


BESSIE BUNTER'S BIG IDEA!


HILDA RICHARDS



CHAPTER I

WHOSE JAM?

"I SAY, you girls!"

"Too late!"

"Wharrer you mean, Clara?"

"We've finished tea."

"Cat!" said Bessie Bunter.

The plumpest member of the Fourth Form at Cliff House School rolled into the doorway of No. 7 Study. Three junior girls in that study looked at her and smiled. There had been tea in No. 7: but Marjorie Hazeldene and Clara Trevlyn had finished, and Dolly Jobling was winding up the very last crumb of the cake. The study was as bare as Mother Hubbard's well-known cupboard: and if Bessie Bunter had dropped in to tea—as too often she did!—she had dropped in a little too late.

When Bessie Bunter filled a doorway with her ample form at tea-time, it was only to be expected that she had come to tea. But on this occasion it was the unexpected that was going to happen.

"Think I've come to tea?" demanded Bessie.

"Haven't you?" asked Clara.

"I've had tea."

"Then why the unexpected, not to say superfluous, pleasure of your call?" inquired Clara.

Bessie Bunter blinked at Clara Trevlyn, through the big spectacles that

were so like those of her brother Billy at Greyfriars. It was an extremely indignant blink.

"Well, I like that!" she said. "When I come here to whack out a pot of jam with you girls—"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Oh!"

There were three ejaculations all at once. All three indicated surprise. Bessie Bunter, with an indignant sniff, rolled into the study. Three pairs of eyes fixed on an object under a fat arm. It was a pot of jam, and there was a tablespoon sticking in it.

There were smears of jam on Bessie's plump face, and smears on her plump hands. It was always easy to discern when Bessie had been near jam. In a burst of generosity, apparently, she had come to No. 7 Study to share that pot of jam with Marjorie and Clara and Dolly. But she had not been able to resist its attraction en route. Evidently she had been helping herself with the tablespoon before arriving in No. 7.

Which did not, as a matter of fact, make even strawberry jam attractive to the chums of No. 7. They were a little more particular in such matters than Miss Elizabeth Bunter.

"It's good," said Bessie. "I've tasted it. I've brought it here to whack out. I've had tea in this study sometimes. Well, now I've got a big pot of jam, I've brought it here. See?"

"That's very kind of you, Bessie," said Marjorie. "But—"

"Awfully kind," said Clara. "But—"

"But—!" murmured Dolly Jobling.

"I mean it!" said Bessie. "It's a three-pound pot, and there's lots." She landed the jampot on the study table. "Sort out your spoons and help yourselves."

Three girls looked at Bessie, and looked at one another. It was kind of Bessie: there was no doubt about that. Her intentions were good—in fact of the very best. Seldom, if ever did Bessie's pockey-money run to the purchase of three-pound pots of strawberry jam. Now, in possession of that expensive luxury, she was offering to whack it out in No. 7 Study. Neither did it dawn upon her fat brain that anyone might hesitate to share a pot of jam from which she had already been guzzling with a tablespoon. That, to Bessie, was a trifle light as air.

"Thanks so much, Bessie," said Marjorie, gently. "But—"

Clara interrupted. Her eyes fixed searchingly on that pot of jam. It was an unusual possession for Bessie Bunter. And it was well known in the Cliff House Fourth that Bessie had no more respect for the rights of property, in matters of tuck, than had her brother Billy.

"Where did you get that pot of jam, Bessie?" asked Clara, suddenly.

"Eh? Oh! I—I bought it at old Janet's tuck-shop, of course."

"What a coincidence!" said Clara, "Just before tea I saw Stella Stone buy one exactly like it from old Janet."

"Oh!" exclaimed Marjorie, startled. "Bessie, you haven't—!" She gazed at the plumpest junior at Cliff House in alarm.

Stella Stone, of the Sixth Form, was Senior Prefect at Cliff House. If that pot of jam belonged to Stella—!

"You silly little fat donkey," said Dolly Jobling. "If that's it, you'll get into an awful row—!"

"Taint Stella's!" exclaimed Bessie Bunter, "I tell you I got it at Janet's shop—"

"This morning," said Clara, "you were trying to borrow sixpence off half-a-dozen girls one after another. You didn't buy that jam, Bessie."

"I—:—I mean—"

"Well, what do you mean?"

"I—I—I mean, my brother Billy sent it to me," explained Bessie. "He—he—he had it in a hamper at Greyfriars, and—and—"

"Bessie!" gasped Marjorie.



"Think I've come to tea?" demanded Bessie.

"Think it isn't mine?" demanded Bessie. "I tell you I bought it from my brother Billy—I mean, Janet sent it to me in a hamper—I—mean—" Bessie seemed to be getting a little confused. "Look here, if you don't want any of my jam—"

"Take it back where it belongs, you little donkey," said Clara. "If Stella hasn't missed it yet—"

"Well, she wouldn't know," said Bessie. "She'd gone to ask some Sixth-Form girls to tea in her study—"

"Then it is hers?" exclaimed Marjorie.

"Tain't!" hooted Bessie. "I haven't been near the Sixth-Form studies, and Stella's door wasn't wide open, and I never saw it on her table. Can't you take a girl's word?"

Marjorie and Co, it seemed, couldn't! They gazed at Bessie almost in horror. Bessie's little ways, as a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles, in the Fourth, were well known: nobody's jam or toffee was really safe, with Bessie Bunter about. But while Bessie's peculiar manners and customs were more or less tolerated in the Fourth, it was a vastly different matter in the Sixth. There was no doubt that the thunder would roll, if it came out that Bessie had annexed a pot of jam from a Sixth-Form study.

"Bessie, for goodness sake—!" exclaimed Marjorie.

"You little idiot!—" said Clara.

"Take it back at once," said Polly.

There was a tread in the passage—a rather heavier tread than that of a junior girl. A tall figure appeared in the doorway. It was that of Stella Stone, Senior Prefect of Cliff House School. Stella was tall: she was invariably calm: she was a little haughty, as became her high position. One stony glance from her calm eyes was enough to quell the most exuberant junior at Cliff House. Those calm eyes glanced into No. 7.

"Is Bessie Bunter here?" Stella's voice was as calm as her glance. "Oh! You are here, Bessie!"

"Oh! Yes!" gasped Bessie. She stood between the jampot on the table and Stella in the doorway, her ample form screening it from view.

"Have you taken a pot of jam from my study?"

"Oh! Nunno!"

"I have missed it," said Stella, still severely calm. "Miss Bellew saw you with a pot of jam under your arm ten minutes ago, Bessie. You were coming from the direction of the Sixth-Form studies."

Marjorie and Clara and Dolly were silent. The pot of jam, behind Bessie, was still not visible to the tall prefect in the doorway.

"You have been eating jam," continued Stella, with a glance of distaste at a smeared mouth and sticky fingers.

"I—I—I haven't tasted jam for—for—for weeks!" gasped Bessie.

"Your face and fingers are sticky, Bessie."

"Oh! Are they?" gasped Bessie. She was unaccustomed to take note of such trifles as that!

"They are!" said Stella. "Do you know anything about the pot of jam that is missing from my study, Bessie?"

"Nun-nun-nothing at all!" mumbled Bessie. "I—I haven't seen it, and—and I never touched it, and—and I haven't got it here now—"

"What?"

Stella Stone advanced into the study. Bessie Bunter, sad to relate, never hesitated at a fib. But somehow her fibs always failed to convince: why, Bessie did not know.

"Bessie!" Stella's eyes fell, at last, on the pot of jam. "Bessie! Did you find that in my study?"

"Oh! No! I—I—I—"

"If it is your own, Bessie, you need only explain," said the Cliff House prefect, with undiminished calm. "Where did you obtain it?"

"My—my brother Janet sent it to me from hamper—I—I mean I bought it at Greyfriars—I—I—I mean—I—I—I—"

Bessie's fat voice trailed away. Stella Stone stood looking at the jampot and the sticky tablespoon embedded in the jam. The expression of distaste on her calm face was more pronounced. Bessie Bunter blinked at her guiltily. The calm gaze turned on her, rather like the petrifying gaze of Medusa.

"I shall report this to Miss Primrose, Bessie!" Stella's voice seemed to emerge from the deepest depths of a refrigerator.

"I—I—I say—"

"You will go to the Head—"

"Oh, lor'!"

Stella swept out of No. 7 Study—leaving the pot of jam where it was. Doubtless, like Marjorie and Co, she did not feel like disposing of that jam, after Bessie's performance with the tablespoon.

"Cat!" breathed Bessie, as she went.

Stella Stone glanced back.

"Did you speak, Bessie?"

"Oh! I—yes—no—I—I never said a syllable—I—I only said thank you, Stella!" stammered Bessie.

Stella gave her a very expressive look, and walked away. Not till she was quite, quite sure that the prefect was out of hearing, did Elizabeth Bunter venture to utter again that expressive word: "Cat!"

CHAPTER II

BESSIE KNOWS HOW!

"SEEN Bellew?"

"Miss Bellew? No," answered Marjorie.

"Hasn't she gone out yet?"

"I think she's in the Staff Room," said Clara.

"Chattering with the other cats, I suppose!" said Bessie. "Don't they chatter in the Staff Room! Always at it!"

At which Marjorie and Co. smiled. It was true that there was a great deal of talk in the Staff Room. But when it came to chattering, Bessie Bunter was without equal at Cliff House. Her capacious mouth was seldom still. When she was not eating, Bessie was generally talking.

"Keeping me waiting!" grunted Bessie.

"Keeping you waiting!" repeated Marjorie, in surprise. "Do you want to see Miss Bellew?"

"I want to see her come out of the House."

"You could go to the Staff Room, if you want to speak to your beak," said Clara.

"I don't want to."

Which was rather puzzling! Marjorie and Co. were coming out of the House, when they came on Bessie, leaning on a buttress near the steps. Her eyes and spectacles were fixed on the doorway. Apparently she was waiting there for Miss Bellew, form-mistress of the Fourth, to come out: but did not want to speak to her. However, Bessie proceeded to explain.

"I heard her tell the Bull that she was going down to Friardale after tea," said Bessie. "I'm waiting for her to go."

"But why?" asked Marjorie.

"Well, I can't go to her study while she's in the House! She might catch me there," explained Bessie.

"Is there a pot of jam in Bellew's study?" asked Clara Trevlyn, sarcastically. And Dolly Jobling chuckled. Marjorie looked alarmed. After Bessie's exploit in a prefect's study, which had led to an interview with the Principal Bessie might have been expected to steer clear of studies where she had no business. But it seemed now that she had designs on the study of no less a personage than her form-mistress.

"Bessie, you silly little thing," exclaimed Marjorie, "what are you thinking of in Miss Bellew's study?"

"That's telling!" said Bessie. "I may be going to tell Stella Stone what I think of her, and I may not. That's telling. Look what she did!" went on

Bessie, her eyes gleaming wrath behind her big spectacles. "Making out that that pot of jam wasn't mine, just because it was hers, you know—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you can giggle," hooted Bessie. "But I had to go to the Primrose, and she jawed me as if I'd been doing something wrong—"

"Oh, dear!"

"A good five minutes of it!" said Bessie, with deep indignation. "And I've got to pay for the jam! It's going to be stopped out of my pocket-money! Fancy that! That's the sort of justice we get here!"

Marjorie and Co. gazed at Bessie Bunter. Evidently the fat junior of Cliff House was deeply indignant. Bessie Bunter's plump brain moved in mysterious ways its wonders to perform.

"And even that's not all!" said Bessie, "I've got a detention. Stella likes reporting a girl, you know. She's a cat."

"But it was her pot of jam!" gasped Marjorie, "and you did take it from her study, and she had to report you to Miss Primrose—"

"You take her side, of course," said Bessie, bitterly. "Ungrateful, I call it, after I brought the jam to your study to share it out. Ingratitude is a sharper child than a serpent's tooth, as Shakespeare says."

"Oh, suffering cats!" ejaculated Clara. "Did Shakespeare put it like that, Bessie?"

"Yes, he did, as you'd know if you remembered what we get in English Literature from Bellew," said Bessie. "But never mind that! Stella's a cat, and will she sit up and take notice when I call her one! He, he, he!"

"You can't—!" gasped Marjorie.

"Can't I jolly well?" jeered Bessie. "You wait till Bellew's gone out, and I can get into her study, and you'll see."

"But Stella isn't in Bellew's study—she's in the Prefects' Room," said Clara.

"What do you mean, Fatima—if you happen to mean anything?"

"Well, I shouldn't call her a cat to her face, should I?" snapped Bessie. "I don't want to go up to the Primrose again. There's a telephone in Bellew's study, see?"

"A—a telephone—!" exclaimed Marjorie. "But—"

Bessie grinned.

"And there's a telephone in the Prefects' Room," she went on. "See? That's how I'm going to call her a cat without getting into a fearful row."

"Oh!" exclaimed the three juniors together.

They understood now.

Bessie, in her indignation, was thinking of reprisals. She was going to tell Stella Stone, Senior Prefect of Cliff House School, what she thought of her. She was going to call her a cat! But even Bessie understood that a Fourth-Form junior couldn't talk like that to a Sixth-Form prefect—without the skies falling, or something like it. Certainly it would have led to another, and much

more serious, interview, with Miss Primrose, the Principal. But Bessie had thought this out. "Safety first" had to be considered. But by the medium of that most useful invention, the telephone, you could talk to a person without being seen—or recognized—or known! At the end of a telephone-wire it was quite safe to call anybody a cat! That was the big idea!

"You little idiot!" said Clara.

"Minx!" retorted Bessie.

"You benighted little fat chump—!" said Dolly Jobling.

"Yah!"

"Bessie, dear, for goodness sake put it right out of your head," urged Marjorie, earnestly. "Forget all about it—"

"I'll watch it!" said Bessie.

"Come out for a walk instead—"

"Stuff!"

"You'll get into a row," said Clara.

"How are they going to know?" grinned Bessie. "Think Stella can see along a telephone wire? Bellew won't know anybody's been to her study. They won't know a thing; not a thing! I shall scream on the phone, so Stella won't know it's me. He, he, he!"

Evidently, the fat junior of Cliff House had been doing something on this subject.

"Don't be such a little ass—"

"Pack it up," said Bessie, hastily. "Here comes Bellew."

Miss Bellew, form-mistress of the Fourth, came out of the House. She walked away to the gates, Bessie's eyes and spectacles following her. Miss Bellew disappeared: safely off the scene: and Bessie turned to the chums of the Fourth with a triumphant blink.

"She's gone!" said Bessie. Now—"

"For goodness sake—!" urged Marjorie.

"Bosh!" said Bessie.

"Look here—!" said Clara.

"Tosh!" said Bessie.

And she rolled in at the doorway of the House: leaving Marjorie and Co. looking at one another in something like consternation.

Bessie seemed to have thought it out. It looked safe enough. But—! She was going to enjoy the unusual experience of calling a Sixth-Form Prefect a cat: and get away with it! But—. No more at Cliff House than at Greyfriars School could a junior in the Fourth Form express such candid opinions to a prefect of the Sixth! There was no doubt that there would be a "row": whether Bessie was found out or not.

"I—I hope she won't—!" muttered Marjorie.

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread!" pronounced Miss Clara, oracularly, "She will!"

"Stella will be furious!" breathed Dolly Jobling.

"Mad as a hatter!" agreed Miss Clara. "Madder, in fact! This way, old dears—I want to see Stella's face when she gets that call!"

Clara walked away to the big bay window of the Prefects' Room. That window was wide open, and several Sixth-Form girls could be seen within: among them, the tall and stately Stella. Marjorie and Dolly followed: more alarmed than interested to see Stella's face when she got the call. Marjorie hoped, at least, that Bessie would think better of it, before she got on Miss Bellew's telephone. But that hope died away as they sauntered past the big open window of the Prefects' Room: for from within that apartment, the ring of a telephone bell came out sharply audible into the quad.

Buzzzzzz!

"She's going it!" breathed Clara.

She was! The big idea was going into action.

CHAPTER III

"CAT!"

STELLA STONE lifted the receiver from the hooks. As Head Girl of Cliff House she naturally took the call. Five or six other senior girls either stopped talking, or subdued their voices, as Stella placed the receiver to her ear.

She started a little, as a voice came through. It was rather a scream than a voice. Certainly it did not sound like the fat tones of Miss Elizabeth Bunter. It was more like a train whistle.

"That Cliff House?"

"This is the Prefect's Room at Cliff House School," answered Stella calmly, in spite of the screaming voice. "Who is speaking?"

"Find out!"

"What?"

"Cat!"

"Eh!"

"Cat!"

Stella Stone almost dropped the receiver. She stared, with popping eyes. Stately calm was Stella's long suit. Seldom did it fail her. But it failed her now. She almost gibbered in her amazement.

"Who—who—who is speaking?" she stuttered, at last.

"Wouldn't you like to know? Cat!"

"Goodness gracious!" gasped Stella.

"I've rung you up to tell you what all the girls think of you," went on the screaming voice. "You're a cat, Stella Stone."

There were startled exclamations in the Prefects' Room. That loud, shrill scream on the telephone was audible far beyond the instrument. Perhaps the speaker intended it to be so. Every senior girl in the room heard it, and they gathered round Stella Stone, almost breathlessly.

"Who can be speaking?" exclaimed Isabel Drake.

"Cut off, Stella!" suggested Phoebe Long.

Stella Stone did not cut off. Her face set in an expression more like Medusa's than it had ever exhibited before. It was obvious, to Stella, that this was some Cliff House girl speaking—no stranger without the gates could possibly have rung her up to say things like this. Some impertinent junior, no doubt, upon whom she had had to come down with the prefectorial authority, was "getting back" in this remarkable way. Stella was deeply angered: but her chief thought was to discover who was the speaker.

The voice was wholly unrecognizable. It was merely a scream. It was somebody whose voice Stella would have known, in its natural tones. But who?

"Cat!" went on the scream. "Minx!"

Stella breathed hard! Some Cliff House girl, using one of the school telephones—that was it! But which?

"From where are you speaking?" asked Stella. The Head Girl of Cliff House couldn't possibly have said "Where are you speaking from?" Even in that moment of indignant wrath, she was careful with her prepositions.

"Guess!" screamed the voice.

"You are a Cliff House girl!"

"Cat!"

"You will be reported to Miss Primrose for this insolence."

"Yah!"

"You will be severely punished."

"I don't think!"

"Give me your name at once!" rapped Stella, with all the authority of Head Girl and Senior Prefect.

"Cat!"

"Will you give me your name at once?"

"Cat!"

Stella breathed harder. Face to face, no Cliff House girl would have disregarded her voice of authority. But the length of a telephone wire made all the difference. Whoever it was that was speaking over the phone, passed that authoritative voice by, like the idle wind which she regarded not.

"Still there, cat?" went on the scream. "I say! All the girls think you are a cat, Stella Stone! Every one of them! Do you know what the girls call the Prefects' Room? They call it the Cats' Home! Yah!"

Stella's cheeks were pink. The other senior girls exchanged looks, and eyes gleamed. Nobody in the Prefects' Room was enjoying this telephonic conversation. They did not smack heads at Cliff House: but had a certain fat

head been within reach at that moment, it was probable that it would have received several smacks.

"Who is it?" breathed Isabel.

"Who can it be—?"

"A junior girl—"

"Of course, but who—?"

"Speaking in the school—on some phone in a study—"

"We must find out," said Stella. She set her lips. "We must certainly find out, and—"

"Good-bye, cat!" came the scream. "I heard what you said, cat! I'm going! Cat! Cat! CAT!"

The final word came fairly in a yell. Then there was silence.

Stella listened. But the unknown interlocutor had cut off. With a face almost pale with wrath and offended dignity, Stella Stone put up the receiver. Whoever had put through this impertinent call was gone: and was not likely to be found in any of the Staff studies.

With set lips, Stella stepped to the window, and looked out. After class there were plenty of girls to be seen in the quad. Stella's searching eyes ran over them. Whatever girl was in the quad at the moment was not the guilty party. But there were some dozens not to be seen.

Three junior girls were quite near the big bay window. But Marjorie, Clara, and Dolly turned away as Stella appeared there. They were careful not to smile until their backs were to Stella.

Still with compressed lips, Stella turned back from the window. All the senior girls looked at her. She was calm: with a quite deadly calmness.

"This—this impertinent junior must be found!" said Stella. "All the prefects will begin inquiries at once."

And no time was lost.

All the Sixth-Form prefects of Cliff House were extremely busy for the next hour. Every one of them was quite keen to discover the offender: for report to the Principal, to be followed by the severest punishment ever meted out at Cliff House School.

But the result was precisely nil.

The voice on the phone gave no clue. Nobody's voice at Cliff House was anything like that shrill scream. Neither was there any other clue. The unknown telephoner had, undoubtedly, entered some Staff study and used the instrument there: equally undoubtedly, she had taken to flight before the search began. As Miss Bellew was out, it was most likely that Miss Bellew's phone had been used. But there was nobody in Miss Bellew's study when prefects looked in. The mysterious telephoner had vanished, and Stella, with deep feelings, had to give up the quest.

CHAPTER IV

STICKY!

"HE, he, he!"

Bessie Bunter was in high feather.

Marjorie was smiling. Clara was laughing. Dolly was chuckling. Certainly, they did not approve of Bessie's antics. Never, never would they have done anything of the kind themselves—never even dreamed of it. All the same, it had an element of the comic. Stella Stone's face, at the window of the Prefects' Room, had been, Clara declared, worth a guinea a box. For the first time in history, the Head Girl and Senior Prefect of Cliff House had been called a cat! And the caller had got away with it! And it was Bessie Bunter, who had not only the fattest figure but the fattest head in the Fourth Form, who had done it, and laid her plans so cautiously that there was no clue! For an hour the Sixth-Form prefects had been going up and down and round about, seeking the offender, but finding her not. To junior girls, there was something a little amusing in the impotent wrath of the majestic Sixth!

"Did I tell her off?" chuckled Bessie. "He, he, he! I say, you girls, did I tell her off! Did I call her a cat? He, he, he!"

"For goodness sake, don't talk about it," said Marjorie. "If it came out—"

"He, he, he! It won't come out," grinned Bessie. "I daresay it would if you girls had done it! But I've got brains. They won't spot me! He, he, he!"

"Stella's face—!" murmured Clara.

"She looked a picture!" chuckled Dolly.

"He, he, he!"

"But you shouldn't have done it, Bessie," said Marjorie. "For goodness sake, never do anything of the kind again—"

"I'll watch it!" retorted Bessie. "Why now I've thought of it, won't I just? Next time Bellew gives me lines, I'll get her on the phone and call her a cat too!"

"Bessie!" exclaimed all three, in horror.

"Why not?" grinned Bessie, "Ain't it safe as houses! And look here, I'll jolly well talk to the Primrose, too!"

"Wha-a-at?"

"She jawed me!" said Bessie. "Well, why shouldn't I jaw her?" She wouldn't know, if I scream like I did to Stella? You wait! I'll make 'em all sit up, I can tell you—all the Staff, one after another! He, he, he!"

"You little idiot!" gasped Clara.

"Yah!"

"You potty little porpoise—!" exclaimed Dolly.

"Cat!"

"For goodness sake, Bessie—!" beseeched Marjorie.

"I can jolly well tell you—," hooted Bessie.

"Hush—here's Bellew!"

Miss Bellew came in at the gates. Bessie Bunter suddenly ceased to speak. She was thinking out tremendous plans, in her fat mind, for making all the Staff at Cliff House "sit up". But certainly she did not want any member of that Staff to hear anything about it! And Miss Bellew, as she came in, was glancing towards the little group of schoolgirls.

She came across to them.

"Bessie!"

"Oh! Yes, Miss Bellew!" stammered Bessie.

"I have spoken to you several times, Bessie, about leaving traces of jam and such sticky things on your face and hands."

"Oh!" gasped Bessie. For a moment, she had dreaded that Miss Bellew had caught a careless word. But it was not that! It was only the accustomed sticky state of the fattest member of her form that had drawn Bellew's attention.

"Your face shows traces of jam, Bessie—"

"Dud-dud-does it?"

"And your fingers are sticky—very sticky—"

"Are—are they?"

"Go into the House, Bessie, and wash your face and hands at once!" said Miss Bellew, severely; and she swept on.

"Cat!" breathed Bessie.

Bessie Bunter did not like an extra wash. Really, after her exploits with Stella Stone's pot of jam that afternoon, even Bessie might have thought of soap and water as desirable. But she hadn't. She disliked such things: in fact, that dislike seemed to run in the Bunter family: her brother Billy, at Greyfriars, felt just the same about it. Bessie was quite satisfied with her sticky state: and extremely annoyed by Bellew's fussiness on the subject.

"Cat!" she repeated. "I've got to go in and wash—cat! Won't I jolly well call her a cat over the phone for this! You just wait!"

And Bessie rolled off to get that unwelcome wash.

Miss Bellew went into the House: where, before two minutes had passed, she was apprised of the spot of excitement that had occurred in the Prefects' Room during her absence. Very properly Miss Bellew was shocked to hear of it, and like other members of the Staff, prepared to do her best to help in tracing the culprit—especially as it seemed probable that it was her own telephone that had been used for the heinous purpose of calling the Head Girl and Senior Prefect a cat!

It was not a matter that could be allowed to rest, if there was anything to be done. Unfortunately, it seemed that there was nothing to be done. For a whole hour the prefects had investigated and inquired: but had investigated

and inquired in vain. Members of the Staff had investigated and inquired: but their investigations and inquiries had proved equally fruitless. There was simply no clue.

Or was there?

Bessie Bunter, rolling in the quad with an unusually clean face, and fingers that were hardly sticky at all, felt as safe as houses. She did not know that Miss Bellew, in her study, had occasion to ring up the bookshop at Courtfield about some books that had not been delivered at Cliff House: and she would not have cared if she had known.

But—!

CHAPTER V

ALAS FOR BESSIE!

“OH!” ejaculated Miss Bellew.

She gave quite a jump.

Quite an extraordinary expression came over the face of the form-mistress of the Fourth.

In her study, she picked up the receiver to ring up the Courtfield bookshop. That was quite a normal proceeding. But it was not normal to find her fingers sticking to a sticky telephone-receiver. Miss Bellew, always as clean and neat as a new pin, as became a schoolmistress, certainly had not left that telephone-receiver in a sticky condition. Someone with jammy fingers had used it since she had last done so.

“Oh!” repeated Miss Bellew.

She released the receiver, and looked at her fingers.

They were sticky!

Then she bent her head over the receiver, and examined it microscopically. It was sticky!

“Oh!” said Miss Bellew, for the third time.

Jammy fingers had clutched that receiver during her absence. No Sherlock Holmes or Ferrers Locke was required to detect that! The receiver was jammy and sticky, and Miss Bellew's fingers, where they had touched it, were jammy and sticky. And only a quarter of an hour ago, she had sent Bessie Bunter in to wash her hands, because her fingers were jammy and sticky!

Miss Bellew drew a deep breath.

Someone had used that telephone, during her absence, to ring up the Prefect's Room and call the Head Girl and Senior Prefect a cat! Miss Bellew knew now who that someone was!

She glanced from the study window, at a fat face in the quad, which was no longer sticky, but which wore a happy grin. Bessie Bunter was still in high

feather. At that very moment, she was thinking out her plans for telling Miss Bellew what she thought of her—telephonically—just as she had told Stella Stone. But those plans were scattered from her fat brain as a sharp voice rapped from Miss Bellew's window.

"Bessie!"

The fat junior stared at the window.

"Oh! Yes, Miss Bellew."

"Come to my study at once."

"I—I—I've washed, Miss Bellew," exclaimed Bessie, warmly. She held up a pair of almost clean hands in evidence of that statement.

"Come to my study!"

"Oh, very well, Miss Bellew."

Indignantly, Bessie Bunter rolled into the House, to repair to her form-mistress's study. Bellew, she supposed, wanted to inspect those hands at closer range, to ascertain that they had been well and truly washed—just like a fussy cat! Inwardly, Bessie resolved that her next performance on the telephone should make Miss Bellew feel quite sorry for herself.

She rolled into Miss Bellew's study.

"I've washed them, Miss Bellew! Look!" Once more Bessie held up a pair of fat hands.

But Miss Bellew did not even glance at them.

"Bessie! You used my telephone during my absence."

Bessie jumped.

"You used it to speak to the Senior Prefect—"

"Oh, lor'!"

"—in the most impertinent way—"

"I—I—I—"

"I shall now take you to the Principal!" said Miss Bellew.

Bessie Bunter blinked at her. Her little round eyes almost popped through her big round spectacles. Miss Bellew did not ask her if she had used that phone. She stated it as a fact! She knew! How she knew was a deep mystery to Bessie! It seemed to her like black magic.

"I—I—I—I—I—!" stuttered Bessie. "I—I—I didn't! I—I wasn't! I—I was in the quad with Marjorie and Clara and Dolly when I telephoned—I mean when I never telephoned—I—I—I—I don't think Stella's a cat, Miss Bellew—I—I—I—I wouldn't call her a cat for—for anything, and I jolly well know that she never knew my voice, either, especially as I never phoned at all—"

"Come with me."

"But I—I—I never—wasn't—didn't—wouldn't—."

"Come!"

"Oh, lor'!"

A dismal, dolorous, doleful Bessie followed Miss Bellew to the Principal's study. For the second time that day, Bessie Bunter had to interview the Head!

Marjorie, Clara, and Dolly, as they saw her trailing dolorously after Miss Bellew to the dreaded apartment, gave her sympathetic looks. They were sorry for Bessie—though not half so sorry as Bessie was for herself!

THERE were no more telephone stunts at Cliff House. All Bessie's extensive plans in that line were completely washed out—after her interview with the Head! Whatever Bessie thought of the Prefects and the Staff, not a single member of either the Prefects or the Staff was ever called a cat again over the telephone!

THE END

NOTE: The Bunter Books, in which are chronicled the adventures of Harry Wharton and Co. of Greyfriars School, are published by Cassell and Co. Ltd., Ludgate Hill, London, E.C.4.