major, with a grunt, took his jacket to put on.

"I suppose that washes it out," he growled. "I suppose you're not going on now."

"I'll go on if you like."

Bolsover major gave him a glare, and seemed half-inclined to take him at his word. But he put on his jacket.

Skinner rubbed his cheek, still burning from the smack. "You'd better get out, Wharton," he said.

Wharton looked at him.

"You're not wanted here," went on Skinner. "Like your cheek to butt in here among decent fellows. Get out of it."

Harry Wharton laughed. Skinner had been quick to catch on to the fact that his hands were now tied. Wingate meant every word that he had said, he was fed up to the teeth with Wharton of the Remove, and a Head's flogging impended over that junior if he failed to toe the line. Skinner could afford to take risks now.

"Yes, get out," said Snoop, taking his cue from Skinner.

"Barge him out!" said Stott.

"Chuck that!" exclaimed Bob Cherry angrily. "You begin any barging, and you'll jolly well soon wish you hadn't!"

Harry Wharton looked round at him. "Nobody asked you to butt in," he said, icily. Bob's blue eyes flamed, and he clenched his hands.

"By gum!" he said. "If it wasn't for what Wingate said, I'd jolly well punch your cheeky head myself."

"You needn't let that stop you."

"By gum—!" repeated Bob. Frank Nugent caught his arm.

"For goodness sake Bob—" he muttered.

"Oh all right!" growled Bob and he unclenched his hands. "Let him rip! I'm fed up with him."

The door opened again, and Lord Mauleverer looked in. He glanced round, apparently not noticing that every face was turned towards Harry Wharton in grim hostility.

"Lookin' for you, Wharton," he called across. "Comin' down to the nets, old bean?"

"Yes rather," answered Harry.

He left the Rag with Lord Mauleverer. Several hisses followed him, as he went, and Skinner, greatly daring, called out "Rotter!" But Wharton, this time, did not seem to hear.

CHAPTER XXV

BUNTER ON THE WAR-PATH!

"BANGING a fellow's head!" said Billy Bunter.

Prep was on in the Remove studies.

Billy Bunter, with his fat person comfortably disposed in the study armchair, his fat little legs stretched out, his fat thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat, in the objectionable way he had, blinked at Peter Todd and Tom Dutton, as they worked at the table.

Two fellows in No. 7 Study were getting on with it.

Bunter, apparently, was "chancing it with Quelch," as he often did, sometimes to his sorrow.

Neither Toddy nor Dutton replied to the fat Owl's remark—Dutton probably because he did not hear, being deaf, Peter because he was not interested. Billy Bunter went on,

"I'll jolly well show him! Rotten bully, you know! banging a fellow's head on the wall of the bike-shed. Cheek!"

"Nothing in it to damage, was there?" asked Peter, looking up.

"He jolly well banged my head!" hooted Bunter.

"And serve you jolly well right," said Peter. "I've heard about that, you fat frump, and if I'd been there, I'd have kicked you into the bargain."

"Beast!"

"Now shut up," added Peter. "Give your chin a rest, and let a fellow work, if you're too lazy to do any yourself."

"If you think I'm going to let a fellow bang my head, Peter Todd, you're jolly well mistaken," said Bunter. "I'm going to punch his head for it."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Peter.

Bunter gave him an indignant blink.

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at. What are you cackling at, you silly ass?"

"I can see you punching Wharton's head!" chuckled Peter. "Better make your will first, old fat man."

"If you funk Wharton, I jolly well don't!" retorted Bunter, disdainfully. "I'd knock him spinning as soon as look at him."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Peter.

"Well, you'll jolly well see, after prep!" declared Bunter. "I'll jolly well show him whether he can bang a fellow's head or not. You wait!"

Peter, chuckling, resumed prep. Billy Bunter, sprawled in the armchair, frowned. Peter, apparently, did not take him seriously! But William George Bunter knew what he was about. Bunter was going to show him!

A couple of days had elapsed since the captain of the Remove had banged Bunter's fat head, for his sins, in the bike-shed. Hitherto, the fat Owl had not seemed to think of avenging that drastic mode of treatment. But circumstances were altered now.

There was a sly glimmer in Bunter's little round eyes behind his big round spectacles. There was a vein of cunning in Bunter, as in many obtuse persons. Bunter had been thinking.

It had, in fact, dawned upon his fat brain, that the scrapping in the Rag, and its outcome, had placed the captain of the Remove in a powerless position. Wingate's eye was going to be very sharply on him, and if Wharton was mixed up in a scrap again, he had to go up to the Head. Even that beast, Bunter considered, couldn't possibly want a Head's flogging—especially as he knew that the head-master was still in doubt whether to "sack" him or not. In these circumstances, it looked to Bunter as if he was on a good thing. Bunter was no fighting-man, in ordinary circumstances. But these circumstances were not ordinary.

He sat in the armchair thinking it out, till prep was over, and it looked good to Bunter, seen from every angle. When Toddy and Dutton put away their books, the fat Owl heaved himself out of the armchair.

"Coming along, Toddy?" he asked, as he opened the study door. "Like to see me thrash Wharton?"
Toddy chortled.

"I'd like to see it no end," he agreed. "It would be a sight for gods and men and little fishes. Think you can handle it?"

"You'll jolly well see!" said Bunter, darkly. "I'm going to his study now to punch his nose, to begin with."

"Are you going to ask him to lend you a chair?"

"Eh! Wharrer you mean?"

"You'll have to stand on something, to reach his nose."

"Yah!"

Bunter rolled out of the study, on the war-path. Other fellows were coming out of the studies, and Billy Bunter grinned as he blinked at Vernon-Smith's face. The Bunder wore only too visible traces of the combat in the Rag. Smithy gave him a black look. He was far from being in a good temper, and he seemed to find Bunter's fat grin neither grateful nor comforting.

"I say, Smithy—" squeaked Bunter.

"Oh, get out, you fat ass," snapped Smithy.

"Like to come along with me to Wharton's study? I'm going to have him out," announced Bunter.

"Wha-a-t?"

"He banged my head the other day. I'm jolly well going to thrash him for it."

"You fat ass!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, what's that?" exclaimed Bob Cherry, as he came down the passage with Johnny Bull, Nugent, and the nabob.

Bunter blinked round at him.

"Don't you get butting in, Cherry!" he said. "'Tain't any business of yours if I thrash Wharton."

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Bob. "No, I won't butt in old fat frump, I'll just stand around and pick up the pieces."

"The peacefulness will be terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The thrashfulness will be a boot on the other leg, my esteemed and idiotic Bunter."

"Who's afraid of him?" demanded Bunter, valiantly. "I'm going to have him out of his study, and thrash him, see? He banged my head—."

"He didn't bang any sense into it!" remarked Johnny Bull.

"What is the fat chump burbling about?" asked Frank Nugent, staring at Bunter. "You'd better steer clear of Wharton, you ass. You won't find him in a good temper."

"Fat lot I care for his temper," jeered Bunter. "Just you watch me, and you'll jolly well see!"

The fat Owl, with a determined fat face, and quite a truculent air, rolled down the passage to No. 1 Study. A crowd of fellows followed him, most of them laughing. Billy Bunter on the war-path was rather a new phenomenon, and the Remove fellows seemed to find him entertaining.

The door of No. 1 Study was shut. No doubt Wharton, like the rest, was through with prep, but he had not come out. Perhaps he was undecided whether to turn up in the Rag that evening, where every face but one would be hostile. At all events, his study door had not opened, and Bunter found it shut when he arrived.

Bang!

The fat Owl delivered a vigorous kick at the door.

That was an act of defiance to begin with.

Nothing was heard from the study. The occupant, certainly, must have heard the bang of Bunter's hoof, but he did not heed it.

Bunter turned the door-handle, and hurled the door wide open, with a crash. He rolled into the doorway, and fixed his eyes, and his spectacles, on Harry Wharton. The captain of the Remove was seated at the table, and he glanced up at the fat figure whose ample proportions almost filled the doorway from side to side.

"Oh!" squeaked Bunter, "there you are!"

"Here I am," answered Harry, with a nod.

"Come out of that study."

"What?"

"And put up your hands."

"Eh?"

"You banged my head the other day—."

"I'll bang it again, if you like," said Harry, laughing. "What's biting you, you fat chump? Roll away while you're still in one piece."

"Think you can bang my head?" hooted Bunter. "I'll jolly well show you. I've come here to thrash you, see? Now come out into the passage and put up your hands, if you ain't funky."

Harry Wharton stared at him, in sheer wonder. It did not occur to him, for the moment, that the fat Owl had been thinking this out very carefully, and deemed that he was on safe ground.

"Are, you coming out?" roared Bunter.

"Roll away, you fat duffer."

"Funk!"

"Fathead!"

"Mind, I mean business," said Bunter. "You banged my head, and I'm jolly well going to thrash you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?" demanded Bunter, "I ain't joking."

"You are!" assured Wharton. "One of your funniest. Now you've done your funny turn, roll away, like a good barrel."

"Will you come out or not?"

"Not!"

"Yah! Funk! Rotter!" roared Bunter. "You punched Skinner for calling you a rotter! Now come and punch me, if you ain't funky."

"But you'd burst all over the passage if I did."

"Yah! Rotter! Swob! Worm!" roared Bunter, more and more valiant as the captain of the Remove did not stir. There was no doubt—in Bunter's fat mind—that Wharton was restrained by the certain prospect of a Head's flogging if he became mixed up in a fight again. And if that was so, the fat and fatuous Owl was at liberty to spread himself to any extent, without fear of painful consequences. In the absence of danger, Bunter was bold as a lion. So he went on valorously. "Rotter! Tick! Worm! Swob! Smudge! Funk! Yah! Who sneaked out of the dorm to punch a man in the dark? Who ought to be jolly well sacked? Who—."

Billy Bunter ceased suddenly, as the captain of the Remove rose to his feet, his brow darkening. Up to that moment Wharton had been so patient that the fat Owl was sure of his ground, not realising in the least that it was because he was too absurd to be worth punching. But Wharton had, apparently, changed his mind now, and he came across the study towards the door, with an expression on his face that made all Billy Bunter's valour ooze out at his fat finger-tips.

"Go it, Bunter," yelled a dozen fellows in the passage.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Give him jip, Bunter."

Billy Bunter did not look like giving anybody "jip." He backed from the doorway.

But he backed in vain. Behind him was a crowd of Remove fellows, and there was no room for Bunter to back through. Almost all the Remove were gathered round No. 1 Study, and the passage was packed.

There was no retreat for the warlike Owl. Certainly, he could have advanced. But never was a fellow more disinclined to advance.

"I—I—I say, you keep off!" yelled Bunter, as the captain of the Remove came on. "D-d-don't you touch me, you beast—you'll go up for a flogging if you do—you keep off—!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a yell from the packed passage, as Billy Bunter thus revealed the hitherto hidden cause of his unaccustomed valour.

"Oh!" gasped Wharton, as he suddenly understood.

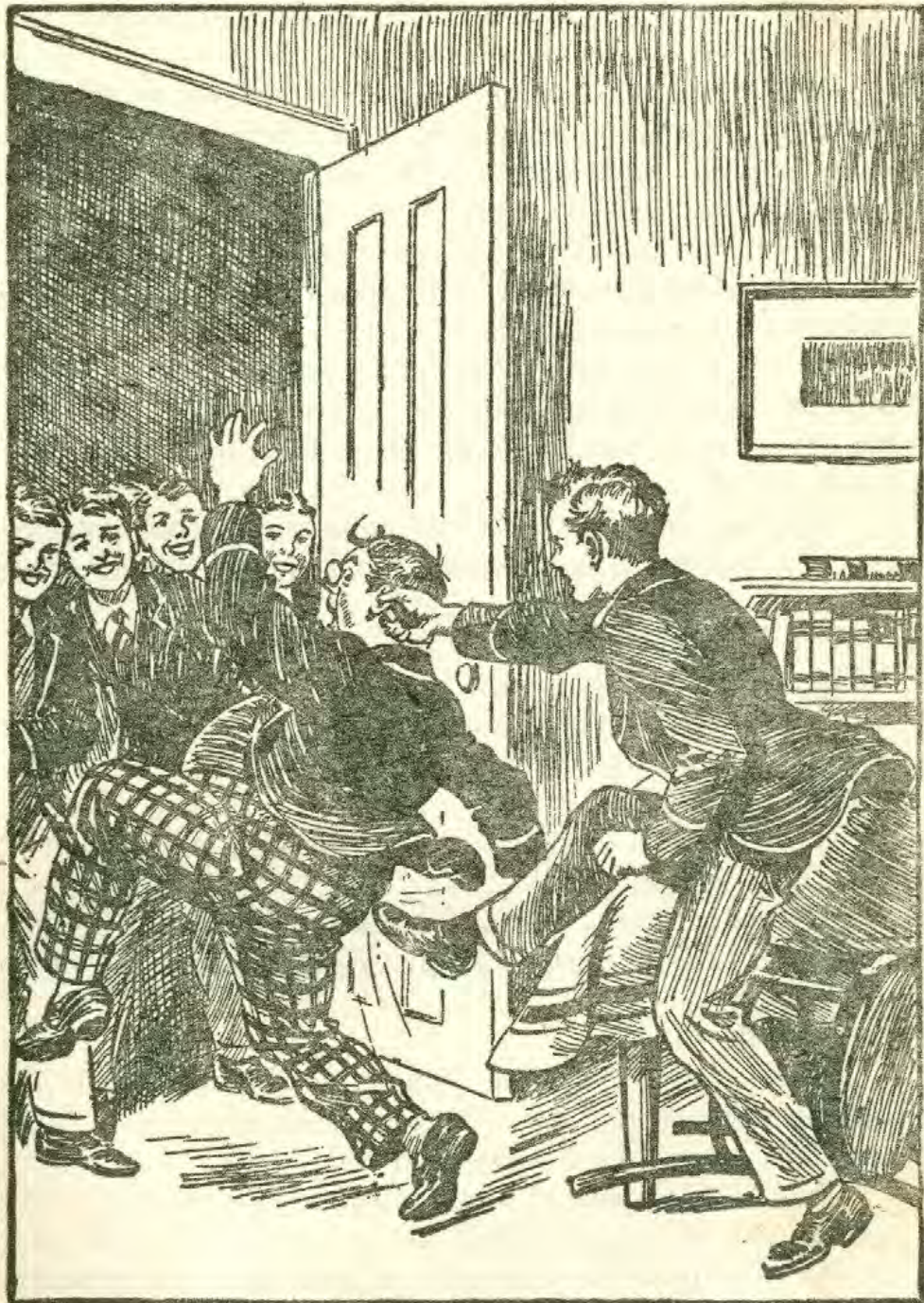
"Why, you fat villain—I'll jolly well—."

"Keep off!" yelled Bunter. "You'll have Wingate after you—you'll go up to the Head—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say you fellows, let a fellow pass—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"



A FOOT THUDED ON THE TIGHTEST TROUSERS AT
GREYFRIARS

"Gerrout of the way. Toddy! Stop shoving me, Wibley! Lemme pass, Ogilvy. I—I've got to go down and see Quelch—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow! Leggo!" raved Bunter, as the captain of the Remove grasped him by a fat ear. "I say—wow! Look here, you beast—I—I mean dear old chap—."

The fat Owl was twirled round by his fat ear. He gave a yell of apprehension as he revolved. The next moment his apprehensions were realised, as a foot thudded on the tightest trousers at Greyfriars.

Thud!

"Yaroooooh!"

Thud!

"Yooo-hoop!"

The fat Owl shot out of the doorway, and rolled. The door slammed after him. He did not open it again. Billy Bunter was no longer on the war-path!

CHAPTER XXVI

MAULY ASKS FOR IT!

TAP!

"Come in," called out Wingate.

It was after class on Saturday. Wingate was standing by his study window, looking into the quad, his eyes upon a junior of the Lower Fourth who was strolling idly, his hands in his pockets, his face sedately indifferent. A frown wrinkled his brow as he looked at Harry Wharton, and his hand unconsciously passed over his chin, still bruised, and with a lingering ache in it. Why that junior was still at Greyfriars Wingate did not know. The Head had stated that he would take time to consider, in a matter that seemed to everybody else as clear as daylight. Apparently he was still considering, for nothing further had transpired, so far.

In the meantime, the offender was an outcast in his form, and in the school generally. He was enduring it with cool hardihood, and apparent indifference. He had the nerve to walk in the quad, as if nothing had happened, heedless, and seemingly unconscious, of the looks that were cast at him by other fellows. The Greyfriars captain could only wonder at his nerve, after what he had done, and in view of what impended over him.

Wingate turned from the window, as the tap came at his study door. It was Lord Mauleverer, of the Remove, who came in.

"Well?" said Wingate.

"May I speak to you for a minute or two, Wingate?" asked Mauleverer.

"Of course, you young ass, if you've anything to say. What is it?"

"About Wharton."

Wingate's brows knitted.

"Well, what about him?" he asked, gruffly. Wharton's name, to Wingate, had rather the effect of a red rag on a bull.

"I hope you won't think it a cheek, Wingate," said Mauleverer. "It's because I believe Wharton's version of what happened on Wednesday night—."

"You young ass, that will do."

"I'm not the only one," said Mauleverer. "His friends believe what he says about it. And the Head seems to think there's a doubt, Wingate."

"Do let me speak, " he went on, as Wingate made an impatient gesture. "I've thought of somethin' that may help."

"Rubbish!"

"According to Wharton, he knew that you were on the landing that night, looking for some fellow who was likely to break out," said Mauleverer. "I don't know who the fellow was—."

"No business of yours, in any case."

"I know! But suppose the fellow, whoever he was, did get out—."

"He did not."

"You wouldn't know, in the dark," said Mauleverer, calmly. "Just suppose for a minute that he did get out. He never knew, as Wharton did, that you were there, and he would walk right into your hands. You collared him—."

"I collared Wharton, as all the school knows."

"Yaas, but that was after you had been knocked out. Suppose the other fellow, whoever he was, was on the spot first? You collared him without seeing who he was—."

"I've told you that I collared Wharton."

"You collared him," continued Mauleverer, apparently blind to the signs of growing wrath in the Greyfriars captain's face, "and he hit out in a funk, and floored you, and cut. Then Wharton comes on the scene—."

Wingate stepped across to his table, on which his official ashplant lay. His hand dropped on the ashplant. Mauleverer did not seem to notice it.

"Not a minute later—perhaps only a few seconds," went on his calm lordship. Mauly, evidently, had been thinking this out, and was determined to pass on to Wingate the result of his cogitations, at the risk of getting "six" from an exasperated prefect. "That would see Wharton through—."

"That's enough!"

"I haven't quite finished. I know that Wharton ought not to have been out of the dorm at all, and he was a cheeky ass to think of shipping your study. But that's not the point—the point is, that it wasn't Wharton who hit you in the dark—."

Wingate picked up the cane.

"You know more than I do about it, it seems," he remarked. "You've come here to teach me my business as a prefect. When we make mistakes in the Sixth, you're ready in the Lower Fourth to set them right! I suppose you mean well, you silly young ass, and I'd rather not lick you. Get out."

"I was goin' to say—."

"One more word, and you bend over."

Lord Mauleverer sighed. He had not quite expected a Sixth-form prefect to take sage counsel with patience from a junior in the Lower Fourth. Probably, of all the Greyfriars Sixth, only Wingate would have heard him with so much patience thus far. But his patience seemed to be exhausted now, and the cane was swishing.

But six or no six, Lord Mauleverer had come there to say what was in his mind, and he was going to say it. He hoped, at least, that it might turn the Greyfriars captain's thoughts in a new direction.

"I suppose you're goin' to lick me, Wingate," he sighed, "but do let me finish. You've got so fixed on Wharton, that you've never bothered your head about the other man—."

"I said one more word, and you'd have to bend over, Mauleverer," said, Wingate, grimly.

"Yaas! I'm ready to bend over as soon as you like," assented Lord Mauleverer, resignedly. "You think it's an awful cheek for me to come here and beard the lion in his den, the jolly old Douglas in his hall, what? But I've really got somethin' to say, Wingate. That man you were watchin' for that night, may have come out, not knowin' that you were there, and he may be the nigger in the woodpile all the time."

Wingate pointed to a chair with the cane.

"I don't know who the man was," continued Mauleverer, calmly, "but you do—and it's worth turnin' over in your mind whether he ran into you in the dark, and punched you when you grabbed him—."

"Bend over that chair!"

"Oh, certainly! I was only pointin' out that if there was another fellow on the spot—."

"Bend over!" roared Wingate.

Lord Mauleverer obediently bent over the chair, in a position for taking "six." The ashplant rose in the air. But his lordship twisted his head round, and looked up at Wingate, and went on speaking, in that rather peculiar position.

"If I knew who the man was, Wingate, I should jolly well be on his track, tryin' to find out whether he was up that night. If there were two fellows there in the dark, and you grabbed the wrong one—."

Mauleverer was interrupted by the descending ash.

Whop!

"Wow!" gasped his lordship.

"Now get out!" growled the Greyfriars captain. "Another word, you cheeky young ass, and I'll make it six."

Lord Mauleverer rose, wriggling. He had been let off with one whop, and it had not been a very hard one. But it made him wriggle. He went wriggling to the door, Wingate frowning after him as he went.

In the doorway, he paused and looked back.

"That's the man to get on the track of, Wingate," he said. "You know who he was, and if it turned out that he was up that night—."

Wingate made a stride towards him, the ashplant swishing. Lord Mauleverer skipped actively out of the study into the passage, and shut the door after him hastily. The prefect seemed half-inclined to open the door, and call him back. However, he threw the ashplant on the table.

"The young ass!" he growled.

He went back to the window, and stood looking out, with a knitted brow. Harry Wharton was still in sight, idling by the old elms. It came into Wingate's mind that if, by some almost impossible chance, he was guiltless, the hapless junior was getting very hard measure. But he shook his head.

What Mauleverer had said, had brought back Price of the Fifth to his mind. He and Gwynne had been on the watch for Price that night, almost certain that the black sheep of the Fifth intended to break out. So far as they knew, Price had done nothing of the kind, indeed, they had forgotten him, in the spot of excitement on the landing, and Wingate had hardly thought of him since. There was no ground whatever for suspecting that Price had stirred from his bed in the Fifth-form dormitory, and he had been dismissed from mind.

Now, however, Wingate was thinking of him. But he shook his head again, decidedly. He had collared the young rascal who had knocked him out in the dark, and there was no room for doubt. Mauleverer was a young ass, and he half-regretted that he had not given him "six."

And yet—!

Wingate's belief was unchanged. But Price's face with its stealthy furtive eyes, lingered in his mind. What Mauleverer had said, had not been wholly without result. If the captain of Greyfriars had not changed his belief, at least he had been given food for thought.

CHAPTER XXVII

NO LUCK FOR BUNTER

"I SAY, Wharton."

Harry Wharton did not turn his head, as he heard that fat squeak.

He was in the bike-shed, pumping a tyre. He was going out on his bike that afternoon—on his own.

Excepting for the cheery friendliness of Lord Mauleverer, the once-popular captain of the Remove was left to himself, these days. That was partly by his own choice, for his old friends would have stood by him, at a sign. But he did not choose to give that sign. Neither did he seem to care for the new and unaccustomed solitude in which he found himself. No one could read in his looks, at all events, that he felt his ostracism.

It was probable that, deep down in his heart, he was finding pride a cold companion, and sorely missed his old comrades. But nothing would have induced him to admit as much, even to himself. He went on his own way, with his chin up, and an indifferent face.

If he was tired of solitude, certainly he did not want it to be relieved by Billy Bunter. There were worse things than solitude, and William George Bunter was one of them.

The fat Owl rolled into the bike-shed, and squeaked unheeded. He blinked at the back of Wharton's head with an irritated blink.

"I say!" he squeaked again. Wharton went on pumping his tyre.

Billy Bunter seemed to have forgotten that, only the previous evening, he had marched down the Remove passage to No. 1 Study on the war-path. He even seemed to have forgotten that he had been booted out of that study. No doubt some matter of more importance was occupying his fat mind.

"I'm speaking to you, Wharton," he yapped. "Look here, are you deaf?"

Wharton seemed deaf, at least.

"Beast!" hooted Bunter. "I mean, look here, old chap! Has Coker gone out? I heard him tell Potter and Greene he was going on his bike. Has he been in for his jigger?"

"I don't know, and don't care, so don't bother," answered Harry, speaking at last.

"Beast! Look here, I want to know whether Coker's gone out yet. It's nothing about a hamper," added Bunter. "I don't know whether Coker's had a hamper or not and I never saw Gosling take it up to his study. I just want to know whether he's gone."

"Fathead!"

"Yah!"

Bunter blinked round at the machines on the stands.

If Coker of the Fifth had gone out on his bike, obviously his bike would not be there. And Bunter was very interested in Horace Coker's proceedings that afternoon—for excellent reasons not unconnected with a hamper in a Fifth-form study.

There was a tramp of feet, and four Remove fellows came in. Harry Wharton concentrated on his bike pump, in order not to see them.

They glanced at him, Frank Nugent compressing his lips a little, while Johnny Bull gave an audible grunt, and Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh shrugged his slim shoulders slightly. Bob Cherry seemed about to speak, but checked himself, and in silence they took their machines from the stands.

But as they wheeled them out, Bob paused. Harry Wharton, without looking round, knew that Bob was glancing back at him.

"Going out on your jigger, Wharton?" called out Bob, evidently making up his mind to one more attempt to break the ice.

"Yes," said Harry, briefly.

"Coming our way?"

"No!"

"Oh, come on," growled Johnny Bull, and the four juniors departed—leaving Harry Wharton, with an expressionless face, pumping, and Billy Bunter grinning. The fat Owl seemed amused by that little scene.

A minute later three Fifth-form men came in. Billy Bunter, still blinking round to ascertain whether Coker's machine was there, now had a view of the burly Coker himself—evidently not yet gone out.

Coker tramped in, followed by Potter and Greene. He glanced at Harry Wharton, and gave a snort. Coker, like most Greyfriars fellows just then, was down on that particular junior, with a very heavy down. His snort expressed what he thought of him.

"By gum!" said Coker, to Potter and Greene, "that young rotter's still here. What's he still here for—what?"

"Goodness knows," said Potter.

"Can't make it out!" said Greene.

Harry Wharton did not look round, but his ears burned. The opinion of Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form, weighed very little with him. But it was very unpleasant, all the same. Unpleasant as it was, it had to be tolerated. Punching a Fifth-form senior's head was not a practical proposition for a Lower Fourth junior. He pumped at his tyre and ignored Coker.

"I've a jolly good mind to boot him round the bike-shed," went on Coker. "Punching a man in the dark—pah!"

Wharton's eyes glinted. If Horace Coker had proceeded from words to deeds, he would undoubtedly have found the junior rather like a wildcat to handle. Luckily, Coker contented himself with another contemptuous snort, wheeled out his machine, and departed with Potter and Greene.

"He, he, he!" came from Bunter.

Harry Wharton put up his pump, and took his machine to wheel out, heedless of that fat cachinnation.

"I say, Harry, old chap." Bunter rolled in his way, "I say—."

"Get out of the way, fathead!"

"Hold on a minute, old fellow. I say, you jolly well heard Coker slanging you—."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Beast! I mean, look here, old chap! I can tell you how to jolly well pay him out," said Bunter, eagerly. "There's a hamper in his study—you know the hampers he gets from that old sketch of an aunt of his. Serve him jolly well right to scoff it, after slanging you like that, old fellow! I say, I'll keep cave in the passage, while you—."

"Get out, you fat ass."

"Oh, really, Wharton! Like Coker's cheek to slang you like that," urged Bunter. "You can't punch him in the jaw—you couldn't catch him in the dark like you did Wingate—he, he, he—but look here, I'll jolly well help you scoff that hamper, and I say-yarooooooh!"

The front wheel of a bike banged on a pair of little fat legs, as a hint to Bunter to get out of the way. The fat Owl tottered and sat down.

"Ow! wow! Beast! wow!" gasped Bunter.

Harry Wharton wheeled out the bike, and Bunter was left sitting and spluttering. He scrambled up, and rolled out of the bike-shed, and cast an infuriated blink after the captain of the Remove, who was mounting his bike at the gate.

"Yah!" roared Bunter. "Who punched a man in the dark? Who ought to be sacked! Who's barred by the form? Yah!"

And having delivered that defiance at the back of Wharton's head, the fat Owl rolled away to the House. Coker was gone now, with his two study-mates, and most of the fellows were out, on a half-holiday. Nobody was likely to be about the Fifth-form studies, unless that smudge, Price, might be smoking in his study, or that lackadaisical ass, Hilton, loafing about. Nobody, at all events, would be in Coker's study—only the hamper! Billy Bunter, certainly, would have preferred to keep cave, while another fellow handled the hamper. But there was no cat's-paw available, and if the fat Owl was going to sample the good things from Coker's Aunt Judy, it was clear that his own fat hands had to do the deed.

He was very cautious, as he blinked into the Fifth-form passage. Nobody, as he had hoped, was about. Almost on tiptoe, he crept up the passage to Coker's study.

He had almost reached it, when the door of the next study opened, and Hilton of the Fifth came out, and almost walked into Bunter.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter, startled. Hilton stared at him.

"What do you want here, you young ass?" he asked.

"Oh! Nothing!" stammered Bunter. "I—I wasn't going into Coker's study—I—I mean, I—I've got a message for him from Prout—Prout told me to come up to Coker's hamper—I mean Coker's study—look here, you leggo my ear, Hilton—yow-ow-ow! I wasn't after Coker's hamper—I didn't know he had a hamper—yow-wow! Will you leggo my ear?" yelled Bunter.

"I think you'd better cut," said Hilton, laughing. Bunter thought so too, when his fat ear was released.

He retreated from the Fifth-form quarters, rubbing a burning ear, and Horace Coker's hamper, for the present at least, remained the property of Horace Coker.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A FRIEND IN NEED!

MARJORIE HAZELDENE slowed down on her bicycle, her eyes fixed intently, and rather curiously, on a figure by the roadside ahead.

She was riding back from Friardale to Cliff House, by the road over the cliffs, when she caught sight of Harry Wharton.

He did not see her coming. His bicycle was leaning against one of the chalk rocks by the roadside, and he was standing, with his hands in his pockets, staring out to sea. Apparently he was watching the sea-gulls circling over Pegg Bay, as if deeply interested in their wheeling and calling. But the Cliff House girl could see that his face was dark and moody, lined with gloomy thought, and a look of concern came over her own face. After one look at Harry, she did not need telling that all was not well with her schoolboy friend of Greyfriars.

She was quite near at hand, when Wharton heard the bicycle and turned his head, with a little start. His moody brow cleared, as he saw her, and he raised his cap. The sight of a kind and friendly face brought a gleam of brightness into his own.

"Marjorie!" he exclaimed.

The Cliff House girl dismounted.

"I saw you some distance off," she said, smiling. "Day-dreaming?"

"Oh! No!" Wharton stammered, and coloured a little. "Not exactly. The fact is—" He broke off.

"Waiting here for your friends?"

"Oh!" Wharton's colour deepened. "No!"

"You're generally in a bunch on a half-holiday," said Marjorie. She smiled again. "No cricket to-day? Isn't it the Carcroft match next week?" Marjorie always remembered the Greyfriars junior fixtures.

"Yes! I'd almost forgotten it, though. I suppose I should have fixed up something this afternoon, but if things had been as usual, I mean—."

"Aren't they as usual?"

"Well, no."

"Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Well, yes."

"Something serious?" asked Marjorie.

"Yes, pretty serious. But—but I don't want to bother you with my scrapes—."

"I shouldn't think it a bother, Harry."

"No, I know you wouldn't! I think you'd believe me, too, and—and I'd like to hear you say so—" he stammered. "I'm jolly glad I met you, Marjorie—it will do me good, if you tell me you believe me, after what I've had the last few days."

"You can take that for granted," said Marjorie, quietly.

"It's serious, Marjorie! It's on the cards that I may be hoofed out of Greyfriars."

"Harry!"

"My own fault, partly, I'm afraid," said Wharton, ruefully. "I've been rather a fool. But you wouldn't believe that I'd done anything to ask for the sack."

"Hardly."

"Yes, I knew," said Harry. "Bob—I—I mean Cherry—says that you've got more sense in your little finger, than most fellows have in their heads—."

"Bob—you mean Cherry!" repeated Marjorie. Her face became very grave. "That doesn't mean that you've had some quarrel with old Bob, does it?"

"I'm afraid it does."

Marjorie stood looking at him. Wharton's colour deepened to crimson. Marjorie believed in him, without question, though she did not yet know what the trouble was. But she did not believe that Bob had been to blame, if there had been a quarrel. That was plainly to be read in her grave face.

"You don't know what's happened, Marjorie," said Wharton, lamely. "Look here, if you're not in a hurry, let's walk the bikes, and I'll tell you—if you'd care to hear—."

"I should very much care to hear," answered Marjorie. "Tell me what's happened." And, as they walked the bikes along the sunny cliff road, in the direction of Cliff House, he told her.

She listened very quietly, and with close attention, as he gave her his account of the trouble at Greyfriars. She did not speak, and her face was very thoughtful.

"You needn't tell me that I've been rather an ass, and asked for a lot of what I've got," Wharton wound up. "I've had plenty of time to think it over, and I can see that plainly enough. So can you, I suppose."

Marjorie smiled faintly, but did not answer.

"Well, I've come to that myself," said Harry. "It all started with my getting my back up and cheeking old Wingate. But—he fancied that I was bullying that fat ass Bunter, and I—I had my back up, and—and—well, I did tell him not to talk rot! That was the beginning of it all. That was really why I had the six! It wasn't the licking, of course, I could take that! But it seemed so rotten unjust. But—I was a priceless fool to think of getting back on Wingate by shipping his study—a bit of a rotter too—I can see that now, though I couldn't then—."

"I can understand how you felt," said Marjorie, softly. "It was quite natural, but—but—."

"But I was a wrong-headed ass," said Harry, with a rueful smile. "Johnny called it sulks, and—and I suppose it was like that, but—but it didn't help, at the time. But you'll believe this, Marjorie—when I came along to the landing in the dark, and heard that moan, and knew that old Wingate had been hurt, I was sorry I'd ever thought of getting back on him—I could jolly well have kicked myself—and I ran up to help him, never thinking of anything else—that's true, Marjorie."

"That's like you," said Marjorie. "More like you than the other things you've told me."

"But it was rotten luck," said Harry, moodily. "Wingate had a nasty crack on the head, and he must have been coming to, when I heard him moan. He fancies that he was stunned for only a moment—but it must have been a good minute, at least—time for the other man to get away and for me to come up. But what was he to think, when I stumbled over him and he grabbed me—I ought not to have been there at all—that did it."

Evidently Wharton had been doing some thinking on the subject, and was in a chastened mood. The clouds of angry temper having passed away, he was able to see the episode as it appeared in other eyes.

"You have no idea who the other man was?" asked Marjorie.

"Not in the least! It might have been the man Wingate was watching for—I don't know who. Or some other fellow breaking out. I don't know."

"They may find him—."

"It doesn't seem likely, now it's fixed on me, and nobody seems to think of looking any further," said Harry.

"Only your head-master," said Marjorie, quietly. "Yes, the Head's a wise old bird! That's the only silver lining to the cloud. It looks a clear case to everybody else—but he can see that it's not so jolly clear as it looks. I don't know how he'll decide—but nothing's happened so far."

"Your friends believe you?" Wharton's face set.

"They're not my friends now, Marjorie. They seem to have believed me when I told them what had happened, the next day. But—before that—I had no chance to explain, and they believed that I had done a rotten beastly thing—they believed like all the rest that I'd hit a man a foul blow in the dark—I couldn't get over that—." His voice trembled a little. "I—I just couldn't—."

Marjorie did not speak. They wheeled on the machines in silence, and Harry, at last, stole a look at her grave face.

"Do you think that I'm in the wrong in that too, Marjorie?" he asked, very quietly.

"You want me to answer plainly?"

"Of course."

"Well, I do think so," said Marjorie.

Harry Wharton's face fell. The dark moody look returned to it, and he said nothing.

"I'm sorry, Harry," said Marjorie, softly. "But—you asked me."

"So I'm in the wrong all along the line," said Harry.

There was a bitter note in his voice. "They couldn't wait till I had a chance to speak—they had to line up with the rest—they couldn't trust me—." His eyes gleamed. "And they said they'd stick to me after what I'd done—and I had done nothing. And—and I'm in the wrong—."

"I don't see what else they could have thought, Harry, when you had placed yourself in such a position by your own fault," said Marjorie.

"Oh!"

"You say they believed you when you told them what had really happened. Surely that was showing great faith in you, when everybody else—."

"Everybody except old Mauly! Yes, I suppose I ought to be grateful for that much," said Wharton, with a curl of the lip.

"Now you are angry," said Marjorie. "I won't say any more—only that I'm sorry."

They walked on silently, till Cliff House came in sight in the distance. Harry Wharton's face was dark with painful thought. It was not easy for him to subdue the stubborn pride that had been his undoing. He spoke at last.

"I can't do anything now, Marjorie."

"Why not?"

"Well, look at it! I'm practically an outcast—not a man except old Mauly is sticking to me. If—if I did anything now, it would look as if I couldn't do without them—." He broke off, as he met Marjorie's clear eyes. "Do you think that's just silly pride?"

She did not answer, but her silence was enough. There was another struggle in Wharton's mind, as they walked on without speaking. But it was his better self that prevailed.

"I—I suppose you're right," he said, at last. "You think I'm a hot-headed ass in the sulks—."

"I don't think anything of the kind," said Marjorie. "But I think you ought to make it up as soon as you can with your old friends, and that it's up to the one who is in the wrong to take the first step."

Harry Wharton winced.

"Well, if you think I'm in the wrong, I suppose I am," he said. "Anyhow, I'll jolly well take your advice,"

Marjorie's face brightened.

"You won't be sorry for that," she said.

Harry Wharton did not feel quite sure of that. But when he parted with Marjorie at the gate of Cliff House, and mounted his machine to ride back to Greyfriars, his mind was made up.

CHAPTER XXIX

NOT GOOD ENOUGH!

STEPHEN PRICE sat in his study, smoking cigarettes, with a scowl on his face. Price of the Fifth was not in a happy mood that sunny afternoon.

Hilton had been in the study when Price came in. He had not spoken, and after a few minutes, he had gone out, still without speaking. He was not exactly "cutting" Price, but it was plain that he wanted to have as little to do with him as possible, and Price could not fail to know why. Harry Wharton's version of the happenings on Wednesday night was known to all, finding few if any believers. But Hilton, who knew that Price had been out of his dormitory at the time, and had bolted back in a state of terrified funk, knew that the Remove Junior had told the truth. He said nothing on the subject, but Price knew what was in his mind, and why his pal kept him at arm's length.

Price had few friends in his form. The cricketing men in the Fifth despised his slack ways, and fellows who were keen in class did not find him among their number. Hilton's easy-going nature tolerated him as a pal, and his friendship, such as it was, meant a good deal to the needy, unscrupulous fellow, and now it seemed that he was losing it. He despised Hilton as a fool, but he did not want to lose him.

That was not the only worry on his mind. He could not be sure that his part in the episode on the dark landing might not come to light.

It had been a stroke of sheer luck, from Price's point of view, for suspicion, or rather certainty, to fall on that Remove kid. The cheeky young rascal had asked for it, and got it, and nothing could have happened more luckily for the real culprit. His conscience did not trouble him, his feelings towards the captain of the Remove were too bitter for that. Had Wharton been expelled on the spot, as almost everyone expected, it would have been a relief to him. But the fact that the head-master had not yet taken that extreme step, left Price with a lingering twinge of uneasiness.

Yet what was the danger? Hilton, whatever he thought, would say nothing, and no one else even dreamed of him in connection with the occurrence. He was safe—quite safe. But he could not feel quite easy.

There was perhaps one consolation in the whole affair.

Blue Fox, that "dark horse," that sure snip, that certain winner, had not, after all, "romped" home in the two-thirty at Wapshot. Like so many dead certs and sure snips, he had tailed in at the end of the field. And as Price, after all, had not been "on," he was not under the necessity of borrowing five pounds from Hilton to settle with Joey Banks.

He was not thinking of that, however, as he sat smoking and scowling in his study. He was thinking of another race and another horse—cunning as he was, and clever as he deemed himself, he was quite incapable of learning anything from such a lesson. He still fancied that he could spot winners, but he did not fancy that he could borrow money from Hilton in present circumstances, which was awkward for a sportsman who was in the state known as "stony."

His unpleasant meditations were interrupted by a tap at the door. It was opened, and Nugent minor of the Second Form looked in.

Price's cigarette disappeared in his hand behind him.

He did not want even a Second-form fag to see him smoking in his study.

And his heart gave an unpleasant jump, as he saw Dicky Nugent. Nugent minor was Wingate's fag, and his coming to the study could only mean a message from the captain of the school. A ghastly dread that Wingate had somehow found something out came over Price. If he was sent for—

"Oh, you're here," said Dicky Nugent, staring across the study at him. "Wingate wants you to go to his study, Price."

"O.K.," said Price, as carelessly as he could. The fag shut the door and went.

Price rose to his feet, his hands trembling. He threw away the stump of his cigarette. He was not feeling like smoking now. His narrow eyes gleamed like a startled rat's.

"What does he want?" he muttered. "What has he sent for me for? He can't know a thing—he thinks it was that young cad Wharton—. Nothing can have come out—nothing!"

He stood in harassed thought for two or three minutes.

The way of the transgressor was hard, for one who had not the courage of his transgressions. He left the study at last, assuming as careless an air as he could, as he went down. Wingate could know nothing, and if he suspected anything, hard lying was not a new resource for Price of the Fifth. And perhaps Wingate only wanted to see him about something else—to "jaw" him for slacking at games, perhaps. He hoped so.

His manner was casual enough, as he tapped at the door of Wingate's study, and entered. Wingate, sitting in the window, fixed his eyes on him, with so searching a look, that Price felt an inward tremor. Something was in the prefect's mind, he could see that. He could not know that it was what Lord Mauleverer had said in that study a few hours ago. Never had the black sheep of the Fifth been more warily on his guard.

"You wanted to see me, Wingate," he said.



HE RAISED HIS EYEBROWS, WITH AN AIR OF SURPRISE

"Yes! Take a pew, Price. "

Price sat down.

"About the cricket?" he asked. "The fact is, I was just going down to change, for the nets, when I got your message."

"Never mind that now," said Wingate. He paused, his eyes still searchingly on the Fifth-former. "Look here, Price, I'll put it plain. The other night, when I was knocked out on the dormitory landing, I was looking for you."

Price had guessed that long ago. But he raised his eyebrows, with an air of surprise.

"For me?" he repeated.

"Yes, for you."

"I don't quite catch on," said Price, looking puzzled.

"From what I've heard, it happened after eleven o'clock at night. We go to roost at nine-forty-five in the Fifth, as I expect you know."

"Oh, quite! Did you get out of your dorm after lights out?"

Price breathed hard.

"Why on earth should I?" he asked.

"That's not an answer. Did you?"

"Certainly not."

"I gave you a warning the other day," said Wingate. "I didn't get any impression that it would be of any use to you, Price. I was pretty certain that you'd got some rot on for the Wapshot races, and I more than half-expected you to break out that night. That's why I was there."

Price laughed.

"So far as I know, I never opened my eyes at all that night," he said. "You'd have had a long wait, Wingate, if Wharton hadn't known you were there, and come along and punched you."

Wingate sat silent, looking at him. In spite of his fixed belief, Lord Mauleverer's words had made him think of Price. And now that he sat looking at the furtive face and shifty eyes, somehow his doubt strengthened. Yet there was not a shred of evidence—not the ghost of a shred—nothing to "go upon" save his suspicion that Price had intended to break out, a suspicion that had seemed, after all, to be groundless. He did not like Price, and could not trust him, but dislike and distrust did not count. There was absolutely nothing to connect Stephen Price with the affair.

"It all hinges on this," said Wingate, at last. "I was knocked out, and lost my senses for a moment. But it might easily have been for more than a moment, as it seemed—I couldn't know. If it was, there was time for one man to get away and another to come on the scene—which is that young sweep's story."

"A very thin story," commented Price. "From what I've heard, you caught him right in the act."

"So I thought—and still think. But—look here, if there was another man on the spot at all, it gives young Wharton a chance. There's not an atom of evidence that any other fellow was there, but—if by some remote chance that young sweep came on the scene, after I was knocked out, as he says, he's getting pretty hard measure." Wingate's brow wrinkled. "The Head seems to think it a case of 'Not Proven'—and the Head knows a lot. Look here, Price—"

"Well?"

"I've come to this," said Wingate. "If it was some other man who knocked me out, and he owns up, I'll let him off. The Head trusts me, as his head-prefect, and I can rely upon him leaving the matter in my hands, if I make a point of it—he will know I've good reason, without asking questions. What I'm anxious about is that the wrong man shan't get it in the neck for what happened that night—I don't care much about anything else, compared with that. If it was some other fellow, not Wharton, and he owns up, I'll wash the whole thing out—he will have nothing to fear."

Price drew a deep, deep breath.

There was no doubt in Wingate's mind, he could see that. He was certain that Wharton of the Remove was the man, yet his thoughts lingered on Price. If Price was the man, the Greyfriars captain was giving him a chance to own up without having to face the consequences of what he had done.

That offer did not tempt Price in the least. His was not a trusting nature. What Price saw in it was a trap.

"That's what I wanted to say to you, Price," said Wingate, after a pause. "And now—have you anything to tell me?"

Price shook his head.

"I won't pretend to misunderstand you, Wingate," he said, "but I've nothing to say on the subject—except what I've said already."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing."

"That's all, then," said Wingate, and the Fifth-form man left his study. The door closed on him, before he allowed a bitter, sardonic sneer to appear on his face. Price flattered himself that he was too "wide" to be trapped so easily as all that! It was not quite good enough—for Price!

Wingate, with a knitted brow, sat staring from his study window. His frown deepened, as he caught sight of Harry Wharton, coming from the direction of the bike-shed. The junior's face seemed to have lost the expression of hard indifference, which it had worn of late, it was brighter, somehow, as if he felt that his affairs had taken a more cheerful turn. But Wingate's brow grew darker and darker as he watched him go into the House. Price, if by some remote possibility he was the guilty man, had been given a chance which surely, if he was guilty, he would not have refused. So it seemed at least to George Wingate. Yet his brow grew darker and darker with troubled thought, and doubt grew in his mind.

CHAPTER XXX

UNEXPECTED!

"ROTTEN all round!" growled Bob Cherry.

"The rottenfulness is terrific!" sighed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"We can't do anything," muttered Nugent.

Grunt from Johnny Bull.

"We've done all we can—more than most fellows would have done. Wharton chooses to keep his back up! Well, leave it at that."

"Not if we can help it," said Frank, quietly.

Another grunt from Johnny!

"Can't make a chap see reason, if he won't!" he said.

"Though you take a horse to the water, you cannot make him spoil the broth, as the English proverb remarks," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, sadly.

"But we can't go on like this," said Bob. "We're playing Carcroft next week, and Wharton's skipper. A lot of the fellows are talking about turning him out. We're not standing for that."

"We're to back him up, against all the form, and get the marble eye for our pains?" asked Johnny.

"Um!" said Bob, rubbing his nose thoughtfully.

"Well, it's jolly rotten all round, as I said."

They were in Bob Cherry's study, after tea, talking it over. It was undeniable that it was "rotten" all round, all the Co. agreed on that. But what was to be done, and whether anything could be done, was another matter, not so easily decided.

"Harry thinks that we let him down," said Nugent, in a low voice, "and—and—so we did, more or less—."

"Rot!" said Johnny Bull. "We had to take what Quelch said. Wharton shouldn't have been there at all. He asked for it, and got it."

"We might have waited till he had a chance to tell us—."

"We never knew he had anything to tell us. And what he did tell us, afterwards, was too jolly steep, for anybody else to believe. He ought to be jolly glad that we could swallow it."

"That's so," said Bob. "But—well, he felt sore about it. But he never needed his pals more than he does now—."

"That would be reason enough for him to turn them down!" snorted Johnny. "That's the sort of stiff-necked ass he is."

"Look here, Johnny—!"

"Rot!" said Johnny. "Are we going down on our knees? You fellows can, if you like! I'm fed up."

"That won't get us any forrarder," said Bob.

"We've been pals too long, to let it end like this, if we can help it," said Frank. "But—what can we do?"

"Nothing," said Johnny Bull. "We've done all we can, and I'm not doing any more, for one. I'd be as glad as anybody to go back to the old footing—but I've had enough airs and graces. It's up to Wharton now."

"He won't take the first step," said Frank.

"Why shouldn't he?" demanded Johnny.

"Well, he won't."

"And it isn't the first step," continued Johnny. "We've taken the first, and the second too, and if he doesn't choose to take the third, he can suit himself so far as I'm concerned. It's up to Wharton to say he's sorry."

"Can't quite hear him saying it," said Bob, ruefully.

Tap!

The study door opened.

Bob Cherry and Co. looked round. They stared at the sight of Harry Wharton in the doorway. There was a dead silence, for a moment. It was Harry who broke it.

"I couldn't help hearing what you said, Bull—your voice isn't exactly a whisper," he said.

Johnny Bull looked at him rather like a bulldog. "You're welcome to hear what I said," he retorted. "No secret about it. I'll say it over again if you like."

"No need, I heard it quite distinctly. You said that it's up to me to say that I'm sorry."

"So it is," said Johnny Bull, uncompromisingly. "You've got your silly back up about nothing, and rowed with your pals because you're a sulky ass, and—"

"Shut up, Johnny," said Frank, hastily.

"I'm not going to shut up! You know it as well as I do! What's the good of beating about the bush? We speak plainly in Yorkshire, where I come from," grunted Johnny. "Plain speech never did any harm. Anybody who doesn't like it can lump it."

"I can't say I like it, exactly," said Harry Wharton, thoughtfully, "but I suppose I could lump it, at a pinch."

"Eh?" Johnny stared at him. The others were staring too, Frank very uneasily. Why Wharton had come to the study, they did not know, unless he was looking for trouble. Certainly Johnny Bull's extreme plainness of speech was likely to encourage him on that course, if such was his idea. But it was the unexpected that happened.

"Sorry!" said Harry Wharton, politely.

"Eh! What do you mean?" asked Johnny, taken aback.

"Isn't that what you wanted me to say?"

"Oh!"

"Harry—!" exclaimed Nugent.

"Well now I've said it," said Harry. "I've been doing some thinking this afternoon, and I've had some advice from somebody who's got more sense than the lot of us put together. I came here to say that I'm sorry I've been such a fathead, and to ask you fellows to wash it all out—if you feel that way."

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"No 'if' about it, old man," he said.

"The if-fulness is not terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The gladfulness is enormous to see the smile of idiotic friendship replace the frown of absurd inimicality."

"We're sorry too—!" said Nugent.

"We're not," said Johnny Bull. "I don't see anything for us to be sorry about."

"For goodness sake, shut up, old man," said Bob.

"Speech is silvery, my esteemed Johnny, but a still tongue locks the stable door that makes Jack a dull boy," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The least said, the sooner the cracked pitcher goes longest to the well."

"Well, I think—!" recommenced Johnny.

"Gammon!" said Bob.

"I think—!"

"Don't exaggerate, old chap—."

"I tell you I think—."

"You can tell us till you're black in the face, but we shan't be able to get it down," said Bob, shaking his head.

"You silly ass!" roared Johnny.

"Same to you, with knobs on."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Never mind what you think, Johnny," he said. "We'll take the speech as read. But there's one more thing—."

"There isn't," interrupted Bob. "Or if there is, forget it."

"I'd better say it. If you fellows stand by me, you're the only fellows who will, excepting old Mauly. You'll have all the form against you—."

"Blow the form."

"And everybody else, for that matter—."

"Blow everybody else."

"And it's on the cards that I may be sacked," added Harry. "I'm not asking you fellows to stick to a man who may be turfed out in disgrace—."

"No, you wouldn't," grunted Johnny Bull. "Still got a stiff neck, what?"

"No," said Harry, "but—."

"Well, wash out the butts. We're sticking to you, whether you get bunked or not—and all the more if you are."

"Hear, hear!" said Nugent, laughing. "The stickfulness will be terrific."

"Not to say preposterous!" chuckled Bob. "My dear chap, we're sticking to you like Bunter to a jam-tart. That's that!"

And as the Famous Five, once more happily united, went down to the Rag, Harry Wharton was thankful, from the bottom of his heart, that he had met Marjorie that day, and had been sensible enough to act on her wise counsel. The clouds were still dark over him, and what would be the outcome he could not know. But he had, at least, retrieved one false step, and whatever was to come, he had his old friends to help him face it.

CHAPTER XXXI

SIX FOR THREE!

"OH!" breathed Harry Wharton.

His face crimsoned.

It was third school on Monday morning. Mr. Quelch had let the Remove into their form-room, and gone to his desk, while the juniors filed to their places. The blackboard, which had been used in second school, was still standing on its easel, facing the form. Quelch saw only its back, which presented its customary aspect. The Remove fellows saw its front, and a chalked inscription thereon, in large capital letters.

Frank Nugent, as he saw it, hurried out of his place, with a flushed and angry face, to pick up the duster. A gimlet-eye from Quelch's high desk fell on him as he did so.

"Nugent!"

"Oh! Yes sir! I—."

"What are you doing? Go back to your place at once."

Frank reluctantly went to his place. His action had drawn general attention to the blackboard, and all eyes were fixed on it. A few fellows were frowning, a good many grinning, and most, after looking at the blackboard, looked at the captain of the Remove, who sat with a burning face.

Skinner winked at Snoop. Snoop giggled, and Billy Bunter grinned. The Bounder laughed. Mr. Quelch, busy with papers at his desk, did not seem to notice, for a moment, that there was anything "on" in his form. But he had to notice a wave of whispering, and a fat cachinnation that floated unmusically across the form-room.

He looked up sharply.

"Bunter!"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter, in alarm. "It wasn't me, sir."

"What? What was not you, Bunter?"

"Oh! Nothing, sir! I—I mean—anything, sir! I—I wasn't laughing, sir, at what's written on the blackboard—."

"Is something written on the blackboard?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

His brows knitted. The form-room was locked during break, and if something had been written on the blackboard, it meant that some person unknown had clambered in at the open window—probably with the help of a "bunk" from another, which was, of course, very much against the rules.

"I—I don't know, sir," stammered the fat Owl, "I—I can't see it from here, sir—I—I'm rather short-sighted—."

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Quelch. "Wharton!"

He called to his Head Boy. "Is there anything written on the blackboard?"

Wharton compressed his lips. "Yes, sir."

"What is it?"

Harry Wharton hesitated. There was a general grin up and down the Remove. Harry Wharton was the very last fellow in the form who could have wanted to read out what was written there.

Mr. Quelch gave him an impatient look.

"Do you hear me, Wharton?" he rapped, testily. "If there is anything written on the blackboard, tell me at once what it is."

"Very well, sir," said Harry, quietly.

Billy Bunter very nearly ejaculated "He, he, he!" again, but suppressed it in time. There were grinning faces all through the form, as Wharton, in a clear voice, read out what was chalked on the blackboard.

"Wharton ought to be sacked."

"What?" he exclaimed. "What do you mean, Wharton?"

"That is what is written there, sir," answered Harry.

"Upon my word!"

Mr. Quelch left his desk, and came round the blackboard, to see for himself. He fixed his eyes on the chalked inscription that sprawled across the board from side to side,

WHARTON OUGHT TO BE SACKED

"Upon my word!" repeated Mr. Quelch. His gimlet-eyes glinted over the form, and two or three fellows felt an inward tremor. Still, Quelch couldn't possibly know who had chalked on the board—how could he?

"Who wrote those words on the blackboard?" rapped Mr. Quelch.

There was no reply. Probably Mr. Quelch did not expect one.

"Some boy must have entered the form-room surreptitiously during break," said Mr. Quelch, in a deep voice. "I shall ascertain who it was, and cane him severely. In the meantime, you may take the duster, Wharton, and wipe the board clean."

The chalked inscription disappeared under the duster, and Harry Wharton, with set lips, returned to his place. Mr. Quelch stood looking at his form, in a dead silence.

"I order the boy who entered this form-room surreptitiously to stand out before the form!" he rapped.

No one stirred. Quelch scanned the form, with eyes like gimlets, scanning every fellow in the room in turn. Then he rapped out,

"Bunter!"

Bunter almost bounded.

"Oh!" he stuttered. "I—I—it wasn't me, sir! I—I didn't—I—I never—I—I ain't syrupstitious, sir—."

"How did you get chalk on the sleeve of your jacket, Bunter?"

"Oh, crikey! I—I didn't—I—I haven't—I—I wasn't—I—I never wiped my fingers on my sleeve, sir—I—."

"Stand out before the form, Bunter."

"Oh, crikey!"

Up to that point, Billy Bunter had been amused. Now he ceased to be amused all of a sudden. His fat face registered woe and dread, as he rolled out reluctantly before the form.

"That fat ass!" murmured Bob Cherry. "Somebody must have put him up to it."

"Silence in the form! Bunter—!"

"Oh, lor'! I—I mean, I—I didn't," groaned Bunter. "I—I never got any chalk on my fingers, sir, and I—I never wiped them on my sleeve, and—and—."

"It was you, Bunter, who entered the form-room during break, by the window."

"Oh! No, sir! I—I was in the tuck-shop at the time, sir—I—I never came anywhere near that window, sir, besides, I—I couldn't climb in at that window unless a fellow bunked me up, and Skinner never bunked me up, did you, Skinner?"

Skinner did not speak. He only looked at Billy Bunter as if he could have bitten him.

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. "Skinner—."

"No, sir! Oh, no, sir! Skinner never bunked me up, and Snoop didn't help him—did you, Snoop? I—I was up in my study, sir, when I got in at that window—I mean when I didn't got in—."

"Skinner! Snoop! Stand out before the form."

Mr. Quelch stepped to his desk, and picked up his cane.

Skinner and Snoop almost crawled out of their places, fervently wishing that they had not assisted the fatuous fat Owl to perform that exploit in break.

Mr. Quelch eyed them grimly.

"Skinner! Snoop! Did you, or did you not, assist Bunter to enter this form-room by the window?"

"It—it was only a lark, sir—!" stammered Skinner.

Snoop gave an indistinct mumble.

"Bunter!" rapped Mr. Quelch.

"Yes, sir! I—I mean, no sir! I didn't, sir—I wasn't—."

"You will bend over that desk, Bunter."

"Oh, crikey!"

Six times the cane swiped on Billy Bunter's tight trousers. Six frantic howls awoke the echoes of the form-room and the corridor outside.

"Skinner—!"

Skinner bent over in his turn, and six swipes sounded like pistol-shots.

"Snoop!"

There were six more shots.

Three dismal youths tottered back to their places—where they sat very uncomfortably. Mr. Quelch laid down his cane. Then he stood looking at his form, with a frowning brow. Apparently there was something more to come. After a pause he spoke.

"I trust," he said, "that there will be no further occurrence of this kind. The charge against Wharton is not proved, and so long as a doubt remains, justice requires that an accused person should be given the benefit of the doubt. It is quite true that at the time there seemed to be no doubt in the matter, owing to Wharton's folly in placing himself in the position in which he was found. But it has transpired that doubt does exist, and it is for your head-master, not for boys of this form, to decide. Until the matter is decided, I shall keep an open mind on the subject, and I advise the boys of my form to do the same. Wharton, you will now give out the papers."

And the Remove settled down to Latin papers, though, after what Mr. Quelch had said, most of them had quite other food for thought.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT!

"ROT!" said Vernon-Smith.

"Smithy, old man—!" murmured Tom Redwing.

"Rot!" repeated the Bounder.

"Rubbish!" said Bolsover major.

There was a little crowd of the Remove in the Rag.

Harry Wharton and Co. had gone down to the nets, but most of the Remove fellows had gathered in the Rag, where a rather excited discussion was going on.

Lord Mauleverer, reposing at ease in a deep armchair, had a placid smile on his face. His lordship was feeling good. Many Remove fellows, after what Quelch had said in the form-room that morning, were coming round to his way of thinking, in the affair of Harry Wharton, which was satisfactory. Still more satisfactory, perhaps, to his lazy lordship, was the circumstance that, now that Harry was on the old terms with his old friends, there was no need for him to exert himself in the cause of friendship, to the extent of bowling at the nets for the outcast of the form.

Billy Bunter was in another armchair, but he was not exactly reposing in it. The fat Owl was still feeling some of the effects of the six he had had that morning, and every now and then he gave an eel-like wriggle. Bunter, however, was not thinking wholly of the six, nor of the discussion that was going on. His fat thoughts wandered to Coker's hamper, which had narrowly escaped him on Saturday, and he was wondering, with deep interest, what might still remain in that hamper, and whether there might be a chance of sampling it before afternoon school. Dinner, certainly, had taken the edge off Billy Bunter's appetite. But Bunter always had room for more.

Skinner and Snoop were scowling. They had no desire whatever for fellows to keep open minds on the subject of Wharton, as Mr. Quelch had recommended. And the Bounder, certainly, was not going to change his views in a hurry, with an eye still darkened, and a nose still swollen, from the fight in the Rag, and perhaps with a thought in his mind of the captaincy of the form, with the present captain out of the way. But it was clear that a good many fellows were influenced by what the Remove master had said, added to the fact that Wharton's old friends were backing him.

"You can see what Quelch thinks!" said Squiff.

"Well, Quelch's a downy bird."

"I know what he told us in the dorm," sneered Vernon-Smith. "Nothing about keeping an open mind then, was there?"

"Well, it looked a certain thing then, Smithy," said Peter Todd. "What was anybody to think, with that hot-headed ass caught on the spot?"

"And it looks a certain thing now," said the Bounder.

"Quelch doesn't think so," said Tom Brown.

"Are we all going to chop and change with Quelch?" jeered Smithy. "When father says turn, we all turn—is that it?"

"Oh, don't be an ass, Smithy," said Mark Linley. "I know Wharton's yarn sounds steep, but I never could quite get it down that he was telling lies about it. It's not like him."

"Think he'd tell the truth about it, and ask to be sacked?" sneered Skinner. "No fellow would, if you come to that."

"You wouldn't, you mean," grunted Squiff. "No need to tell us that!"

"I say, you fellows—!" came from Bunter's armchair.

"Oh, shut up, Bunter."

"Beast! I say, I jolly well know that Wharton did it, and he jolly well ought to be sacked for it, just like I wrote on the blackboard," yapped Bunter. "I jolly well know—."

"And how do you know, ass?" asked Peter.

"Well, look how he banged my head—!"

"You howling ass!"

"Oh, really, Toddy—."

"But if it wasn't Wharton, who was it?" asked Skinner. "You're making out that somebody else punched Wingate in the dark, now. Well, who?"

"Ask us another!" said Tom Brown. "The Head must think that somebody else might have done it, or he would have bunted Wharton before this."

"And old Mauly believed in him all the time," said Ogilvy.

"Mauly's a silly ass!" said Smithy.

"Thanks!" yawned Lord Mauleverer.

"After all, his pals are backing him up," said Squiff.

"Bob, and Nugent, and Bull, and old Inky—. They believe what he's said about it."

"Trying to, I daresay," sneered Smithy.

"Look here, Smithy," said Tom Redwing, "Quelch was right on the wicket in saying that an accused man is entitled to the benefit of the doubt—."

"There isn't any doubt," said the Bounder, obstinately.

"Well, most of us think there is, and Quelch and the Head seem to think so," said Squiff, "and I don't see barring a chap for something that somebody else may have done—."

"Same here," said Tom Brown.

"Rot!" said the Bounder.

"I say, you fellows, I don't think Wharton ought to be let off, after the way he banged my head—."

"You'll get your silly head banged again, Bunter, if you don't shut up," hooted Squiff.

"Beast!"

There was a tramp of feet in the doorway, and five fellows in flannels came in, in a cheery bunch. The discussion in the Rag died away, as the Famous Five came in. The Co. glanced round inquiringly, and Harry Wharton's face set a little. He did not need telling that he had been the subject under discussion.

Squiff looked round at the other fellows, and then walked across to the captain of the Remove. The Australian junior was a direct fellow, and having thought the matter out and made up his mind, he did not hesitate.

"Look here, Wharton—!" he said.

"Looking!" said Harry.

"We've been talking it over—."

"I could see that," said Harry, drily.

"We just don't know whether you gave Wingate that jolt or not," said Squiff. "That's your own fault."

"Is it?"

"If you don't know that it is, any fellow in the Remove could tell you, including your own pals," said Squiff, tartly.

The Co. stood uneasily silent. They more than half-expected an angry rejoinder. But once more it was the unexpected that happened.

"No need for them to tell me," said Harry. "I know it well enough."

"Oh," said Squiff, a little disconcerted. "Well, that's sense! A fellow can't grouse about getting what he asks for. All the same, Quelch says it's not proved, and the Head seems to think so too, and fair play's a jewel. You've been barred in the form, as you jolly well ought to be if you did it—."

"Oh, quite!"

"Well, that's over, so far as I'm concerned, at least," said Squiff.

A couple of days ago, Harry Wharton would probably have replied "Thank you for nothing," and turned on his heel. But he had learned his lesson since then. He answered quietly,

"Thanks. Look here, Squiff, old man. You used to be able to take my word, and I give you my word that I never touched Wingate. I can't guess who did—but I did not."

"And I jolly well believe you, too," said Squiff, "and that's that." He looked round. "Other fellows who agree, come over here."

There was a general move. Tom Brown and Peter Todd came first, followed by Redwing and Ogilvy, and then by Wibley and Russell and Mark Linley, and then by nearly every fellow in the Rag.

Skinner and Snoop sneered, and the Bounder scowled, but they were the only fellows remaining outside the crowd that surrounded Harry Wharton.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ANY PORT IN A STORM!

BILLY BUNTER stopped at the door of Coker's study, in the Fifth, and bent a fat ear to listen.

There was no sound from the study.

That, Bunter hoped at least, indicated that it was vacant. But he wanted to be sure. A fellow couldn't be too sure, when he was planning to sample the contents of a hamper belonging to another fellow—and that fellow as heavy-handed as Coker of the Fifth!

Bunter had been scouting cautiously for some time.

He had seen Potter and Greene going down to the cricket, with a crowd of other Fifth-form men. So he knew that Potter and Greene were out. He had seen Hilton with the cricketers, and Price "mooching" in the quad with his hands in his pockets, so he knew that the next study to Coker's was vacant, and that beast, Hilton, would not walk into him as he had done on Saturday. All, in fact, was safe, if he could only feel sure that Coker, like almost everybody else in the Fifth, was out. And there was plenty of time before the bell rang for class.

So he strained a fat ear to listen for a sound from the study, and there was no sound.

Coker was not a silent person, in his ways. Even alone, he was likely to be audible—shuffling his large feet, or knocking something over. So the silence from the study reassured Bunter at last.

Cautiously, he turned the door-handle.

He opened the door a few inches, and blinked in through his big spectacles. Had that blink revealed Coker within, the fat Owl would have revolved on his axis, and departed in his highest gear.

But it did not reveal Coker. Bunter's fat face registered relief and satisfaction. He pushed the door wider, and had a view of a hamper that stood in a corner of the study, with the lid open. His eyes glistened at the sight of that hamper. It was in that hamper that his interest was centred. But he was still cautious, and he put his fat head into the doorway, and blinked round the room, to make assurance doubly sure that Horace Coker was not there. And his eyes and his spectacles assured him finally of the fact that Horace Coker wasn't.

Having no eyes in the back of his head, Billy Bunter was happily unaware that the door of the games-study, at the end of the passage near the landing, had opened. He remained equally unaware of the fact that Horace Coker, who was in the games-study, was about to emerge. But though Bunter remained unconscious of Coker, Coker, glancing up the passage, did not remain unconscious of Bunter. He did not see Bunter's face, the fat Owl's head being inside the doorway, but he saw the rest of Bunter, and stared at it blankly. And as Coker stared at Bunter's back, Bunter, quite assured now, rolled into the study and disappeared from view.

He shut the study door, and shot across to the hamper. All was safe now, in Bunter's belief, as he had not the faintest idea that Coker of the Fifth had seen him, and was coming up the passage with long strides, and an expression on his rugged face that was almost blood-curdling.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. "Good!" He blinked into the hamper with an ecstatic blink.

He had wondered how much might still remain in that hamper. He knew that Coker's hampers from his Aunt Judy were always well supplied, he had been there before, as it were. Coker and his friends had made a deep inroad into that hamper, but it was still half-full. Apples and pears, paper bags that evidently contained pastry, met Billy Bunter's eyes, and brought a beatific expression to his fat face.

Bunter did not waste time. He clutched up a large and luscious pear, and gave a gurgle of delight as he took an extensive bite out of it. It was a delicious bite—but it was, alas! the last as well as the first.

For as the fat Owl gurgled over a large mouthful of luscious pear, the study door was hurled open with a crash, which made the startled Owl jump clear of the floor.

"Oooogh!" gasped Bunter. Some of that extensive mouthful went down the wrong way, and he choked. "Oooogh! Grooogh! Oh, crikey! Ooooh."

His eyes almost popped through his spectacles at Coker of the Fifth, standing in the study doorway. He was fairly caught!

"So I've caught you, have I?" roared Coker. "Snooping my tuck, what? You fat young villain—."

"Groooogh! I—I say—I—I wasn't—I—I mean I—I—" spluttered Bunter. "Oh, lor! I—I say—."

Coker strode into the study. He picked up a ruler from the table. What he was going to do with that ruler, Billy Bunter did not need telling. He could almost feel it already, banging on his tight trousers.

Ruler in hand, Coker stepped towards Bunter. Bunter bolted round the study table.

"Stop!" roared Coker.

"Beast!" gasped Bunter.

For the moment, the table was between Bunter and Coker. But Coker was coming round it, and in a game of "here we go round the mulberry bush," Bunter's little fat legs had simply no chance against Coker's long ones. Neither could he hope to bolt from the study before Coker's powerful grasp fell on him. In sheer desperation, Bunter took aim with the big, luscious pear which was still in his fat hand, and hurled it at Coker across the table.

Squash!

It was a ripe pear, ripe and soft and juicy. And at such short range even Bunter could not miss the target. The whizzing pear caught Coker suddenly and unexpectedly in the eye and squashed there.

Coker gave a startled splutter and staggered. It was like him to stagger into a chair, stumble over it, and sprawl on the floor.

Bump!

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

The roar of wrath that came from Horace Coker as he spread over the floor of his own study, was positively terrifying. What he was certain to do, when he got up, was still more terrifying. Bunter had a few seconds—and like an arrow he shot out of the open doorway into the passage.

He heard Coker scrambling up as he sped.

Billy Bunter was not very bright, and he was not distinguished for presence of mind. But terror seemed to sharpen his fat faculties. Had he charged away down the passage, he would certainly have been captured before he had a chance of escaping. Instead of that, he stopped at the door of the next study, opened it, shot in, and closed the door after him. Within that door, he listened, palpitating.

The next moment there was a thunder of heavy feet in the passage. Coker, breathing fury, was charging in pursuit. Probably he was surprised that Bunter was not in sight, and the fat Owl, trembling, wondered whether Coker would guess that he had dodged into a study. But Horace Coker was not quick on the uptake. He charged away down the passage towards the landing, nothing doubting that Bunter had fled for the Remove quarters. His heavy footsteps clattered away, to Billy Bunter's infinite relief.

"Oh crikey!" gasped Bunter.

He was safe—for the moment. But he realised that it was only for the moment. He was in Hilton's study, and Hilton or Price might come in, in which case he would be promptly kicked out. And Coker, if he did not see him on the landing, was fairly certain to guess what had happened, and come back. Billy Bunter's exploits as a snooper of tuck had often landed him in unpleasant situations, and this was one of the most unpleasant in his fat experience.

"Beast!" groaned Bunter.

He opened the study door a few inches, and peered out. To his dismay, he caught sight of Price of the Fifth at the end of the passage, coming from the landing. A voice not unlike that of the Bull of Bashan reached his fat ears

"Here, Price! Seen Bunter?"

"What? No."

"Didn't he pass you?"

"No."

Price came on up the passage. Billy Bunter hastily closed the door, and stood palpitating.

In less than a minute, Price would be at that door, and if he found Bunter in his study, was absolutely certain to kick him out—right into Coker's hands! Once more the fat Owl's podgy brain worked at double pressure. He bolted across the study to the window, under which was the cushioned settee on which Cedric Hilton liked to stretch his elegant limbs. In a matter of seconds, Billy Bunter was squeezed into the limited space behind the settee, out of sight when the door opened.

It opened a moment later, and Price came in.

He kicked the door shut—an action which indicated that he was not in the best of tempers. Then he came across to the settee under the window, and the approaching footsteps made the hidden Owl quake with dread. But Price only wanted to sit down on the settee. He threw himself upon it, happily unaware of a quaking fat Owl parked behind it.

A scent of smoke came to Bunter's fat nose. Price had lighted a cigarette. That was reassuring, proof positive that the Fifth-form man had no suspicion that anyone was in the study. Then a muttering voice reached Bunter's fat ears.

"The fool! The lackadaisical nincompoop! Still at the cricket, I suppose! I shall have to have it out with him! Pah!"

Billy Bunter wondered to whom those angry mutterings referred. From the description, it might have been Price's study-mate, Hilton.

Price smoked cigarette after cigarette. Twice Bunter heard a heavy tramp of feet pass the door. Coker was still on the hunt! Suddenly the door opened, and Bunter almost squeaked aloud with apprehension, in the dread that it was Coker. But it was not Coker—for Coker's voice came booming from further up the passage.

"Seen Bunter, Hilton?"

"No. "

It was Cedric Hilton, and he came into the study, and threw the door shut after him. Then, as he saw Price on the settee, he paused, and put his hand on the door-handle, as if to leave the study again. Price's voice came across in a bitter, almost venomous snap.

"Don't go!"

"Well, I—."

"I want to speak to you." There was a brief pause.

"Oh, all right!" said Hilton, at length.

"Come and sit down, can't you?"

"I'll stand."

And Cedric Hilton, with his hands in his pockets, stood leaning against the door, waiting to hear what Price had to say.

CHAPTER XXXIV

FOR IT!

PRICE did not speak immediately. He sat on the settee, a half-smoked cigarette hanging loosely from his lip, his furtive eyes on the handsome fellow leaning on the door, with an evil glint in them. Price, certainly, did not want to lose his pal, the wealthy, easy-going Hilton was much too useful to him for that. But at the moment he was feeling something like hatred for him.

Not for many days had there been the usual talk about "gees" in that study. Hilton seemed to have taken to cricket, and to have forgotten the tastes he had in common with Price. He was not so often in the study as of old, and sometimes he walked out when Price came in. His reluctance to remain now was perfectly visible in his face and his manner. It was a change that evoked Stephen Price's bitter resentment, and made him fear that it would go further. Already it was noticed in the Fifth that Hilton and Price were not so "thick", and the more he was with the cricketing fellows, the less use he was likely to have for the dingy dabbler in racing and betting. Price wanted to get back to the old footing, but he would have been almost as pleased to dash his knuckles into the handsome, half-contemptuous face.

"Well?" said Hilton, restively, as Price did not speak.

"In a hurry?" sneered Price.

"The bell will be goin' soon, for class."

"The bell won't go for twenty minutes yet. Look here," said Price, "what have you got your back up about, Cedric?"

Hilton shifted uncomfortably.

"I haven't exactly got my back up," he said, "but—."

"You're always keeping out of my way now. The fellows have noticed it. Frightfully keen on cricket now?" Price could not help sneering when he spoke of cricket. "I wanted to speak to you after dinner, but you'd scuttled off to the nets with Blundell's gang."

"A spot of cricket wouldn't do you any harm, Pricey. Look here, what's the good of talking? You know what you've done, and you know what I think about it, and it's too jolly thick!" exclaimed Hilton. "I'm not goin' to say anythin'—you know that I couldn't give you away. But there's a limit, and you've gone a long way past it."

"Do you mean about young Wharton?"

"You know I do."

"I told you that morning—!"

"Yes and don't tell me over again. You went out of the dorm that night, and scudded back trembling with funk—I knew that something must have happened. I didn't believe what you told me in the morning, even before I heard young Wharton's version. After I heard it, I knew all right. And you're letting that poor little beggar get sacked for what you did! What sort of a rotter do you call yourself, Steve Price?"

Hilton's voice rose angrily.

"Don't shout!" snarled Price.

"Why not, if you had nothing to do with it?" snapped Hilton.

"I don't want to get mixed up in it—and if anybody knew I was out of the dorm that night, they might think—."

"They might think what is true, you mean. For goodness sake, don't tell any more lies about it, Price. I know what you did—and Wingate and everybody else would know, if they knew you were on the spot at the time.

"What young Wharton says is true—he came up after you'd knocked Wingate out, and stumbled over him—and they're going to sack him for what you did! And I've got to stand for that—unless I give you away, which I can't do! You make me sick."

"Young Wharton hasn't been sacked yet," muttered Price. "It's nearly a week ago, and he's still here."

"You've landed it on him all right."

"Even if it's as you say, he landed it on himself. Do you think I had the faintest idea that a Remove kid was going down to ship Wingate's study that night?" snarled Price. "He got what he asked for—it was his own fault that he was there at all."

"I know that! But he never hit Wingate in the dark, and you did—you've landed it on that kid, whether you meant to or not, and it was a foul and dirty trick, even if it hadn't got landed on the wrong man."

Price's narrow face set bitterly.

"Do you think I was going to let Wingate nail me, and march me off to the Head to be sacked?" he muttered. "I'm not anxious to catch a morning train home, I can tell you. Wingate collared me in the dark, and I had to hit out—it was that or the long jump. And—and I lost my head, too—I hit out before I really knew what I was doing—."

"Yes, I can believe that much," said Hilton, his lip curling. "I can guess the blue funk you were in. You didn't care what damage you did, so long as you got loose, and could bolt back to the dorm like a rat to its hole."

Price's eyes glinted.

"It's too rotten," said Hilton. "You knocked a man out in the dark, and hurt him—and keep mum when another man's lagged for it. You're a rank rotter, Steve Price. And now you've made me speak out, I'll tell you plainly that I'd rather you kept your distance. And look here, if young Wharton does get booted out for it, I'll never speak to you again, and if you speak to me, I'll hit you. Got that?"

Price panted.

"So you're turning me down—."

"Yes, if you like to put it that way! I'm not a particular chap, but you're yards over the limit! And that's that!"

Hilton turned to the door again, Price watching him from the settee with the look of a spitting cat. His hand was on the door-handle, when the door was suddenly hurled open—so suddenly, that Hilton only saved himself from being knocked over, by a quick backward Jump.

The rugged, excited, angry face of Coker stared into the study. Price eyed him with angry inquiry, Hilton with an annoyed stare.

"You clumsy rhinoceros," exclaimed Hilton. "What do you mean—?"

"He's here," hooted Coker. "Eh! Who—what—?"

"That fat tick Bunter!" roared Coker. "I know he dodged into a study—he couldn't have got away—he's in a study—and I've looked in every other study in the passage—so he's jolly well here—and I jolly well know it. Where is he?"

"Bunter—here!" repeated Hilton. "What rot! You can see that he's not here, can't you?"

Coker glared round the study. Nothing in the shape of a fat Owl was to be seen, that was certain. But that did not satisfy Coker. Quite assured that Bunter had dodged into a Fifth-form study, and having looked into every other Fifth-form study, he was sure that Bunter must be there—as, indeed, he was!

"You didn't see him when you came in, Price?" demanded Coker.

"No!" snapped Price. "He wasn't here. Get out."

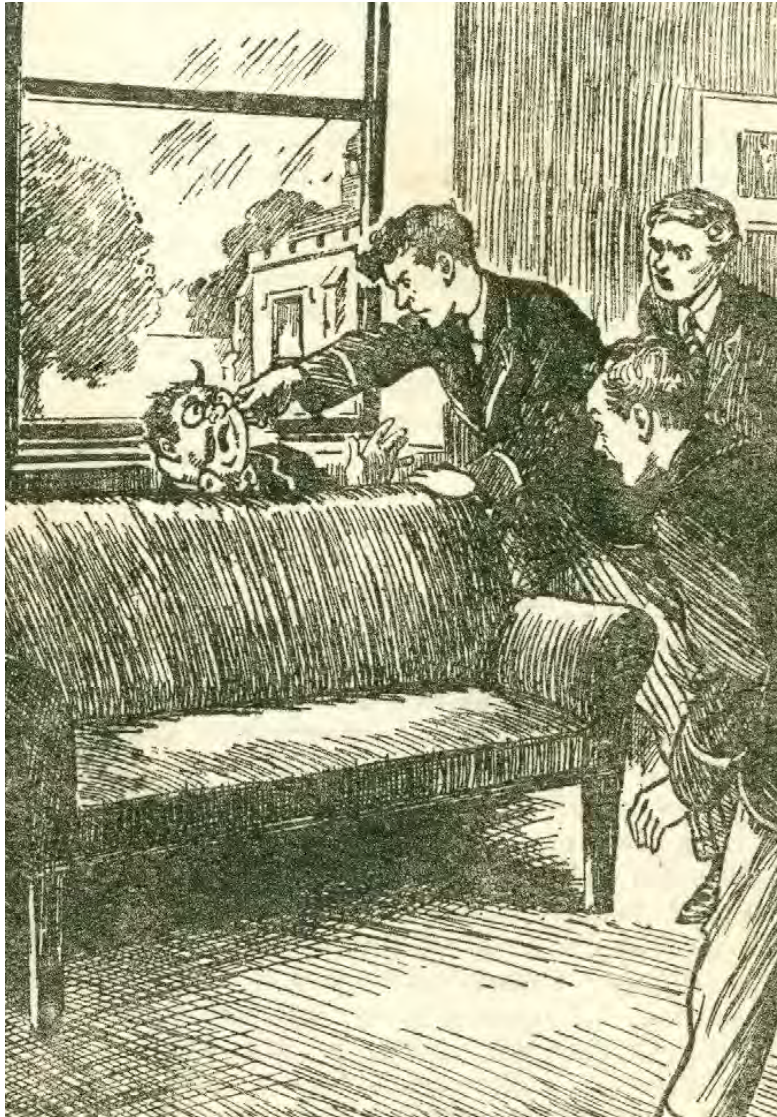
"I'll get out when I've got Bunter! I expect he dodged out of sight when he heard you coming in—."

"Oh, rot!"

"Well, I'm going to look!" snorted Coker. "Think I'm going to have a Remove tick scoffing my tuck, and banging a pear in my chivvy? What? I've looked through all the other studies, and I'm going to look through this."

And after another glare round, in search of any possible hiding-place, Coker strode across to the settee. That was the only possible hiding-place in the study—behind that settee. If Bunter had dodged out of sight in that study, he was there—and Coker was going to see! Hilton and Price watched him angrily, not for a moment supposing that a fat Removite was parked out of sight in the room. But their looks changed, as Coker, leaning over the settee, stared down into the space between it and the wall under the window, and roared,

"That fat tick! What did I tell you?"



A FAT FIGURE WAS HOOKED OUT LIKE A WINKLE FROM A SHELL

There was a startled squeak behind the settee. Two little round eyes blinked up in terror through a pair of big round spectacles.

"Ow! I'm not here—oh, crikey! I say—."

"Come out!" roared Coker.

"Beast!"

Coker reached over the settee, and grasped a fat neck in a powerful sinewy hand. A fat figure was hooked out like a winkle from a shell.

Price, staring at Bunter, turned as white as chalk.

Hilton whistled. Neither of them had dreamed, for a moment, that anyone was hidden in the study, that other ears had heard what had been said. But Bunter had been there all the time, and, only too evidently, must have heard every word. Price's eyes stared at him, from a colourless face.

"Good gad!" muttered Hilton, and he whistled again.

Price did not speak or move. He could not. He could only gaze at Bunter, and think of what this meant for him. Coker, regardless of both of them, swung the fat junior across to the door, yelling.

"I say! Leggo! I—I wasn't—I didn't—yaroooh! Will you leggo? Oh, crikey! Beast! I say—oh, lor'!"

Another swing of Coker's arm, and Bunter was in the passage. Then there was a sound of a ruler establishing contact with trousers, and frantic yelling. Billy Bunter had had six from Quelch that morning, in third school. Now he was getting more than six, from Coker. And his voice, on its top note, revealed that he did not like it in the very least.

Price, unheeding the yelling from the passage, staggered to his feet. He seemed weak on his legs. He gave Hilton a ghastly look.

"Do you think he—he heard?" His voice was a husky whisper.

"He must have—every word."

"Then—it will be all over the school—" muttered Price. "Oh! I'm for it—the game's up, and I'm for it."

Hilton gave him a look, half of pity, half of contempt, and left the study, without speaking again. Price remained there, leaning weakly on the table, as if all the strength had gone out of him, his brain almost reeling with the knowledge and certainty that all must now come out, and that the sentence that Harry Wharton had so narrowly escaped, would now be his—without hope and without reprieve.

CHAPTER XXV

BOTTLED UP!

"I SAY, you fellows!"

Billy Bunter fairly yelled.

The bell was ringing for class. Billy Bunter did not heed the bell. He hardly heeded the swipes he had received from Coker's ruler. Bunter was wildly excited—almost bursting with it.

Greyfriars fellows were heading for the form-rooms.

Bunter had almost forgotten the existence of a form-room. He was full of news—amazing news—thrilling news—news that would make the fellows jump when they heard it.

Bunter knew!

What was a mystery and a secret to all Greyfriars, was known to Bunter—and to William George Bunter alone! The Head, and Quelch, and Wingate, and everybody else, were all in the dark, but he, Bunter, knew! Naturally Bunter wanted to startle other fellows with what he knew.

Bunter liked to be the fellow with the news! And never had he had so tremendous an item of news as this!

Harry Wharton, who was condemned by the whole school, hadn't done it— Price of the Fifth, whom no one suspected, had! And only Bunter knew!

No wonder he did not heed the clang of the bell. No wonder he almost forgot the swipes of Coker's ruler, and the existence of Mr. Quelch! Bunter had to get that thrilling news out, or burst.

He careered out of the House, his fat face crimson with excitement, his eyes almost popping through his spectacles. He ran into the Famous Five, coming in for form, and yelled to them.

"I say, you fellows—I say—!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! What's the jolly old excitement?" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Has your postal-order come?"

"Eh? Oh! No! I—."

"Come on, Bob," called out Nugent, "the bell's stopping."

"Coming!"

"I say, you fellows!" shrieked Bunter. "I say, Wharton—!" He grabbed at Harry Wharton's arm. "I say, it wasn't you—."

"What?"

"It wasn't you all the time—!" spluttered Bunter. "You wasn't—I mean you weren't—you didn't—."

"Fathead!"

What Billy Bunter's incoherent splutterings might mean, if they happened to mean anything, the captain of the Remove did not know. Neither did he care. He jerked his arm loose, and cut after his friends.

"I say—!" yelled Bunter.

The Famous Five disappeared. No doubt, had they known what the news was, with which Bunter was evidently bursting, they would have lingered, at the risk of a grim stare, and lines, from Mr. Quelch. Not knowing, they did not want to know, in fact they couldn't have cared less. They ran in to join the crowd at the door of the Remove form-room, leaving the fat Owl to waste his sweetness on the desert air.

"I say, Peter." Bunter clutched at Peter Todd, as he came along at a trot, causing him to drop a couple of books. "I say—."

"You fat chump!" hooted Peter. He stopped and retrieved his books, and cut on.

"But I say, Toddy—!" howled Bunter.

Toddy vanished.

Bunter gave an angry snort. Smithy, a late comer, was cutting in, when the fat Owl clutched at him.

"I say Smithy—."

"The bell's stopped, you fat ass."

"Yes but I say—."

"Do you want to be late for Quelch, fathead?"

"Yes—no—I say—Beast!"

Vernon-Smith cut in, and joined the crowd at the form-room, where Quelch was already letting in his form. Billy Bunter rolled in last, his great news still unuttered.

Now it had to be bottled up, as it were, till class was over, and that was a whole hour. For Billy Bunter to keep that tremendous news bottled up for a whole hour was a practical impossibility. He grabbed Squiff by the sleeve as the juniors went to their places.

"I say, Field—!"

"Dry up, ass!"

"But I say—."

Squiff shook off a fat paw, and went to his place.

Bunter spluttered a whisper into Bolsover major's ear, "I say, Bolsover, I went to Price's study and I jolly well found him out—!"

"Lucky for you, you fat ass! I expect he would have kicked you out, if he'd been in."

"I don't mean I found him out—I mean I found him out—."

"What?"

"Bunter!" came Mr. Quelch's deep voice.

"Oh! Yes! No! I—I wasn't talking to Bolsover, sir—."

"Go to your place at once, Bunter."

Billy Bunter breathed hard, and went to his place. It was really hard luck on Bunter. Never, in all his fat career had he had such an exciting item of news to relate. Any fellow who heard it was certain to jump, as soon as he heard. And he was not able to get out enough to make a single fellow jump!

Bunter was silent for a couple of minutes. Then he was whispering to Skinner.

"I say, Skinner, what do you think? I say, I was in Price's study, and I heard him talking to Hilton, and he said—."

"Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

"Are you talking in class, Bunter?"

"Oh! No, sir! I—I never said anything to Skinner, sir. I—I never opened my mouth, sir," gasped Bunter.

"You were speaking to Skinner, Bunter."

"Oh, no, sir! I—I never said a word, sir! You can ask Skinner, sir—he heard me—."

"Silence!"

Billy Bunter relapsed into reluctant silence. His form-master gave him a severe look. Bunter was often in trouble for talking in class, the sound of his fat voice was music in Bunter's ears, if in nobody else's. It was Roman history that afternoon in the Remove, and Quelch, with the happy optimism of a schoolmaster, expected his pupils to dismiss other matters from their minds, and give undivided attention to his words of wisdom. Certainly, he did not dream what tremendous news was bottled up in the fattest member of his form. Even Quelch would have been interested in Bunter's news, for once! But as it was, he frowned the fat Owl into silence, and proceeded to enlighten his form on the subject of the Augustan Age.

Billy Bunter's interest in ancient history was at its lowest ebb. Never, since Greyfriars School had had a local habitation and a name, had any fellow been so utterly uninterested. The Emperor Augustus, and Marcus Antonius, and Brutus, and Cicero, and Maecenas and Horace, passed Billy Bunter by like the idle wind which he regarded not. How could any fellow possibly give attention to such stuff, when he was bursting with news that would make every man at Greyfriars jump when he heard it?

Bunter had to keep silent, but if Mr. Quelch expected Bunter to give him any attention, he was booked for one of those disappointments which so often occur in the career of a schoolmaster. Quelch's voice, to Bunter, was merely a drone, of no more account than the buzzing of a blue-bottle that was seeking—unsuccessfully—to get through the glass of the form-room window.

"I say, Snoopey!" Bunter, after a long silence that was positively anguish, was whispering again. "I say, it was Price all the time—."

What that cryptic remark might mean, Sidney James Snoop did not know. But he did not want to draw a gimlet-eye in his direction, if Bunter did.

"Shut up!" he muttered.

"But I say, Coker was after me, you know, and I dodged him, and—."

"Bunter!"

"Oh, crikey!"

"You are talking again, Bunter."

"Oh, no, sir! I—I was listening to everything you said, sir," groaned Bunter. "I—I—I never missed a word, sir."

"Have you been giving attention to the lesson, Bunter?"

"Oh! Yes, sir! I—I heard everything you said about Octavius Brutus and—and—and Marcus Augustus, sir—."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry, and there was a sound of a chuckle in the Remove.

"If you have been giving attention, Bunter, you will be able to answer some questions I shall put to you, said Mr. Quelch, grimly." "The name of the celebrated patron of letters in the reign of the Emperor Augustus?"

"Price, sir—."

"Wha—a—t—?"

"Oh! I-I didn't mean Price, sir," gasped Bunter.

That name, being uppermost in Bunter's fat mind, had popped out of its own accord, as it were. "I—I—I mean—I—I didn't mean—I—I mean Julius Caesar, sir—."

"You mean Julius Caesar!" ejaculated Mr. Quelch. "Bunter! If you have not listened to a single word I have been saying—."

"Oh, yes, sir! I—I heard every syllable—."

"Then why did you not give me the name of Maecenas?"

"Oh! I—I was just going to, sir! I—I meant Maecenas all the time," groaned Bunter, dizzily wondering who Maecenas might have been.

Mr. Quelch breathed hard. Evidently, something other than Roman history was occupying Bunter's fat mind, which, on the subject of the Augustan age, was a perfect blank. However, Quelch gave him another chance.

"Name the author of the Odes and Epodes, Bunter."

Bunter could only blink at him.

"Apparently, Bunter, you have never heard of Horace," said Mr. Quelch, with almost ferocious sarcasm.

"Oh! Yes, sir! If—if you mean Coker, sir—."

"Coker!" repeated Mr. Quelch, dazedly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from the Remove. Really, they could not help it.

"Silence in the form! Bunter, you will stay in the form-room for one hour after class, and I shall set you a paper on the subject of this lesson."

"Oh, crikey!"

Bunter almost collapsed. This was the unkindest cut of all. Not only had his great news to remain bottled up during class. It had to continue bottled up for an hour after class! It was the limit!

But there was no help for Bunter! When the Remove were dismissed after that lesson, Billy Bunter had to remain in the form-room, and the Remove marched out and left him there, dismally, dolefully, and disconsolately blinking at the paper kindly set him by his form-master, which was to improve his knowledge of the Augustan Age—an improvement upon which Billy Bunter set no value whatever.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE LAST CHANCE

GEORGE WINGATE came into his study, and pitched Thucydides on the table. The Sixth had been doing Thucydides with the Head, enjoying a little excursion with the Spartans to the island of Sphacteria. Judging by Wingate's expression, he was not sorry to have finished with the Spartans, and to be at leisure to think of cricket. Thucydides bumped on the table, and then Wingate glancing round, observed that the study was not vacant.

Price of the Fifth Form was standing by the window.

The Greyfriars captain glanced at him inquiringly, and then his look became fixed on Price's face. There was always something a little furtive about Price, he never seemed quite able to look a fellow in the eyes. Now he seemed more furtive than ever—almost stealthy. Wingate could hardly keep an expression of distaste from his face. He had never liked Price, or trusted him, and never had any fellow looked more worthy of distrust, than Stephen Price did at that moment.

His face was pale and harassed. Since the discovery of Bunter in his study, and the certainty that the fat junior must have overheard every word he had said to Hilton, the wretched black sheep of the Fifth had been in a very unenviable frame of mind. Bunter, of course, would repeat what he had overheard—everyone at Greyfriars would know that it was Price, and not Harry Wharton, who had knocked Wingate out in the dark. Lying cost Price little, if lying could have saved him, but he knew that it could not. Bunter's story would soon be all over the school, and everyone would know. Price would be questioned—Hilton would be questioned—and even if Price had the nerve to cling to a desperate scheme of lying, Hilton certainly would not back him up in it. He was a lost man—the game was up, and he was going to be sacked.

Price had been hardly able to drag himself into the Fifth-form room for class. He was late, and Mr. Prout had snapped at him for being late. He hardly heard Prout. Prout did not matter much, when he was going up to the Head to be expelled.

But during form in the Fifth, the wretched fellow rallied a little, trying to think of any means of escape. And like a beam of light in the darkness, he remembered what Wingate had said to him on Saturday. He had been given his chance then—and had refused it. Now it was the only chance that remained to him, and he grasped at it like a drowning man at a straw.

Immediately the Fifth were out, Price had hurried to Wingate's study, to wait for him there. He had to speak to Wingate, before the Greyfriars captain heard what all Greyfriars would soon be hearing.

Bunter, he had no doubt, had already been telling his tale. Even if he had not babbled it before class, he would be babbling it now, now that the Remove were out of form. If Wingate heard—!

Price could picture the cold scorn in Wingate's face, if he had heard—if he knew in advance why the wretched culprit was there to make his belated confession. If Wingate knew, he would cut him short, and march him directly to the Head.

It was only a few minutes, but it seemed almost an eternity to Price, before Wingate came in. But one glance at him reassured the wretched fellow—Wingate had not heard yet! He had time.

Wingate eyed him very sharply. Price had little nerve, and what little he had was in a shattered state. He was in an utter funk, as he had been the night when he had struck that sudden savage blow in the dark. His fear and uneasiness leaped to the eye. He had to lick his dry lips before he could speak.

"Well?" said Wingate, curtly. "What do you want here, Price?"

"I—I came to-to speak to you, Wingate—" stammered Price.

"Get on with it."

"I—I—I've something to tell you." Wingate's face set.

"Something that I asked you on Saturday?" he rapped.

"Yes!" breathed Price.

Wingate stood looking at him. Price went on desperately,

"You—you said that if the fellow owned up, you'd wash it out. You remember? You—you only wanted to know what was the truth. I—I've been thinking it over, and—and—and I've come here to own up."

His voice trailed away.

Wingate, in silence, looking at him. The contempt in his face did not hurt Price much. But what would he do? Price, utterly untrustworthy himself, trusted nobody. He had scented a trap, and prided himself upon his astuteness in seeing the trap and eluding it. But he had to take the chance of that now and could only hope that Wingate would be as good as his word—a frail hope for a fellow whose own word was worth nothing.

There was a long silence.

Perspiration clotted on Price's forehead. His knees sagged. Was Wingate going to keep his word, or had it been after all a trap, and was he going to take him to the Head?

"So it was you!" said Wingate, at last.

"Yes!" breathed Price.

"You were out of your dormitory that night, and it was you that I collared in the dark, and who knocked me out—?"

"Yes."

"Then what Wharton said was true—he came on the scene after I was knocked out—."

"Yes."

Wingate drew a deep breath.

"And you let me believe—you let all Greyfriars believe—that it was that Remove kid, and that he was lying—."

"I—I—I—I never knew he was there! It was his own fault that he was mixed up in it at all. I never knew—."

"Yes, that was his own fault! But—you let me believe—. Only the Head thought there might be a doubt, or that kid would have been sacked for it—and you—you—oh, you worm! You rotter!"

"You—you said—!" muttered Price.

"Yes, I said I'd let the rat off, if he owned up, and put things right," said Wingate. "You can crawl out of it, you worm, as you've done that—that poor kid will get justice now, at any rate. I can fix it for you, as you've owned up—why didn't you tell me on Saturday?"

Price dared not answer that.

"Well, you've come clean at last, at any rate," said Wingate, little dreaming why Price had come clean. "You're safe, if that's what's worrying you. I shall have to report this to the Head, but I shall tell him that you've owned up of your own accord, and he will leave it in my hands."

Price breathed more freely.

"I—I'm sorry, Wingate," he faltered. "I—I was frightfully scared—that night—I—I lost my head—I never meant—."

"Get out of my study."

"I—I—I—."

"Get out!"

Price got out.

CHAPTER XXXVII

AT LAST!

"BEAST!" groaned Billy Bunter.

Sad to relate, he was alluding to his form-master, Henry Samuel Quelch.

Bunter sat at his desk in the Remove form-room, all on his own, and feeling as solitary and abandoned as Robinson Crusoe on his island. And he saw absolutely none of the charm that sages have seen in the face of Solitude.

Quelch had kindly set him a paper on the lesson.

From that paper, the fat Owl might have derived much knowledge of the Augustan Age—had he felt the slightest, remotest interest in that historic age. But he didn't.

Full of startling news, crammed with it, bursting with it, Billy Bunter had to sit there all alone in the form-room, waiting for the hour to pass—and never had an hour seemed so long, even when Bunter had been waiting for a meal. The hand of the clock seemed not merely to crawl, but scarcely to move at all. But for the risk that Quelch might look in, Bunter would have chanced it and bolted. But Quelch was not a man with whom it was safe to take chances, so the dismal fat Owl remained where he was—with head-line news still bottled up within.

Voices floated in through the open window of the form-room, from the quad. Everyone was out—excepting Bunter. And nobody, so far, knew what Bunter could tell them—with a whole school, as it were, ready to jump at his startling news, there had not been a single, solitary jump, so far. It was undoubtedly very tough.

For the umpteenth time, Bunter blinked at the clock.

He wondered whether it had stopped. After hours and hours and hours, as it seemed to him, there was still another half-hour to go.

"Beast!" mumbled Bunter

He blinked at his paper. But really he could not work up a spot of interest in it. Indeed, his only feeling towards the great men who had adorned the Augustan Age, was that he would have liked to punch the heads of Maecenas, Horace, Virgil and Co. all round.

He rose from his desk at last. He could not venture out of the form-room, but there was the window. He rolled to the window, and hooked himself up, in the hope of spotting some fellow within hearing.

A group of Remove fellows stood at a little distance—Vernon-Smith, Redwing, Squiff, Tom Brown, Peter Todd, and two or three others. They seemed to be arguing, and Bunter caught the word "Carcroft"—from which he could guess that the topic was the Carcroft match, due on Wednesday. Bunter gave a snort. Talking cricket—when Bunter was full of news that would make them bound the minute they heard it!

The Bounder was looking angry. He was, in fact, arguing that a fellow who was barred—Wharton to wit—couldn't captain the side at Carcroft. To which the other fellows replied that Wharton was no longer barred—not by any fellow who mattered, at any rate—and that he certainly was going to captain the side, and that that was that. Not one of the group noticed a fat face and a shining pair of spectacles at the form-room window, till a fat voice reached their ears,

"I say you fellows."

Then they glanced round at Bunter.

"That fat ass!" grunted the Bounder. "Look here, you fellows can chop and change if you like, but I think—"

"Smithy, old man—!" said Redwing.

"I think it's rot! Wharton's barred—"

"He isn't!" said Squiff. "I take his word for one."

"You didn't before—"

"Well, better late than never!"

"Rot! I think—"

"I say, you fellows!" yelled Bunter. "I say, Toddy! Come here, old chap! I've got something to tell you."

"Tell somebody else," called back Peter, over his shoulder.

"Beast! I mean, do come over here, old fellow! I say, I've found it all out!" yelled Bunter. "I say, it was Price—."

"Eh?"

"Price all the time—."

"Price of what?" asked Peter, staring at him. "What are you burbling about, you fat ass? Who's talking about prices?"

"Price of the Fifth—!" howled Bunter. "I tell you I've found him out! I say, you fellows, I know who knocked Wingate out that night."

"What?"

All the group stared at Bunter now. If they did not exactly jump, at least they were startled. The Bounder scowled.

"We all know that, you fat chump," he snapped. "It was Wharton—."

"It wasn't!" yelled Bunter. "It was Price."

"Rot!"

"Price all the time—I say, you fellows, I know all about it—I say, I tell you it was Price all the time—."

Billy Bunter had attention now. Everyone in the group came over to the form-room window, to hear what the fat Owl had to say. Billy Bunter grinned with satisfaction. He was getting an audience—and it was likely to increase when his startling tale was told.

"Now what are you burbling about?" asked Squiff.

"How do you know that Price had anything to do with it?"

"Because I jolly well heard him tell Hilton!" retorted Bunter, triumphantly. "Hilton knew all the time. He's been keeping it dark, because Price is his pal. But he jolly well knew."

"Rubbish!" said the Bounder. Smithy, at least, was not going to be easy to convince. He had been looking forward to captaining the Greyfriars Junior side at Carcroft, in the place of the fellow who was, or had been, barred. He did not want to relinquish that idea.

"Oh really, Smithy—."

"Look here, how do you know anything about it, if you do know?" asked Peter Todd.

"I jolly well know the whole thing!" trilled Bunter. "I'd have told you before, if Quelch hadn't kept me in. I say, I heard Price say—."

"Latest keyhole news!" sneered the Bounder.

"I wasn't," howled Bunter. "I mean, I didn't! How could I help hearing, when I was behind the settee in Hilton's study?"

"Oh, my hat!" said Squiff. "And what were you doing behind the settee in Hilton's study, you fat villain?"

"That beast Coker was after me, and I dodged into the study to keep clear of him," explained Bunter. "Then Price came in, and I jolly well knew he'd turn me out, so I got behind the settee. And then Hilton came in, and they talked about it—."

"About what?"

"About Price going out of the dorm that night, and Wingate grabbing him in the dark, and Price knocking him out—!"

"Oh, scissors!"

"Price all the time!" said Bunter. "I jolly well know! Hilton said he'd never speak to Price again if Wharton was sacked for what he did! I say, you fellows, it was Price all the time."

Bunter had got it out at last! And there was no doubt that his startling news made a sensation. Other fellows were coming up, and a crowd was gathering under the form-room window. Billy Bunter blinked down at a crowd of upturned faces, in sheer enjoyment. For once—probably for the first time in history—everyone wanted to hear what Bunter had to say. The fat Owl quite forgot Quelch, and the possibility that he might look into the form-room.

"Where's Wharton?" exclaimed Squiff. "If there's anything in this, Wharton will want to hear it—."

"Oh, really, Field! Wharrer you mean by if there's anything in it?" demanded Bunter, indignantly. "I tell you I heard—."

"Gammon!" snapped the Bounder. But even Smithy was looking dubious now.

"Oh, really, Smithy—!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" came a roar. "What's the jolly old meeting about? You'll have Quelch after you, Bunter."

"I say, you fellows, it was Price all the time—." trilled Bunter, as the Famous Five came up and joined the crowd under the window. "I say, Wharton, it wasn't you knocked Wingate out—."

"Eh?"

"It wasn't you, old chap—."

"Thanks for the information," said Harry Wharton. "But I happened to know that already."

"I mean, it was Price—!" yelled Bunter.

"What?"

"Price all the time! I tell you I've found it all out! Dice was out of the prorm that night—I mean Price was out of the dorm—and Wingate collared him in the dark, and Price knocked him out—" gasped Bunter.

Harry Wharton stared blankly at the fat Owl. The Co. blinked at him. Bunter was making fellows jump, at last.

"Price!" gasped Bob Cherry. "Oh, crumbs!"

"He's the sort," said Johnny Bull, "but—."

"But how does Bunter know, if it's so?" said Nugent.

"Is the knowfulness terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter?" asked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"He says he heard Price tell Hilton—!" said Squiff.

"So I jolly well did!" gasped Bunter. "I know the whole thing! You see, Coker was after me, and I stodged into the duddy—."

"What?"

"I mean I dodged into the study—and I heard everything they said, and it was Price knocked Wingate out that night and he said—Yaroooooooh!"

Billy Bunter broke off with a yell and a hand that seemed like a steel vice fell on the back of his fat neck, and jerked him away from the window. He whirled round to face his form-master.

"Ow! Oh crikey! I—I—ow!" gasped Bunter. He had feared that Quelch might look into the form-room. He had been right. There was Quelch!—with his gimlet-eyes boring into the dismayed fat Owl.

"Bunter!"

"Oh! I—I've done my pip—pip—paper, sir—I—I mean I—I—I was just going to do it—I—I—I—." But Mr. Quelch was no longer interested in Bunter's paper. What he had heard, as he came into the form-room, banished Bunter's paper, and the Augustan Age, wholly from his mind.

"Bunter! I heard what you were saying. You have stated that it was Price, of the Fifth Form, who was guilty of the act of which Wharton was accused. Tell me at once what you know about the matter."

Billy Bunter had not envisaged having to tell his startling tale to a "beak." But he had no choice about it now. Under Quelch's grim eye he babbled it out once more, Quelch putting in a sharp question now and then. When he had heard all, the Remove master—still oblivious of Bunter's paper and the Augustan Age—left the form-room, and hurried to Wingate's study. He arrived there only ten minutes after Price of the Fifth had left. Price had been only just in time.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE CLOUDS ROLL BY!

"WHARTON!"

"Yes, Wingate!"

There was a crowd of fellows in the Rag, after tea, and a buzz of excited voices. It died away as Wingate of the Sixth came in.

Everybody, or almost everybody, had heard by this time. Billy Bunter had related his startling story to everyone who was willing to hear, and everyone wanted to know. For once, if only for once, William George Bunter was in request, and there were eager ears to hear his fat squeak.

The news was not yet official. But few doubted it.

More and more fellows in the Remove had been coming round to Harry Wharton's side, even before the facts were known, and now the whole form had "chopped and changed," as the Bounder expressed it. Skinner and Snoop sneered, and Smithy still doubted, or affected to doubt, but the few dissentients were hardly noticed in the crowd. The story, certainly, had reached the ears of Price of the Fifth, and that Price had nothing to say was clear from the fact that he said nothing. Price was keeping to his study, and fellows who went along to see him, found that he was "sporting his oak," and there was no admittance. When Coker thundered at his door, Price did not even answer him. Which was as good as proof that Price was the man. Still, it was not yet official.

The Famous Five, in the Rag, were looking merry and bright. Lord Mauleverer had a cheery grin on his lazy face. Harry Wharton's friends believed in him, and stood by him, and other fellows had come round, nevertheless, he was still under a cloud, and the shadow of the "sack" still hung over him—he could not know how the Head would decide, and even if the decision was in his favour, the cloud still clung to him, unless the right man was discovered, and of that there had seemed little hope. And now, all of a sudden, the cloud had rolled by. It was no wonder that the chums of the Remove were looking tremendously bucked.

"Price all the time!" Billy Bunter was chirruping, in a corner, to some fellows eager for details. "You see, that beast Coker was after me—he made out that I was after his tuck—as if I'd touch a fellow's tuck! I never helped myself to a single pear from his hamper, and I'd had only one bite, too, when the beast rushed in—."

"We never thought of Price," Bob Cherry was saying.

"We might have—."

"Just the sort!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Price, I suppose, that Wingate was looking for that night," said Harry Wharton, "and it was he—."

"And he's kept it dark all this time," said Frank Nugent, "leaving it on another fellow—."

"Thank goodness it's come out."

"Yes, rather!"

"The ratherfulness is terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But as the English proverb remarks, it is a long lane that has no turn-table."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows, I had to seize behind the squettee—I mean squeeze behind the settee—."

"Jolly good luck," said Squiff. "Even that fat idiot Bunter has come in useful for once."

"Oh, really, Squiff—."

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here's Wingate!"

The buzz of innumerable voices was hushed, as the Greyfriars captain came in, and called to Wharton.

All eyes were on Wingate!

He had come there for Wharton! Did that mean that Bunter's startling tale was to be confirmed, or—? The juniors were not left long in doubt. He gave Wharton a nod and a smile, and then glanced round over the eager crowd.

"I've got something to say for you all to hear," said Wingate, and the crowded Rag hung on his words. "You all know what happened on Wednesday night last week, and that Wharton was very nearly sacked for it. That was his own fault, for being out of his dormitory after lights out, as I daresay he knows himself by this time—."

"Quite!" said Harry Wharton, meekly.

"Well, it's come out now that Wharton was not the man," went on Wingate. "The man has owned up, and there's no doubt in the matter now. It was Price, of the Fifth Form."

"I say, you fellows, I told you—."

"He's owned up?" exclaimed Bob.

"Yes, and the whole thing's cleared up. Sorry, Wharton," added Wingate. "It was your own fault, and if you get the idea of going down to ship a prefect's study again, you'd better think twice about it."

Harry Wharton coloured.

"I'm sorry I thought of it once, Wingate," he said. Wingate nodded, and walked out of the Rag. He left the room in a buzz behind him. Skinner and Snoop had nothing to say. But the Bounder had. He came over to the captain of the Remove with rather a shamefaced look.

"Sorry, Wharton," he said. "I'm jolly glad it's come out."

"O.K." said Harry, cheerily. "All serene now, Smithy."

And all serene it was!

It was rather a surprise to the Greyfriars fellows that Price of the Fifth was not "sacked." But scornful and averted looks were probably a sufficient punishment for the wretched fellow. Harry Wharton and Co. wasted hardly a thought on him. The clouds had rolled by, and all was calm and bright—and that was enough for the cheery chums of the Remove, more than enough for Harry Wharton, who had been so long down on his luck!

THE END