

TAP!

“Oh!”

It was a sudden, startled squeak.

Harry Wharton, the captain of the Greyfriars Remove, had tapped at his form-master's door.

If Mr. Quelch was there, he expected to hear Quelch say, “Come in”. If Mr. Quelch had gone out, he did not expect any answer to his tap. Most certainly, he did not expect to hear the fat and unmistakable squeak of Billy Bunter of the Remove!

But that was what he heard!

Evidently, Quelch was out. Equally evidently, Billy Bunter was in his form-master's study, for some reason of his own, and was startled out of his wits by the tap on the door.

Wharton opened the door and entered.

Then he stared round the Remove master's study. It was or appeared to be—empty!

For a moment or two, the captain of the Remove stared blankly. Had he not heard that startled squeak, he would have supposed the study to be deserted. But he had heard it! Yet there was no one to be seen!

Then he grinned...

From behind Quelch's armchair, which stood by the window, a foot, a length of striped sock, and about six inches of trouser leg, projected.

Bunter had taken cover—leaving that much in view!

Unaware, no doubt, that his startled squeak had been audible outside the study, the fat Owl of the Remove had dived behind the armchair before the door opened:

and was now in the happy belief that he was out of sight and perfectly invisible!

“You fat ass!” exclaimed Harry Wharton, “Come out of it.”

“Oh!” came a gasp from behind the armchair, “Is that you Wharton! I thought it was some beak coming to see Quelch!”

A fat face, and a big pair of spectacles, rose into view. Billy Bunter blinked at his form-captain through those big spectacles. His fat

face registered relief.

“Only you!” he gasped, “Beast! Startling a fellow like that! I thought I was copped here.”

“What are you doing in this study?” demanded Wharton.

“Well, what are you doing, if you come to that?” retorted Billy Bunter, “I suppose you knew Quelch had gone out, or you wouldn’t be here.”

“I’ve come here to use the telephone, fathead! Look here, what are you up to?” exclaimed Wharton, eyeing the fat Owl of the Remove very suspiciously.

If Billy Bunter had been discovered in a Remove study, it would have been unnecessary to inquire what he was up to. He would have been after some fellow’s tuck! But Mr. Quelch, master of the Greyfriars Remove, was long past the age when tuck had attractions: There was nothing eatable to be found in Quelch’s study. In that quarter, Billy Bunter could not be tuck-hunting. On the other hand, Bunter had been “whopped” in class that morning, having had no time for prep the previous evening. This seemed to Billy Bunter fearfully unjust. A fellow couldn’t sit in an armchair and eat butterscotch, and get on with his prep at the same time. No fellow could do two things at once. And Bunter had been busy in the armchair with butterscotch— with painful results in the morning!

“If you’re here to play some idiotic trick on Quelch, you fat ass—!” said the captain of the Remove.

“Well, he’s gone out!” said Bunter. “He went out after class. How’s he to know who put the gum into his inkpot!”

“Oh, you howling ass! Have you been putting gum into Quelch’s inkpot?” exclaimed the captain of the Remove.

“Not yet!” admitted Bunter. “You see, I forgot the gum!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

‘Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! I was going to put Toddy’s bottle of gum in my pocket, but I must have left it on the table in No. 7—as soon as I got here, I found that I hadn’t got it—’

“All the better for you, fathead!” said Harry Wharton, laughing,

“Get out.”

“Quelch hasn’t come in, has he?” asked Billy Bunter, anxiously.

“Not that I know of.”

“Then I’m not getting out! It’s safe as houses, unless some other beak pokes in to see Quelch. I was looking for some gum, when you knocked at the door, and made me jump! Quelch must have some gum in his study somewhere! What do you think?” asked Bunter, with an inquiring blink through his big spectacles at the captain of the Remove.

“I think you’d better travel!” answered Harry. “I’ve got to phone to Highcliffe—get out!”

“I say, help me to find some gum first!” urged Bunter, “You know I’m a bit shortsighted! I daresay it’s right under your nose, if you looked.”

Harry Wharton laughed again. There was a bottle of gum on Mr. Quelch’s desk:

but the fat Owl had not spotted it there. But the captain of the Remove did not point it out.

Gumming a form-master’s inkpot was a more serious matter than the fat Owl seemed to comprehend. Japing Quelch was a very dangerous game—much too dangerous a game for Billy Bunter to undertake. Moreover, as Harry Wharton had visited the study, he did not want a trail of gum to be left behind him. He might be suspected of having done the gumming!

“I say, can you see any gum?” asked Bunter. “Do stop cackling, and help a fellow! Suppose Prout or Hacker looked in, and copped us here! You’re wasting time.”

“Are you getting out, fathead?”

“No!” hooted Bunter, “Not till I’ve gummed Quelchy’s inkpot. You jolly well know that he whopped me in the form-room—.”

“You’ll get another whopping, if you gum his inkpot, you fat chump! Travel!” exclaimed Wharton, impatiently.

“Well, so would you, if Quelch knew that you were bagging his phone while he was out—.”

“I was going to ask him, if he was here—.”

“Well, he ain’t here, so you can’t ask him! I say, can you see any gum—oh, there it is!”

Billy Bunter, blinking round, spotted the gum-bottle—and made a dive for it! Harry Wharton made a dive after Bunter. To Bunter, after a “whopping”, it seemed quite a right and natural proceeding to put gum in Quelch’s inkpot. To the captain of the Remove it did not! He grasped at the back of Bunter’s fat neck, as the fat junior clutched at the gum bottle.

“Oh! Leggo!” howled Bunter.

“Come away, you ass!”

“Beast!” roared Bunter, “Leggo!” As Wharton pulled at his collar, Bunter clutched hold at the desk.

On that desk lay a pile of Form papers, waiting for correction.

Billy Bunter’s clutch for hold missed the desk, but caught the pile of papers. They scattered over the floor like a snowfall.

“Oh, crikey!” gasped Bunter, “Look what you’ve done!”

“You blithering owl!” exclaimed Wharton.

“All your fault, you beast! Leggo!”

Harry Wharton did not let go. He yanked Bunter across the study to the door. With his left hand, he reopened the door. With his right, he swung the spluttering fat Owl into the passage.

“Now cut!” he snapped, “I’ve got to pick up all those papers, you blitherer! Cut, or— !”

“Beast!”

Thud!

“Oooooogh!” gasped Bunter, as a foot landed on his tight trousers,

“Why you beast, you kick me, and I’ll—wooooooooooh!”

Bunter cut! There was no arguing with a boot at close quarters.

One application was enough for Bunter. He travelled!

Harry Wharton shut the door after him. Then he turned to pick up the scattered Form papers.

The whole pile had been scattered, and they lay over Quelch’s carpet almost as thick as the autumn leaves in Vallambrosa. There were more than thirty papers: the Greyfriars Remove was a numerous form. Wharton did not feel like leaving them scattered

over the floor, to greet Mr Quelch's eyes when he came in—indubitable evidence that his study had been surreptitiously visited in his absence!

Paper after paper was gathered up, and replaced on the desk. But some of them had gone under the table, some behind the armchair, some into corners—and it was quite a little time, before the junior could be sure that he had collected the whole lot.

At length, however, the pile was back in its place: and Harry Wharton turned to the telephone. Had Quelch been there, he would, as he had told Bunter, have asked permission to use the phone, to put through that call to Courtenay of the Fourth Form at Highcliffe School. As Quelch was not there, he couldn't—but this was not the first time that the Remove master's telephone had been borrowed while he was taking a walk abroad!

It was more than ten minutes after Bunter's departure, that Harry Wharton got to the telephone, at last. But he did get to it at last, and picked up the receiver.

Mr HACKER frowned.

On that bright June afternoon, most faces were cheery. But frowns came more easily to Mr Hacker than smiles.

The master of the Greyfriars Shell was standing at his study window, looking out into the sunny quad.

There were plenty of fellows to be seen, in the quad, after class. Mr Hacker's eyes fixed on four Remove fellows, talking in a group. Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

The fifth member of the famous Co., who was generally with his chums in hours of leisure, was not to be seen—Harry Wharton was not in the quad.

The "Acid Drop" frowned at the Co. He did not like those cheery juniors. He had no doubt that they were hand-in-glove with that young rascal, Wharton, who had given him so much trouble that term. Indeed he wondered, in his acidulated way, whether Wharton

was “up” to something in those very moments, and whether that was why he was not with his friends. Whenever Mr Hacker thought of Wharton of the Remove, it was with concentrated suspicion.

A slim and elegant Fifth-form man came sauntering along, and stopped to speak to the group of juniors. It was Hilton of the Fifth: and Hacker heard his drawling voice, as he spoke to the Co.

“Seen Pricey, any of you?”

Hilton, it seemed, was looking for his pal, Price of the Fifth—not that Mr Hacker was in the least interested.

“Blow Pricey!” was Bob Cherry’s answer.

Hilton laughed.

“Blow him as much as you like, kid—but have you seen him? He seems to have vanished after class.”

“The esteemed and ridiculous Price has gone out of gates!” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“You saw him go out?” asked Hilton.

“Half-an-hour ago!” grunted Johnny Bull.

“Notice which way he went?”

“No! Just happened to see his ugly mug as he went out, that’s all !”

Cedric Hilton laughed again, and sauntered elegantly down to the gates. The Co. resumed their conversation: the murmur of their voices reaching Mr Hacker at his study window. He could not hear what they were saying: but he thought it quite probable that they were discussing the latest trick that had been played on the master of the Shell. Mr Hacker had been given a rather annoying time that term:

and everything that happened to him, he set down to Wharton of the Remove, as a matter of course.

As a matter of fact, the chums of the Remove were discussing a visit to Highcliffe, for the following day, which was a half-holiday: and Wharton had gone into the House to get a Highcliffe man on the phone. But Hacker was a suspicious man—he lived, moved, and had his being, in an atmosphere of suspicion.

Buzzzz!

It was the telephone bell, behind him in his study. Mr Hacker gave a grunt, and turned from the window.

He picked up the receiver, and barked.

“Well?”

“Is that old Hacker?” came a voice on the telephone.

Mr Hacker jumped.

“Wh-a-at?” he stuttered.

“Is that the Acid Drop?”

The master of the Shell stood staring at the telephone, as if transfixed. Hacker knew that he was nicknamed the “Acid Drop”.

It annoyed him extremely. But he had never expected to be addressed personally by that obnoxious nickname.

“Upon my word!” he gasped, “Who—who—who is speaking?”

“Like to know?” came the voice.

“Who is speaking?” hissed Mr Hacker. His bony face was red with wrath, “What impertinent young rascal?”

“I’ve rung you up to give you a tip, Hacker! We’re fed up with your meddling in the Remove.”

“What?”

“Keep off the grass! If Quelch wants your help in managing his form, he can ask you! Until then, chuck it. See!”

Hacker gurgled.

This, of course, was some Remove fellow—cheeking him by telephone, safe out of sight! But he strove in vain to identify the voice. Wharton was the name that flashed into his mind. But if it was Wharton speaking over the wires, he was disguising his voice: Hacker could not possibly identify it.

“Stick to the Shell !” went on the voice from the other end, “They have to stand you in the Shell, as you’re their beak! But we won’t stand you butting into the Remove!”

“Is that Wharton speaking?” hissed Mr Hacker, in helpless fury.

“Find out!”

“You young rascal— !”

“Can it, Hacker! If you fancy that any Remove man cares a boiled bean for you, you’re an old ass!”

“I—I—I——.”

“We’ve told you what we think of you, more than once. You’ve been told to mind your own business! You’ve had a few messages left in your study to tell you so. Now I’m telling you on the phone. If you don’t steer clear of the Remove, you old goat, look out for squalls. Got that?”

Mr Hacker fairly foamed.

He could have given a term’s salary to be able to reach along the telephone wire, and grab the cheeky young rascal at the other end. But that cheeky young rascal was out of reach: and Hacker could not even guess who he was—though, without guessing, he had no doubt that it was Harry Wharton!

“That’s all !” added the disguised voice. “Chew it over, Hacker—you’ll get toco, if we have any more of your meddling! Put that in your pipe and smoke it!”

Mr Hacker stood trembling with rage.

“Wharton!” he breathed.

He had no doubt of it! This kind of thing had happened before, though not on the telephone. He had never been able to pin that young rascal Wharton down—but he had no doubt of the culprit. He had no doubt now—this was why Wharton was not with his friends after class, as usual: he had gone off somewhere to telephone! Hacker was sure of it. Somewhere out of sight—out of reach—once more he had cheeked the Acid Drop and could not be pinned down!

But could he not!

Hacker’s thoughts moved quickly. The young rascal might have gone out of gates to telephone: but it was more likely that he had used one of the school telephones: and his form-master was out—Hacker had seen Quelch walk out with Mr Prout after class.

“Hear me, old pie-face?” The voice was going on. “Take a tip, Acid Drop! We hear altogether too much of you, in the Remove! We’re fed up with you, right up to the back teeth! Cheeky old ass!” Hacker’s eyes glinted.

He did not speak: he replaced the receiver quietly, and flew across

his study to the door. That young rascal would be still at the phone: and if he was in any study in Masters' Passage using a master's phone, Hacker had him!

Hacker wrenched open his door. He bounded into the passage! He fairly sprinted down the passage to Mr Quelch's study.

He hurled open the door.

Then, at the sight of a Remove junior standing at Quelch's telephone, receiver in hand, he gave a roar!

"Wharton! You young rascal, I have caught you!"



HARRY WHARTON stared round.

He had the receiver in hand, and was about to speak to the exchange, when he was startled by the sudden hurling open of the study door, and the unexpected entrance of the master of the Shell, with flaming face.

He stood and stared.

In using Quelch's telephone, he had to take the chance of another master dropping in, unaware that Quelch was absent. But he certainly had not expected Hacker to drop in: there was a freezing coldness between the masters of the Shell and the Remove, and they never visited one another's studies. But there was Hacker—raging!

"I have caught you!" thundered Mr Hacker, advancing into the study. "You are here."

Harry Wharton breathed rather hard. It was against the rules, of course, for any fellow to use his master's telephone in the master's absence. But it was not a fearfully serious matter: no occasion for all this thunder. And it was not Hacker's business!

"I am here, Mr Hacker!" answered Harry, quietly, "What about it?"

"You young rascal—!"

"Oh, rot!" snapped Wharton, "I was going to use Mr Quelch's

telephone. I should have asked leave if he had been in. I shall tell him so. You have no right to interfere, Mr Hacker."

"I knew that I should find you here!" panted Mr Hacker, "You—I know it was you who uttered that string of insults—."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you dare to deny that you have just called me up on the telephone in my study?" roared Mr Hacker.

Wharton blinked at him.

"Certainly I do," he answered, "I have not telephoned at all yet. I'm just going to, though."

"Upon my word!" gasped Mr Hacker, "Such effrontory— such untruthfulness—such audacity! I have been insulted on the telephone—I find you here, with the receiver in your hand—and you have the audacity to deny—."

"Do you mean that somebody has been phoning you?" asked Wharton, quite bewildered, "It was not I. I have not used the phone yet."

"It is false!" thundered Mr Hacker.

Harry Wharton crimsoned.

"It is not false, and you have no right to say anything of the kind!" he retorted, "Now leave me alone, please."

"Wha-a-t?"

"Leave me alone!" snapped Wharton, "You can report to Mr Quelch, if you like, that you saw me using his phone—I shall tell him myself! If anybody's rung you up, I haven't the faintest idea who it was—I've come here to ring up a Highcliffe chap—!"

That was too much for Mr Hacker! Even a less suspicious man than Hacker, might have believed that he had caught his man, when he found the suspected junior actually standing at the telephone. Mr Hacker gazed round him, and grabbed up Quelch's cane, which lay on the table.

Cane in hand, he made a stride at the captain of the Remove.

Quelch was out... he could not hand over this young rascal to immediate justice: he was going to take the law into his own hands.

Harry Wharton dropped the receiver into place, and jumped away from the telephone as the Acid Drop came at him.

“Hands off!” he roared.

Swipe!

Harry Wharton barely dodged that swipe! It missed him by hardly an inch, as he cut round the study table.

Hacker glared at him across the table.

“Will you have a little sense, Mr Hacker!” shouted the captain of the Remove, “I tell you I have not telephoned to you—.”

Hacker, by way of reply, reached across the table, and swiped again with Quelch’s cane! Wharton jumped back, out of reach, and the cane landed on the table with a crash.

“You mad old ass!” roared Wharton. He was quite reckless of what he said now. “Will you stop playing the goat?”

Mr Hacker came round the table, with flaming face, and the cane uplifted for another swipe.

Harry Wharton dodged round swiftly, ahead of him. They changed sides of the table, the junior still out of reach.

“Rascal !” gasped Mr Hacker.

He rushed round! Wharton rushed round ahead. Again they changed sides of the study table.

Harry Wharton, certainly, was not going to be caned by the master of the Shell! He could hardly punch Hacker! All he could do was to dodge the infuriated Acid Drop—and that he did! He was a good deal nimbler than Hacker, and he had the best of that game of “Mulberry-bush”.

Mr Hacker came to halt, panting for breath, and glaring at the junior across the table.

“You... you... you young rascal... you insolent young scoundrel—!” he panted.

“Oh, chuck it!” snapped Wharton, “I tell you I never phoned you! I know nothing about it! I— keep off, you old ass!”

He circled the table again, as Hacker came barging round. Once more they changed sides, and Hacker halted again, panting for breath.

Then, giving up the chase, he grasped the table, to pull it aside. Once that table was jammed against the wall, Wharton had no more chance of playing mulberry-bush round it!

But, as Hacker heaved at the heavy table, the captain of the Remove shot to the study door, which Hacker had left wide open. He bounded out of the study: grasping the door-handle as he bounded, and dragging the door shut after him, with a bang.

“Stop!” shrieked Mr Hacker.

He let go the table and jumped at the door. The moment after it had banged, he had hold of the door-handle inside, and was pulling.

But the door did not open. Harry Wharton was holding the handle on the outside! He had no idea of being chased down the passage by a swiping cane! He held on to the door with all his strength.

Inside Hacker pulled and pulled!

“Let go that door!” he roared.

Wharton held on!

In a foaming state, the Acid Drop put his cane under his arm, and grasped the door-handle with both hands. He braced himself for a tug, and put all his beef into

That tug was too much for the junior outside! The door began to give! Harry Wharton let go, suddenly!

The door flew open, and Mr Hacker was exerting all his strength in a terrific tug! Hacker was not prepared for that! He went over backwards, letting go the door-handle, and sprawling at full length on Mr Quelch’s study carpet. He landed with a terrific crash.

“Oh!” came a roar from Hacker, as he landed, “Oooogh! Oh!”

Harry Wharton did not wait!

He went down the passage, as if it had been the cinder-path. He was out of the House, before Mr Hacker was on his feet. And when he was on his feet, Mr Hacker was not feeling equal to further action. He was a bony gentleman, and his bones had hit Quelch’s floor hard—he had an ache in every bone. The Acid Drop was left gurgling, and rubbing aching places, when Harry Wharton, flushed and breathless, joined his friends in the quad.

“HALLO, hallo, hallo! What’s up?” exclaimed Bob Cherry.

That something was “up” was very clear to the Co, as the captain of the Remove joined them. They all looked at him inquiringly.

“Hacker” answered Harry.

“Is the esteemed and absurd Hacker on the war-path again?” asked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Haven’t you phoned to Highcliffe?” asked Nugent.

“No: the Acid Drop butted in! Let’s get out.”

“It’s near tea-time!” said Johnny Bull, “What do you want to go out for?” Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t want to have to punch Hacker’s nose in the quad!” he answered. “But it may come to that, if he comes after me again.”

“Oh my hat! But what—?”

“Let’s get out, and give him time to cool !“ said Harry. “We can scrounge a tea at the bun-shop on Courtfield.”

“Oh, all right.”

The Famous Five went out of gates. . . four of them startled and puzzled, and a little alarmed. Trouble between the captain of the Remove, and the master of the Shell, had been incessant, that term: and now, evidently, there was more, and rather more serious.

Certainly, it was judicious to keep out of the Acid Drop’s way, if the punching of noses was a possibility!

“But what the thump has happened?” asked Bob Cherry, as the juniors left the gates, and walked up the Courtfield road.

Harry Wharton explained.

“It was all that fat ass, Bunter’s fault,” he concluded. “If I hadn’t had to pick up all those papers, I should have been gone, before Hacker butted in. As it was, he caught me just as I was going to phone. He fancied that I had phoned already. . . it seems that somebody had.”

“Somebody ragging him over the phone!” said Frank Nugent.

“That’s it! Some Remove chap, I suppose... the whole form’s fed up with Hacker! But I suppose it looked rather suspicious—seeing me standing there at Quelch’s phone.”

“What made him butt into Quelch’s study at all?” asked Bob.

Harry Wharton laughed.

“Oh, I expect he thought of me first of all. . . he always does! He must have cut straight to Quelch’s study... and he found me there! This means a row with Quelch—that ass who ragged Hacker, whoever he was, has landed me in the soup.”

“Some japing ass on one of the school telephones. I suppose!” said Bob.

“I suppose so. .. Smithy, perhaps.”

“Or perhapsfully not!” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, shaking his dusky head, “The last time the esteemed Hacker was ragged, we found out that it was the execrable Price of the Fifth—.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Harry Wharton. His brow darkened. “I wonder if this is Price at that game again—as likely as not! It wouldn’t be the first time that that Fifth-form cad has set Hacker on my track. I wonder—.”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo!” ejaculated Bob Cherry, “Talk of rats and you hear them squeak! Here he comes.”

From the direction of Courtfield, a cyclist came In sight on the road. It was Stephen Price, of the Fifth Form, riding back to the school.

Harry Wharton fixed his eyes on the bad hat of the Fifth, as he approached. He had not, at first, thought of Price: but as soon as the nabob mentioned the name, he guessed the truth at once.

“It was that cad!” he said, in a low voice, “He was phoning Hacker from the post- office in Courtfield— that’s where he’s been. Stop him.”

“I say, we can’t be sure— !” said Nugent.

“I’m sure enough! Get him off that bike.”

Price of the Fifth, as he saw the bunch of juniors in the road, started a little. He put on speed, to get past them: perhaps anticipative of trouble. The Famous Five barred the way: and Wharton held up his hand.

“Stop!” he shouted.

Price did not stop: he ground at the pedals, and fairly flew. But he

did not get past the juniors.

They parted, as the bike came whizzing out, but as it passed through the group, they grabbed Price on either side.

He was grabbed off the machine, which went curling and clattering over in the road: and Price bumped down in the dust, yelling.

The bicycle crashed by the roadside. Price sat up in the road, smothered with dust, and gasping for breath.

“You young hooligans!” he spluttered, “What do you mean? What—?” He staggered to his feet. . . the Famous Five in a circle round him.

“I called to you to stop!” said Harry, “As you didn’t, we’ve stopped you! Where have you been?”

Price glared at him.

“You cheeky young rascal, what bizney is it of yours?” he snarled.

“Have you been to the post-office?”

“Find out.”

“Have you been on the phone to Hacker at the school?”

Price did not answer that. He made a movement to back away towards his bicycle. But the circle of juniors barred him in.

“You’re not getting away yet, you cur!” said the captain of the Remove, quietly, “I want my question answered.”

“I haven’t been to the post-office!” said Price, between his teeth.

“Now let me pass, you young ruffians.”

“You’ve landed me in more than one row with Hacker,” said Wharton, “You’re making use of the suspicious old goat, to pay off your rotten grudges. I licked you in your study for it, last time.

Now I want to know if you’ve been at it again. Hacker had an insulting phone call from somebody, and he’s put it down to me... as usual! Where have you been?”

Price breathed hard.

“I know nothing about it—if you’ve been playing tricks on Hacker!” he said, “Now let me pass.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“You cheeky young cad—.”

“Cut that out! Where have you been?”

But where he'd been we'll never know, because
some rotter's bagged the rest of the story!

