

BILLY BUNTER'S BRAIN-WAVE

By
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"GOAL !"
IT WAS A ROAR THAT AWOKE ALL THE ECHOES.

CHAPTER 1

LAZY!

“HERE Bunter !”

“Oh ! Yes, Wingate !”

Billy Bunter eyed the captain of Greyfriars rather uneasily through his big spectacles. Bunter was seated on a bench under one of the old Greyfriars elms, when Wingate and Gwynne, two great men of the Sixth Form, came by.

They were talking as they walked, and Billy Bunter’s fat ears caught the words “football” and “St. Jim’s”, from which he was able to deduce, without much mental effort, that they were discussing the First Eleven match that was due the following week.

Bunter was not interested. Almost every other fellow at Greyfriars, from the Sixth down to the Second, was quite keen about First Eleven matches. But Bunter had more important matters on his fat mind, and he couldn’t have cared less. A postal order, which he had long expected, had failed to arrive, and that was quite enough for Bunter to think about.

So the two seniors, discussing the St. Jim’s match, might have passed him by like the idle wind which he regarded not, had not Wingate, turned towards him, and called. Whereat Bunter, as aforesaid, blinked at him uneasily. He had a misgiving that the Greyfriars captain wanted him to do something. Bunter did not want to do anything. Bunter was sitting down, and when he was sitting down, he disliked getting up. He was resting comfortably on the old bench under the elm, and nothing but news of a study spread would have made him willing to stir his lazy limbs. Any other Remove man would have been glad to fag for old Wingate. Billy Bunter would have been glad if Wingate had passed on without noticing him there.

“Cut into the House, Bunter —.”

“Eh ?”

“And tell Loder I’d like to see him in my study after tea.”

“Oh !”

The two great men walked on. Wingate did not think of turning his head to see whether Bunter started on that errand or not. It could never have occurred to him that any Lower Boy, directed to take a message by so tremendous a personage as the captain of the school, would dream of hesitating to carry out the behest. Wingate and Gwynne dismissed Bunter wholly from mind as they walked on and talked on.

Billy Bunter cast an inimical blink at their departing backs.

“Beast !” murmured Bunter, not loud enough for Wingate to hear.

Everyone at Greyfriars School liked old Wingate. Even Bunter, whose affections were chiefly concentrated on his fat self, rather liked him. At the moment, however, he was in Bunter’s estimation a beast. Bunter did not want to lift his uncommon weight from the old oak bench, and roll across the quad with a message to Loder of the Sixth.

Bunter, in fact, was lazy. He had to go: but he was in no hurry to make a move.

It was rather a relief to him, to see Herbert Vernon-Smith, of the Remove, stroll down the path with his hands in his pockets.

“I say, Smithy,” squeaked Bunter. “Stop a minute.”

Smithy stopped.

“I say, Wingate wants to see Loder in his study after tea,” said Bunter.

“Does he ?” yawned Smithy. “No accounting for tastes.”

“He’s told me to cut in and tell him,” explained Bunter. “I say, will you cut in and tell him, Smithy ?”

The Bounder laughed.

“Not in these trousers,” he answered, and he strolled on.

Bunter’s blink after Smithy, as he went, was as inimical as his blink after Wingate. However, a few minutes later, as he was slowly making up his fat mind that he had better get a move on, Lord Mauleverer appeared on the path, coming along with his usual leisurely saunter. Bunter’s hopes revived. Old Mauly was all good-nature, and would do anything for anybody. Once more there was a possibility that the fat Owl of the Remove might be saved from the awful necessity of exerting himself a little.

“I say, Mauly !” squeaked Bunter. “Stop, will you ?”

Lord Mauleverer glanced round. But he did not stop.

“Mauly !” howled Bunter. “Deaf ?”

His lordship seemed deaf. If he heard that fat squeak, he understudied the ancient gladiator who heard but heeded not ! Instead of stopping, he accelerated.

“Mauly !” hooted Bunter.

Mauly’s easy saunter developed into quite a vigorous stride. Probably the pleasures of Bunter’s company, if any, had long since palled on his lordship. He did not know what Bunter wanted: but evidently he did not want to know. He just went.

“Beast !” hissed Bunter.

He blinked round over the quad, bright in the sunshine of a fine afternoon in late autumn. There were plenty of fellows in sight: but none within range of a squeak. Not that it would have been of much use, anyway, as Bunter bitterly reflected: they were a lazy lot ! Once more the fat Owl prepared to heave his weight from the old oaken bench. But once more he settled down again, at the sight of five fellows coming out of the House in a bunch — Harry Wharton and Co. of the Remove.

They were heading for the gates. Bob Cherry had an old football under his arm.

Apparently the Famous Five were going to take that old footer for a run. Bunter eyed them hopefully as they came along: they would be within the radius of a fat squeak when they came nearer.

They too were talking football as they walked. Bunter gave an impatient snort as their words fell on his fat ears. They were not discussing Remove football. The First Eleven match was the topic.

“Sykes will be in goal !” Frank Nugent was remarking.

“St. Jim’s won’t find it easy to get past him,” said Johnny Bull.

“I say, you fellows !” squeaked Bunter.

They did not heed the squeak. For some reason, unknown to Bunter, Harry Wharton and Co. were more interested in the St. Jim’s match than in the fattest member of their form. It was very irritating to Bunter.

“It will be a jolly good team,” said Harry Wharton. “Wingate’s got plenty of good men to choose from. Every man in the Sixth would jump at playing in the St. Jim’s game.”

“Even Loder’s keen,” remarked Nugent.

“Loder’s a slacker,” grunted Johnny Bull. “Wingate wouldn’t play him in a game like

that.”

“I say, you fellows !”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Bob Cherry, tolerantly. “Loder’s been sticking to the game for weeks, and everybody knows he’s keen on the St. Jim’s match. He might push in !”

“He would have to cut out the smokes in his study,” said Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

“Think he’d think it worth while ? I expect he’d conk out at half-time, against men like St. Jim’s.”

“The conk-outfulness would probably be terrific,” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a nod of his dusky head.

“I say, you fellows,” yelled Bunter. “Will you stop talking rot for a minute, and listen to a chap ? You fellows are like a sheep’s head — all jaw ! I say, stop a minute, blow you.”

Thus politely adjured, the Famous Five came to a stop.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo ! What’s the jolly old trouble ?” asked Bob Cherry. “Cough it up, old fat man — we’re going down to Friardale for tea —.”

“Never mind that,” grunted Bunter. “I say, Wingate’s given me a message for Loder of the Sixth. Which of you fellows will cut in and tell him ?”

The Famous Five stared at Bunter.

“The whichfulness is terrific,” grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Why can’t you cut in and tell him yourself ?” asked Nugent.

“Well, I’m sitting down —.”

“Oh, my hat !”

“That’s all right,” said Bob Cherry, cheerily. “I’ll give you something to cure all that, old fat man.”

“I say — leggo — look out — wow ! — wharrer you grabbing me for, you silly idiot ? Will you leggo ?” roared Bunter.

The heftiest pair of hands in the Greyfriars Remove whirled the fattest member of that form off the bench.

Billy Bunter sat on the earth instead of the bench, and roared.

“Yaroooooh !”

“Now give him a start !” said Bob. “Stick there, Bunter ! Line up, you men, and all boot him together ! Hold on, Bunter ! Where are you going ?”

Billy Bunter did not linger to state where he was going. He bounded up and went. He did not, apparently, want to be given a start. In fact an arrow in its flight had nothing on Bunter, as he departed.

The Famous Five, laughing, walked on to the gates, kicked out the old footer, and followed it down Friardale Lane. Billy Bunter, breathless and indignant, rolled into the House at last, to deliver that belated message to Gerald Loder of the Sixth Form.

CHAPTER 2

UNEXPECTED GOAL!

“STOP that !”

“What ?”

“I said stop it !” rapped Coker of the Fifth, frowning.

Five Remove fellows looked at Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form, almost as if they could have eaten him !

Harry Wharton and Co. in cheery spirits, were speeding Bob’s old footer down

Friardale Lane. They were enjoying the run, in the happy and perhaps rather thoughtless way of healthy youth. It was, in fact, a little thoughtless: for Friardale Lane, like many of the leafy lanes in the pleasant county of Kent, had many twists and turns, which in many places shut off visibility ahead. A whizzing soccer ball was likely to have quite a startling effect on anyone coming round one of those turns.

The juniors had not thought about that. Coker of the Fifth kindly thought of it for them.

Coker was sitting on the stile in the lane, hardly more than a hundred yards from the school gates, when the old footer came speeding along, with five fellows in pursuit of it, racing one another and kicking the ball. Coker frowned, and immediately shouted to them to “stop that !”

“You silly young sweeps !” said Coker, magisterially, as the chums of the Remove halted, and glared at him. “You might bash somebody with that ball ! Stop it at once !”

Coker was, in fact, quite right ! Somebody might have been “bashed”, as he expressed it, by the whizzing ball. There was little traffic in Friardale Lane, but pedestrians might have appeared at any moment. Had a prefect of the Sixth been on the spot, no doubt the juniors would have been called to order. But Coker was not a prefect ! He was only in the Fifth, and nobody in particular. But Coker had a way of adopting the manners and customs of one having authority, saying “Do this !” and he doeth it ! Which often produced the very opposite effect to that desired by Coker.

“You cheeky ass !” said Bob Cherry. “Can’t you mind your own business, Coker ?” That was quite a superfluous question. Coker of the Fifth had never been known to mind his own business.

“I said stop it!” he repeated. “And don’t give me any lip, Cherry ! I’ve a short way with fags, as you’ll jolly well find out. Pick up that ball and take it back, or I’ll take it away from you.”

That, from Wingate, or Gwynne, or Loder, or Sykes, or any prefect of the Sixth, would have settled the matter. From Coker of the Fifth, it had no more effect than water on a duck. The mere fact that Coker ordered them to stop kicking the ball along the lane, was a sufficient reason for the juniors to continue to kick it, even had they been otherwise inclined.

“Come on, you fellows,” said Harry Wharton.

“On the ball !” said Johnny Bull.

“Go to sleep and dream again, Coker,” suggested Frank Nugent.

“The mindfulness of your own idiotic business is the proper caper, my esteemed and absurd Coker,” remarked Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

“Hold on, though,” said Bob Cherry. “Cokers going to barge in if we kick that ball again, ain’t you, Coker ?”

“I am !” said Coker, with emphasis.

“You silly ass, Bob,” roared Johnny Bull. “Are you going to let that Fifth-Form fathead give you orders ?”

“Well, we don’t want Coker barging in,” said Bob.

“Blow Coker !”

“Bless Coker !”

“What do you mean, you ass ?”

“This !” said Bob, and he made a sudden dive at Coker’s feet, resting on the step of the stile. Before Horace Coker knew what was happening, Bob’s grasp was on his ankles, and two large feet were suddenly jerked into the air.

“Oh !” roared Coker. “You mad young ass — Oh !”

Coker went backwards over the stile on which he had been sitting. There was no help for that, with his feet suddenly jerked up into the air. He roared frantically as he went. Tipped backwards over the stile, Coker had no choice but to obey the well-known Law of Gravitation, so ably demonstrated by Sir Isaac Newton. Like all falling bodies, he descended rapidly towards the centre of the earth.

He did not of course, go so far as that. The surface of the earth stopped him. It stopped him with a terrific bump.

“Oh !” roared Coker, as he bumped.

“Ha, ha, ha !” yelled the juniors.

“Oh ! Ow ! Ah ! Ooogh ! Woogh !”

“Come on, you chaps,” said Bob, cheerily. “Coker won’t barge in, in a hurry.

Goodbye, Coker !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh ! Ow ! Woogh ! Wow ! Wait till I get at you ! — ow — ooogh — ow ——— !”

“Put it on,” said Harry Wharton, laughing. “Coker sounds in a bad temper.”

“On the ball,” chuckled Bob. “Clear before the dear man gets going.”

It was, in fact, judicious to clear before Horace Coker got going. Five merry juniors chased on down Friardale Lane, leaving Coker to sort himself out at his leisure. They put on a burst of speed, to gain distance before Coker got through the sorting-out process.

It was that that did it !

At a more leisurely pace, the accident would not have happened, But with five fellows going all out, and the ball whizzing like a bullet, it did happen.

A kick from Bob landed the ball a dozen yards away, and the juniors rushed after it. Harry Wharton was in the lead, and he reached the ball, and kicked as he reached it. And as the soccer ball flew from his foot almost like a bullet from a rifle, a tall angular form came round one of those twists in the winding lane — just in time to meet it.

“Look out !” shrieked Frank Nugent, as he spotted Mr. Quelch, the master of the Greyfriars Remove ahead.

“Quelch — !” gasped Bob.

“Look out !”

But it was too late ! Wharton saw his form-master the next moment, but the ball was whizzing.

“Oh, my hat !” he ejaculated, blankly.

Mr. Quelch glanced at the juniors. He did not, for a split second, see the ball. He did not, for that brief space of time, know that a soccer ball was whizzing in the air. The next second, he knew: only too well.

Crash !

Mr. Quelch hardly knew what happened. It was distinctly unfortunate that he was in the direct line of fire. Something landed on his chest, and knocked him over like a ninepin.

He sat down suddenly in Friardale Lane.

“Oh !” gasped all the juniors together, overwhelmed with dismay.

Quelch sat and spluttered.

“What — what — what ——— ?”

Then he realized what had happened. He had been knocked over by a soccer ball, recklessly whizzed along the lane by a boy of his form. He sat in the dust, his hat

cocked rakishly over one ear, the soccer ball at his feet. And, as he realized what had happened, the expression that came over the face of Henry Samuel Quelch might have made a stone image quake.

“Upon my word !” gurgled Mr. Quelch.

He staggered to his feet.

“Sorry, sir !” gasped Harry Wharton.

“The sorrowfulness is terrific, esteemed sahib !” breathed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“So sorry, sir,” stuttered Nugent.

“Oh, suffering cats and crocodiles !” murmured Bob Cherry. “There’s going to be a row now !”

“All Coker’s fault !” growled Johnny Bull. “But for him —.”

“I — I have been struck by a — a — a football !” gasped Mr. Quelch. “I — I have been — been overthrown ! Upon my word ! Which boy kicked that ball ?”

“It was quite an accident, sir,” stammered Harry. “I — I didn’t see you —.”

“Was it you. Wharton ?”

“Yes, sir !”

“Such thoughtlessness — such — such recklessness — you, the Head Boy of my form — you — you —.” Quelch gasped for breath. “I shall deal with you severely for this, Wharton.”

“I — I — .”

“Not a word ! Go back to the school at once ! Go to my study, and wait there till I come in. Go ! At once.”

“We — we were all in it, sir,” stammered Bob.

“Take a hundred lines, Cherry !”

“Oh ! Yes, sir.”

“Wharton ! Go !”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry, quietly.

He gave his friends a rather eloquent glance, turned, and walked back up the lane.

Really, he was no more to blame than the others: they had all been, as Bob said, in it. But certainly he had floored his form-master with the soccer ball, and “toco” for such a performance was only to be expected. The fact that really it was more Coker’s fault than anyone else’s did not help.

Mr. Quelch, still gasping for breath, tottered to a wayside tree, on which he leaned, to recover himself. Bob Cherry quietly picked up the ball and put it under his arm. Four very subdued juniors walked on to Friardale. After what had happened, they did not feel like whizzing the soccer ball recklessly along the Queen’s highway: and it was still under Bob’s arm when they arrived at Uncle Clegg’s in Friardale.

CHAPTER 3

SMOKES FOR BUNTER

“BEAST !”

Billy Bunter made that remark.

He made it with deep feeling, as he blinked round Loder’s study in the Sixth through his big spectacles.

That study was vacant. Loder was not there. Wingate, no doubt, had known that Loder was in his study when he despatched the message. But that message had been considerably delayed. Bunter, had he cut in at once, would no doubt have found Loder on the spot. But the lapse of twenty minutes or so made the difference. Loder was no

longer on the spot.

Bunter rolled in expecting to find him there. He did not find him. So he ejaculated “Beast !” to express his feelings.

The fat and lazy Owl had had to exert himself to carry that message. Now Loder was not there to receive it. It was very irritating to a fat and lazy Owl ! That message had to be delivered, or Wingate would want to know the reason why. And Bunter couldn’t deliver it and get it off his fat mind.

No doubt, Loder was somewhere in the House. He might have gone along to the Prefect’s Room, or stepped into another Sixth-Form man’s study. Bunter did not feel disposed to wander round the House in quest of Loder. He decided to wait for him to come in. That was the line of least exertion.

He blinked at Loder’s armchair, very much inclined to deposit his weight in it. But if Loder came in suddenly, Bunter knew what was likely to happen to a junior found sitting in his armchair. Loder had a bad temper, and a very ready hand with the official ash.

“Beast !” repeated Bunter.

And he leaned on Loder’s table, to wait.

His eyes, and his spectacles, fixed on the door of Loder’s study cupboard. Bunter’s eyes, naturally, turned in any direction where there was food. It was known that Loder of the Sixth did himself very well in the matter of study teas. Very likely, more likely than not, there was something very attractive in that cupboard: and there was Bunter, only a few feet from it, like a podgy Pen just outside the gate of Paradise.

In a junior study, the fat Owl would not have hesitated for a moment. In a Sixth-Form prefect’s study, he did hesitate. He gave the cupboard longing blinks through his big spectacles: but, for some minutes, left it at that. But it is well said that he who hesitates is lost !

One tart from a tin, three or four biscuits from a bag, would surely not be missed !
Or a few chocolates or toffees !

Had Loder come in, Bunter would have been saved from temptation. But Loder did not come in. And, at length, the fat Owl tiptoed to the door, and peered out, to ascertain whether Loder was coming. Like Moses of old he looked this way and that way, and there was no man ! The passage was empty.

That was enough for Bunter. He closed the door quietly but carefully, and shot back to the study cupboard.

In a moment, it was open, and the fat Owl was blinking eagerly into the interior.

“Beast !” said Bunter, for the third time.

No packets of chocolates, or tarts, or cake, no bag of biscuits, met his view. There were crockeries and other articles in the cupboard. But at the first eager blink there seemed to be nothing of an edible nature.

Billy Bunter’s fat brow wrinkled in a frown. It was disappointing and exasperating. Generally Loder’s study cupboard was well supplied. Bunter, indeed, had been there, once before, and had found ample provender. Now there was nothing ! Not a chunk of cake, not a biscuit, not a chocolate, not a single solitary bull’s-eye to comfort Bunter while he waited for the beast to come in !

But was there not ?

As Bunter scanned the interior, he discerned a tin pushed almost out of sight behind various other articles. On that tin was a label. On the section of the label that he could see, were the letters, in capitals T-O-F——obviously the first half of the magic word “Toffee.”

The frown disappeared from Bunter’s fat brow. He reached into the cupboard and

disinterred that tin from its retreat in the corner. Why it had been poked away there, almost invisible, was rather a puzzle: Loder, a Sixth-Form man, could hardly have doubted that his toffees were safe in his study cupboard. Bunter had almost missed it. However, he hadn't quite, so that was all right.

He paused for a moment, and listened with both fat ears intent for a sound from the passage that might indicate that Loder was coming. But there was no sound — Loder was not coming.

He whipped the lid off the toffee tin.

The expression on his fat face was one of happy anticipation. Bunter was going to help himself to those toffees: not too many, in case Loder should miss them: but just as many as Loder would not be likely to miss. His anticipative grin was almost ecstatic as he whipped the lid off.

And then, as the poet has expressed it, a change came o'er the spirit of his dream ! From the open tin emanated a faint scent — not at all like toffee. It was the scent of tobacco ! Billy Bunter stared, and glared, into that tin. It was a toffee tin, undoubtedly. But it did not contain toffees.

He knew now why it had been shoved out of sight in the cupboard behind the other things. Nobody, certainly, was likely to guess that a toffee tin contained cigarettes, but a Sixth-Form prefect who smoked in his study could not be too careful about it.

There was not a single toffee in the tin. There was nothing that even Billy Bunter could eat. There was a heap of cigarettes: two or three dozen at least. Bunter gave a snort of angry disgust.

More was known, or surmised, in the Lower School, of Gerald Loder's manners and customs, than was dreamed of in his headmaster's study. Plenty of fellows knew, or thought they knew, that Loder smoked in his study, with the door locked. Billy Bunter now knew it for a fact. Loder, a big Sixth-Form man, was probably not very keen on toffees. Cigarettes, evidently, were more in his line. Billy Bunter would have swapped all the cigarettes that ever came from Virginia for a single packet of toffee.

"Beast !" hissed Bunter.

He was about to slam the lid back on that disappointing tin, and shove it back where he had found it. But he paused.

His fat fingers groped in the tin, and picked out half a dozen cigarettes. He would certainly have preferred toffee, or anything edible. But the fat Owl would smoke a cigarette if he could get one for nothing. Indeed, he fancied that it was extremely doggish so to do, and esteemed himself quite a man of the world with a cigarette in his mouth. Bunter was an ass, but he was not ass enough to exchange good money for smokes. But he was more than willing to smoke a cigarette if it was somebody else's. Half a dozen cigarettes were transferred from the tin to Bunter's pocket. Then he replaced the lid, and put the tin back into its corner. He grinned as he rolled back to the table, and leaned his weight thereon. It did not even occur to Bunter's fat and fatuous mind that what he had done was pilfering. He had just helped himself to a few cigarettes, that was all. The only worry was that Loder might, possibly, miss the cigarettes. But that was a very remote danger: Loder would not miss half a dozen from such a heap, and if he did, could he venture to make any inquiry after missing smokes ? Of course he could not:

Bunter grinned at the idea. Loder had to keep those smokes a deep, dead secret: such a discovery in his study would have led to a painful interview with Dr. Locke:

moreover, he was keen on playing in the St. Jim's match, and a fellow who risked spoiling his wind by smoking was little likely to be picked out for a big fixture.

Bunter was quite safe: and that, to the fat Owl's obtuse mind, was all there was about

it.

But, with Loder's cigarettes in his pocket, the fat Owl would have been glad to get out of Loder's study without meeting Loder's eye. Also, now he had cigarettes to smoke, he was keen to get to his own study in the Remove, and begin on the doggish and man-of-the-world business of smoking them. Loder did not seem to be coming: so Bunter, at last, made up his fat mind to go and look for him: and, having made up his fat mind, he rolled out of Loder's study in quest of Loder.

CHAPTER 4

IN QUELCH'S STUDY

HARRY WHARTON gave quite a jump.

He was startled.

Indeed, for a moment he could hardly believe either his eyes or his ears.

He had walked back to the school at Quelch's behest, leaving his comrades to go on to the village without him. He had arrived at the door of Mr. Quelch's study, in which apartment he had to wait for Quelch. That was likely to be followed by Quelch's cane being featured in the next scene, which was not a happy prospect, and the captain of the Remove was not looking quite so cheerful as usual, as he stopped at Quelch's door and turned the handle.

Had Mr. Quelch been in his study, he would of course have tapped before entering. But he had left Mr. Quelch in Friardale Lane at some distance from the school, and naturally supposed that the study was vacant. So he turned the handle and opened the door, and was about to step in, when he was suddenly arrested by what he saw and heard.

That study was not untenanted, as he had expected. A Sixth-Form man was there, standing at the telephone.

His back was towards the door: but a back view was quite sufficient for Wharton to recognize Loder of the Sixth.

Loder was speaking into the telephone as the junior opened the door. He had not heard the door open, and did not break off, or turn his head.

"Three to one, did you say, Joey?"

Those were Loder's words, which came as clearly to the junior staring in at the doorway, as to the ears of Loder's interlocutor at the other end of the line.

Harry Wharton stared blankly.

Loder, evidently, knew that Mr. Quelch was out of the school, as he was borrowing his telephone. From where he stood at the instrument, he was able to keep an eye on the window, which gave a view of the gates in the distance: so, had Quelch come in, Loder would have had ample time to ring off and get out of the study. He was in no danger of being caught by the Remove master. Which was well for Loder, for had it transpired that he had used a master's telephone to ring up a racing friend about backing a horse, Loder's departure from Greyfriars School would have been very swift and very sudden.

Wharton could only stare.

He knew, as a good many fellows did, that Gerald Loder's ways were not always quite in conformity with his position and duties as a prefect. He could hardly mistake the meaning of the words Loder was speaking into the phone. But that even Loder had the nerve to ring up Joey Banks, at the Cross Keys, on a master's phone, was a surprise.

For a moment or two, the captain of the Remove stood staring, Loder quite unaware of his presence. Loder's attention was divided between the telephone and the window, and he did not think of looking round. He went on speaking.

"Well, look here, Joey —."

Wharton interrupted him at that point. He had no desire to hear what Loder had to say to Mr. Banks at the Cross Keys: and he could guess, too, what Loder would feel like, when he found that a junior was within hearing. Wharton rattled the door-handle loudly.

Loder, at the telephone, gave a bound. He was so startled that the receiver dropped from his hand, and hung at the end of its cord. He spun round from the instrument, his face suddenly as white as chalk.

For one awful moment, Loder fancied that he was caught. It couldn't be Quelch.

Quelch was out. But — someone —.

Then, as he saw the junior in the doorway, he panted with relief. Certainly, he did not want even a junior to know anything about his secret and surreptitious dealings with Mr. Banks. But it was not, at all events, a master. He had had the fright of his life: but he was in no danger.

He stared at Wharton, as blankly as Wharton stared at him. For a moment he was conscious only of relief. Then relief gave place to rage, and his eyes blazed at the captain of the Remove.

"Wharton! You young rascal!" he panted. "You're listening there —."

"Oh, don't be an ass. Loder," was Wharton's unceremonious answer. "I've only just opened the door."

"You — you heard me —."

"I couldn't help hearing you as I opened the door, I suppose?" snapped the captain of the Remove. "And I rattled the door to cut short your drivel on the phone."

It was not exactly a respectful manner in which to address a Sixth-Form prefect. But Harry Wharton was not feeling respectful. He did not take the trouble to conceal the contempt he was feeling. It showed in his look and in his voice. Loder, certainly, was a prefect: but at that moment he was also a surreptitious young rascal who would have been "sacked" if Dr. Locke had heard what Wharton had heard.

"How dare you enter a master's study without knocking?" breathed Loder, eyeing the junior almost wolfishly.

"I was sent here, and I knew Quelch was out. I didn't know you were here at the phone," added Harry. "But I should have come in just the same, as I was sent."

"Who sent you?"

"Quelch!"

"That's untrue. You've just said that Quelch is out, and I know he is. Get out of this study at once."

Harry Wharton did not get out of the study. He stepped in. He had to carry out his form-master's order, Loder or no Loder.

Loder's eyes fairly flamed, at that disregard of his command. He stepped to Mr. Quelch's table, on which a cane lay.

"I know why you've come here," he said. "Playing some trick in your form-master's study, while he's out. I shall report this to Quelch."

"Do!" said Harry, carelessly.

"And now, get out."

Wharton shook his head.

"Can't," he explained. "You see, Loder —."

Loder grasped the cane on the table. "I've told you to go," he said, between his teeth.

Harry Wharton laughed. He could guess that Loder had not finished his talk with the racing man at the Cross Keys, and wanted to get on with it before Quelch came in. Obviously, he could not get on with it in the presence of a Remove junior. But Wharton had no intention of going.

His form-master had sent him there, and that was that.

“Will you let me explain —?” he asked.

“Get out, I say.”

“Quelch sent me here to wait for him —.”

“That’s enough !” Loder swished Mr. Quelch’s cane.

“I’ve had enough lip from you, Wharton ! Bend over that chair.”

That was the preliminary to “six.” But Harry Wharton did not bend over the chair. He stood looking coolly at the enraged prefect: a coolness that intensified Loder’s exasperation.

“I’ve told you Quelch sent me here,” he said, stubbornly. “I’ve got to wait for him, as he told me to do. And I’m not going to bend over, Loder.”

“What ?”

“You’re not going to give me six,” said Harry, coolly and deliberately. “If you touch me with that cane, Loder, I shall appeal to my form-master when he comes in. I shall ask him whether a fellow is to be caned for interrupting a prefect talking to a book-maker on his phone.”

Loder stood staring at him, his face almost livid. His grasp on the cane was quite convulsive. He made a stride towards the junior, and Harry Wharton did not recede an inch: he stood cool and calm, looking Loder in the face. For a moment or two, it seemed that Loder’s rage would carry him beyond the bounds of prudence. But he checked himself. After what the captain of the Remove had said, he dared not use the cane.

There was a brief pause. Then Loder laid the cane back on the table.

“You won’t go ?” His voice was choked and husky.

“No, I won’t.”

“I’ll remember this, Wharton.”

“Oh, do.”

Loder’s hand went, as if in spite of himself, to the cane again. But he did not pick it up. He turned away, picked up the hanging receiver and replaced it: leaving Mr. Banks, at the other end, probably puzzled by being cut off so suddenly. Then, with one black look at the junior, Loder of the Sixth left the study, without another word. The door banged after him.

Harry Wharton shrugged his shoulders. That Loder would “remember,” as he had threatened, he had no doubt: and there were many ways in which a prefect who was not over-scrupulous could make himself unpleasant. But the captain of the Remove was not unduly perturbed: he was, in fact, a good deal more concerned about his coming painful interview with Mr. Quelch, than about Gerald Loder and his threats. And when, from the study window, he discerned a tall and angular form coming towards the House, he forgot Loder’s existence.

CHAPTER 5

TEA IN NO. 7 STUDY

“YAROOOOH !”

Billy Bunter’s roar woke almost all the echoes of the Sixth-Form studies.

Bunter was surprised. He was also hurt. Why Loder of the Sixth smacked his fat head, Bunter did not know. But he knew that Loder did. And he knew that it was a hard smack.

Bunter had left Loder's study to look for Loder. He had not, as it happened, far to look. For as he came down the passage from one direction, Loder came up it from the other.

Loder's face was not pleasant in its expression. He was, in fact, in the worst temper ever. He had had to leave the telephone with his conversation with Joey Banks unfinished, on the important subject of backing a "gee" at three to one. He had had to back down before a mere junior: retreating from the field of battle, as it were, and leaving a Remove junior victor. Loder was in a mood to fly off the handle at the slightest provocation, when Billy Bunter met him in the Sixth-Form passage.

The short-sighted Owl of the Remove did not observe the danger signals in Loder's speaking countenance. Anyway, he had his message to deliver, and he wanted to have done with it and get away to No. 7 in the Remove. So he squeaked, "I say, Loder," expecting Loder to stop and give him a hearing. Quite unaware that Bunter had a message from the captain of the school, and too savagely ill-tempered to think of asking him what he wanted, Loder gave him an angry shove aside and stalked on. Bunter, with his message to deliver, couldn't leave it at that. He grabbed Loder's sleeve as he stalked on, with a rather grubby and sticky paw. Then Loder smacked. Bunter roared.

"Yaroooh! Ow! Wow! Ooogh! Beast! Wow!"

"Get away, you fat freak," snapped Loder.

"Ow! Wow! But I say — oh, crikey!" Loder's hand rose for another smack, and Bunter promptly dodged.

One smack was enough for Bunter. He distinctly did not want another. He dodged the smack and bolted down the passage. Loder cast an angry glare after him, stalked into his study, and banged the door. Smacking Bunter's head made him feel a little better. Certainly, he would rather have smacked Wharton's: but Bunter's was something to go on with, as it were.

Billy Bunter bolted out of the Sixth-Form quarters, without thinking of making any further attempt to deliver Wingate's message. A fellow could not deliver a message to a fellow who smacked his head before he could get the words out of his mouth. What the beast was in such a beastly temper about, Bunter did not know: but he knew that wild horses would not have dragged him anywhere near Loder again, message or no message.

He rubbed his fat head, as he went up the staircase. He could, at least, console himself with a quiet smoke in his study. But when he rolled into No. 7 in the Remove, he found his study-mates, Peter Todd and Tom Dutton, there, making preparations for tea. Dutton was spreading a newspaper over the table, doubtless by way of a tablecloth, and Peter was opening a tin of sardines with a pocket-knife.

The fat Owl immediately dismissed the cigarettes from mind. Food came first, Bunter was, of course, hungry. He was seldom in any other state. He could smoke Loder's cigarettes after tea.

"I say, you fellows, what have you got for tea?" he asked.

"Sardines," answered Peter.

"Anything else?"

"Lots of bread," said Peter, "and a spot or two of marger."

Bunter sniffed.

"Is that the lot?" he asked.

“Plenty more in the tuck-shop, if you like to fetch it,” said Peter, affably. “Cut down and bring back all you can carry.”

“Oh, really. Toddy —.”

Billy Bunter blinked disparagingly at the somewhat meagre array of comestibles that dotted the newspaper on the study table. Bread, no doubt, was the staff of life: but it did not appeal very much to Bunter, even supported by a spot or two of marger and a tin of sardines. As Bunter was making no contribution to the study tea, it might have been supposed — by anyone who did not know Bunter ! — that he would be thankful for small mercies. Bunter, certainly, did not look thankful. He looked extremely dissatisfied.

“If my postal order had come, I’d stand a better spread than that, Toddy,” he grunted.

“Look here, you lend me half a crown and I’ll stand something decent.”

“Wouldn’t five bob be better ?” asked Toddy.

“Oh ! Yes ! Rather !” exclaimed Bunter, eagerly.

“Might just as well say five bob, then,” said Peter, pleasantly, “you’re just as likely to get it, you know.”

“Beast !”

Bunter turned to Tom Dutton. Tom was getting busy spreading the spot or two of marger on the bread, somewhat thinly to make it go round. As Dutton was deaf, Bunter poked him in the ribs with a fat thumb to draw his attention. Tom jumped.

“Ow ! Don’t puncture me, you fat ass.”

“I say, old chap, lend me half a crown, will you?”

“Eh ?”

“Half a crown !” howled Bunter.

“Brown ? Do you mean Tom Brown ?”

“Oh, you deaf ass —.”

“Eh ?”

“I didn’t say Brown, I said half a crown !” howled Bunter. “Lend me half a crown, old fellow.”

“Rot,” said Dutton, “Brown’s quite a quiet chap: I’ve never heard him bellow. What do you mean ?”

Will you lend me half a crown to get something for tea !” yelled Bunter.

“Oh ! Good !” said Tom. “If Brown’s asked you to tea, you’d better go. There isn’t much in this study.”

“Oh, crikey ! Will you lend me half a crown ?” roared Bunter, putting on steam.

“Oh ! No ! And don’t yell at me, either — I’m not deaf,” snapped Dutton.

“Beast !”

Evidently there was nothing for Bunter, in No. 7 Study, but bread and marger, and a share in Peter’s sardines. He hoped to make it the lion’s share. But Peter, with the selfishness to which Bunter was sadly accustomed, apportioned the sardines in three equal portions on three plates — a proceeding which Bunter eyed with deep disgust. But for the circumstance that Harry Wharton and Co. had gone out of gates, the fat Owl would have rolled along to No. I Study in quest of something better. As it was, he sat down, with a frowning fat brow, to make the best of what was going in No. 7. He had, at any rate, a smoke to follow tea. Smithy was well known to smoke a cigarette after tea in No. 4. and Bunter was quite keen to follow the Bounder’s bad example. So, tea over, he groped in his pocket for Loder’s cigarettes. Peter and Tom stared at him across the table, as a cigarette appeared in his fat fingers.

“Got a match, Toddy ?” asked Bunter, breezily.

“You fat ass !” roared Peter.

“Oh, really, Toddy ! Have one !” said Bunter, hospitably. “I’ve got some more in my pocket. I’m not mean about my smokes like you are about the grub, I can tell you. Have a fag, old chap ?”

“No !” gasped Peter. “I won’t have a fag, old chap —.”

“Oh, be a man !” urged Bunter. “Put on a smoke !”

The pre.’s ain’t likely to look in, if that’s what you’re afraid of. Be a man, Peter. Like me.”

“Like you !” gurgled Peter. “A man — like you ! Oh, my only hat and sunshade ! No, old fat man, I won’t be a man like you ! I’ll shove that cigarette down the back of your silly neck, instead.”

Bunter jumped up just in time as Peter Todd reached across the table.

“Look here — !” he bawled.

Peter jumped up too. Evidently he was not tempted to be a man like Bunter ! He came round the table.

“Look here, keep off, you cheeky beast,” howled Bunter, dodging round the other side of the table. “A fellow can smoke in his own study if he likes, I suppose. Ow ! Stop kicking me, you beast ! I’ll jolly well punch your head if you don’t stop kicking me ! Yaroooh !”



“OH, BE A MAN!” URGED BUNTER. “PUT ON A SMOKE!”

Bunter bounded to the door. He tore it open and bounded into the passage. It appeared that a fellow couldn’t smoke in his own study if he liked. It was very exasperating: but really there was no arguing with Toddy’s lunging foot.

Bunter flew down the passage, and Peter banged the door after him. Evidently the fat and fatuous Owl had to seek a more peaceful spot to enjoy a quiet smoke !

However, that was easily found. The door of No. 1 Study was open, and there was nobody in that study. Wharton and Nugent, to whom the study belonged, would assuredly have raised strong objections to any fellow smoking there, had they been at home. But they were not at home, so that was all right. Bunter rolled into No. 1 Study,

shut the door, deposited his fat person in the armchair, tore half a page out of Nugent's Latin grammar to make a pipelight, ignited it at the remnant of a fire in the grate, and at long last lighted one of Loder's cigarettes, and smoked it with great satisfaction.

Having smoked one, he smoked another. He surrounded himself with a blue haze of cigarette smoke, with a happy feeling that he was quite a devil of a fellow ! It was his intention to smoke all the half dozen cigarettes, one after another. But a slightly uneasy feeling in his fat inside warned him that Loder's rather potent cigarettes did not wholly agree with Peter Todd's sardines. He decided sagely to leave the remaining four for another occasion. And feeling a need of fresh air after his doggish exploit, he rolled out of the study, and went down to the quad: leaving behind him a reek of smoke in No. 1 Study that was very unusual in that apartment.

CHAPTER 6

WHO?

HARRY WHARTON came across the Remove landing with a faint frown on his brow, and his lips a little set. He was not in the best of tempers: and was feeling, in fact, considerably disgruntled.

He had had to wait quite a long time in Mr. Quelch's study for his form-master to come in, which was extremely irksome. However, the lapse of time had cooled down Quelch's wrath, and the cane was not featured in the next act. Wharton almost wished that it had been, for Mr. Quelch had given him a "book" instead; and a "book" was a tremendous imposition. In the briefest of the twelve books of the *Æneid*, there were seven hundred and five lines: and seven hundred and five Latin lines were enough to keep any fellow busy for quite a long time. "Six on the bags" would have been more painful at the moment, but less lingering, as it were.

It was past tea-time when Wharton got away at last from Quelch's study: too late to think of rejoining his friends in Friardale for tea at Uncle Clegg's. Neither did he feel disposed to tea on his own in his study: so he went into hall for what the juniors disrespectfully described as "doorsteps and dishwater". After tea he came up to his study, to have a "cut" at Virgil's deathless verse: not in a cheerful mood. Wharton was a fellow with a taste for the classics, rather unusual in a junior form: he could see qualities in Virgilian verse to which most of the Remove were blind and deaf: but a whole "book" was no light matter, and on the present occasion, there was no doubt that the quantity out-weighed the quality !

Not in the best of tempers already, he was surprised, and not pleased, to see a little crowd of Remove fellows gathered round the open door of his study, most of them grinning. Vernon-Smith was laughing: Tom Redwing looking puzzled: Skinner and Snoop and Stott chuckling. They seemed amused about something — evidently something in No. 1 Study: and the captain of the Remove wondered, not very amiably, what it might be.

"Here he is," said Skinner, as Wharton came up the passage. "You must be an ass, Wharton, to leave your door wide open like that. A pre. might come up."

Wharton stared at him in astonishment.

"There's nothing in my study that I should care about a prefect seeing," he snapped.

"What do you mean, Skinner ?"

"Oh, my hat ! Mean to say you wouldn't care if Wingate put his nose into your study now ?"

“Of course I wouldn’t.”

“Draw it mild, old bean,” said Vernon-Smith, laughing. “Suppose Quelch came up ?”
“Quelch can look into my study any time he likes. I don’t keep smokes and racing papers in my study, Smithy !” added Wharton, sarcastically. “I’m not afraid of what Quelch might see there.”

Smithy shrugged his shoulders.

“Hoity-toity !” he said. “If you’ll take my tip, you’ll open the window and let the wind blow through. Haven’t you any sense, Wharton ? This is simply asking for it.”

“Asking for what, you ass ?”

“I wonder what Quelch would think of his Head Boy, if he looked in now,” remarked Skinner. “He told me once I should do well to follow Wharton’s example. I’ll follow it, next time I get hold of some cigarettes.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

Harry Wharton cast a puzzled and irritated glance round at grinning faces, quite at a loss. Something was up. it was clear: but what it was, was a mystery to him. However, evidently the clue was in No. 1 Study, and he walked into the room, and glanced about him.

Then he sniffed !

The moment he was inside, the odour of tobacco struck him, and then he discerned that there was a faint haze of smoke in the air. It was, in fact, hardly ten minutes since Bunter had left the study after his quiet smoke: and the traces of the fat Owl’s manly exploit still lingered very perceptibly. Wharton sniffed: and then he turned to the faces grinning in at the doorway, his own face dark with anger.

“Somebody’s been smoking here !” he exclaimed.

“I noticed it, when I was passing the door a few minutes ago,” drawled Skinner.

“Lucky for you it wasn’t a pre.”

“Do you know who it was ?”

“Eh ?” Skinner stared. “Not you ?”

Wharton set his lips.

“So that’s the joke, is it ?” he asked. “You fancy you’ve spotted me playing the silly ass in my study as you do in yours. I haven’t been up to the studies since class.”

Skinner winked at Snoop and Stott. They laughed.

“Is that what you’d tell Quelch, if he came up ?” asked the Bounder.

“Certainly it is.”

“It’s the truth, Smithy,” said Tom Redwing, quietly. “Don’t be an ass.”

“They say that truth is stranger than fiction !” remarked the Bounder, airily. “Quelch might believe it. But I wouldn’t bank on it.”

Wharton’s eyes gleamed.

“If that means that you don’t believe me, Vernon-Smith —.”

“Oh, talk sense,” said Smithy. “Your study’s reeking with smoke, and you say you haven’t been up since class. Did the cigarettes walk here and smoke themselves ?”

“So probable !” remarked Skinner.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Somebody’s been smoking here, that’s certain,” said Harry Wharton, breathing hard.

“And I’m going to find out who it was, and cram his silly cigarettes down his neck, and punch his head afterwards. Was it you, Skinner ?”

“Not guilty, my lord.”

“Do you know who’s been smoking here, Vernon-Smith ?”

“Yes,” answered the Bounder.

“Who, then ?”

“You !” said Smithy, coolly. “What’s the good of gammon ? We’re not going to tell Quelch. Fellows don’t smoke in other fellows’ studies, that I’ve ever heard of. For goodness sake cut out the humbug.”

Harry Wharton clenched his hands, and made a stride towards Vernon-Smith. The Bounder eyed him with cool defiance: but Tom Redwing grasped his chum’s arm, and fairly dragged him away down the passage to the landing. Skinner and Co. backed away, rather alarmed by the expression on the face of the captain of the Remove. They followed Vernon-Smith in some haste.

The door of No. 7 Study opened, and Peter Todd came out. He came down the passage, and stopped to stare at Harry Wharton’s angry face in the doorway of No. 1. “Anything up ?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Harry curtly. “Some cheeky ass has been smoking in my study, and those shady sweeps think it was me — or pretend to think so.”

“Oh, my hat !” ejaculated Peter. He grinned. Peter Todd, at least, did not need a clue to the unknown smoker. He could guess easily enough who it was.

Wharton gave him an angry stare.

“There’s nothing to grin at,” he snapped. “If a pre. had come up, I should have been called over the coals for this. I’m going to find out who it was and punch him — hard.”

“Don’t punch him too hard,” advised Peter.

“Why not, you ass ?”

“Well, he might burst,” said Peter, shaking his head. “You don’t want to burst him all over the school, do you ?”

“Bunter !” exclaimed Harry.

“Well, he had a pocketful of cigarettes in No. 7,” explained Peter. “He was going to smoke one after tea, but there were ructions.”

“That fat ass —!”

“Better clear off that niff,” said Peter. “If Quelch put his nose in, he wouldn’t guess that a bold bad Owl had been smoking here. You might get lagged for it.”

“Don’t I know it ?” growled Wharton.

Peter went on his way, and the captain of the Remove, with a frowning brow, proceeded to open the window wide, and wave a newspaper, to clear off the lingering scent of the cigarettes.

He had come up to the study to begin on his lines: but he was not thinking of that now. He was thinking of a fat and fatuous Owl who had used No. 1 Study as a smoking-room, evidently without giving a thought to possible consequences for the tenant thereof.

The rule on the subject of smoking was very strict at Greyfriars. It was irritating enough to Wharton for Smithy and Skinner to suppose that he had taken up their own dingy ways: but if a prefect had chanced to make the discovery, it would have meant a report to his form-master.

Having cleared off the traces left by the fat Owl, Wharton quitted the study, and went down to look for Billy Bunter with the intention of making it clear to that fat youth that if he wanted to be doggish, No. 1 Study was not an appropriate place for doggishness. That could be made clear by cramming what remained of his cigarettes down the back of his fat neck, and planting a boot on the tightest trousers at Greyfriars. With that fell intention, the captain of the Remove went to look for Bunter.

CHAPTER 7

CAUGHT!

“BUNTER!”

“Oh !” ejaculated Bunter.

He blinked round through his big spectacles.

Bunter was leaning on an elm near the school wall. A walk in the fresh air had cleared off the effect of his quiet smoke in No. 1 Study, and the fat Owl was no longer feeling that restlessness on the part of Toddy’s sardines. Indeed, as he leaned on the tree in that secluded spot, out of sight of the many windows, he was considering whether to carry on his doggish career by putting on another smoke. He still had four of Loder’s fat and potent cigarettes in his pocket. Luckily, perhaps, he had no matches: or something might have happened, after all, to those sardines.

Harry Wharton came up with a quick stride and a frowning face. He had been looking for Bunter for some time.

“You fat ass — !” he began.

“Oh, really, Wharton —.”

“You benighted chump, you’ve been smoking in my study,” hooted Wharton.

“Well, Toddy made a fuss about my smoking in No. 7,” explained Bunter. “What about it ?”

“What about it ?” repeated Harry. “You blithering bloater, you left the study all smoky, and if a pre. had come up, I should have been landed in a row. Smithy and Skinner are making out now that I smoke in my study.”

“He, he, he !”

“Is that funny, you fat frump ?” roared Wharton.

“He, he, he !” Bunter, apparently, thought it funny.

“It’s all right, old chap — I’ll tell them. Anyhow they know you’re too sissy to smoke like I do.”

“Why, you — you — you —— !” gasped Wharton.

“Got a match ?” asked Bunter.

“A — a — a match ?”

“I want a light, you know. I’m going to have another smoke,” said Bunter, breezily, “only I haven’t got a match. I’ve got some jolly good smokes — expensive, too. Have one ?”

“Have one ?” repeated Harry, almost dazedly.

“Dash it all, be a man for once,” urged Bunter. “I’ll stand you a smoke. I’m not mean with my smokes, old chap. Nobody can see us here, behind these trees. Look here !”

Bunter groped in his pocket, and produced four cigarettes. “Pretty good, what ? Have one ?”

“You blithering, blethering, bloated bloater —.”

“Well, you needn’t call a fellow names, if you’re too sissy to put a smoke on. Look here, have you got a match ?”

“Hand me those cigarettes —.”

“Here, draw it mild !” exclaimed Bunter, warmly. “You can have one, if you like — you’re jolly well not having the lot.”

“Will you hand over those smokes ?”

“No, I jolly well won’t ! Don’t be a greedy pig,” admonished Bunter. “Asking a fellow for all the smokes he’s got, by gum ! I’ll let you have one of them to smoke, if you like.”

“Do you think I want to smoke them, you fat frowsy frump ?” hooted Wharton.

“Eh ? What do you want them for, then ?” demanded Bunter, blinking at him.

“I’m going to cram them down your back.”

“Eh ?”

“And then boot you.”

“Oh, really, Wharton —.”

“Now hand them over.”

“Beast ! Leggo !” roared Bunter, as the captain of the Remove grabbed a fat neck.

“If you think you can pinch my smokes, I can jolly well say — yaroooh ! Will you leggo, you beast ?”

“Are you handing over those smokes ?”

“No !” yelled Bunter.

“I’ll tap your head on that tree till you do.”

“Beast !”

Tap !

There was a fiendish yell from Billy Bunter, as his fat head established contact with the trunk of the elm. Bunter’s head was hard: but the elm was harder. The trunk sustained no damage: but it seemed that Bunter did.

“Yow ! Ow ! Ow ! Wow ! Leggo !”

Tap !

“Oh, crikey! Wow ! You can have them !” shrieked Bunter. “I — I don’t mind ! You can have the lot, you beast ! There ! Wow !”

Four cigarettes passed from Bunter’s fat palm into Wharton’s hand. Billy Bunter rubbed his fat head, and glared at the captain of the Remove with a glare that might have cracked his spectacles.

“Is that all you’ve got ?” demanded Wharton.

“Ow ! Wow ! Yes ! Wow !”

“All right ! Now they’re going down the back of your neck.”

“Leggo !” yelled Bunter.

Bunter wanted his cigarettes. But he did not want them down the back of his neck. Very much indeed he didn’t ! He struggled frantically in the grasp of the captain of the Remove.

“Will you leggo ?” he yelled.

“Not till I’ve parked your smokes down your neck —”

“Beast !” spluttered Bunter, as he was slewed round, for the cigarettes to be “parked” down his plump neck. “Will you leggo ? I’ll jolly well hack your shins !”

In sheer desperation, the fat Owl kicked out backwards: and the captain of the Remove, catching a hack with his shin, staggered back, relaxing his hold on the fat Owl.

That was enough for Bunter. In a split second he wrenched himself away, and bolted through the trees.

“Oh !” gasped Wharton.

“Beast !” floated back, as Bunter flew. He vanished from the scene, leaving Harry Wharton with the cigarettes in one hand, and rubbing a painful shin with the other. He was still rubbing that shin, when a Sixth-Form man came loafing up the path between the elms and the school wall. It was Loder of the Sixth; lounging with his hands in his pockets, and a dark look on his face. Probably he was thinking of that interrupted telephone call, and considering other ways and means of communicating with his sporting friend at the Cross Keys. His eyes glinted as he saw the captain of the Remove. Loder’s feelings towards that particular junior were very deep, just then. Then Loder gave quite a start, as he saw what was in Wharton’s hand. He came to a sudden halt, staring at him.

“Wharton !” he rapped.

Harry Wharton glanced impatiently round at the unpleasant voice. He had a pain where the fat Owl had hacked, and he was not, for the moment, thinking of the cigarettes in his other hand.

“Well ?” he said, curtly.

“What’s that in your hand ?”

“Oh !” said Harry.

“So you’ve sneaked into this quiet corner to smoke, you young sweep !” said Loder, grimly.

Harry Wharton coloured. It was, perhaps, a natural conclusion for Loder to come to. Only a few minutes had elapsed since Billy Bunter had bolted, but the fat Owl was far off the scene now, and Wharton was there alone, in a spot screened from general view, with the cigarettes in his hand. Certainly it looked like a clear case, to Gerald Loder.

“So I’ve caught you !” he said.

His look was almost gloating.

This was the junior who had “cheeked” him in Quelch’s study. Loder had not been in a position to deal with him then. But he could deal with him now !

Harry Wharton breathed hard.

“You’ve caught me, if you want me, Loder,” he said, quietly. “Do you happen to want me ?”

“I’ve caught you smoking here —.”

“Nothing of the kind. These cigarettes are not mine,” said Harry. He hardly expected Loder to believe him: and evidently, Loder did not. “Only a few minutes ago I took them from a silly ass who was going to smoke them.”

Loder laughed.

“Who ?” he asked.

No reply.

“You couldn’t give me his name, by any chance ?” asked Loder, with grim banter.

“I’m not going to, anyway,” answered Harry.

“Very well ! I shall take you to your form-master, and you can spin him that yarn if you like,” said Loder. “Don’t try to throw your smokes away — I’ve got my eye on you. Come along.”

Harry Wharton hesitated for a moment. But there was no help for it, and, with a set face, and the cigarettes still in his hand, he followed Loder to the House.

CHAPTER 8

BEFORE THE BEAK

MR. QUELCH frowned.

He was standing at his study window, looking out into the quad, not with his bonniest expression on his face.

Quelch was, in fact, still feeling some lingering effects from that unexpected goal in Friardale Lane.

He had awarded Wharton a “book” for that unhappy accident, and was inclined to think that he had let him off a little too lightly. A Remove fellow, floored by a football, might have forgotten the incident a few minutes later. But it was a different matter with the Remove master, who had reached an age when flooring was extremely disconcerting. A pile of form papers on the table awaited Quelch’s attention, but he

did not feel disposed to settle down to them. Little aches and pains lingered, and he stood looking from the study window, with a cast of countenance that could only be described as morose.

In that mood, he was not likely to be pleased by the sight of a fat junior charging across the quad like a runaway bull.

Greyfriars fellows were often quite lively, sometimes perhaps livelier than they need have been: but a certain circumspection was required of fellows in the quadrangle under the masters' windows. Certainly they were not supposed, or expected, to charge about like runaway bulls, causing dozens of other fellows to stare at them as they charged. If Billy Bunter had been a runaway bull, or if a runaway bull had been after him, he could not have charged more wildly and frantically across the quad: and Quelch's brow, already morose, darkened into a deep frown as he watched him.

Why Bunter was putting up that performance was not apparent. He had emerged from the elms, at a distance from the House, at full speed. Nobody was pursuing him. But the guilty flee when no man pursueth: and Bunter came on full pelt, puffing and blowing as he flew.

Frowning, Mr. Quelch threw open his window, and leaned out.

"Bunter !" he rapped.

The fat Owl neither heard nor heeded. He did not see the frowning face at the study window, and he was not thinking of his form-master. He was thinking of the fellow whose shin he had hacked under the elms, and as he did not think of looking round, he was happily unaware that he was unpursued. He charged on.

"BUNTER !"

Quelch put on steam. He almost roared.

In the quad, dozens of fellows stared at Bunter. Prout, the master of the Fifth, and Hacker, master of the Shell, were in the quad, and they stared at Bunter: Mr. Prout raising his eyebrows, and Mr. Hacker curling his lip. It was extremely annoying to Mr. Quelch.

"BUNTER !" Quelch fairly bawled.

Stentor, of old, was fabled to possess a voice equal to a hundred. But Stentor himself could hardly have excelled Quelch at that moment. Billy Bunter heard, and blinked round through his big spectacles at the awful face at the study window.

"Oh !" gasped Bunter.

"Come here, Bunter !"

"Oh, crikey !"

Bunter was heading for the doorway. Unwillingly, he changed his direction, and came spluttering to Quelch's study window. He cast an alarmed blink behind him as he came, and was relieved to see no sign of the captain of the Remove in the rear.

"You utterly absurd boy !" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. "How dare you race about the quadrangle in that ridiculous manner? "

"Oh ! I — I — I ——" stuttered Bunter.

"Take a hundred lines, Bunter."

"Oh, really, sir !" gasped Bunter. "I — I —."

"And go to your study immediately and write them."

Oh, lor' !"

Billy Bunter rolled away, still puffing and blowing. He puffed and blew into the House.

Mr. Quelch gave an impatient snort. Prout and Hacker, at a little distance were talking, and though Quelch could not hear what they said, he did not need telling that they were commenting upon the manners and customs of boys in his form. Prout's

plump face was disapproving: and Hacker was shrugging his thin shoulders. Mr. Quelch turned away from the window, very much annoyed: and it was quite a crusty form-master who sat down, at last, to correct form papers. Judging by Quelch's expression. any fellow who had been careless with his Latin prose was likely to hear something about it.

Tap !

Mr. Quelch looked up from his task, as a tap came at his door, breathing hard through his nose. Annoyance seemed piled on annoyance that afternoon, like Pelion piled on Ossa. He had been floored by a football: he had been irritated by a fat and fatuous Owl: and now somebody was coming to interrupt him in his work. There was a sharp edge on his voice as he rapped:

“Come in!”

Loder of the Sixth came in, followed by Harry Wharton.

Mr. Quelch laid down his pen, and gazed at the prefect and the junior. His gaze was somewhat like that of the ancient basilisk. Wharton was not in his good graces that afternoon: and it was rather an unfortunate occasion for him to be brought before his form-master. If there had been further reckless antics with a football, Quelch was prepared to be very grim.

“What is it, Loder ?” asked Mr. Quelch, with a still sharper edge to his voice.

“I have to report this boy of your form, sir, for smoking,” said Loder.

“What ?” ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

“I found him with his cigarettes in the corner behind the elms, sir, and —.”

“Upon my word !” exclaimed Mr. Quelch. “Loder ! Are you quite sure of this ? I am very much surprised.”

Quelch was undoubtedly surprised. He was prepared to hear that that boy of his form had been reckless with a football, or that he had knocked off Coker's hat in the quad, or that he had whizzed down the banisters, or anything of that kind. But he was not prepared to hear this.

“There is no doubt about it, sir,” answered Loder, smoothly, though his eyes glinted. Quelch did not like this about his precious Head Boy, was Loder's sarcastic reflection. He could like it or lump it: he had to act on a prefect's report, and that was that !

Loder turned to the junior.

“Put your cigarettes on the table,” he rapped.

“I have told you that the cigarettes are not mine, Loder,” answered Harry quietly.

“Put them on the table at once.”

Harry Wharton laid the four cigarettes on Mr. Quelch's table. The Remove master stared at them quite blankly.

“Upon my word !” he repeated. “Loder, you found this boy of my form with these cigarettes in his possession ?”

“Yes, sir, in the corner behind the elms. He had gone there to smoke them, but I happened to come along and catch him.”

“Upon my word !” said Mr. Quelch, for the third time. “Wharton ! I am very much surprised at this — and very painfully surprised. I have had occasion to-day to punish you for thoughtless recklessness: but I should never have suspected anything of this kind.”

Harry Wharton coloured deeply.

“May I explain, sir ?” he asked.

“Certainly you may, if you have anything to say. The facts appear to me to speak for themselves.”

“I had not gone there to smoke, sir, as Loder says,” said Harry, quietly and steadily. “The cigarettes do not belong to me, and they had been in my hand only a few minutes when Loder came up. I had taken them away from a silly fellow who had them, and I told Loder so.”

“Oh !” said Mr. Quelch. “Wharton told you this, Loder ?”

Loder’s lip curled in contempt.

“He told me so, certainly, sir,” he answered. “I did not suppose that he would have the impudence to repeat such a story to you.”

“It is true,” said Harry.

Loder’s look was openly contemptuous. He did not believe a word of it: and in fact Wharton could hardly expect that Mr. Quelch would do so. Any fellow spotted with smokes on him could have told such a story: and there was only one proof: giving the name of the fellow concerned. That the captain of the Remove could not do. Willingly he would have kicked Billy Bunter all round Greyfriars School and back again: but no fellow could give another fellow away to a “beak”. That was an unwritten law, as rigid and immutable as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

Mr. Quelch was silent for some moments, his eyes keenly on Wharton’s face. Loder found it hard to suppress his impatience. The Remove master intended to take his time. Loder was anxious for the culprit’s condemnation and punishment: Mr. Quelch had no desire but to ascertain the truth and do exact justice. And exasperated as he had been with Wharton that day, he was not the man to allow such feelings to deflect the course of justice by the fraction of an inch. He spoke at last.

“You say you took these cigarettes from another boy, Wharton ?”

“Yes, sir.”

“A boy of your own form ?”

Wharton hesitated a moment.

“Answer me, Wharton !” rapped Mr. Quelch, sharply.

“Yes, sir,” said Harry.

“You did not intend to smoke them ?”

“No, sir.”

“Then what did you intend to do with them, when, as you say, you took them away from another Remove boy ?”

Again Wharton hesitated.

“Did you hear my question, Wharton ?” demanded Mr. Quelch, raising his voice a little. To Loder, these repeated hesitations indicated that a young rascal, practically caught in the act, was trying to lie himself out of a scrape: and perhaps Mr. Quelch was getting the same impression.

“Yes, sir,” stammered Harry.

“Then answer me immediately.”

“I was going to cram them down the back of his neck, sir,” said Harry, at last.

Mr. Quelch gave quite a little jump: and Loder stared. Certainly neither of them had expected that answer.

“Oh !” said Mr. Quelch. He paused, and repeated “Oh !” Then he paused again, his gimlet-eyes almost boring into Wharton’s flushed face. After a long pause, he went on: “It appears, Wharton, that you did not carry out that intention.”

“No, sir. He bolted. I — I mean, he ran for it.” Mr. Quelch turned to Loder.

“Did you see any other boy on the spot, Loder ?”

“No, sir. There was nobody about at all,” answered Loder. “I should certainly have seen any one who was anywhere at hand.”

“How long had this boy been gone, Wharton, when Loder found you with the

cigarettes ?”

“Two or three minutes, sir.”

“You remained there, with the cigarettes, two or three minutes, after the other boy was gone ? Why ?”

“The young ass — I — I mean, the — the fellow, hacked my shin, sir, getting away, and I was rubbing it.”

Another long pause. Loder, who did not believe a single word that the junior uttered, had to admit that he had his story pat, if it was false. Mr. Quelch was evidently in troubled doubt.

“Are you prepared to give me the boy’s name, Wharton?” he asked.

Wharton’s face set stubbornly.

“No, sir !”

“You are aware that, unless you can do so, I can only act on the evidence placed before me by a Sixth-Form prefect ?”

“I — I suppose so, sir.”

“You are absolutely certain, Loder, that you saw no other boy near the place? ”

“Absolutely certain, sir.”

“Wharton says that the boy — ahem — bolted. as he expresses it. You did not see anyone running ?”

“No, sir.”

Then Mr. Quelch gave a slight start. His own words had rung a bell, as it were, in his own mind. Loder had seen no one running. But Mr. Quelch, from his study window, certainly had seen a boy running, and from the direction of the elms at the corner of the school wall: the spot where Wharton had been found with the cigarettes !

“Bless my soul !” exclaimed Mr. Quelch. “Loder, I think that this matter may, after all, be explained. Wharton, kindly touch the bell.”

Loder could only stare blankly, wondering savagely what bee the old ass had got in his bonnet now ! Wharton, equally astonished, touched the bell. It rang far away in lower regions, and after a brief space the chubby face of Trotter, the House page, presented itself at the study door.

“You rang, sir.”

“Yes, Trotter,” said Mr. Quelch. “Oblige me by going to Master Bunter’s study and telling him to come here at once.”

“Yes, sir !” said Trotter.

And there was a pause till Bunter came.

CHAPTER 9

ONLY BUNTER!

BILLY BUNTER’S little round eyes blinked uneasily through his big round spectacles, as he rolled slowly and reluctantly into his form-master’s study. Why Quelch had sent for him, Bunter had no idea. But he had too many sins on his fat conscience to feel easy in his fat mind.

Quelch, certainly, couldn’t expect his lines yet, as it was hardly a quarter of an hour since he had handed them out. It wasn’t that ! But what was it ? Quelch couldn’t know anything about that quiet smoke in No. 1 Study. Did he know anything about biscuits missing from the biscuit box on the sideboard in Common Room ? Or had Coker of the Fifth been making a fuss about a bag of oranges he had left in his study, and which certainly were not in Coker’s study now ? It couldn’t be about Squiff’s

toffee: the Australian junior wouldn't tell Quelch. Nor could it be Hazeldene's cake: Hazel would kick up a row, very likely, but Quelch wouldn't hear of it. These and other little incidents were crowding in Bunter's fat mind — more than enough to make him feel uneasy under a pair of eyes like gimlets. However, Bunter was prepared with a general denial of anything that might be laid to his charge. Like Mr. Jagger's witness, he was prepared to "swear, in a general way, anything".

"Bunter — !" began Mr. Quelch.

"It wasn't me, sir," said Bunter, in great haste.

"What ? What was not you, Bunter ?"

"Oh ! Anything, sir !" stammered Bunter. "I — I mean, nothing, sir ! I haven't eaten an orange to-day, sir."

"An orange ?" repeated Mr. Quelch, blankly. "I have not sent for you to speak about oranges, Bunter."

"Oh !" Bunter was glad to hear it. Evidently, it was not the case of Coker's missing oranges. "Yes, sir ! I mean, no, sir ! I haven't been in Common Room, sir."

"In Common Room ?" repeated Mr. Quelch. "No, sir ! Besides, I never knew there were any biscuits on the sideboard, and — and I certainly never looked, sir."

"You utterly absurd boy, be silent, and listen to me," snapped Mr. Quelch.

"Oh ! Yes, sir ! I — I like listening to you, sir," groaned Bunter. "I — I think you — you've got such a nice voice, sir."

"Will you be silent, Bunter ?" hooted Mr. Quelch, in what could not have been, by the widest stretch of the imagination, described as a nice voice.

"Oh ! Yes, sir ! C — c — c — an I go now, sir ?"

"You will listen to me, and answer my questions, Bunter. A short time ago I saw you running across the quadrangle. You were tearing across the quadrangle, Bunter, in a most disorderly and unseemly manner, and I called to you from my window," said Mr. Quelch, sternly.

"Oh !" breathed Harry Wharton. He began to understand now why Quelch had sent for Bunter.

"But — but you gave me lines, sir," protested Bunter. "You gave me lines for that, sir, and sent me to my study, sir. Don't you remember, sir ? I — I don't think I ought to be kik — kik — caned, sir, when you gave me lines —. Don't you remember you gave me lines, sir ?" gasped Bunter.

Mr. Quelch drew a deep breath.

"You obtuse boy —."

"Oh, really, sir, you did give me lines, and I went to my study, and —."

"Why were you running across the quadrangle in such haste, Bunter ?"

"I — I was in a hurry, sir."

"Why were you in a hurry, Bunter ?" asked Mr. Quelch, as patiently as he could. It was really not very easy to be patient with William George Bunter. Indeed, that member of his form sometimes made Mr. Quelch wonder whether a schoolmaster's life was quite worth living.

"I — I — I — !" stammered Bunter. He blinked at Harry Wharton, and then at Loder, and then at Mr. Quelch. "I — I — I —."

"Were you running away from Wharton, Bunter ?"

"If — if Wharton says I was running away from him. Sir —."

"Wharton has said nothing."

"Oh ! If — if he hasn't, I — I — I wasn't !" gasped Bunter. "I — I was just running, sir, because — because I — I'm fond of exercise. It was nothing to do with Wharton, sir. I never hacked his shin —."

“What ?”

“Besides, I didn’t mean to — only when a fellow grabs a fellow by the back of the neck to jam something down his back —.”

“Wharton was going to jam, as you express it, something down the back of your neck, Bunter ?”

“Yes, sir ! I — I mean, no, sir ! He — he wouldn’t, sir ! We’re such pals — ain’t we, Harry, old chap ?”

“Was it cigarettes ?” demanded Mr. Quelch, grimly.

Bunter jumped.

He knew now ! It wasn’t the biscuits from the biscuit box in Common Room: it wasn’t Coker’s oranges: and certainly it wasn’t Squiff’s toffee or Hazel’s cake ! It was those beastly cigarettes !

“Was it ?” thundered Mr. Quelch.

“Oh, crikey? ”

“Will you answer me, Bunter ?”

“Oh, lor’ ! I never knew Wharton had told you, sir — I think it’s jolly mean to tell on a fellow — I — I —.”

“I’ve said nothing about you, Bunter,” said Harry.

“Oh, really, Wharton — !”

“Wharton has not mentioned your name, Bunter,” rapped Mr. Quelch. “Now answer my question. Was it cigarettes ?”

“Oh, dear ! Yes, sir,” groaned Bunter.

“How many ?”

“Fuf — fuf — fuf — fuf — four, sir.”

“Wharton took them away from you ?”

“Yes, he jolly well did, sir. I would have let him have one, as he jolly well knows, but he grabbed the lot —.”

“That will do, Bunter.”

“Oh ! Thank you, sir ! M—a—may I go now ?”

“You may not.”

“ Oh, lor’ !”

Mr. Quelch turned to Loder. The expression on Loder’s face was very expressive. He had had no doubts: he had counted, as an absolute certainty, on Wharton’s punishment as a surreptitious young sweep: a punishment all the more severe because he was Quelch’s trusted Head Boy, of whom more was expected than of any other fellow in his form. And now he saw the whole thing tumble over like a house of cards. The admissions dragged out of the fat Owl completely cleared and exonerated the captain of the Remove. It was Bunter who had had the cigarettes, and his form-captain had taken them away to cram them down his neck. The case was clear to Quelch: and even Loder had to admit that it was clear: though it made him feel rather like a tiger who saw his prey escaping.

“You have heard what Bunter has said, Loder,” said Mr. Quelch. “It bears out Wharton’s statement.”

“Oh ! I — I — I suppose so, sir,” muttered Loder.

Mr. Quelch gave him a sharp look.

“I presume, Loder, that you are quite satisfied, as I am, that Wharton stated the exact facts,” he said, with a rumble in his voice. “It was Bunter who had the cigarettes, and Wharton took them away from him, as he stated.”

Loder breathed hard. His eyes glinted at the fat Owl. Wharton had escaped him: that could not be helped: but it was Bunter who had pulled his victim through: and Loder,

at that moment, would have been glad to repeat his smacking of the fat Owl's fat head. That he could not venture to do in Quelch's study: but at any rate, Bunter had had the cigarettes, and a whopping was due to Bunter if not to Wharton. That was a solace to Loder in his disappointment.

"Well, Loder?" said Mr. Quelch, sharply.

"Yes, sir, it — it appears to be as Wharton stated," admitted Loder, slowly, and hardly able to conceal his reluctance. "It was Bunter who had the cigarettes, and who is to blame for the whole thing."

"Quite!" said Mr. Quelch, "and I shall make it clear to Bunter that it is a very serious matter to form such unhealthy habits, in defiance of the rules laid down for the good of the boys of this school. I shall deal with Bunter very severely."

"Oh, crikey!"

Mr. Quelch picked up the cane from his table: a proceeding that afforded Loder some satisfaction. It afforded Bunter none whatever. The unfortunate fat Owl blinked at his form-master with a blink so dolorous that it might have touched a heart of stone. It had no perceptible effect on Mr. Quelch: still less on Loder. But Harry Wharton was moved to put in a word for the fat Owl. He had had a narrow escape, due to Bunter's fatuous antics: but he was not proof against the dismal woe in the dolorous fat face.

"If you please, sir —!" ventured Harry.

"What? What is it, Wharton?"

"I think I ought to speak, sir, as Head Boy," said Harry. "Bunter had the cigarettes, but I am quite sure that he never brought them into the school, and I know that he doesn't smoke. He can't help being silly —."

"Oh, really, Wharton —."

"Silence, Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir! But —."

"Silence! You may go on, Wharton."

"Bunter's silly enough to smoke a cigarette if he found one," said Harry. "But that is all, sir. I should know if it was anything more than that, and it certainly is not. I am quite certain that he has never had any cigarettes before to-day, during the whole term, sir."

"Oh!" said Mr. Quelch. "If you are sure of this, Wharton, that certainly does alter the case."

"I am quite sure of it, sir."

And, to Billy Bunter's immense relief, the grim expression on his form-master's countenance relaxed very considerably: and, to his still greater relief, Mr. Quelch laid the cane down again upon the table.

CHAPTER 10

UNEXPECTED!

"Now, Bunter —!"

"Oh, dear!"

"After what Wharton has said, Bunter, I feel that I must question you further before administering punishment," said Mr. Quelch. "You will tell me the truth, Bunter."

"Oh, yes, sir! I — I never do anything else, sir," moaned Bunter. "I — I never smoked the cigarettes, sir — I — I wouldn't! I never smoked any in Wharton's study while he was out —."

“What ?”

“Besides, it was only two, sir,” gasped Bunter. “I wasn’t going to smoke any more, and it wasn’t because they made me feel queer in the tummy, sir, after the sardines. I — I never smoked any at all, sir —.”

“Upon my word !”

“If — if Wharton found his study smoky, sir, I — I don’t know anything about it. I never smoked while I was there. Besides, I never went to his study — nowhere near it. And — and I shouldn’t have gone there at all, sir, only Toddy kicked up a fuss in my study —.”

“Did you smuggle the cigarettes into the school, Bunter ?”

“Oh ! No !” howled Bunter. “I — I wouldn’t, sir !”

“Then where did you obtain them ?”

“I — I — I found them, sir.”

“You found them !” repeated Mr. Quelch. “You appear to have had six cigarettes, two of which you have admitted that you smoked in Wharton’s study while he was absent —.”

“I — I — I didn’t — I — I wasn’t — I — I never —.”

“And four which Wharton took from you in the quadrangle, and which now lie upon my table,” said Mr. Quelch, sternly. “Do you expect me to believe, Bunter, that you found six cigarettes lying about the school ?”

“I — I — I ———,” stammered Bunter.

“Well ?”

“I — I — I — oh, lor’ !”

“Bunter, tell me at once where you obtained these six cigarettes. If you found them, as you state, where did you find them ?”

“I — I — I found them —.”

“Where ?”

“In — in — in a study, sir.”

Loder’s eyes gleamed. Was there, after all, a chance of pinning this on the victim who had so far escaped ? If there was a chance, Loder was not the man to lose it. He struck in without waiting for Mr. Quelch to speak.

“Did you find them in Wharton’s study, Bunter ?” he rapped.

Harry Wharton’s lip curled.

“Bunter certainly did not find them in my study. Loder,” he said.

“You need not speak,” snapped Loder. “Mr. Quelch, Bunter has admitted that he smoked two of the cigarettes in Wharton’s study, and it is quite impossible that he can have found half a dozen lying about the school. If the boy is afraid to tell the truth in Wharton’s presence —.”

“You may leave this matter in my hands, Loder.”

“Oh, yes, sir, certainly. But —.”

“Bunter !” rapped Mr. Quelch, ignoring Loder.

“Oh, crikey ! I — I mean, yes, sir,” groaned Bunter.

“You have stated that you found the cigarettes in a study. Do you mean a Remove study ?”

Harry Wharton wondered for a moment whether something was coming out about Smithy or Skinner, No. 4 and No. 11 were the only studies in the Remove where anyone was likely to find smokes. He was rather relieved when the fat Owl spluttered out:

“Oh ! No, sir.”

“You found them in a study, but not in a Remove study ?” exclaimed Mr. Quelch,

with evident doubt. "Is that what you mean, Bunter?"

"Yes, sir," mumbled Bunter.

"If that statement is true, Bunter, you must tell me in what Lower boy's study you found them."

Oh, lor'!"

"Was it a Fourth-Form study?"

Again Wharton wondered for a moment, whether something was coming out about Aubrey Angel of the Fourth.

The festive Aubrey was the only fellow he knew of, in the Fourth, whose manners and customs resembled those of Smithy and Skinner. But it was not that.

"No, sir!" moaned Bunter.

"A study in the Shell?" demanded Mr. Quelch.

"N — n — no, sir."

"Then what do you mean, Bunter?" snapped Mr. Quelch.

"I — I — I ——" gurgled Bunter.

"Upon my word!" Mr. Quelch gave quite a start.

"Bunter! You do not mean that you found cigarettes in a senior study?"

"Oh, crikey!"

"Answer me at once, Bunter."

"Ye — ees, sir!" gasped Bunter.



"BUNTER! YOU DO NOT MEAN THAT YOU FOUND CIGARETTES IN A SENIOR STUDY?"

Once more Wharton wondered, whether anything was coming out about Price of the Fifth. Loder wondered too: he was rather pally with the black sheep of the Fifth, and certainly did not want to be the cause of the "lagging" of Steve Price.

Mr. Quelch drew a deep breath. He was quite determined to get to the bottom of this: he was, in fact, after it like a dog after a bone. The truth was coming out of Bunter, if Quelch had to extract it like teeth at the dentist's.

"Are you speaking of a Fifth-Form study, Bunter?"

"N — n — no, sir!"

"Bunter! I warn you to speak carefully! Are you alleging that you found cigarettes in a Sixth-Form study?"

“Oh, dear !”

“Answer me !”

“Yes, sir,” stuttered Bunter.

Loder caught his breath. Certainly, he did not suppose that the smokes hidden so carefully in the toffee tin at the back of his study cupboard could have come to light. Still, the chase was now getting a little too near home to please him.

“It is plain, sir, that Bunter is lying at random,” said Loder. “It is scarcely possible to believe a single word he may say.”

“I shall be the judge of that, Loder,” said Mr. Quelch. “Certainly I should not accept such a statement without the strongest proof. But if it prove to be correct, it will be my duty to place the matter in Wingate’s hands, to deal with as head prefect. Most assuredly it cannot be allowed to pass uninvestigated. Now, Bunter —.”

“Oh, jimmy !”

“You say that you found these cigarettes in a Sixth-Form study. You are aware that such a statement is almost incredible.”

“I — I — I did, sir.”

“Then, in the first place, what were you doing in a Sixth-Form study, where a Remove boy can have no concern ?” demanded Mr. Quelch.

“I — I was sent there, sir.”

“Do you mean with a message ?”

“Yes, sir.”

“By whom?” snapped Mr. Quelch.

“Wingate, sir.”

“Wingate ?” repeated Mr. Quelch. “You understand, Bunter, that I may refer to Wingate, as to whether he sent you to a Sixth-Form study with a message or not ?”

“Oh, yes, sir ! He — he — he will remember, sir. He — he told me to tell him he — he wanted to see him in his study after tea, sir,” mumbled Bunter.

“You delivered this message to a Sixth-Form boy in his study ?”

“Nunno, sir — he — he wasn’t there —.”

“Do you mean that you found the study empty ?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Bunter ! Have you the audacity to tell me that you found cigarettes in a Sixth-Form study, visible to the eye, and liable to be seen by anyone entering the room ?” exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

“Oh ! No, sir,” gasped Bunter. “They weren’t in sight, sir — nothing of the kind.”

“Then how could you have seen them, if they were not in sight ?”

“I — I happened to look in the study cupboard, sir,” groaned Bunter. “I — I — I wasn’t looking for cake or anything —.”

“Bless my soul !”

“I — I just looked into the — the tin, as it was labelled toffee, sir. I — I thought it was toffee in the tin —.”

Loder almost bounded.

“You found cigarettes hidden in a tin labelled toffee !” said Mr. Quelch. “Upon my word ! And you pilfered from the tin —.”

“Oh ! No !” almost yelled Bunter.

“Then what did you do ?”

“I — I — I just helped myself to a — a few, sir ! He — he had lots.”

“Whose study was it, Bunter ?”

“Answer me !”

“I — I’d rather not say, sir !” groaned Bunter.

“Unless you tell me immediately, Bunter, I shall regard your whole story as a reckless invention, and shall take you to your headmaster.”

“Oh, crikey ! Loder’s, sir.”

“Wha — a — t ?”

“Loder’s, sir !”

And then there was a dead silence in Mr. Quelch’s study: a silence that could almost have been cut with a knife !

CHAPTER 11

CORNERED

LODER stood quite still.

He seemed scarcely to breathe.

Billy Bunter’s unexpected revelation astonished Mr. Quelch. It startled, but did not really surprise, Harry Wharton. It almost knocked Loder over !

Not for a moment could he possibly have dreamed that the trail of those wretched cigarettes would lead to his own study. But — it had !

From the bottom of his heart, Gerald Loder wished that he had not jumped at that chance of landing Harry Wharton into trouble with his “beak.” But it was too late to wish that ! It had seemed to him a clear case — an absolutely clear case. And this was how it had turned out !

Mr. Quelch sat staring at Bunter. Loder stood dumb. Harry Wharton could not help smiling. The sportsman of the Sixth had started that chase, never dreaming of the quarry that would be run down — himself ! Wharton wondered, with a rather grim amusement, how Loder was going to wriggle out of this. His own cigarettes had, as it were, come home to roost: and Harry Wharton wished him joy of them.

Mr. Quelch broke the silence at last.

“Loder ! Is there a single word of truth in what Bunter has said ?”

Loder tried to pull himself together. Between rage and alarm, it was not easy for him to speak calmly. But he answered as calmly as he could:

“None whatever, sir.”

Harry Wharton’s lip curled. Quelch might doubt Bunter’s startling statement, and Loder might deny it: but the captain of the Remove knew very well that the terrified fat Owl had babbled out the truth. He had not wanted to tell it: it had been dragged out of him, and it was true. But it was not, of course, for Wharton to speak: he remained silent, an interested spectator.

“Bunter !”

“Oh, dear !” mumbled the wretched Owl. “Yes, sir.”

“The statement you have made is almost incredible, Bunter.”

“Is — is — is it, sir ?”

“You have stated that you found a quantity of cigarettes, concealed in a tin, in the cupboard in Loder’s study —.”

“I—I—I—.”

“If you are telling the truth, Bunter, how many did you leave in the tin ?”

“I — I — I ———.”

“Answer me, Bunter !”

“I — I — I didn’t count them, sir !” gasped Bunter.

“Approximately !” snapped Mr. Quelch.

“I — I — I think about — about a couple of dozen, sir. I — I thought Loder wouldn’t

miss a few — I — I mean, I — I thought he wouldn't mind — I — I ——.”

Loder broke in.

“I hope, sir, that you attach no importance to the random assertions of this foolish and untruthful junior,” he said.

“None at all, Loder, unless proof be forthcoming,” answered Mr. Quelch. “Bunter is the most untruthful boy in my form, or in the whole school.”

“Oh, really, sir —.”

“Silence, Bunter !”

“Thank you, sir,” said Loder: his heart beating a little less unpleasantly. He was on very thin ice now, as he realized only too well. What was a foolish escapade in a junior, was a very different matter where a prefect of the Sixth was concerned. Loder had cause for alarm. But at all events, Quelch did not believe a word of it, so far. That was encouraging.

“Now, Bunter,” resumed Mr. Quelch. “You are aware that what you have stated is extremely serious ?”

“Is it, sir ?”

“You stupid boy, it could scarcely be more serious,” exclaimed Mr. Quelch. “If you have made a malicious and unfounded statement, reflecting on a prefect of the Sixth Form, you will be reported to your headmaster for judgment.”

“Oh, lor' !”

“You will certainly be flogged —.”

“Ow !”

“You may be expelled from the school —.”

“Oh, crikey !”

“Before this matter goes further, Bunter,” said Mr. Quelch, sternly, “reflect, and answer me truthfully. This is no time for prevarication.”

“Is — is — isn't it, sir ?”

“Grant me patience !” breathed Mr. Quelch. “Bunter, you have heard Loder say that there is no truth whatever in your assertion. Do you, after this, adhere to it ? I warn you to tell me the truth.”

Billy Bunter blinked at him. He blinked at Loder. Only too easily he could guess what Loder's feelings were like, and what he had to expect later from the bully of the Sixth. Loder was assuming, as well as he could, an air of scornful indifference. But Bunter knew, if Quelch did not, that that indifference was only skin-deep. Inwardly Loder was seething.

Between his dread of Mr. Quelch, and his terror of Loder, the unhappy fat Owl was in a most unenviable state. It was not the first time that Billy Bunter's investigations into other fellows' study cupboards had led to trouble. But this was the very worst of his experiences.

Bunter seemed unable to speak. He could only blink in dismal dismay from the form-master to the prefect, and back again from the prefect to the form-master.

“Will you answer me, Bunter ?” snapped Mr. Quelch.

“Oh ! Yes, sir ! I — I — I ——,” bumbled Bunter.

“Do you, or do you not, adhere to the statement you have made ?” demanded Mr. Quelch, categorically. “Yes or no ?”

Billy Bunter would willingly have answered yes or no, had it been practicable. But he had to make his choice, and his dread of Quelch predominated over his terror of Loder.

“Yes, sir !” he gasped.

“Very well,” said Mr. Quelch. “In justice to you, Bunter, I shall inquire into the facts:

and if you have spoken untruthfully, you will take the consequences, which will be very severe.”

“I — I — I——.”

“That will do, Bunter.”

Mr. Quelch transferred his glance to Loder. That dutiful prefect met it as calmly as he could. But his uneasiness was growing. What sort of “inquiry” was Quelch going to make ?

“This matter cannot rest where it is, Loder,” said the Remove master. “If there is any truth in Bunter’s statement, which I need hardly say I strongly doubt, there is a tin — a toffee tin — in your study cupboard, containing a large number of cigarettes —.” Loder’s colour changed.

“I have already told you, sir, that there is nothing of the kind,” he muttered.

“Quite so, Loder ! I have no doubt that I shall fail to find anything of the kind there —.”

“You, sir ?” breathed Loder.

“You will remain here, Bunter, while I accompany Loder to his study, and place the matter beyond all doubt,” said Mr. Quelch, rising.

“Oh !” gasped Bunter.

His fat face brightened. Quelch would have to believe him, if he saw those smokes hidden in Loder’s study. He was not, after all, going to be marched off to the Head ! That was a great relief to Bunter. It had quite an opposite effect on Loder. The brightening of Bunter’s fat face, in fact, was in striking contrast to the expression on Loder’s. Loder looked quite sick.

“Come with me, Loder,” said Mr. Quelch.

Loder did not stir. Mr. Quelch looked at him, and, as he looked, his own expression changed. He could hardly fail to see what was so easy to read in Loder’s face. Loder was cornered — and he looked it.

“You have no objection, Loder ?” asked Mr. Quelch, in a very deep voice.

Loder stammered. To raise objections was practically to admit the truth. Yet what could he do ? One glance into that wretched toffee tin would reveal the facts. What was he to say, or do ?

He felt Quelch’s eyes keenly on him now. And Loder realized, as many a Remove man had realized before him, how much they resembled gimlets in their penetrating qualities. It seemed to the unhappy sportsman of the Sixth that they almost pierced him.

He found his voice at last.

“Yes, sir, I — I certainly object ! I certainly object to a search being made in my study —.”

“It is not a question of a search of your study, Loder, but of investigating the truth, or otherwise, of a statement made by a boy of my form, a statement for which Bunter must be severely punished unless it be verified. If you object —.”

“I do, sir,” said Loder, desperately.

Quelch’s face set like iron.

“You are a Sixth-Form boy, Loder, and not under my authority. If you object I have no right to insist. But I shall draw my own conclusions, Loder.”

Loder made no answer to that. He knew what Quelch’s conclusions must be, but that could not be helped. It would not improve matters to let the Remove master see the cigarettes in the toffee tin !

“You hear me, Loder ! I am prepared to put Bunter’s statement to the test of immediate investigation. It appears that you are not.”

There was nothing for Loder to say, and he said nothing.

“Very well, Loder,” said Mr. Quelch. “I shall now say plainly, that I have no choice but to believe that Bunter has stated the facts. You, who had reported to me a boy of my form for having cigarettes in his possession, are yourself the owner of those cigarettes, and you have a further supply in your study which you dare not let me see.”

Loder made an inarticulate sound. But he did not speak.

“Have you anything further to say, Loder ?” Loder, with a crimson face, edged towards the door. “Very well,” repeated Mr. Quelch. “You are not under my authority, Loder, and I shall say no more, excepting that I shall place this matter in Wingate’s hands to deal with as head prefect. You will answer to him. You may now leave my study.”

Loder was glad, at least, to get out of the study, which he fervently wished that he had never entered. The door closed on him.

Mr. Quelch glanced at Wharton, who had been a silent but extremely interested spectator of the scene.

“You may go, Wharton.”

“Yes, sir.”

Wharton went to the door, a longing blink from Billy Bunter following him in that direction.

“If you pip — pip — please, sir, may I go too ?” squeaked Bunter.

“You may not, Bunter.”

“Oh, lor’ !”

Mr. Quelch picked up his cane.

To Billy Bunter, the lawless appropriation of cigarettes was a trifle light as air and smoking them a doggish feat ! Quelch’s views, it seemed, differed from Bunter’s: and Quelch proceeded to make that clear — painfully clear — to the fat Owl of the Remove.

“Bend over that chair, Bunter.”

“Oh, crikey !”

Sounds of woe from Quelch’s study followed Harry Wharton down the passage.

Judging by those sounds, Mr. Quelch was not running the risk of spoiling Bunter by sparing the rod !

CHAPTER 12

DOGGO!

“HA, ha, ha !” roared Bob Cherry.

Frank Nugent and Johnny Bull echoed that outburst of merriment, though on a rather less Stentorian scale. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh grinned all over his dusky face. Harry Wharton, sitting at the table in No. 1 Study, pen in hand, Virgil propped against the inkstand, smiled. Uncommon hilarity seemed to reign among the Famous Five of the Remove.

The four juniors had come in, after tea at Uncle Clegg’s in the village — Bob with that luckless soccer ball under his arm, having with great self-restraint refrained from kicking it along the lane back to the school. They were rather anxious to know how Wharton had fared, since the encounter in Friardale Lane: and not seeing him in the quad or the Rag, they came up to the studies, and found him in No. 1 busy with lines. Most fellows, sitting at lines in a study, would have looked serious, if not solemn or

sad. But Wharton's face was cheerful and smiling. From his expression it might have been supposed that there was something particularly exhilarating in the Fourth Book of the *Aeneid*.

It was a relief to his friends to see him looking so cheery, when they had rather expected the reverse. However, when they learned what had happened during their absence, there was an outburst of mirth in No. 1 Study which woke all its echoes, and most of those along the Remove passage. Loder of the Sixth, no doubt, quite failed to see the comic side of the affair: but to the Remove fellows there was something quite excruciatingly funny in Loder, setting out to "lag" a Remove man for smoking, ending by "lagging" himself.

"Ha, ha, ha ! It's too jolly rich !" gasped Bob. "Loder's own smokes — and he took them to Quelch —."

"What a jolt for Loder !" chuckled Johnny Bull. "He greases up to the beaks — zealous prefect, and all that. And now Quelch jolly well knows —."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"He refused to let Quelch see for himself, and that of course settled it for Quelch," he said.

"I suppose he couldn't do anything else," said Nugent, laughing. "It wouldn't have done him any good to let Quelch see the smokes in the tin."

"Ha, ha, ha !"

"Oh, crumbs !" said Bob. "The next time Loder lags a junior for smoking, he'd better give his own stock the once-over first, and make sure there aren't any missing."

"Ha, ha, ha !"

"By gum, though," said Johnny Bull, "this won't do Loder any good if it gets to Wingate. Old Wingate wouldn't think of him for the St. Jim's match next week, if he knew; and Loder's as keen as mustard on pushing in."

"It will get to Wingate all right," said Harry. "Quelch said that he was going to place the matter in Wingate's hands as head prefect. He couldn't do less."

"Phew ! Wingate will have Loder on the carpet, then !"

"That means exit Loder, so far as the St. Jim's match is concerned," said Bob. "Dash it all, the man's supposed to be in training. You can't train on smokes."

"And he lagged himself," chuckled Nugent. "That's the cream of it !"

"Serve him jolly well right !"

"Hear, hear !"

"As honourable Shakespeare remarks, 'tis sport to see the absurd engineer hoist by his own ridiculous petard !" grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Perhaps it will be a lesson to the esteemed Loder to stick to the strait and narrow path which goes longest to the well, as the English proverb remarkably observes."

"What a silly ass the man is !" said Bob. "He's done himself right in the eye !"

Wingate will be seeing him about smokes instead of about soccer !"

"The absurd Loder will be terrifically infuriated with the idiotic Bunter for giving him away," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Poor old porpoise !" said Bob. "He will have to keep a wary eye open for Loder after this."

"Well, it wasn't Bunter's fault, really," said Harry. "Quelch fairly dragged it out of him. But Loder will be wild, that's a cert."

"I say, you fellows —."

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, here he is !" exclaimed Bob, as that fat squeak was followed by a fat face looking in at the doorway. "Enjoying life, you wicked old smoky roosting porpoise ?"

The lugubrious face that looked in did not indicate that Billy Bunter was enjoying life. Indeed he looked like a fellow plunged into the deepest depths of pessimism. The fat face that generally looked as broad as it was long, now had an unusually lengthy aspect, and the little round eyes blinked dismally and woefully behind the big round spectacles. The Owl of the Remove was emphatically not enjoying life at the moment. He wriggled in a spasmodic sort of way as he rolled into the study.

"I say, you fellows, Quelch gave me six !" mumbled Bunter. "And he jolly well laid them on, you know. I shan't be able to sit down at prep."

"Serve you right, you fat ass," said the captain of the Remove, unsympathetically.

"Oh, really, Wharton —."

"You ought to be jolly well booted, too," growled Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull —."

"You should keep your absurd hands from the pickfulness and the stealfulness, my esteemed idiotic Bunter."

"Beast ! I say, you fellows, do you think Loder will be waxy ?" asked Bunter, with an anxious blink at five grinning faces.

"Will he ?" chuckled Bob.

"Sort of," said Nugent.

"The waxfulness will probably be terrific."

"I — I say, I — I don't want Loder after me !" moaned Bunter. "I've had enough from old Quelch ! More than enough, really. I — I say, Loder looked waxy when I saw him on the stairs just now. Think he's coming up here ?"

A heavy tread in the Remove passage came as an answer to Billy Bunter's question. The fat Owl gave a suppressed squeak of alarm. He shot across the study and ducked behind the high back of the armchair.

"Oh, my hat !" murmured Bob.

The next moment a Sixth-Form man passed the open doorway. It was Gerald Loder, with his official ashplant under his arm. He glanced into the study, with a dark brow, and went on up the passage.

The Famous Five looked at one another. Why Loder of the Sixth had come up to the Remove studies, they did not know. But they could guess.

"I say, you fellows," came a quaking whisper from behind the armchair. "Is — is — is that Loder ?"

"Yes, you ass ! Better keep doggo."

"Oh, crikey !"

Loder's footsteps stopped a little further up the passage. The juniors heard a door kicked open: easily guessing that it was the door of No. 7. Undoubtedly Loder had come up for Bunter. The next moment his voice was heard. "Isn't Bunter here, Todd ?"

"No ! Haven't seen him since Quelch sent Trotter up for him," came Peter's reply.

There was an angry grunt from Loder, and he came back down the passage. This time he stopped at the doorway of No. 1 and looked in. Behind the armchair a fat Owl was as still and silent as a mouse with the cat at hand.

"Wharton !"

Loder's eyes glinted at the captain of the Remove, as he rapped out his name. His look showed how willingly he would have handled the ash. But he had no pretext for handling it in No. 1 Study: and even Loder had to have a pretext.

"Yes, Loder," answered Harry, mildly.

"I'm looking for Bunter ! It seems that he has a message for me from Wingate, and hasn't delivered it. Do you know where he is ?"

Harry Wharton looked at him steadily. Bunter, in Mr. Quelch's study, had said what that message was, and Loder had heard him. Wharton could hardly keep the contempt out of his face. It was not the message in which Loder was interested, as he knew it already — only as a ready-made excuse for whopping the fat junior who had given him away to Quelch. Loder could not "whop" Bunter for letting out that secret. But he could "whop" him for failing to deliver a message from the captain of the school. "Do you hear me?" snapped Loder, irritably. "Do you know where Bunter is now?" A fat Owl behind an armchair trembled.

"He was here a few minutes ago, Loder," answered Harry. "I haven't seen him since." Bunter breathed again.

Harry Wharton's reply was strictly veracious. Bunter had been there a few minutes ago, and Wharton had not seen him since — as he was hidden from sight behind the armchair. Veracious as it was, that reply savoured, perhaps, a little more of the wisdom of the serpent than of the innocence of the dove. But the captain of the Remove certainly was not going to hand Bunter over to Loder's ash if he could help it.

"But it's all right about the message, Loder," went on Harry. "Bunter repeated it in Quelch's study — don't you remember? It was only that Wingate wanted to see you in his study after tea."

Loder gave him a black look.

"That will do," he snapped. "When you see Bunter, Wharton, or any of you, tell him to come to my study at once with the message."

"Very well, Loder."

Loder of the Sixth stalked down the passage unaware that the fat Owl had been within three yards of him all the time. When he was gone, a palpitating fat Owl emerged from behind the armchair.

"I — I say, you fellows —!" mumbled Bunter. "He — he was after me —."

"You're to take that message to his study, old fat man," said Bob, with a grin.

"I'll watch it!" gasped Bunter. "Lot he cares about a message that he's heard already! He just wants to lick me! I — I ain't going anywhere near Loder's study, I jolly well know that."

Billy Bunter blinked cautiously into the passage. There was no sign of Loder: he had gone down the stairs. Bunter rolled out of No. 1 — not with the intention of going to see Loder, but with the fixed determination to keep as far away from that zealous prefect as he possibly could. And Harry Wharton and Co. could only wish him luck.

CHAPTER 13

LODER'S CHANCE

GERALD LODER sat, or rather sprawled, in the armchair in his study, his hands in his pockets, and a black scowl on his face.

He looked — and was — in the worst temper ever.

On his table lay his ashplant, ready for action. It was going to get some exercise when Bunter came. Whopping Bunter, certainly, would not set matters right; still, there would be some solace in it.

Everything seemed to have gone wrong that day: and Loder derived no comfort from the knowledge that the fault was all his own.

He was very keen to play in the St. Jim's match: the biggest fixture of the football season. And he could not help realizing that what had happened, had most likely

washed out his chances completely.

It depended on Wingate, and Wingate was no friend of his. The Greyfriars captain neither liked nor trusted him. Loder was never asked into his study like Gwynne, or Sykes, or other Sixth-Form men. All that, certainly, would have made no difference in matters of soccer: Wingate, as skipper, would pick out the best men, whether he liked them or not. Loder, judging others by himself, was not so sure of that. In his suspicious mind was a doubt that the Greyfriars captain would be glad of an excuse for passing him over.

From what Bunter had babbled to Mr. Quelch, he knew that Wingate had wanted to see him after tea. That could only mean to talk soccer: Wingate had nothing else to talk to him about. And that, in turn, meant that the coveted place in the team was as good as his. Having no excuse for passing him over, Wingate was going to play him — that was how Loder looked at it.

But now — !

All would have gone well, if he had received that message in time. He had not received it, because he was in a master's study phoning to Joey Banks when Bunter came with it: and because, in an evil temper, he had smacked Bunter's head in the passage instead of listening to what he had to say. Bad conduct in the first place, and bad temper in the second, had been his undoing.

But for that, he would have been in Wingate's study after tea, talking soccer, instead of loafing in the quad, and catching Harry Wharton with those cigarettes — with such unexpected and unpleasant results to himself.

Wingate must have expected him in his study after tea. But that was a good while ago, and the Greyfriars captain had gone out since. That would have mattered little: Loder could see him when he came in. But now, when he came in he would see Quelch, and learn what Quelch had to say to him. What would be the effect of that ?

Loder saw his chances of being picked for the St. Jim's match fading away to nil.

Wingate, as head prefect, had to call him to account. He might even report him to the Head; which would mean the end of his prefectship, if nothing worse. The Greyfriars captain was hardly likely, at the same time, to offer him a place in the eleven. He would jump at this, Loder told himself sourly.

Tap !

Loder's eyes glinted, at that tap on his door. Bunter, at least, should be made to squirm for nosing out his secrets and babbling them to Quelch.

“Come in !” rapped Loder.

He jumped up and grasped the ash from the table.

But he dropped it again as the door opened. It was not Billy Bunter of the Remove, it was George Wingate of the Sixth, who came in.

“Oh !” ejaculated Loder.

He eyed the Greyfriars captain anxiously and furtively. If Wingate had already seen Quelch, and knew —

But the cheerful and good-humoured expression on Wingate's face did not look like it. Certainly he did not look like a fellow who had come to that study to call its owner over the coals. He had not yet seen Quelch. Or had Quelch, after all, decided to say nothing ? Loder wondered uneasily. It might be that!

Wingate gave him a pleasant nod. Obviously, he had heard nothing so far, at least.

“I've looked in to speak to you, Loder —.”

“Glad to see you ! Take a pew, old man.” Loder, suppressing his harassing anxiety, spoke as cordially as he could. “I hear you sent me a message to come and see you after tea, Wingate: but that young ass Bunter told me too late — you were

gone out —. Of course I'd have come like a shot —.”

“That’s all right !” Wingate sat on the edge of the study table, facing Loder. “You can guess what it’s about.”

“Soccer?” said Loder.

“Exactly.”

Wingate sat looking at Loder, a rather grave expression coming over his frank, good-natured face. Loder found it a little difficult to meet those frank, steady eyes. He never found it quite easy to look Wingate in the face. And what was he looking so solemn about, if he had heard nothing from Quelch, as plainly he had not ?

“I’ve had my eye on you lately, Loder,” went on Wingate, after a pause. “I’ve been jolly glad to see you so keen, and you’ve shown up well — you’re a first-class forward when you choose. Potter, of the Fifth, is a good man, and I was thinking of him. But —.” He paused again.

So it was between him and Potter of the Fifth, Loder reflected. Wingate had been thinking of passing him over for a Fifth-Form man !

“Potter’s keen as mustard,” added Wingate.

Loder managed to smile.

“I fancy I’m as keen as Potter,” he said.

“Well, that’s the point,” said Wingate, slowly. “Are you ? You’ve been pretty slack at times, Loder. And —.” He paused again, and then came directly to the point. “Look here, Loder, I’m not exactly blind or deaf, and a good many things have been said or hinted or whispered about you in the House.”

“I hope you don’t believe all you hear.”

“Not at all! I’ve talked it over with Gwynne —.”

“Gwynne wouldn’t be likely to say much in my favour,” said Loder, sourly.

Wingate stared at him.

“You’re mistaken,” he said. “Gwynne thinks you’re the man for the place, and that helped me to make up my mind.”

“Oh !” said Loder, taken aback.

“But there’s one or two things,” said Wingate. “I’d better speak quite plainly, Loder. The St. Jim’s match is the toughest we ever play, and I’ve heard that Kildare and his men are at the top of their form. I can’t afford to take risks. We’re going to beat St. Jim’s next week if we can — I’ve set my mind on that. They beat us last time — and this time we’re going to beat them, if we’ve got it in us. Every man in the team has got to be at the tip-top of form and fitness — and any man failing to keep up to the mark goes out so quick that it will make his head swim.”

Loder could guess now what was coming.

“I’ve not come here to ask you questions, or to give you sermons,” went on Wingate, “but I had to have a talk with you to clear the air. You know as well as I do that a man can’t train for soccer on smokes, for instance.”

“If anybody’s told you anything of the kind —,” muttered Loder.

“Nobody has: but one hears things. I’m quite prepared to take your word that there’s nothing in it, and go ahead.”

“That’s all right, then.” said Loder. “There’s nothing in it, Wingate.”

Loder spoke quite calmly. Quelch had said nothing, so far — and if he continued to say nothing — ! It was possible, at least.

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” said Wingate. “If I played a man who conked out in a hard game, I should want to kick myself. If you give me your word on that, I’m satisfied.” Even Loder hesitated for a moment. But it was a case of “in for a penny, in for a pound.”

“Then you can be quite satisfied,” he said, with a smile.
“O.K. then,” said Wingate, getting off the table. “I thought we’d better have it clear, Loder. You go in as inside right.”
“Good !” said Loder, his eyes glistening. “I’ll play the game of my life, Wingate.”
“Do, old man,” said Wingate, cordially: and with that, he went to the door.
Loder’s heart was beating rather unpleasantly. He had the place he coveted: he was in the list to play for Greyfriars. If only Quelch said nothing to Wingate, all was clear. Quelch might, after all, decide to say nothing. It was rather a frail reed for Loder to lean upon — but it was all he had. If only that old ass kept his mouth shut — ! A junior was waiting in the passage, when Wingate opened the door. It was Squiff of the Remove.
“I went to your study, Wingate, and Gwynne said you’d come here,” said Squiff. “So I waited — I’ve a message for you.”
Loder caught his breath.
“Cough it up,” said Wingate.
“Mr. Quelch would like to see you in his study.”
Wingate shut the door and walked away. He left Loder with feelings that could not have been expressed in words.

A quarter of an hour later, Wingate looked into the study again. His face was no longer cordial: it was grim. Loder looked at him in silence, wincing under the contempt in the Greyfriars captain’s glance.

“I’ve just seen Quelch,” said Wingate, quietly. “You can guess the rest, Loder. I shall have to consider whether to report you to the Head. In the meantime, you can forget all about the St. Jim’s match. That’s washed out — for you !”

Without waiting for a reply, Wingate shut the door and went. Loder was left with feelings still more inexpressible. His chance had come — and gone ! And that was that !

CHAPTER 14

TOFFEE FOR ONE

“You fat villain !” exclaimed Harry Wharton.
“Oh !” ejaculated Billy Bunter.
They met in the doorway of No. 1 Study.
It was the following day, after class. Harry Wharton was entering his study, just as Billy Bunter was coming out. It was almost a collision. Bunter came to a halt, blinking at the captain of the Remove through his big spectacles with an uneasy blink.
“Well, what are you doing here, you fat frog ?” demanded Wharton.
“Oh ! Nothing. I —.”
“More smokes ?” asked Harry. “By gum, if that’s it —.”
“Oh ! No ! Nothing of the kind,” stammered Bunter. “I — I haven’t any cigarettes — I — I — I mean, I — I wouldn’t —.”
Harry Wharton eyed him grimly. If the fat Owl had been repeating his doggish performances in No. 1 Study, the captain of the Remove was prepared to boot him the length of the Remove passage. He had had more than enough of Bunter’s doggishness in his study.
But it was not, it seemed, that. There were no cigarettes about Bunter, and no whiff of smoke in the air. As it was not that, suspicion naturally turned in the direction of the

study cupboard.

“If you’ve bagged that tin of toffees — !” said Harry.

“Oh, really, Wharton —.”

“What are you in my study for ?”

“I — I — I — I was just keeping out of Loder’s way,” stammered Bunter. “I — I never went to him yesterday, you know, and — and I believe he’s looking for me. He — he might come up to my study, you know. So I — I — I just dodged in here for a bit.”

The captain of the Remove eyed him doubtfully. It was true that Bunter had been exercising a great deal of activity and ingenuity that day in steering clear of Loder of the Sixth. The merest glimpse of Loder in the offing was enough to make Bunter vanish like a fat ghost at cockcrow. So it was possible that Bunter was stating the facts.

On the other hand, there was a tin of toffees in the study cupboard — or had been ! Wharton had come up to knock off a batch of his lines: after which his friends were to join him in the study and dispose of the toffees. It looked as if Bunter might have been first in the field. Nobody’s “stickers” were safe from the fat Owl’s fat paws.

“If you’ve bagged that tin of toffee —.”

“I hope I’m not the fellow to bag a fellow’s toffee,” said Bunter, with dignity. “I never knew you had any toffees in the cupboard, and I never looked in, and never saw it. Besides, it’s still there — go and look !”

Harry Wharton laughed.

If Bunter had that tin of toffees parked somewhere about his fat person, all he wanted was an open doorway: if Wharton crossed to the study cupboard to look in, the fat Owl would be off like an arrow from a bow. Although he had stated that he had dodged into No. 1 to keep out of Loder’s way, it was plain that he was just going to leave it when Wharton arrived, and was anxious to leave it now.

“Roll over to the cupboard and open the door,” said Harry. “I can see it from here if it’s still there.”

“If you can’t take a fellow’s word, Wharton —.”

“If you’re waiting for my boot —.”

“Beast !”

Billy Bunter revolved on his axis, and rolled across to the study cupboard. He pulled the door of the same wide open: and from the study doorway Harry Wharton could see the interior and the contents. Prominent was a tin which bore the attractive label “Blunt’s Super-Cream Toffees !” Evidently that tin was not parked about Bunter.

“Oh, all right,” said Harry. “Look here, you fat ass, you can stick here if you like, if you’re afraid of Loder. We’re going to whack out the toffees when the fellows come up, and you can take your whack. Only don’t jaw while I’m doing my lines.”

“Oh, really, Wharton —.”

“Squat in the armchair, and keep quiet, if you’re staying.” Harry Wharton crossed to the table. Bunter edged nearer the doorway.

“Oh ! Thanks !” he said. “But —.”

“But what ?”

“I — I don’t care much for toffee, really —.”

“Eh ?”

“I — I — I mean, I — I’m afraid Loder might look in here — he did yesterday, you know — I — I think I’ll cut, in case he comes up.”

And with that. Bunter cut. He rolled out of the study, and rolled down the passage to the stairs, promptly disappearing.

Harry Wharton stared after him, for a moment. No. 1 Study was as safe a refuge as Bunter was likely to find, if Loder was still nursing his wrath. And the prospect of a “whack” in a tin of toffees might have been expected to glue Bunter to the spot. However, the captain of the Remove was by no means sorry to lose his company, and he dismissed the fat Owl from his mind, and sat down at the table, opened the *Æneid*, and dipped his pen in the ink.

He was soon deep in Virgil. So far, he had toiled through about a quarter of the “book” awarded him for getting a goal on his form-master. An almost interminable length remained to be toiled through. A “book” was not an imposition that could be worked off in a single sitting, or two, or even three. It had to be got through on the instalment system, as it were.

More or less cheerfully, he took up the tale at “*Oceanum interea surgens*”, and his pen ran rapidly on. His friends were punting a footer in the quad after class, and he would have been glad enough to join up: but it was judicious to knock off another chunk of that almost endless impot.

He had arrived at “*descendere monte leonem*” when there was a tramp of feet in the passage, and a powerful voice boomed in.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo !”

Bob Cherry, ruddy and bright from strenuous exercise in the fresh air, tramped in with Frank Nugent, followed by Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Oh, here you are !” said Harry, looking round.

“Here we are, here we are, here we are again !” agreed Bob. “How many lines have you done ?”

“Just on a hundred and sixty, altogether.”

“More than enough to go on with,” said Bob, cheerfully. “Chuck it, and trot out the toffees.”

“They’re in the cupboard,” answered Harry. “Trot them out while I put these papers away.”

“O.K.”

Harry Wharton laid down his pen, and closed Virgil with a bang — not sorry to be interrupted. He gathered the written sheets to put away in a drawer, to wait there for the next instalment to be added.

Bob tramped across to the study cupboard. All the juniors had a healthy schoolboy taste for toffee, and were prepared to do justice to the contents of the tin, which had arrived from Wharton’s affectionate Aunt Amy that day. Bob jerked off the lid of the tin — and the next moment, stared into it, with quite a blank expression on his face. The interior of that tin seemed to surprise him.

“Well, my hat !” he ejaculated.

His blank stare caused Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh to join him at the cupboard. They also looked into the tin. Then they also stared blankly.

“Is this a joke ?” asked Bob, looking round at Wharton, busy with papers at the table drawer.

“Eh ?”

“The jokefulness seems to be terrific,” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“What?”

“Blessed if I see it,” grunted Johnny Bull. “If this is your idea of a joke, Wharton, I don’t think much of your sense of humour.”

“Pulling our leg, I suppose,” said Nugent. “My dear chap —.”

Harry Wharton stared at them, across the table. He was quite mystified.

“What the dickens are you fellows talking about ?” he exclaimed, testily.

“Didn’t you tell us your Aunt Amy had sent you a tin of toffees ?” demanded Bob.

“Yes, I did.”

“And didn’t you ask us here to whack them out ?”

“Yes.”

“Then what the thump do you mean?” exclaimed Bob, warmly. “If you’ve got the toffees, where are they ?”

“In that tin, of course.”

“Only what’s in that tin ?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it may be funny,” said Bob. “But if it is, I don’t quite see it. Jolly old feast of the Balmevides, what ? — thank you for nothing ! Asking fellows to whack out toffees from an empty tin — !”

“Oh, awfully funny !” said Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

“The funnifulness is preposterous.”

“An empty tin !” repeated Harry Wharton, blankly. “Dreaming ? There’s a pound of toffees in that tin — Oh !” He suddenly remembered Bunter. He rushed across the study and stared into the tin. It had once been filled to the brim. It was not filled to the brim now. It was empty ! Not a single, solitary toffee remained.

“Oh !” gasped Wharton.

“You didn’t know —?” asked Bob, staring at him.

“You silly ass !”

“Look here —.”

“Bunter !” roared Harry Wharton. “He was in the study when I came up — I thought it was all right when I saw the tin there — he must have stacked them in his pockets and left the tin —.”

“Oh, scissors !”

“Bunter !” repeated Johnny Bull. “You found him in the study — ?”

“Yes, and I thought —.”

“And you let him walk off with his pockets full of toffees, under your nose ? Well, you are an ass !”

“Priceless ass !” agreed Bob.

“I — I — I — !” gasped Wharton. He realized it now. The fat Owl had not ventured to carry off the tin. He had simply filled his pockets with the contents, leaving an empty tin behind him. And he had, as Johnny Bull said, walked off under Wharton’s nose with his pockets full of toffees. The Famous Five were left to enjoy a feast of the Balmevides — a feast at which there was nothing to eat !

“I — I — I’ll burst him !” breathed Harry Wharton. “I — I — I — .” He put a fives bat under his arm, and hurried from the study. His friends were left grinning. Not in the least, at the moment, disposed to grin, Harry Wharton cut down the stairs to look for the fat Owl. He was not likely to find him. Billy Bunter, at that moment, was leaning on a buttress in a remote corner of the old Cloisters, slowly but surely travelling through what were left of a pound of toffees.

CHAPTER 15

BAD FOR BUNTER?

“OH, crikey !” breathed Billy Bunter.

He ceased, suddenly, to chew toffee.

In that remote corner, leaning on the old stone buttress clustered with ivy, Billy

Bunter had believed himself safe from all perils. If Harry Wharton and Co. looked for him — as was possible when they discovered the disappearance of the toffees — they were not likely to search so far afield. He was safe also from Loder, if Loder was still keeping an eye open for him — Loder was not likely to stray there, so far as Bunter knew. In fact since he had been ensconced in that quiet spot, Bunter had seen only one fellow — Wingate of the Sixth, who did not matter. And Wingate, walking slowly with his hands in his pockets, and a thoughtful frown on his brow, did not even notice the fat junior there — he passed on out of sight, occupied with his own thoughts, and Bunter was left to the solitude he desired, so long as the toffees lasted. Bunter, generally, was a gregarious animal: but when he had “stickers” to consume, he, like the sages, saw charms in the face of Solitude. But another footstep in the old Cloisters announced that somebody else was coming along: and the fat Owl of the Remove, with an alarmed blink, saw that it was Loder — the very last fellow he wanted to see. His eyes popped behind his big spectacles at Gerald Loder. Why the beast was there he could not, for the moment, guess. He did not know that Bunter was there — he was not looking towards the fat figure half-hidden in ivy. He was walking, or rather stalking, along, with a scowl on his face, obviously in a bad temper. Possibly he wanted a smoke, and, not caring to put it on in his study after the happenings of the previous day, was looking for a quiet corner where he could indulge in a cigarette. Anyhow, there he was, coming along towards Bunter, much to the alarm of the fat Owl.

Billy Bunter almost wished that he had left those toffees in No. 1 Study. He quite wished that he had selected some other spot to devour his prey. But it was too late now — there he was, and there was Loder. If the beast was still shirty — ! Judging by the expression on his face, there was no “if” about that ! To Bunter’s further alarm, he noted that Loder had his ash under his arm. Very likely he had put it there, for use if he came across Bunter ! Now he had come across him !

“Oh, crumbs !” moaned Bunter, inaudibly. His popping eyes fixed on the Sixth-Form man in terror.

He had one hope ! Loder might walk on, like Wingate, without noticing him there. He seemed to be thinking — perhaps of his lost chance of playing in the St. Jim’s match: perhaps of Joey Banks and the “gee” at three to one in which he was deeply interested — perhaps of the fat junior who had given him away to Quelch ! If he passed on without glancing round — ! If he did it was all right ! If he did not, Bunter was “for it”. He could guess how Loder was likely to lay it on, catching him in a remote spot where his yells were not likely to be heard. The fat Owl cringed at the thought. And he backed deeper into the thick ivy round the old buttress, to make himself as small as possible and escape notice.

That, of course, did it ! Had the alarmed fat Owl kept perfectly still and quiet, Loder might have walked on like Wingate without noticing him. But the creak and rustle of tough old stems as the fat junior squeezed into the ivy caused him to glance round.

“Oh !” ejaculated Loder. “Bunter !”

“Oh, crikey !”

Loder reached him in a stride or two. There was no chance of escape. The fat Owl was fairly cornered, and he could only blink at the prefect in terrified dismay. Loder’s eyes glinted at him, as he slipped the ashplant down into his hand. It was Bunter — that nosing, pilfering young rascal Bunter — who was the cause of his disaster. But for that fat young scoundrel, his name would be in the football list for the St. Jim’s match, and he would not be dreading a report to his headmaster. Loder was down on his luck: but there was still balm in Gilead, as it were. He could “take it out”

of Bunter. He had, in fact, been keeping an eye open for Bunter — now he had found him.

“You prying, spying, pilfering young villain,” said Loder. “Bend over and touch your toes, Bunter.”

“I — I — I say, Loder —.”

“Get a move on.”

Billy Bunter did not get a move on. A junior directed to “bend over” by a prefect was bound to obey that command and Bunter, as a rule, would have been the last fellow to think of resisting prefectorial authority. But the look on Loder’s face told him what he had to expect: not the usual official swipe, but something very much more painful — Loder was going to put his beef into it. Loder was somewhat of a bully at the best of times, and now he was at his very worst. The dismayed fat Owl just could not do it.

“I — I say, Loder, I — I couldn’t give you that message when you smacked my head and wouldn’t listen — !” he gasped.

“I’ve told you to bend over.”

“I — I — I —.”

Loder, losing patience, grasped him by the collar with his left hand, and jerked him out of the ivy. His right went up: and Bunter gave a howl of horrid apprehension.

“Ow ! Wow ! Leggo ! Ow ! I —.”

Swipe !

“Yaroooh !”

Swipe ! Swipe ! Swipe ! Up went the ash, and down it came, swiping with all Loder’s beef in the strokes. The hapless fat Owl yelled, and roared, and struggled, and almost danced round Loder, in wild attempts to escape the swipes: but the grip on his collar was like iron, and there was no escape for him. “Six” from a prefect might consist of any number from one to six: but that was the immemorial limit. Loder forgot limits now. He was warming to his work. The ash swiped on, while Bunter’s frantic yells woke every echo of the old Cloisters.

But there was a sudden interruption.

A strong hand was suddenly laid on the back of Loder’s collar, wrenching him away from the yelling Owl. His grasp on Bunter relaxed, and the fat junior tottered away, roaring, while Loder, under the swing of a powerful arm, went whirling, to stumble over and fall at full length on the old stone flags.

“You rotten bully !” roared Wingate, glaring down at him. “How dare you handle a junior like that !”

Loder sprawled and gasped, staring up at him.

“Ow ! Ow ! Ow !” roared Bunter. “Wow ! I say, Wingate — wow ! I say — oh, crikey ! Yow — ow — ow — ow — ow !”

Loder sat up dizzily.

“Look here, Wingate — !” he panted.

“Shut up, you worm !” snapped Wingate. “Do you think you can let your temper rip on that young ass, because you’re kicked out of the eleven ! By gum, I’ve a good mind to give you six with your own ash.”

“You cheeky fool — !” Loder choked with rage.

“That’s enough ! You’d better shut up,” said Wingate, savagely. “And take care there’s no more of this ! Bunter !”

“Yow — ow — ow — ow !”

“Listen to me, you young ass ! If Loder lays a finger on you again, come to me at once ! Do you hear ?”

“Ow ! Yes — wow !”

Loder staggered to his feet.

“Look here, Wingate. I’m a prefect, as you are —.”

“You wouldn’t stay a prefect, if I reported this to the Head. Is that what you want me to do ?” snapped Wingate.

“I — I ——.”

“Oh, shut up, and get out. If you lay a finger on Bunter again, you go up to the Head for bullying. Now get out !”

Loder clenched his hands. But he unclenched them again, turned, and tramped away. Wingate, frowning, followed him out of the Cloisters. Billy Bunter’s dulcet tones followed both of them.

“Yow — ow — ow — ow ! Wow ! Yow — ow — wow !”

It was quite a while before the Owl of the Remove ceased to “ow !” and “wow !”; and found himself able, at last, to take comfort in what remained of the toffees.

CHAPTER 16

WHO WAS IT ?

“HALLO, hallo, hallo ! Here he is !”

“Bag him !”

“Oh ! I say, you fellows — !” stuttered Billy Bunter, in alarm.

Apparently there was no rest for the wicked ! Loder had caught him in the Cloisters: now the Co. had caught him in the Remove passage. Harry Wharton had looked for him in vain. But a fellow could not remain permanently out of sight. A fellow had to come up to his study to tea — especially when he knew that there was a cake in his study. The fat Owl rather wished, however, that he had given Toddy’s cake a miss, when Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull, Frank Nugent and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, closed round him in the passage, and barged him into No. 1 Study — where Harry Wharton picked up a fives bat from the table. After Loder’s ash, Bunter did not want to contact a fives bat — very much indeed he did not.

“I say, you fellows, it wasn’t me,” gasped Bunter. “I say —. If — if Wharton’s going to make out that I had the toffees —.”

“Didn’t you ?” demanded Bob.

“Nothing of the kind ! I — I haven’t tasted toffee for — for days ! You can jolly well look in my pockets if you like,” declared Bunter.

“I fancy we should want an X-ray outfit to spot them now,” said Bob. “What about up-ending him, and shaking them out of him ?”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh, really, Cherry —.”

“Tip him over the table,” said Harry Wharton. “You fat villain, you could have had a whack — and you collared the lot and walked off with them. These silly asses thought I was pulling their leg, when they came up, and found an empty toffee tin —.”

“He, he, he !”

“Oh ! You think that funny, do you ?” asked the captain of the Remove. “Well, now we’re going to have some more fun, with this fives bat. Tip him over.”

“I — I say, you fellows, do listen to a chap !” gasped Bunter. “I never knew there were any toffees here at all, and I certainly never took them out of the tin, and I wasn’t eating them in the Cloisters when Loder came up —.”

“Oh, my hat !”

“I think you might take a fellow’s word,” exclaimed Bunter, warmly.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Blessed if I see anything to cackle at ! Leggo ! The — the fact is —.”

“Tip him over !”

“Oh, let’s hear the facts,” grinned Bob. “Bunter’s facts are stranger than fiction. Cough up the facts, Bunter.”

“The — the fact is, it — it was another chap snooped those toffees,” stammered Bunter. “Not me at all ! I — I saw him —.”

“Who was it ?” asked Nugent.

“I — I — I forget —.”

“Tip him over !”

“I — I mean, it — it was Coker —.”

“Coker of the Fifth !” ejaculated Johnny Bull, staring.

“Yes,” gasped Bunter. “I — I’d have stopped him, if — if it had been a Remove chap, you know. But — but I — I couldn’t handle a Fifth-Form man. So — so I — I had to let Coker walk off with your toffees, Harry, old chap.”

The Famous Five gazed at Bunter. Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form, was capable of many things. But he was not capable of snooping toffees from a junior study. If Billy Bunter hoped that the Famous Five would believe that statement, it showed that Billy Bunter was an optimist.

“So it was — was — was Coker, was it ?” Bob Cherry almost stuttered. “Why, you fat Ananias —.”

“You prevaricating porpoise —.”

“Tip him over the table.”

“Leggo ! I — I say, you fellows, I — I saw him !” howled Bunter. “He — he marched into the study as bold as — as brass, and — and snooped the toffees. It was — was Coker all the time.”

“Well,” gasped Bob. “If it was Coker —.”

“It — it was, old chap ! He — he swaggered into the study, and — and snooped them, and — and walked off with the lot, and — and ———.”

“If it was Coker —,” repeated Bob.

“It — it was, honest Injun —.”

“Your Injun is not terrifically honest, my esteemed prevaricating Bunter,” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Oh, really, Inky —.”

“If it was Coker,” said Bob, for the third time, “we’ll jolly well go and see him about it, in his study —.”

“Oh ! Do !” gasped Bunter. “Cut off at — at once, old fellow, before — before he’s scoffed the lot. You fellows go to Coker’s study —.”

“Done !” said Bob. “We’ll all go —. And take Bunter with us —.”

“Eh ?”

“Come on, Bunter.”

“Oh, crikey !”

“I’d like to see Coker’s face, when he hears that Bunter saw him snooping toffees in a Remove study,” said Bob. “Come on, old fat man.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“I — I — I say, you fellows, it — it wasn’t Coker — !” gasped Bunter. “N — n — now I come to think of it, it — it wasn’t Coker at all — it — it was — was —. The — the fact is, it — it was — was — was —.”

“Take your time,” said Bob, kindly. “Whoever it was, we’re going to take you to see him. But take your time ! You’d better think out somebody less dangerous than

Coker of the Fifth.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“It — was — was — was —.”

“Cough it up !”

“It was — was — was the — the cat !” gasped Bunter.

“The cat !” yelled the Famous Five, all together.

“Yes ! Mrs. Kebble’s cat, you know ! That cat is always nosing in the studies, looking for something to eat. It had Smithy’s sardines once. It was — was that cat —.”

“The cat ate the toffees !” shrieked Bob.

“Yes, old chap ! That — that cat will eat anything ! I saw it —.”

“You saw it —?”

“Yes, old fellow.”

“The same time you saw Coker ?”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh ! Yes ! No I — I mean — I — I never saw Catter — I saw the coke — I mean I never saw Coker — I saw the cat —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“I — I say, you fellows, that’s how it was ! It was that cat — it had your toffees just like it had Smithy’s sardines — now you jolly well lemme out of this study. Toddy’s got a cake —.”

“Toddy’s cake can wait,” grinned Bob. “Gentlemen, chaps, and fatheads, Bunter’s due for six from the fives bat for snooping the toffees, and I think he had better have another six for telling such whoppers.”

“Hear, hear !”

“Tip him over the table !”

“Ow ! Leggo !” roared Bunter. “I say, you fellows, I’ll square for the toffees — honest Injun ! I’m expecting a postal order to-morrow ———.”

“Tip him over !”

“Yaroooh !”

Four pairs of hands heaved up the fattest member of the Greyfriars Remove. Billy Bunter was flattened out on the study table. Harry Wharton flourished the fives bat. There was a frantic yell from Bunter. The prospect of the fives bat, after Loders ash, was unnerving.

“Ow ! Keep off ! I’ve got a fearful pain —.”

“I’ll give you another !”

“Beast ! Loder whopped me —.”

“Oh !” Harry Wharton paused. The fives bat, about to descend, remained suspended, like Mahomet’s coffin, in mid-air. “Has Loder been whopping you?”

“Ow ! Yes ! He caught me in the Cloisters, where I was eating the toffees — I mean where I wasn’t eating the toffees.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“You can cackle,” howled Bunter. “But I tell you he laid it on as if he was beating a carpet ! Wow ! He gave me more than a dozen, and he would have gone on, too, only Wingate came up and stopped him. Keep that bat away ! I’ve got awful fearful frightful pains —.”

Harry Wharton laughed, and threw the fives bat on a chair.

“Well, if Loder’s whopped you, I expect you’ve had enough,” he said.

“I — I have, really, old chap ! More !” gasped Bunter.

“Roll him off the table.”

Bump !

“Wow ! Beast !”

“Now cut, you fat villain ! One second to get out of the study, before we all boot you together !”

One second — a split one ! — was enough for Billy Bunter.

He vanished.

CHAPTER 17

PERIL PAST!

“I SAY, you fellows !”

Harry Wharton and Co. sauntering in the quad in morning break, glanced round them, in surprise.

As that fat familiar squeak reached their ears, they expected, naturally, to see Billy Bunter in the offing. But they did not see him ! There was no sign of a fat figure, a fat face, or a glimmering pair of spectacles. It was the voice of Bunter, undoubtedly. But Bunter was invisible.

“What the dickens — !” said Harry.

“I say, you fellows !”

It was the fat squeak again. But that was all. There was no Bunter.

“Well, my hat !” said Bob Cherry, staring round. “That’s Bunter. But where is he ?”

“The wherefulness is terrific.”

Really it seemed, for a moment, that the Owl of the Remove must have borrowed the cloak of darkness in the fairy tale. There was enough of Bunter to be easily seen if he was anywhere about. But he was not to be seen.

But the mystery was solved a moment or two later. From behind the trunk of a massive old elm, near the path, a fat head emerged, like that of a tortoise from its shell, and Bunter’s spectacles glimmered in the autumn sunshine. Bunter was in cover behind the tree.

The Famous Five stared at him blankly.

“You howling ass !” said Johnny Bull. “What are you playing hide-and-seek for behind that tree ?”

“I say, seen Loder ?” breathed Bunter.

“Oh !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

Then they understood. Bunter was dodging Loder of the Sixth. Having met Loder in the Cloisters the day before, Bunter was very anxious not to meet him again. Even after the lapse of time, the fat junior was still feeling lingering twinges. Undoubtedly Loder had laid on the ash not wisely but too well. In morning break Billy Bunter would naturally have haunted the tuck-shop. But now it was a question of “safety first.” Loder might drop in at the school shop in break. Even had his celebrated postal order arrived, Billy Bunter would hardly have ventured to expend it there.

In fact, nowhere could he feel quite safe from Loder. It seemed, to Bunter, quite a tragic state of affairs, though apparently it had its comic side to other fellows.

“I — I say, I saw him come out of the House,” mumbled Bunter. “I — I dodged him, you know —. I say, is he anywhere about ?”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Blessed if I see anything to cackle at,” hooted Bunter, indignantly. “You jolly well wouldn’t cackle if the beast was after you instead of me.”

“You should have left his smokes alone,” said Frank Nugent, laughing.

“Oh, really, Nugent —.”

“Keep your paws from picking and stealing,” suggested Johnny Bull.

“Beast !”

“Loder’s not in the offing,” said Bob Cherry, comfortingly. “You may run into him when the bell goes.”

“I — I don’t want to run into him,” said Bunter, pathetically. “I had an awful whopping, you know — dozens and dozens and dozens — I can tell you he laid it on. I wasn’t able to sit down at prep.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh, cackle !” said Bunter, bitterly. “That’s all the sympathy I get from you fellows, after all I’ve done for you. I say, Loder will be wilder than ever, after Wingate grabbed him and chucked him over, you know.”

“Oh, crumbs ! Did old Wingate grab him and chuck him over ?” asked Bob, with great interest. “Wish I’d been there to see him do it !”

“You should have seen the look on his face, when he sprawled,” said Bunter. “Like a Gorger.”

“Like a which ?” gasped Bob.

“A Gorger —.”

“Oh ! A Gorgon !” said Bob. “By gum ! He must have felt rather wild ! Good old Wingate !”

“Well, Loder will take it out of me,” said Bunter, dolorously. “He funks Wingate, but he doesn’t funk me, you know. He looked just like a Gorger —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“I wish you’d stop cackling when a fellow’s in an awful jam like this,” yapped Bunter. “’Tain’t funny, that I can see. Loder looked as if he was going to punch Wingate — but he didn’t —.”

“Bet you he didn’t !” chuckled Bob.

“But that will make him take it out of me all the more,” groaned Bunter. “I say, I can’t keep on dodging the beast. What can a fellow do ?”

“Keep clear of other fellows’ study cupboards,” suggested Johnny Bull.

“Oh, really, Bull —.”

Johnny’s suggestion was no doubt a good one, as a guide for the future. But it was no present help in time of need. It came too late to be of any use to Bunter in the present circumstances.

“It is no use to lock the stable door after the cracked pitcher has gone to the bird in the bush, as the English proverb remarks,” grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “The esteemed and idiotic Bunter is for it.”

“I — I say, you fellows, think Wingate would stop him again ?” asked Bunter, blinking anxiously at the chums of the Remove. “He stopped him yesterday, you know, grabbing him and chucking him over.”

“Wingate would stop bullying, if he saw it,” said Harry. “But ——— you ask for these things, old fat man. You ought to have had the fives bat for snooping our toffees —.”

“I — I — I say, is that Loder ?” gasped Bunter, vanishing behind the tree as he gasped. A burly figure was passing at a distance. That was enough for the alarmed fat Owl.

“No, ass —that’s Coker of the Fifth —.”

“Oh !” Bunter’s fat head emerged into view again. “I — I say, Wingate told me to go to him if Loder laid a finger on me again, and he said that Loder would go up to the Head for bullying. That’s all very well, but it wouldn’t help if Loder pitched into me,

would it ? I — I mean to say, if Loder walloped me, I should feel just as bad, even if Wingate did report him afterwards. You — you see, I — I don't want to be walloped."

Bob Cherry whistled.

"Did Wingate really say that ?" he asked.

"Haven't I just told you he did ?" hooted Bunter.

"Yes, but that rather sounds as if he didn't —."

"Beast !"

"By gum," said Harry Wharton. "Loder must have been going it, if Wingate really said that to him. Did he ?"

"I tell you he did !" howled Bunter.

"Well, if he did, you're all right," said Harry. "Wingate's a man of his word, and you're safe as houses."

"Yes, but — but I can't go to him before Loder whops me, and — and afterwards, I — I should have had the whopping, see ?"

"You howling ass," said Johnny Bull. "If Wingate really said that to Loder, he wouldn't dare to lay a finger on you, if you bagged all the smokes in his study, and the racing papers too."

"Oh !" said Bunter. His fat face brightened. "Think so ?"

"Bank on it," said Nugent. "If Wingate really said that —."

"He did !" shrieked Bunter.

"Well, you're O.K. then. Loder wouldn't dare to touch you after that, even if you trod on his pet corn."

"Oh !" said Bunter.

He came out from behind the tree, though with an uneasy blink round him through his big spectacles. He was reassured, but not quite easy in his fat mind. If Wingate's warning kept Loder from laying a finger on him, it was all right. But if Loder let himself go, it was far from all right. No doubt it would be a consolation for Loder to be called to account for whopping him. But Bunter did not want the whopping. There was a clang of a bell in the distance.

"Halo, halo, halo, there's the jolly old bell," exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Come on, you fellows."

"I say, hold on a minute," gasped Bunter. "I — I say, do all you fellows think Loder won't dare to whop me after what Wingate said ?"

"Of course he won't, ass."

"Oh ! All right, then," said Bunter. "But — but if he did — I say, you fellows, don't walk away while a fellow's talking to you — I say — hold on ! I — I'll come to the House with you, and — and if Loder spots me, and goes for me, you — you fellows keep him off. He — he ain't safe, you know. You fellows keep all round me, like a Stentorian Guard, you know —."

"Like a whatter ?" stuttered Bob Cherry.

"Stentorian Guard," said Bunter. "Like the Roman emperors used to have you know — we've had it in history with Quelch —."

"Ha, ha, ha !" yelled the Famous Five.

"What are you cackling at now?" hooted Bunter. "If — if you think Loder will keep off you'll be all right. You keep round me like a Stentorian Guard —."

"Do you mean a Praetorian Guard ?" gasped Bob.

"No, I don't — I mean a Stentorian Guard," yapped Bunter. "You don't know much Roman history, Bob Cherry. You stick to me like a Stentorian Guard —."

"Ha, ha, ha !"

“Look here, you cackling beasts —.”

“Oh, come on,” gurgled Bob. “We’ll keep round Bunter like a Stentorian Guard, if he likes that better than a Praetorian one ! Come on, fatty.”

Five laughing juniors headed for the House, for third school. In the midst of them rolled Billy Bunter, his little round eyes popping behind his big round spectacles, on the alert for Loder. Even after what Wingate had said, and with what he preferred to call a Stentorian Guard round him, the fat Owl was in a state of blue funk. And he uttered a scared squeak as a tall Sixth-Form man came into view from the Elm Walk. “Oh, crikey! Is—is—is that Loder?” squeaked Bunter.

“It’s Loder this time,” agreed Bob. “Roll on, barrel ! If you’re right about what Wingate said, he won’t damage you.”

“Oh, lor’ !”

Loder glanced at the juniors, sourly. Then, as he discerned the fat figure in their midst, his eyes glinted, and he made a stride towards them.

“I — I say, you fellows, keep him off !” wailed Bunter.

But Loder did not need keeping off. He remembered Wingate’s warning, the next moment. He gave Bunter a look and then, with knitted brows, strode away to the House, taking no further notice of the juniors.

Billy Bunter blinked at his back, as he disappeared. He could hardly believe his eyes, or his spectacles. Loder, evidently did not think that he had had enough. After that scene with Wingate, he would have been glad to give Bunter some more. But — he dared not ! That was plain, even to Bunter. He was safe from Loder at last !

“Oh, crikey !” said Bunter. “I say, you fellows, he funks it — he just doesn’t dare to let Wingate report him to the Head — I’m all right.”

“Right as rain,” said Bob.

“The rightfulness is as terrific as the rainfulness,” agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Nothing to be scared about, my esteemed idiotic Bunter.”

Billy Bunter gave him a disdainful blink.

“Who’s scared ?” he demanded.

“Ain’t you ?” grinned Bob.

“Oh, really, Cherry! I’m not scared of pre.’s like you fellows ! I’d jolly well tell Loder fast enough where he gets off.”

“Oh, my hat !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“You can cackle,” said Bunter, with a sniff. “But I can jolly well tell you that I ain’t scared by a pre. scowling at me, like some fellows I could name. Who’s Loder ? Think I’m afraid of him ?”

“Ha, ha, ha !” roared the Famous Five. The discovery that he was safe from Loder had evidently made a great difference to the fat Owl. He was no longer in need of a guard, Stentorian or other. He was full of beans. Where there was no danger, Bunter was brave as a lion.

“Who’s Loder ?” repeated Bunter, contemptuously. “Fat lot I care for Loder ! I jolly well wish I’d turned up my nose at him now as he went.”

“Would it turn up much further ?” asked Johnny Bull.

“Oh, come on,” said Harry Wharton, laughing. “We don’t want to be late for Quelch ! Hurry up, Bunter.”

“Shan’t !” retorted Bunter, independently.

“Wha — a — t ?”

“I’m not going to hurry ! You fellows can rush about if you like. I’m not going to.”

“Do you want to lose your Stentorian Guard ?” grinned Bob.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Yah !” repeated Bunter. “You fellows can cut in, if you like. I’m not going to hurry ! Think I’m going to let Loder fancy I’m afraid of him ? Not likely !”

“Ha, ha, ha !” shrieked the Famous Five.

And they cut in, leaving Billy Bunter to roll in at his leisure. Which he did: and, passing Gerald Loder near the doorway, he cast a disdainful blink at that once-dreaded prefect. Then, as Loder’s eyes turned on him, his newfound courage came a little unstuck, as it were, and he accelerated, and arrived breathless at the Remove form-room.

CHAPTER 18

JUST LIKE BUNTER !

MR. QUELCH frowned.

He frowned because Billy Bunter grinned.

The Remove were on “con” in third school that morning, and if there was anything in the deathless verse of Virgil to cause a fellow to grin, the Remove master was unaware of it.

In fact, it was evident to Quelch’s gimlet-eye that that plump member of his form was not thinking of the lesson at all, but that his fat mind was occupied by other matters. Mark Linley was translating, and Bunter, like everyone else, should have been giving attention, following the “con” and ready to go on if called upon. And while Mark’s excellent “con” brought a smile of approval to his form-master’s face, there was no reason at all why it should bring a grin to Bunter’s. There was absolutely no element of the comic whatever in the sad tale of flight and shipwreck that the good Aeneas was relating to the patient queen of Carthage. Bunter was grinning at something that was working in his own fat brain: and the approving smile on Quelch’s crusty countenance changed into a frown as he noted it.

Bunter, in fact, was amused. He was thinking of Loder of the Sixth — not now with terror. He had been leading quite a hunted life since the unfortunate affair of the cigarettes: but that was over now. Loder had gone too far in letting loose his bullying temper: Wingate had warned him, and meant what he said: and Loder simply dared not lay a finger on the fat Owl. Even if Bunter cheeked him. what could he do ? Nothing — or he would be “for it” with the Head. He dared not “pitch into” Bunter, whatever Bunter said or did. In the peculiar circumstances, Bunter could be as cheeky as he liked to a prefect of the Sixth Form — a prefect for whom he had a particular and deep dislike ! There was only one possible outcome to that. Bunter was jolly well going to cheek Loder, and see how he liked it !

With that happy thought in his fat mind, the fat Owl rather forgot that he was supposed to be absorbing Latin in form. Bunter was very often inattentive in class. Now he was more inattentive than ever. He pictured himself turning up his little fat nose at Loder in the quad, under dozens of pairs of eyes. He even envisaged himself placing a fat thumb to that fat little nose, and extending podgy fingers, at Loder ! That would make him wild ! It did not matter how wild he was, as he would not dare to do anything. It was no wonder that Bunter grinned, a wide grin that almost met round his fat head, as he pictured that happy scene in his mind’s eye. In the ecstatic contemplation of it, he forgot Quelch.

He was suddenly reminded of him.

“That will do, Linley ! Bunter !” rapped Mr. Quelch.

“Oh !” ejaculated Billy Bunter.

He came back to earth again, as it were. He was not yet in the quad, with his fat fingers to his nose at Loder: he was in the form-room, under a gimlet-eye !

“You will go on, Bunter.”

“Oh ! Yes ! I — I — I’ve lost the place, sir,” stammered Bunter. “I — I — I’ll find it in a minute, sir.”

“You were not attending to the lesson. Bunter.”

“Oh, yes, sir ! I heard every word that Wharton was saying —.”

“It was Linley who construed last, Bunter,” said Mr. Quelch, in a grinding voice.

“Oh ! Was it, sir ? I — I mean I heard every word that Linley was saying —.”

“Go on at once, Bunter.”

Billy Bunter blinked at the Latin page in despair. He had not the faintest idea where to go on. Vernon-Smith was near enough to whisper: and, greatly daring, under the gimlet-eye, he whispered “Sum pius Aeneas.”

“Oh ! Sum pius Aeneas,” babbled Bunter, “raptos qui ex hoste Penatis — classe veho mecum —.”

“Construe !”

“I — I — I am the — the pious Aeneas,” mumbled Bunter. He was sure of that much, at least. “Who — who — who —.”

“I am waiting, Bunter.”

Quelch had to wait ! “Raptos qui ex hoste Penatis classe veho mecum” did not present many difficulties to most of the Remove. Even Lord Mauleverer could have told Bunter that it meant that the good Aeneas carried in his fleet the household gods snatched from the enemy. But there were two reasons why it presented difficulties to Bunter. He had hardly looked at his prep the evening before: and he hadn’t looked at Virgil at all, or listened to a word, during third school. So he was at a loss.

“Bunter—!” said Mr. Quelch, in a deep voice.

“Oh ! Yes, sir ! I — I’m just going on, sir —.”

“Go on at once !”

“Oh ! Yes, sir.” Bunter had to make a shot at it. “I — I — I am the good Aeneas, who — who snatched the fleet from the enemy —.”

“What ?”

“I — I mean, who — who — who — who snatched the enemy from the fleet —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Silence ! Bunter, you will stay in the form-room after class, and write out the whole lesson.”

“Oh, lor’ !”

Billy Bunter did not grin any more during third school. He did not feel like grinning any more.

When the Remove were dismissed, the fat Owl remained behind, with the lesson to write out. Mr. Quelch remained a few minutes at his desk, and then left him to it.

Billy Bunter shook a fat fist at the door — after it was closed — and then set himself dismally to his task. Loder had to wait ! It was extremely annoying to Bunter, who, now that he had made up his fat mind to “get his own back” on Loder, was anxious to commence operations.

But as the fat Owl proceeded with a mixture of Latin, blots, smudges, and smears, he gave a sudden start, and blinked round towards the window. The window was open, and a voice floated in from without. It was a familiar voice — that of Loder of the Sixth Form. Loder, evidently, was walking on the path under the form-room windows, and talking to somebody as he walked.

“The rotter !” Loder’s tone was venomous. “He never meant to give me a chance, if he could help it. He jumped at an excuse for dropping me out.”

“Oh, I don’t know!” This was Walker’s voice. “You know how jolly keen Wingate is on a man keeping himself fit —.”

“Oh, don’t talk rot, Walker ! You know he’s got a down on me, as well as I know it. I’ll get level with him somehow, too.”

The fat grin returned to Billy Bunter’s face.

He left his desk, and rolled across to the open window, blinking out through his big spectacles. Loder and Walker, passing below, did not look up. Bunter grinned down at the top of their heads.



LODER GAVE THE FAT FACE AT THE FORM-ROOM WINDOW
A BLANK LOOK

“I say, Loder!” he squeaked.

Then Loder looked up. He gave the fat face at the form-room window a black look. Walker stared.

Black looks from Loder no longer scared the valiant Owl of the Remove. He grinned at the scowling face.

“I say, has Wingate chucked you out of the football, Loder” he squeaked.

“What ?”

“Well, what do you expect ?” went on the cheery fat Owl. “You can’t play football for toffee, Loder.”

“Wha — a — at ?” stuttered Loder.

“You play soccer ?” said Bunter, derisively. “Why, you couldn’t play marbles. Hopscotch is your game, Loder.”

Loder made a furious stride towards the window. But he paused, turned, and walked on, almost choking with fury. Walker stared at him, stared at Bunter, and then followed Loder.

“He, he, he !” chuckled Bunter.

He went back to his task in quite a cheery mood. Loder had had to take it: he had nothing to fear from Loder. He grinned happily over Virgilian verse as he scribbled and blotted and smeared. He had given Loder a sample of what was to come: and what was to come was going to be up to sample ! It was a very cheery fat Owl that rolled out of the form-room at last.

CHAPTER 19

BUNTER GOING STRONG

“WHO’S Loder ?”

That question made a dozen fellows stare.

It was asked by Billy Bunter. And it was asked in quite a loud voice. And the Sixth-Form prefect about whose identity the fat Owl made that inquiry was passing within quite easy earshot !

It was Bunter’s opportunity ! Six or seven Remove fellows were gathered in a group in the quad, chatting till the dinner bell should ring. The topic was the coming First Eleven match, which interested juniors almost as much as seniors. And, as it happened, Loder’s name came into the discussion. All Greyfriars knew how keen Loder was to push into the St. Jim’s match. It had been rumoured that Wingate was going to play him: but it was now known that, for whatever reason, Loder was out of it, and that Potter of the Fifth was in. Vernon-Smith, Redwing, Peter Todd, Squiff, Tom Brown, Wibley, and one or two other fellows in the group, exchanged opinions on the subject: while Billy Bunter, hovering round, was less interested in soccer than in the possibility of “touching” Smithy for a small loan to tide him over till his postal order came. And then Loder of the Sixth came along, and, as he noted the fat Owl, gave him a black look.

For a moment, Bunter felt a tremor.

He had “tried it on” from the form-room window: and he had talked to Loder as certainly no Greyfriars prefect had ever been talked to before by a Lower boy. Loder had had to “take it”. But now, Bunter was within reach, and if Loder let his temper rip — ! Whatever might happen to Loder afterwards would hardly console Bunter for having his fat head smacked right and left.

But it was only for a moment that the Owl of the Remove felt a quake. That Loder would have given much to “pitch into” him was certain. But Loder did not “pitch into” him. He gave him only a black look, and walked on. Which quite reassured Bunter. He had Loder where he wanted him !

Billy Bunter’s courage knew no bounds in the absence of peril. Loder was actually passing within a few yards when he squeaked, with a very loud squeak: “Who’s Loder ?”

Not that Bunter, of course, had any doubts about Loder’s identity ! He did not really want to know who Loder was ! That question was intended to convey his overpowering contempt for Loder, and his utter disregard of that particular prefect of the Sixth Form.

The other juniors, unaware of the safe ground upon which Bunter was treading, stared at him, and Vernon-Smith whispered hastily: “You fat ass, shut up ! There’s Loder — he’ll hear you —.”

“Who cares ?” retorted Bunter.

“Are you going to ask for six ?” hissed Peter Todd.

“Catch Loder giving me six !” jeered Bunter. “Who’s Loder ? That’s what I said. Who’s Loder, I’d like to know !”

Loder paused a moment in his stride. Bunter had “cheeked” him at the form-room window, but only Walker had heard him, there. But this — before a crowd of staring juniors — !

The juniors were all staring. They stared at Bunter, and they stared at Loder. The best-tempered prefect at Greyfriars, even old Wingate, would certainly have called the fat Owl to account. And Loder was the worst-tempered prefect at Greyfriars: and known to be even more unpleasant of late than usual. Bunter,

undoubtedly, was asking for it.

But the fat Owl was not alarmed.

Loder had paused — but he did not turn. He had in fact placed himself in an impossible position. If he laid a finger on Bunter, he was going up to the Head for bullying — Wingate had said so, and what he had said he would do, he would do. Certainly, Wingate would never have dreamed that the fat and fatuous Owl would take this line. But Loder had only himself to thank for it.

Bunter, to Loder's deep fury, and the amazement of the juniors, went on cheerily: "Who's Loder? Who cares for a rotter like Loder?"

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Peter Todd.

"You mad ass —!" whispered Smithy.

"Loder can hear every word you say!" hissed Tom Brown into a fat ear. "Shut up, you potty porpoise."

But Bunter had no intention of shutting up.

"He can hear if he likes," he answered, loudly. "Think I care whether Loder hears me or not? I'll tell him fast enough where he gets off!"

"Oh, scissors!"

Breathlessly, the group of juniors waited for the storm to burst. Why Loder had not already grabbed the fat Owl they did not know. But they expected him to do so at any moment.

Instead of which, Loder walked on.

The Remove fellows could hardly believe their eyes. Loder had heard every word — he must have heard every word. And he was taking no heed! He was letting Billy Bunter get by with this astounding cheek!

"Well, my hat!" said Squiff. "What's the matter with Loder?"

"He, he, he!" chuckled Bunter.

"What is Loder letting you cheek him for, Bunter?" asked Tom Redwing, blankly.

"He, he, he!"

Loder had gone rather hastily into the school shop. His cheeks were burning, his eyes glinting. For once, probably for the first time in history, a Greyfriars Sixth-Form prefect, hurried to get out of sight of a crowd of such inconsiderable nobodies as Lower-School juniors! It was amazing — Incredible — unthinkable! But there it was! Loder disappeared into the tuck-shop, leaving the Removites staring.

"Well, this takes the cake!" said Tom Brown, with a whistle.

"Loder heard him," said Vernon-Smith, blankly.

"He heard him all right!" said Squiff. "Why is he taking it like a lamb?"

"He, he, he! I ain't done with Loder yet!" chuckled Bunter. "I say, you fellows, you come on — I'll give him some more when he comes out of the shop."

Billy Bunter, full of beans, rolled off on Loder's track. In sheer wonder, the juniors followed him. Where the fat Owl found the nerve to cheek a Sixth-Form prefect in this amazing manner was a mystery. Why Loder took it like a lamb was a still deeper mystery. And Bunter, apparently, was going on with the good work! All the juniors were intensely interested to see how it would turn out.

Bunter planted his fat person at a little distance from the shop door. Evidently he was going to intercept Loder when he came out. The other fellows watched him. Loder could not stay there very long: the dinner bell was beginning to ring.

He came out, walking rather quickly. It was an extraordinary and unprecedented state of affairs, but Loder of the Sixth was anxious to get back to the House without meeting Bunter! He was, in fact, as anxious to dodge Bunter, as Bunter had recently been to dodge him!

But Bunter was not to be dodged !

There was Bunter, right in his path. And, as Loder came, the fat junior placed a fat thumb to a fat little nose, and extended fat fingers therefrom, actually “pulling noses” at Loder, fairly in his face.

Loder halted, staring at him.

The Removites gazed on breathlessly. If Loder did not hurl himself at that impertinent Owl, they simply could not guess what was the matter with Loder. But — he did not ! And Bunter was not finished yet. His fat right hand, with extended fingers, was at his nose. Now he added his left, placing the thumb of his left hand to the little finger of his right, and extending all his left-hand fingers. Right in Loder’s path, almost within his grasp, there stood the fat Owl, his fingers to his nose !

For a moment, there was a breathless pause. Then — !

Loder did not rush at Bunter ! He did not strew the earth with his remains. He walked round him, and hurried on to the House.

“He, he, he !” chuckled Bunter. He blinked round after Loder. “I say, you fellows, come on ! Who’s Loder ? Fat lot I care for Loder ! Come on ! I’ll give him some more ! I’ll jolly well show him !”

Bunter rolled after Loder. After him marched the amazed Removites, with a crowd of other fellows who had witnessed that extraordinary scene outside the tuck-shop. But the fat Owl was not able to give Loder any more ! Loder cut into the House and vanished.

He left a mob of amazed fellows staring blankly at Bunter, and Billy Bunter grinning his widest grin, feeling quite on top of the world.

CHAPTER 20

ALAS FOR BUNTER !

“SCAT !”

Five fellows spoke in unison.

Harry Wharton and Co. were in No. 1 Study after class. Frank Nugent was the happy possessor of a handsome pineapple, which the Famous Five had gathered in the study to dispose of: after which, Harry Wharton had to push on with that endless “book,” while his friends went about their various avocations. Bob Cherry was about to slice the pineapple when a fat face looked in. Billy Bunter, apparently, was not “persona grata” in that study at the moment, for five voices pronounced the word “Scat” all at the same time. Bunter, however, did not “scat”. He rolled in.

“I say, you fellows —.”

“You fat villain, how did you know we had a pineapple ?” asked Bob.

“Eh ?” Bunter blinked at the pineapple. “Oh, really, Cherry ! I didn’t know. Still, now I’m here, I’ll have a slice.”

Bunter had a slice. He was grinning as he disposed of it. Bunter had been grinning a great deal that day. He was still grinning. It seemed that the fat Owl was finding life quite hilarious.

“I say, you fellows, like to see something funny ?” he asked.

“Is that why you came here ?” asked Bob. “Yes, old chap.”

“Well, now we’ve seen it, roll away, like a good barrel.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“You silly ass !” roared Bunter. Evidently he was not alluding to himself as the something funny, as Bob — perhaps — supposed. “I mean, there’s going to be

something jolly funny in the quad. Like to see a Sixth-Form prefect squirted with red ink ?”

“What !” ejaculated the Famous Five, all together. They stared at Bunter. It might or might not be “funny” for a Sixth-Form prefect to be squirted with red ink in the quad. But it was not a sight that had as yet been seen at Greyfriars: nor one that any fellow expected to see.

Bunter’s grin widened.

“That’s it,” he said. “I’ve borrowed Toddy’s squirt, and there was some red ink in Russell’s study, and I’ve filled it. Loder’s gone out —”

“Loder ?” repeated Harry Wharton.

“He’s been sticking in his study,” grinned Bunter. “I’ve been giving him jip ! He doesn’t want to meet me ! He, he, he ! But if he thinks I’m done with him, he’s jolly well mistaken. Laying into a fellow as if he was beating a carpet, you know — I’ll show him !”

“You’ve done enough already, you fat ass — more than enough.”

“The morefulness is terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter.” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“A feast is as good as a lane that has no turning, as the English proverb remarks.”

Sniff, from Bunter.

“I’ll jolly well show him !” he said. “You fellows wouldn’t have the nerve to squirt a prefect with red ink — !”

“Hardly !” said Frank Nugent, laughing. “And you’d better think again, you fat ass. Leave Loder alone.”

“I’ll watch it,” said Bunter. “I can tell you fellows. I’ve got him on toast. He can’t do a thing. Didn’t Wingate tell me to go to him if Loder laid a finger on me ? Think Loder wants to be reported to the Head ? I can jolly well tell you that I’ve got him fairly tied up.”

And Bunter chuckled explosively.

“Do you think that Wingate would stand for squirting red ink at a pre., you howling ass ?” demanded Johnny Bull.

“Well, it would be an accident, if Wingate heard of it,” explained Bunter. “You fellows, being on the spot, could bear witness that it was an accident, see ?”

“Oh, crumbs !”

“That’s all right !” said Bunter. “If there’s a row, you fellows stand by me. I’ll do as much for you another time.”

“Oh, holy smoke !”

“A squirt might go off by accident, if a fellow was collaring a fellow,” said Bunter, “and with witnesses, too —.”

“You fat fabricating fozzler —.”

“Oh, really, Cherry ! Look here, I tell you Loder’s gone out into the quad. He’s been sticking in his study — but he couldn’t stick in his study for ever. He’s gone out now, and I’m going after him. I’m going to let him have the red ink right in the chivvy —.”

“By accident ?” snorted Johnny Bull.

“Yes, if Wingate hears of it. Anyhow he’s going to have it — red ink all over his face !” chuckled Bunter. “Will he look funny ? He, he, he !”

“For goodness sake, you fat ass —.”

“I’ve got the squirt in my pocket. It’s cramjam full of red ink —.”

“You’d better chuck it, you fathead,” said Nugent.

“Well, that wouldn’t be any good,” said Bunter. “I’m going to squirt it —.”

“I mean you’d better drop it, you chump.”

“Might break if I dropped it, and Toddy would kick up a row. Besides, why should I

drop it ?” asked Bunter.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Blessed if I see anything to cackle at ! You’ll cackle all right when you see Loder with his face all streaked with ink, like a zebra. He, he, he !”

Bunter fairly gurgled. Evidently, he was enjoying that startling scene in anticipation. Bunter was on the warpath now. A fellow who had put his fingers to his nose to a prefect, before staring fellows, and got off scot-free, plainly had nothing to fear. He had, in fact, Loder on toast. Bunter was in the happy position of being able to do just what he jolly well liked, and Loder could not do a thing ! That suited Bunter. Loder was going to suffer for all his sins now — Bunter was going to see to that. And his ideas were expanding. He had started by telling Loder that he couldn’t play football. He had gone on by putting his fingers to his little fat nose. Now he was going to squirt him with red ink ! And that wasn’t going to be the finish. Bunter had lots more in store.

“Coming, you fellows ?” chuckled Bunter. “I say, it will be jolly funny ! Fancy Loder’s face ! He, he, he !”

There was a tread in the Remove passage, coming from the direction of the stairs. It was a rather heavy tread.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo ! Is that Loder coming up ?” exclaimed Bob.

“Fat lot I care, if it is,” jeered Bunter. “Think I funk Loder like you fellows do ? Not me ! If that’s Loder, and he looks in here, I’ll jolly well let him have it as soon as he sticks his nose in.”

“You fat chump — !”

“Yah !”

“Look here, Bunter —.”

“Rats !”

Bunter evidently, was not to be reasoned with. Absolutely sure that there was no danger, Bunter feared no foe. He put a fat hand into his pocket. If it was Loder coming up the passage, Loder was going to have it, as soon as he put his nose in ! There was no stopping the warlike Owl.

The heavy tread came up to the open doorway of No. 1 Study. All eyes turned on the big Sixth-Form man who looked in. But it was not Gerald Loder. It was James Walker of the Sixth. He had his prefectorial ash under his arm.

“Is Bunter up in the studies ?” asked Walker. “Oh ! Here you are, Bunter. I want you.”

“Oh! Yes, Walker,” stammered Bunter. Loder was the only prefect at Greyfriars whom Bunter could venture to beard like a lion in his den. Other prefects were as awe-inspiring as ever. The fat Owl blinked uneasily at Walker through his big spectacles. Walker stepped into the study, Harry Wharton and Co eyeing him in silence.

Walker slipped the ash down into his hand: a proceeding that made Billy Bunter feel still more uneasy.

“I hear you’ve been cheeking a pre., Bunter,” said Walker, casually.

“Oh ! No ! Yes ! No ! I — I mean —.”

“That won’t do,” said Walker.

“Oh ! I — I — I —.”

Walker pointed to the table with his ash.

“Bend over that table !”

“Oh, crikey !”

“Sharp !” said Walker, impatiently.

Billy Bunter blinked at him. Walker was rather a pal of Loder's. Evidently he had heard of Bunter's antics, and disapproved of them: as indeed a Sixth-Form prefect could hardly fail to do. Indeed it was quite likely that Loder had told him how the matter stood and asked him to intervene. Anyhow here he was, ashplant in hand, and the hapless fat Owl was "for it". He had "cheeked" a pre.; there was no doubt of that. His cheek had been unprecedented, unheard-of, in fact, unnerving. Having called the tune, it was now time for Bunter to pay the piper.

"But I — I — I say — !" moaned Bunter, dismally. "I — I say —."

"No need to say anything," said Walker, briskly. "And I've no time to waste on you. You've been cheeking a pre., and I'm going to whop you. Bend over that table or I'll make it a dozen."

"Oh, lor'!"

In the lowest spirits, Billy Bunter bent over the table. Harry Wharton and Co. looked on in silence. Bunter, undoubtedly, had asked for it: and really he might have expected something of this kind. He had not: but really he might have! His fat face, lately so wreathed in grins, was deeply woebegone — there was not the ghost of a grin now.

Whop! Whop! Whop!

"Yow-ow-ow!" roared Bunter.

Walker laid it on with scientific precision. The whops came down fast, and they came down hard.

Whop! Whop!

"Wow! Oh, crikey! Wow!"

WHOP!

"Yaroooh!"

Bunter fairly bellowed. The last of the six came down rather like a flail. It was quite a severe "six". It almost doubled Bunter up.

"Now — !" drawled Walker.

"Wow! Oh! Oh, crumbs! Wow!" roared Bunter.

"Keep that in mind," said Walker. "Don't let me have to whop you again, Bunter! I shall lay it on next time."

Walker tucked the ash under his arm again, and strolled out of the study. He left Billy Bunter putting up a very good imitation of the Bull of Bashan, famed in olden time for his roaring.

"Ow! Wow! Whoop! Wow! I say, you fellows-wow! Oh, crikey! Oh, crumbs! I say—wooooooooooh!"

"Have another slice of pineapple old fat man," said Nugent, kindly.

"Yow — ow — ow — ow — wow!"

"Going after Loder now, Bunter?" asked Johnny Bull, with mild sarcasm.

"Yow — ow — ow — wow!"

Even an extra slice of pineapple did not comfort Bunter very much, after that six. He rolled out of No. 1 Study wriggling like a fat eel, and still emitting sounds of woe. But it was clear that he was not going after Loder! He was not going to squirt red ink over that unpopular prefect, and make him look like a zebra. He was not going anywhere near Loder — after that six from Walker! Loder was not, after all, "on toast", and Billy Bunter was going to leave him severely alone. It was a doleful, dismal, deflated fat Owl that rolled away from No. 1 Study, his dulcet tones floating back as he rolled: "Wow! Ow — wow — wow! Oh, crikey! Wow!"

CHAPTER 21

SHANKS'S PONY

“TODDY, old fellow —.”

“Stony !” said Peter Todd, sadly.

“Will you lend me — ?”

“Didn’t you hear me say stony ?”

“Your bike !” hooted Bunter.

On Saturday afternoon, Peter Todd, in No. 7 Study, was adjusting trouser-clips. That looked as if Peter was going out on his bike: as, indeed, he was, in company with Tom Dutton. It was not a propitious moment for Billy Bunter to prefer a request for the loan of Peter’s jigger.

“Going out on it, fatty,” was Peter’s answer.

“Oh, really, Toddy— .”

“Ready, Dutton ?” asked Peter. Tom was sitting on the table, waiting for him.

“Eh ?”

“Ready ?”

“Who’s Freddy ?” asked Dutton, staring at him.

“Oh, my hat ! Not Freddy ! Ready ?” bawled Peter.

“Who’s Teddy ?”

“He, he, he !” came from the fat Owl, blinking in at the doorway through his big spectacles. Peter breathed rather hard. A deaf pal was a trial at times.

“Not Freddy or Teddy — ready ?” he shouted.

“What are you talking about, Toddy ?” asked Dutton, testily. “Who’s steady ? I’m steady enough, if you mean me.”

“I say, Peter, you don’t want to go out on your jigger with that deaf ass,” said Bunter.

“Besides, you ought to be at games practice. You jolly well want Wharton to put you into the Rookwood match, don’t you ? Well, you ain’t up to Rookwood form, old chap, or anything like it. What you want is some footer practice, Toddy. You need it badly.”

If Billy Bunter expected that argument to have a persuasive effect on Peter Todd, he was disappointed. Peter gave him a glare.

“Some of the fellows are picking up sides now,” went on Bunter. “You go and join up, Toddy. Can I have your bike ?”

“No !” roared Peter.

“I say, old chap, don’t be selfish,” urged Bunter. “I want a bike this afternoon, Peter, and you know my jigger’s crocked. I’m going over to Cliff House, Peter. I can’t walk a mile and a half, old chap.”

“Why not ?” asked Peter.

“Oh, really, Toddy — !” Billy Bunter could see many reasons, if Peter could not, for not walking a mile and a half. Perhaps he doubted whether he could carry his weight that distance. A yard and a half would have suited Bunter better.

“Half the distance, if you take the short cut through the wood,” said Peter. “Come on, Dutton.”

“It’s pretty tough going, through the wood,” objected Bunter. “I’d rather bike it, really, Toddy. Be a pal !”

“Ask next door !” said Peter.

“Selfishness all round,” said Bunter, bitterly. “I’ve asked Smithy, and he said I crocked his bike last time I borrowed it, and that he will crock me if I touch it again. But you’re a pal, Toddy. I say, I’m going over to see my sister Bessie — you know how fond I am of Bessie, Peter —.”

“I know !” agreed Peter. “Has she had a cake from home, or what ?”

“Beast ! I say, Dutton, will you lend me your bike ?”

“Eh ? Did you speak. Bunter ?”

“Oh, crikey ! Will you lend me your jigger ?” yelled Bunter.

“Who’s bigger ?”

“Not bigger — jigger !” shrieked Bunter.

“Rot !” said Dutton. “You don’t want a bigger jigger, Bunter. You couldn’t reach the pedals. You ready, Peter ? I’m waiting.”

Peter Todd chuckled. He nodded, to save his lungs, and they went to the door. Bunter clutched Peter’s sleeve in passing.

“I say, Toddy, old chap, I’ve really got to go over to Cliff House. Bessie’s had a parcel — I — I mean, she’s ill, and I’m very anxious about her. I can’t go over without a bike.”

“What about a pony ?” asked Peter.

“A pony !” repeated Bunter, blinking at him. “I’d jolly well like to ride a pony, but where can I get a pony, you ass ?”

“Shanks’s pony !” explained Peter.

“Beast !” roared Bunter.

Peter, grinning, followed Dutton down the passage, and they disappeared. Peter was going out on his bike, regardless of the fact that Bunter wanted it. It seemed a very selfish world, to Bunter.

He rolled down the passage grunting. Neither a mile and a half by the road, nor half that distance through Friardale Wood, had any appeal for Bunter. On the other hand, his sister Bessie had asked him to tea at Cliff House School, and he knew that there was a cake from home, and probably other good things. Family affection was not, perhaps, very conspicuous in the Bunter clan, and in fact the fat Owl often quite forgot that he had a sister at another school little more than a mile away. But a parcel from home made a considerable difference. At such a time Bunter was a quite affectionate brother. He was really anxious to see Bessie that afternoon.

Toddy and Dutton were gone when he arrived at the bike-shed. But it was quite populous: quite a number of fellows were taking out their jiggers that fine autumn afternoon. Among them were Harry Wharton and Co., whom the fat Owl regarded with a hopeful blink.

“I say, you fellows —,” squeaked Bunter.

“Halo, hallo, hallo ! Coming for a run, old fat man ?” asked Bob Cherry, cheerily.

“We’re going to do twenty miles —.”

“Eh ?”

“And a bit over, perhaps —.”

“Oh, really, Cherry —.”

“Do come !” grinned Johnny Bull.

“You silly idiot — I — I — I mean, I’d be glad to come, only my jigger’s crocked, and besides, I’ve got to go over to Cliff House. My sister Bessie’s had a parcel — I mean she’s had influenza, and — and I’m rather worried about her. I — I say, Harry, old chap, if you’ll lend me your jigger —.”

“What ?”

“They’re picking up sides for a pick-up,” said Bunter. “Don’t you think you ought to be there. Wharton, as football captain ?”

Harry Wharton laughed.

“If I did, I should be there,” he said. “Why not pile in and mend your old crock, if you want a bike ?”

“Well, it’s got the chain broken, and a pedal twisted, and a lot of punctures,” said Bunter. “You go and play football, old fellow, and lend me your bike.”

“I will — when I want it back with the chain broken, and a pedal twisted, and a lot of punctures !” agreed the captain of the Remove. “Not till then.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Beast ! I — I mean, do be a pal, old chap ! I’ve simply got to go over to Cliff House, now poor old Bessie’s had plumbago —.”

“As well as influenza ?” asked Frank Nugent, sympathetically.

“I — I mean influenza ! Influenza with a touch of plumbago,” explained Bunter.

“I’ve just got to go over. Well, look here, if you won’t lend me a bike —.”

“No ‘if’ about that !” remarked Johnny Bull.

“I say, Bob, old chap —.”

“Say on!” grinned Bob Cherry. “Say anything except that you want my jigger.”

“You’re a splendid cyclist, Bob —.”

“Eh ?”

“You could do anything on a bike,” said Bunter, blinking at him. “You’re as strong as a horse, and a spot of extra weight would be nothing to you. I — I’ve often envied you, old chap, being such a magnificent cyclist.”

Bob Cherry stared at him.

“Pile it on,” he said.

“I mean it, old chap ! I — I’ve always admired you for it,” assured Bunter. “I’m not just pulling your leg because I want you to give me a lift on your bike over to Cliff House —.”

“Oh, my hat !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“I’ll stand on the foot-rests, and hold on to your shoulders,” said Bunter. “You’d hardly notice the extra weight — a magnificent cyclist like you. It would be simply nothing to you, you being such a splendid rider, you know. You could cut after these fellows afterwards, see ? A few extra miles wouldn’t matter a bean to you — a splendacious rider like you —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Blessed if I see anything to cackle at. You’ll give me a lift over to Cliff House, Bob, old chap, what ?”

“Sorry, old fat bean — my bike won’t carry more than a ton !” said Bob Cherry, regretfully. “Wait till I get a two-ton lorry, and I’ll give you a lift with pleasure. Come on, you men.”

Five fellows, laughing, wheeled out their jiggers. Billy Bunter, not laughing, blinked after them wrathfully.

“Yah !” hooted Bunter. “You can’t ride ! Yah !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

The Famous Five disappeared. Other fellows wheeled out their jiggers, and Bunter was left alone in the bike-shed. He blinked at the machines that remained on the stands.

To borrow a bike without the owner’s leave was to ask for a booting. On the other hand, Bunter wanted to go over to Cliff House, and he did not want to walk. He was tempted — and he fell ! He lifted Ogilvy’s bike from the stand, and wheeled it to the doorway.

It was rather unfortunate for Bunter that, as he was wheeling the bike out, Robert Donald Ogilvy of the Remove came in for it. They met in the doorway.

“Oh !” gasped Bunter.

Ogilvy glanced at Bunter and the bike.

“Somebody lent you a jigger, fatty ?” he asked. It was obvious that a clean and well-kept bike could not be Bunter’s own.

“Oh ! Yes ! ’Tain’t yours, old chap !” gasped Bunter.

“What ?”

“I — I mean, lemme pass, will you — I’m in a hurry —.”

“Why, you fat sweep, that’s my bike —.”

“I — I — Yaroooooh !”

Billy Bunter departed, in haste, without a bike. Ogilvy got in only one with his boot, but it was a good one, and quite enough for Bunter. He departed on his highest gear. There was nothing for it but to adopt Peter Todd’s suggestion, and rely upon Shanks’s pony. And the fat Owl, making up his fat mind to it, rolled out of gates, and headed for Friardale Wood and the short cut — at the pace of a very old and very tired snail.

CHAPTER 22

THREE IN A WOOD

“LODER !” breathed Billy Bunter.

He felt an inward quake.

In a lonely spot, a mile from everybody and everywhere, Loder of the Sixth was really the last person that Billy Bunter desired to meet.

The fat Owl had not made much speed on Shanks’s pony. He had taken a rest on the stile in Friardale Lane, and another on a log by the footpath. Now he had left the footpath, and followed the short cut through the wood, which saved a considerable distance, but was, as he had told Toddy, tough going. Rugged earth, thick trees, brambles and briars, and a scarcely-marked track almost hidden by fallen leaves, gave Bunter more trouble than he wanted: and now he was taking a third rest. The woodland track wound past the massive trunk of an ancient oak, the tallest tree in the wood, and a well-known local landmark, at the spot where Bunter halted for his third spell of rest. On the other side of that massive trunk was a soft bed of moss, as Bunter knew, having reposed his fat limbs thereon, on more than one occasion. So he moved round the trunk, sat down, rested a podgy back against the massive trunk, and pumped in breath. This time he was going to have a good long rest, before he restarted after the interval.

But the fat Owl had not been seated under that oak more than ten minutes, when there was a sound of footsteps, and a rustle of brambles, which showed that somebody else was coming along the woodland track. Whoever it was, Bunter was not in the least interested: he listened idly to the footsteps, expecting them to pass, on the other side of the big oak.

But they did not pass. They stopped. Whoever it was, he had stopped under the wide-spreading branches, with only the massive trunk of the ancient tree between him and Bunter. Round the trunk came the sound of a muttering voice:

“Not here ! He should be here now.”

It was then that Bunter quaked.

He knew that voice. Up to that moment Bunter’s thoughts had been of the fatigue in his fat legs, and the need for replenishing his short supply of breath. But at the sound of Gerald Loder’s muttering voice, he forgot that he was tired and breathless, and quaked.

Loder was after him ! That was the fat Owl’s immediate and alarmed thought. He

had had no trouble with Loder since his “six” from Walker. But Loder was not the fellow to forget offences. Wingate’s warning stood between him and Bunter — at the school. Would it have the same effect if the bully of the Sixth caught him in some solitary spot far from the school, with no eyes to witness ? It did not look like it: for what could those muttered words mean, except that Loder was on his track ?

He quaked ! That beast had followed him into the wood, and expected to have overtaken him by this time. It seemed clear to Bunter.

But he quaked in dead silence! By great luck, the big oak was between him and Loder, and the Sixth-Form man was not likely to guess that he had sat down at that spot for a rest. And the thickets were so thick, that even if Loder glanced round, he was not likely to see him, unless he came right round the tall oak. Silence was not, as a rule, Bunter’s long suit. Even when he was not talking, he was liable to grunt. But on the present occasion Billy Bunter was as silent as a stone image. He hardly breathed. In tense anxiety, he waited for Loder to pass on.

But Loder did not pass on.

Bunter heard a brushing sound, and guessed that Loder was leaning against the big trunk, on the other side. Then he heard the scratch of a match. A familiar scent floated in the air. Loder had lighted a cigarette.

Bunter was puzzled.

If Loder was after him, why did he not push on, as obviously he did not know that the fat Owl was at hand ? If he was not after him, why was he there at all ? No doubt the sportsman of the Sixth liked to find a secluded spot to put on a smoke: but he could hardly have walked a mile for that purpose. Billy Bunter’s fat brain was not quick on the uptake: and he could not make it out. Anyhow, whether Loder was after him or not, it was his cue to keep quiet, so that Loder would pass on his way without discovering him. Very much indeed he did not want to meet Loder in the middle of the wood !

He heard an impatient exclamation from the other side of the oak.

“Why isn’t he here ? Is he going to keep me waiting ?”

That exclamation was followed by the scratch of another match. Loder was consoling himself with a second cigarette.

“Oh !” breathed Bunter inaudibly.

He understood now. Loder’s presence there had nothing to do with him. He had an appointment with somebody: the big oak in the middle of the wood was a rendezvous. Loder was expecting to meet someone there, and the someone had not yet arrived. Who it was, and why, Bunter could not begin to guess, but it was a relief to realize that Loder was not thinking of him — and had, in all probability, forgotten his fat existence altogether.

A few minutes later, there was a sound of brushing in the thickets. Someone was coming towards the tall oak, from the direction of Friardale, pushing through the thick wood. Bunter’s eyes, popping behind his big spectacles, glimpsed, for a second, the crown of a bowler hat, over an intervening bush. But it disappeared the next moment, as its wearer emerged into the woodland track on the other side of the oak.

“Oh ! Here you are, Joey !” came Loder’s voice, in ungracious tones.

“ ’Ere I am, Mr. Loder, sir !” came a husky voice in reply.

“You’re late, Banks.”

“Only a few minutes, sir ! ’Ard going through that blinking wood ! Nor I don’t see why you couldn’t look in at the Cross Keys as usual, sir, or tip a man on the phone like you’ve done often enough.”

There was a faintly sulky tone in Mr. Banks’s voice. Apparently the podgy racing

man had not enjoyed a tramp through a thick wood.

"I've a reason," growled Loder.

"Well, if you 'ave, I don't see it, sir !" said Mr. Banks. "Come to the 'igh oak in Friardale Wood at three-thirty, you says on the phone, and I says O.K., I says. But why you couldn't come to the old place —."

"Have you ever heard the proverb that walls have ears, Banks ?" snapped Loder.

"I 'ave, sir ! But you've backed your fancy at the Cross Keys often enough afore now, if you come to that."

"I'm not backing my fancy now."

"Ain't it about a 'orse ?"

"No !"

There was a grunt from Mr. Joseph Banks. Evidently he had taken that troublesome tramp through a thick wood, with an eye to business. But if Loder did not want to see him about a horse, Mr. Banks could not guess why Loder wanted to see him at all. Loder had unusual tastes for a Greyfriars man: but even he could hardly have wanted to meet Joey Banks for the pleasure of his company.

"Well, if it ain't about a 'orse — !" muttered Mr. Banks.

"It isn't."

"Oh ! If you've a fancy for the dogs, sir, I'm your man," said Mr. Banks, more genially. "If it's the grey'ound racing, sir —."

"Nothing of the kind."

"Then what — ?"

"I'll tell you ! I want something done, and you're the man to do it for me. It will be worth your while, Banks — I'm not asking you to take trouble for nothing. But —," Loder sank his voice a little, although he believed himself to be alone with Mr. Banks in the middle of a solitary wood. "But — we've got to be careful. It would be pretty serious if it came out. That's why I asked you to meet me here — walls have ears ! It would be the sack for me at Greyfriars if anything came out — and a spot of trouble for you, too ! We've got to be careful !"

On the other side of the big oak, Billy Bunter's eyes grew big and round behind his spectacles. A cold shiver ran down his plump back. Billy Bunter, as a rule, was all ears for anything that did not concern him. It was said in the Remove that there was hardly a keyhole at Greyfriars to which he had not had a fat ear. But, for once, Bunter would have preferred not to listen. He was curious: but he was more scared than curious. If Loder discovered him now — ! The mere thought made the fat Owl shiver.

Gladly he would have crawled away in the underbrush, and left the precious pair to themselves. But he dared not stir. He dared not risk making the slightest sound. He sat where he was, with popping eyes and bated breath, still as a mouse with the cat at hand, while the voice from the other side of the massive trunk came distinctly to his fat ears.

CHAPTER 23

A PRECIOUS PAIR

GERALD LODER stood leaning against the great oak, an unlighted cigarette in his fingers, his face pale and set, a glinting gleam in his eyes.

The plump betting man eyed him rather uneasily.

Mr. Banks knew Loder pretty well. He had had many dealings with him. It was by

means of Joey Banks that Loder “backed his fancy” — it was into Joey’s pockets that a very great deal of Loder’s cash disappeared. Mr. Banks knew, if the headmaster of Greyfriars did not, that Loder, prefect as he was, not infrequently let himself out of the school at a late hour by way of his study window. He knew also that Loder had plenty of money, which made him worth Joey’s while. But Loder in his present mood was quite a new one on Mr. Banks. He looked like a fellow whom deep and passionate emotions had worked into a state of nervous tension: in whom black bitterness had stifled the whisper of conscience. Mr. Banks would have preferred the sportsman of Greyfriars in his usual mood, discussing the chances of his favourite “gee” for the two-thirty at Wapshot. However, all was grist that came to Joey’s mill, though he was puzzled and a little uneasy.

Loder threw the unsmoked cigarette away, and glanced round him, as if to make assurance doubly sure that there were no ears to hear even in that solitary spot. Fortunately for a fat Owl parked behind the oak, he did not think of looking round the tree. Wingate’s warning, or anything else, would hardly have saved Bunter if Loder had discovered him then.

“Look here, Joey.” Loder’s voice was low, but clear. “It’s a simple matter — quite simple — only we’ve got to be careful about it. All it amounts to is a trunk call on the telephone.”

“That all ?” asked the puzzled Mr. Banks.

“That’s all ! I’d better make it clear. You know there’s a big football match on at Greyfriars on Wednesday next week — I’ve told you about it.”

“I know, sir, and I’d be glad to come along, if it was possible, and see you taking goals for your school, sir.”

Mr. Banks was quite startled by the fury that leaped into Loder’s face, at that apparently harmless remark.

“I shan’t be taking any goals for Greyfriars,” said Loder, in a thick voice, “I shan’t kick goals, Joey — I’ve been kicked myself — out of the team.”

“Oh !” murmured Mr. Banks, realizing that he had touched the wrong chord. “That’s ’ard luck, sir.”

“Somebody else is going to have some hard luck on Wednesday, too,” said Loder.

“I’m not the only man that is going to cut the match. It’s the biggest match of the season — no end of kudos for any man picked to play, and I should have been picked on my form — in fact I was picked: Wingate’s no friend of mine, but he simply couldn’t pass me over — not without an excuse, at least, and — and he found an excuse. A trifling matter — the merest trifle — but it was enough for him — it served his turn. I was dropped like a hot brick.” Loder breathed hard, with smouldering eyes. “He’d rather put in a man in a lower form — nowhere near my quality — if he had the excuse he wanted — that was all he wanted, and he had it.”

Mr. Banks made no rejoinder to that. He had heard enough about the Greyfriars captain to know that this could not be an accurate description of him. He could see that Gerald Loder was blinded by rage and resentment and by his deep dislike of a fellow better than himself. But it was not Joey’s cue to argue the point with his young sporting friend. Loder was a source of profit to him: certainly not a fellow with whom he desired to quarrel.

“That’s how it stands,” went on Loder. “Everybody knew I was banking on a place in the eleven — and everybody knows that Wingate can’t find another man as good at inside right. But his word is law — all he wanted was a pretext, and he’s got it. I can stand round on Wednesday and watch Potter fumbling with the ball in my place. It may lose the game for Greyfriars — I tell you I’m wanted in the team, if Wingate

would own up to it.”

There was really no need for Loder to convince Mr. Banks on that point, for which Mr. Banks did not care a solitary bean. Perhaps Loder was trying to convince himself !

“Nor is that all,” went on Loder, muttering savagely. “Wingate has always been against me, in every way. He just doesn’t like me. He would put paid to me in anything he could. I tell you, he handled me the other day — knocked me over because I was whopping a cheeky fag — he chose to call it bullying, and threatened to report me to the Head — even a beastly little fag has dared to affront me in open quad, because he had Wingate behind him to protect him, and I — I had to stand for it.”

Loder’s voice trembled with rage. Billy Bunter’s antics had done more harm than the fat Owl could have dreamed.

Mr. Banks shifted from one leg to the other, uneasily. Loder’s bitter resentment of what he considered his wrongs really did not interest Mr. Banks, and he wished that the Greyfriars fellow would come to the point.

“ ’Ard, luck, sir,” muttered Mr. Banks, as sympathetically as he could. “But where do I come in ?”

“I’ll tell you where you come in, Banks. I’ve got to cut the St. Jim’s match next week, by order of our lord and master Wingate,” said Loder, venomously. “Well, he’s going to cut it, too.”

“I don’t see —.”

“St. Jim’s beat us last time,” went on Loder. “Wingate has set his heart on beating them this time. He’s made every man slave for it — a fellow can hardly call his soul his own under Wingate — I’ve had to give up a lot of things to keep in with him, and — and only to be kicked out at last. Well, if Greyfriars are going to beat St. Jim’s, they’ll have to do it without George Wingate — he’s made me cut the match, and I’m going to make him cut it. He’s going to get a telephone call on Wednesday —.”

“Oh,” murmured Mr. Banks. He began to see light.

“He will be called away, half an hour before kick-off,” said Loder, between his teeth.

“I’m out of it, and he will be out of it too.”

“Oh !” repeated Mr. Banks.

“It might mean that I shall play after all. Gwynne, as vice-captain, will skipper the team in Wingate’s place, and he will want another man. He’s no friend of mine, any more than Wingate: but he was backing up my claim to play, before Wingate got his excuse to chuck me out. It’s on the cards that he may call on me. Somebody will have to fill a vacant place, anyway. If I play I shall go all out, and Wingate won’t be missed so much as he may flatter himself.”

Mr. Banks eyed the sullen, angry, resentful face curiously. Loder was, in point of fact, making excuses to his own conscience ! He did not want to realize that he was letting down his own school. He was ready to play, keen to play, and if he played, Wingate would not be missed — he was as good a man as Wingate on the soccer field: or at all events he was determined to believe so, though certainly nobody else at Greyfriars would have been likely to agree.

“If Gwynne doesn’t choose to do the right thing, it’s on him,” went on Loder, muttering. “If he chooses to throw the game away, I can’t stop him. He’s pally with Wingate, and may follow his line, leaving me out. That’s not my fault. But never mind all that,” added Loder, perhaps realizing that Mr. Banks could hardly be interested in these details, which occupied his own mind so fully. “Wingate’s got to be made to cut the match, and that’s where you come in. Easy enough to get over to

Sussex and put in a trunk call.”

“That’s easy, sir,” mumbled Mr. Banks. “But —.”

“But what ?” snapped Loder, savagely. “You’ve got to stand by me in this, Joey. If you let me down in this —.”

“I ain’t letting you down, sir,” said Joey Banks, hastily. “You’ve had a raw deal, sir, and I’m the man to ’elp you get your own back. But this Wingate, sir, he won’t ’op it out of the school jest in front of a big football match, jest because you want him to. What am I going to tell him on the phone to make him ’op it ?”

“I’ve thought that out, of course. A motor crash —.”

“Oh !” breathed Mr. Banks.

“Wingate’s people live at Belwood, in Sussex. They’re none too well off, I believe,” Loder, who had plenty of money to jingle in his pockets, could not repress that sneer. “But old Colonel Wingate keeps a car—a twopenny-hapenny affair I’ve seen once or twice, and he has a man named Finn, who was his batman in the war, who is a sort of valet, general factotum, and chauffeur, but the old bean generally drives the car himself, I believe. A trunk call comes through from Belwood on Wednesday, and even before he hears a word, Wingate will take it for granted that it’s a call from home —.”

“He would, I s’pose,” assented Mr. Banks. “But —.”

“You needn’t wait for him to ask who’s speaking. You give the name of Finn. Any difference in the voice would be accounted for by the long-distance call — you know what telephones are like —. And you could have a cough or something —.”

“You’ve thought it all out, sir,” said Mr. Banks. “You got it all cut and dried.”

“I haven’t thought of much else, since that rotter booted me out of the eleven,” snarled Loder. “It’s all cut and dried, as you say. You give Wingate the news of a motor crash — his father’s car —.”

Mr. Banks gave a sort of uncomfortable wriggle.

“Wouldn’t that upset the young bloke an awful lot, sir ?

“He will find it’s all right when he gets home.”

“But on the way ’ome, sir —,” mumbled Banks, uneasily. He broke off, under the fierce look Loder gave him.

“That’s what you’ll tell Wingate,” said Loder, in a low deliberate voice. “He will believe the call comes from his home, because he couldn’t do anything else. His father’s car hit a lorry or something, and the doctor says he had better come immediately. He’ll go.”

“No doubt about that, sir,” muttered Mr. Banks. “He wouldn’t be thinking much about football after hearing that. But —.”

“The kick-off’s at three! There’s a train two-forty-five from Courtfield,” said Loder, sourly. “Wingate will catch it. It’s a good trip from Kent — the St. Jim’s match will be played while he’s on his train. Now have you got it clear ?

“I got it clear, sir ! But —.” Mr. Banks hesitated. “You — you’re sure you ain’t doing something you’d be sorry for afterwards, sir ?”

“Don’t be a fool !”

“It’s a bit thick, sir, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Is it ?” sneered Loder. “You’re so particular, Joey Banks, aren’t you ? You’ve never sent a bogus telegram about a horse, or anything of that kind ?”

“Never mind what I may or may not ’ave done, sir, in the way of business,” grunted Mr. Banks. “If you’re set on it, I’m your man, sir. You’re taking a spot of risk, sir — —.”

“I’d do exactly the same, if I were going to be sacked from Greyfriars for it an hour

later,” snarled Loder, probably exaggerating a little. “But there’s no risk, if you keep your mouth shut.”

“You bet I’ll do that, sir. I’m your man if you’re set on it,” said Mr. Banks.

And after a few more words, the precious pair parted. Mr. Banks went trundling away through the wood, in the direction of Friardale and the Cross Keys, with a thoughtful and not wholly satisfied expression on his face. Loder, leaning on the old oak, smoked another cigarette, after he was gone: and then, he too walked away, in the direction of Greyfriars. And when both were gone, and the sound of footsteps and rustling brambles had died away, a frightened fat Owl squatting in the thicket behind the great oak ejaculated, in a gasping voice: “Oh, crikey !”

CHAPTER 24

DOUBTING THOMASES

“I SAY, you fellows !”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo ! Still alive, Bunter ?” ejaculated Bob Cherry.

“Eh ! Wharrer you mean ?” demanded Billy Bunter, blinking at Bob through his big spectacles.

The Famous Five had returned from their spin. They were strolling from the bike-shed to the House when Bunter happened. Bunter was looking a little dusty, a little red, a little perspiring, and a little short of breath. But undoubtedly he was still alive.

“Haven’t you walked to Cliff House ?” asked Bob.

“Yes, I have.”

“And walked back ?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a good two miles,” said Bob. “Then what are you doing still alive ?”

At which the Co. chuckled, and Bunter snorted.

“Oh, really, Cherry! I say, you fellows, I wanted to ask you —.”

“Too late !” said Frank Nugent, with a shake of the head.

“Eh ? Wharrer you mean, too late ?”

“We had tea at the Pagoda at Lantham,” explained Nugent. “It was a good tea — and a bill to match ! Nothing left.”

“Stony all round,” said Bob, sadly. “Go and look for Mauly, old fat man.”

“I wasn’t going to ask you to lend me anything,” howled Bunter.

“You weren’t !” ejaculated Bob. “Hold me, somebody, while I faint !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

Billy Bunter blinked at five laughing faces, with a deeply-indignant blink. Actually, for once, Bunter was not in search of a little loan. He was not going to ask the Co. to cash the postal order that had not yet arrived. For once Billy Bunter was thinking of something not wholly connected with his own fat and important self. He was thinking of the startling discovery he had made in Friardale Wood — of Loder’s unscrupulous scheme for “dishing” George Wingate over the St. Jim’s match. He had thought of it even while munching cake with his sister Bessie at Cliff House. And he had rolled back to Greyfriars full of it. So full of it was Bunter, that he had even forgotten, for the moment at least, that he was expecting a postal order, and that it had not come.

“Will you fellows let a fellow speak ?” hooted Bunter. “I wanted to ask you to give me some advice, see ?”

“Oh, my hat!” said Bob Cherry. “If that’s all you want, old porpoise, you’ve come to the right shop. Good advice always on tap. I advise you to go and get a wash. You

need it.”

“You silly ass !” roared Bunter.

“I advise you not to bag any more toffees from my study,” said Harry Wharton.

“You’ll get the fives bat next time.”

“Look here —.”

“I advise you to leave keyholes alone,” said Johnny Bull. “It will save wear and tear of your trousers.”

“Beast !”

“I advise you to begin telling the truth,” said Frank Nugent. “Just a little to begin with, and then more and more till you get used to it.”

“You — you — you — !” gasped Bunter.

“My esteemed advice is to keep your absurd hands from the pickfulness and the stealfulness of other fellow’s tuck,” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “Honesty is the long lane that has no turning, as the English proverb remarks.”

“You silly idiots !” shrieked Bunter.

Bunter had said that he wanted advice. All the Famous Five had given him advice, one after another. Still he did not seem satisfied. He gave them a glare that might almost have cracked his spectacles.

“Will you let a chap speak ?” he hissed. “I say, you fellows, it’s awfully serious. Wingate’s a good chap — I mean a good chap for a pre. —.”

“Wingate ?” repeated Harry Wharton, staring.

“Look how he stood up for me when that beast Loder was bullying me,” said Bunter.

“Loder would be after me now, but for Wingate, because he makes out that I snooped cigarettes from his study. Of course all the pre’s are beasts, but Wingate ain’t such a beast as the others. Now is he ? I’m jolly well not going to stand by and see Wingate done in, and chance it.”

This was Greek to the Famous Five. But they gave the fat Owl attention.

“Does that mean anything ?” inquired Bob Cherry.

“Of course it does, you ass.”

“Well, if it means anything, what does it mean ?”

“I’ll tell you, if you’ll let a chap speak, instead of being like a sheep’s head, all jaw !” grunted Bunter. “This is how it happened. I sat down to get a rest in Friardale Wood, going over to Cliff House by the short cut —.”

“We could have guessed that one !” remarked Bob Cherry.

“And then I heard them talking —.”

“Who’s them ?” inquired Harry Wharton.

“Loder and that man Banks, you’ve seen that fat man Banks, who hangs about the Cross Keys and the Three Fishers. Well, I heard them —. You see, I was behind the tree and they never knew I was there —.”

“You fat villain !”

“Oh, really, Wharton —.”

“Come on, you men,” said Johnny Bull. “If Bunter’s been eavesdropping, we don’t want to hear about it.”

“Oh, really, Bull —.”

“The less you burble about it the better, Bunter,” said Bob Cherry. “If you’re telling the truth —.”

“Oh, really, Cherry —.”

“If you’re telling the truth, Loder would skin you for spying on him. If he does meet that man Banks, he doesn’t want all Greyfriars to know.”

“I wasn’t spying on him,” hissed Bunter. “How could I help hearing them when I was

sitting on the other side of the tree ? If you think I'm a fellow to listen syrupstitiously, Bob Cherry —."

"Oh, my hat ! How often have you been kicked for sticking that tent-flap you call an ear to a keyhole? "

"Beast ! I'd have been jolly glad to cut," yapped Bunter. "Only Loder might have spotted me. I say, you fellows, you'll jump when I tell you what they were talking about —."

"You're not going to tell us," said Harry Wharton. "Pack it up ! Nobody here wants to know."

"But it's about Wingate !" said Bunter.

"What rot !"

"I tell you I heard every word —."

"You would !" snorted Johnny Bull.

"That's what I want you fellows to advise me about," went on Bunter. "A fellow hardly knows what to do. I mean to say, Loder would deny every word of it, wouldn't he ? He ain't truthful. Well, suppose I go to Wingate and say — don't walk away while a fellow's talking to you, you beast —."

"I wouldn't say that to Wingate," said Nugent.

"Ha, ha, ha !"

"I'm saying that to you," hooted Bunter. "Listen, will you ? Suppose I go to Wingate and say that Loder is plotting with a rotter like Banks to dish him over the St. Jim's match next week— ."

"What ?" stuttered the Famous Five, as if all afflicted with a stutter at the same moment. Bunter had succeeded, at least, in surprising them.

"That's it !" said Bunter. "I heard it all — you see, I was sitting on the moss on the other side of that big oak, when Loder came up, and I thought at first he was after me and kept doggo, and then Banks came up, and I heard every word they said, and they're going to dish Wingate over the St. Jim's match between them, because he chucked Loder out of the team, and old Wingate's going to be got away on the day of the match by a spoof message, and — I say, you fellows, ain't it awful ?"

"The awfulness is terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter, if the truthfulness is also great," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"If !" grunted Johnny Bull.

"You fat ass," said Frank Nugent. "What on earth are you spinning us this yarn for ? Have you been to the films ?"

"If you fellows don't believe me —."

"It wants some believing, old fat fibber," said Bob Cherry. "Loder's rather a bad hat, I believe, but there's a limit. Don't pile it on."

Harry Wharton laughed. Certainly he had no high opinion of Gerald Loder, of the Greyfriars Sixth. But he was not likely to believe a story like this about even Loder, on evidence no better than Billy Bunter's.

"You sat down to rest behind that tree ?" he asked.

"Yes, old chap. I was a bit tired."

"And you went to sleep ?"

"No !" howled Bunter.

"And dreamed all this — ?"

"No !" yelled Bunter. "I tell you I heard it all. Mean to say that you won't take my word for it ?"

"Ha, ha, ha !" roared the Famous Five. The idea of taking Bunter's word seemed to strike them as quite funny.

“Look here, you cackling beasts —.”

“You told us the other day that Coker had had our toffees,” said Harry Wharton, laughing. “Now you’re spinning us a yarn about Loder —.”

“ ’Tain’t a yarn ! It’s true !”

“But it’s you that’s telling it !” said Frank Nugent, shaking his head. “So how could it be true ?”

“The howfulness is terrific,” grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Billy Bunter blinked at the chums of the Remove in great exasperation.

For once at least in his fat career, he was telling the truth ! But his well-known propensity to follow the bad example of Ananias was against him. Some Remove fellows averred that Bunter could not tell the truth if he tried. No one really supposed that he had ever tried ! Smithy had remarked that if Bunter said it was raining, a fellow had to look out of the window before he believed him ! And now he was telling a tale that would have sounded startling even from a fellow whose word was as good as gold !

Whether Bunter had gone to sleep and dreamed it, whether he had fancied it, whether he had heard something and misunderstood it, or whether it was a mixture of all three, coloured by his antipathy to Loder, the Famous Five did not know. But certainly they did not believe a word of it.

“I say, you fellows, it’s all true,” persisted Bunter. “Loder was in a fearful rage about being chucked out of the soccer. He was — was gnashing his teeth —.”

“Oh, my hat ! You heard him gnashing his teeth, from behind a tree ?” exclaimed Bob Cherry. “Must have put his beef into the gnashing.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“The gnashfulness must have been terrific.”

“Oh ! Yes ! No ! I — I mean ——,” stammered Bunter. Bunter never could tell a plain unvarnished tale. He always had to adorn it with details from his fat imagination. “I — I — I — I didn’t exactly hear that, you know —.”

“And you didn’t exactly hear the rest either, you fat fraud ! Now own up that it’s all bunk from beginning to end.”

“ ’Tain’t !” howled Bunter.

“ ’Tis !” chuckled Bob.

“ ’Tain’t !” shrieked Bunter.

“ ’Tis !”

“ ’Tain’t —— !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh, you rotters ! I mean, look here, dear old chaps. I can’t let them dish old Wingate like that ! But — but if Loder denies it, think Wingate will believe me ?”

“Not likely !”

“The likeliness is not preposterous, my esteemed fibbing Bunter.”

“You fat ass ! If you spin Wingate a yarn like that about another pre., he will give you six !”

“Oh, crikey ! But — but don’t you think I ought to put him on his guard, you know ?”

“Certainly, if it’s true,” said Harry Wharton. “But as it isn’t —.”

“I don’t want to get into a row,” said Bunter. “That’s important. But — but I — I want to put Wingate wise. I — I’m afraid he — he might not believe me, you know — and — and I jolly well ain’t going to have six ! I — I don’t want to be in the soup, you know. Look here, suppose you fellows come to Wingate with me —.”

“What good would that do ?”

“Suppose — suppose you say you were all with me, and — and you all heard it too !

A — a lot of witnesses, you know —.”

“What ?” yelled Harry Wharton.

“You fat villain !”

“Kick him !” roared Johnny Bull.

“Yaroooh ! Oh, crikey ! Leave off kicking me, you beasts, will you ?” yelled Bunter.

“I say — wow ! Wow ! Whooop !”

Billy Bunter roared. The Famous Five walked on, and left him roaring.

When the fat Owl rolled into the House, he did not head for Wingate’s study. Really and truly, Billy Bunter did want to put Wingate on his guard against Loder’s nefarious plot. But it was borne in upon his fat mind that Wingate was no more likely to believe him than the Remove fellows. Loder, as a matter of course, would deny every word of it: he could scarcely do anything else. And where would Billy Bunter be, then ? All the proof he had to offer was the word of a fellow whose word was worth nothing ! It was rather a dilemma for Bunter: and he felt that it was rather too much for him. He rolled into the House: but it was not to Wingate’s study, it was to his own, that he rolled.



“KICK HIM !” ROARED JOHNNY BULL, “YAROOH! OH, CRIKEY!” YELLED BUNTER.

CHAPTER 25

BILLY BUNTER’S DILEMMA

PETER TODD stared.

He came into No. 7 Study in the Remove, and was quite arrested by the sight of Billy Bunter in the armchair.

There was nothing unusual, of course, in seeing Billy Bunter in an armchair. Billy Bunter never stood up when he could sit down: and if there was an armchair to be had, Bunter would select that chair. The armchair in No. 7 belonged to Toddy: but it was generally occupied by Bunter when he was in the study: indeed if Bunter found Peter sitting in it, he would give him an indignant or reproachful blink. So it was not the circumstance that Bunter was sitting in the armchair that made Peter stare. It was Bunter’s unusual aspect. He was deep in thought. His fat brow was crinkled in a worried frown. So deep in thought was Bunter, that he did not even notice Toddy

staring from the door. He seemed lost to the world in deep, concentrated mental efforts, like a fellow trying to work out some extremely difficult problem. It was so unusual for Billy Bunter to think deeply, or indeed to think at all, that it was enough to make Peter or any other fellow stare.

“Penny for ’em, old fat man,” said Peter.

Bunter gave quite a start, as Peter’s voice roused him out of his deep reverie. He blinked round like a startled owl.

“Oh ! You !” he said. “It’s you, Toddy.”

“Little me !” agreed Peter. “What’s the matter ?”

“I — I — I was thinking —.”

“I noticed that ! That’s why I asked you what was the matter ? Something given your brain a jolt and started it working, or what ?”

“Oh, really, Toddy —.”

“Think these sudden changes will be good for you ?”

“Beast ! I mean, look here, Toddy ! I’m in a jam,” said Bunter. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“Coker missed the apples from his study ?”

“I haven’t been near Coker’s study, you beast ! If he’s lost any apples, I never had them. They weren’t really ripe, either. It’s a bit more serious than Coker making out that a fellow’s had his apples, Toddy.”

“If you’ve been in a Sixth-Form study again after smokes —.”

“I haven’t,” yelled Bunter. “ ’Tain’t that at all. I say, Toddy, I’m worried about old Wingate.”

“Wha — a — a — t ?”

“I mean to say, he’s a good chap, for a pre., I mean,” said Bunter. “He stopped Loder whopping me. He’s a jolly good chap, Peter. Even if he whops a chap, he only just flicks him — he never lays it on like Loder or Walker or Carne. Don’t you think he’s a jolly good fellow, Peter ?”

“One of the best,” said Peter, staring. “But what the thump — ?”

“Well, then, I’ve got to stand by him, and see him through,” said Bunter. “A fellow couldn’t do less — I mean a straightforward honourable fellow like me, you know.”

“Ye gods !” said Peter.

“I’m awfully worried about it, old chap —.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” said Peter. “It’s just barely possible that the captain of the school might be able to carry on without your help. Or are you wandering in your mind — if any ?”

“You see, he doesn’t know what I know,” explained Bunter. “Think Wingate would guess that Loder had fixed it up to dish him over the St. Jim’s match ?”

Peter jumped almost clear of the floor.

“No !” he gasped. “I don’t think Wingate would guess that one ! Have you gone crackers, you fat ass, or have Coker’s apples got into your head ?”

“That’s how it stands,” said Bunter. “They’re going to play a rotten trick and diddle Wingate into cutting the match. I’ve told Wharton and his gang, and they don’t believe a word of it, Peter. You do, don’t you ?”

“Hardly,” said Peter. “You benighted ass, Loder’s been rather tough on you, but you asked for it: and if you spin a yarn like that about him, you’ll land yourself right in the soup. Wash it right out.”

“It’s true !” howled Bunter.

“Bow-wow !” said Peter.

“I tell you I heard him fixing it up with that man Banks, in Friardale Wood, this very

afternoon. They're going to get Wingate away from the school just before the match with a spoof telephone call —."

"Pile it on !" said Peter.

"Think I'm making it up ?" howled Bunter.

"Aren't you ?"

"Oh, really, Toddy ! Have you ever known me tell a lie, I'd like to know ?" demanded Bunter, warmly.

"Have I ever known you tell anything else ?" inquired Peter.

"Beast !"

"Better leave Loder alone," said Peter, shaking his head. "He's leaving you alone, since Wingate warned him off. Have a little sense, you fat chump. You got six from Walker for checking Loder in the quad. You'd get something more than that, for starting a yarn like this about him."

"But it's true !" wailed Bunter.

"Gammon !"

"I just can't leave Wingate to it, Peter, when I know ! I can't let him be taken in and diddled like that, now can I ? I've got a conscience —."

"First I've heard of it."

"Beast !" mumbled Bunter.

He blinked dismally and dolorously at his study-mate.

The fact was that Bunter, for once in his fat career, was concerned about a person other than William George Bunter. It was strange but true !

Billy Bunter had a conscience — of sorts. True, it was a very accommodating conscience. It would stretch almost like elastic. It never kept him to the strait and narrow path of veracity. It never kept his fat fingers from other fellows' tuck. But, such as it was, there it was.

Wingate had stood between him and the bully of the Sixth. That, indeed, was partly the reason why Loder was so revengeful and malicious. Almost everybody liked old Wingate: and everybody had reason to like him. Even Bunter liked him. Really, and truly, the fat Owl did want to do the right thing, and give the Greyfriars captain a word of warning that would frustrate Loder's knavish tricks. But — !

Peter Todd looked at him rather curiously. He did not think of believing Bunter's queer story: that was altogether too steep. But he got so far as to wonder how much of it Bunter might himself believe !

"Look here, you dithering duffer," he said. "If you've been at a keyhole again, and heard something or other and got it all mixed —."

"'Twasn't a keyhole !" hooted Bunter. "It was in Friardale Wood, and I was behind a tree. I heard every word they said —."

"And mixed it," said Peter. "If you're not telling whoppers as usual, old fat man, you're making some idiotic mistake."

"How could I make a mistake when I heard them — ?"

"How could you do anything else, with a brain like yours ?"

"If you had half my brains, Peter Todd, you'd be twice as clever as you jolly well ain't !" yapped Bunter. "I tell you they've got it all fixed up to diddle Wingate over the St. Jim's match."

"Rot !" said Peter, tersely.

"You — you don't think Wingate would believe it, Peter ?"

"Of course he wouldn't !"

"It's true !" mumbled Bunter. "I heard it all —."

"You didn't go to sleep and dream it ?"

“That’s what that beast Wharton asked me, blow you. I heard it all, I tell you — Loder and Banks —.”

“And got it all wrong, or fancied most of it, you fat ass. You can’t spin a yarn like that about a Sixth-Form man and say you heard it all eavesdropping behind a tree ! Better wash it out.”

“I think you might believe a chap, Peter, knowing me as you do !” said Bunter, reproachfully.

“It’s because I know you as I do, old fat bean, that I couldn’t swallow a word of it.”

“Beast !” roared Bunter. “I — I say, think I should get into a row, Peter, if I let it out — what I know, you know —.”

“Bank on that, unless you could prove it.”

“Well, I’ve only got my word — !”

“That’s worth a lot !” said Peter, sarcastically.

“But — but if I let it go on, Wingate will be dished over the St. Jim’s match, and — and he’s been awfully decent to me, Peter.”

Peter stared at him. He began almost to wonder whether there might be anything in it. It was unusual, but not impossible, for Bunter to tell the truth. It was improbable, but still possible, that he might not be making a mistake — though Bunter was the fellow to make mistakes if there was room for a mistake to be made.

“Look here, you fat ass,” said Peter, at last. “It’s too jolly steep — and you’re such a fathead, and such a fibber — but look here, if you’re telling the truth, and if you’ve got it right, you’re bound to go to Wingate and put him wise, and chance it. Go to him now.”

“But — but if he don’t believe me —.”

“Magna est veritas et praevalebit,” said Peter.

“You silly ass ! Wharrer you spouting Latin at me for ?” hooted Bunter.

“That means that great is truth and it will prevail,” explained Peter. “A chap can’t do more than tell the truth and chance it. If it’s true, Wingate’s the man to know. Go and tell him.”

“Yes, but I might get into a row, you know. I — I want to tip old Wingate, but — but I don’t want to get into a row,” mumbled Bunter. “You see, I’m in a digamma, old chap.”

“In a whatter? “ gasped Peter.

“A digamma, you know. I suppose you know what a digamma is.”

“I’ve heard of it,” assented Peter. “It’s an obsolete letter in the Greek alphabet, I believe. What the holy smoke —.”

“Oh, don’t be an ass, Toddy ! When a chaps in a digamma it’s when he just doesn’t know what to do —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !” yelled Peter.

“Wharrer you cackling at ?” howled Bunter.

“If you mean a dilemma, you fat chump —.”

“I think it’s a digamma,” said Bunter, shaking his fat head. “But if it’s dilemma, it comes to the same thing.”

“Well, I’ll help you out of the dilemma,” said Peter. “When in doubt, do the right thing. See ? Wingate’s no fool, and if there’s any truth in your yarn, he will sift it out all right. If there isn’t —.”

“There is, you beast !”

“Then off you go,” said Peter. “If it’s true, old Wingate’s the man to hear it, and if it isn’t, I’m going to boot you for trying to pull my leg. Roll out of that armchair.”

“But — I — I say — leggo that chair, you beast — I shall fall out — will you leggo

that chair ?” yelled Bunter, as Peter grasped the high back of the armchair and tilted it. “Look here, you rotter — wow !”

Billy Bunter rolled out of the armchair.

“Now cut !” said Peter, drawing back his foot.

“Beast ! Keep your hoof away ! I’m going, ain’t I ?” howled Bunter.

And he went. Peter’s foot was not to be argued with, and the fat Owl rolled out of No. 7. If Bunter went to Wingate with that strange story, Peter was prepared to believe that there might be something in it. But he doubted very much whether Bunter would go to Wingate.

His doubts were well-founded. Billy Bunter rolled down the passage to the stairs with his fat mind made up to do the right thing. But on the landing, his resolution came unstuck, as it were, and he slowed down. Second thoughts, not always the best, supervened.

If Wingate believed him, it would be all right. But Bunter was sorrowfully accustomed to having his statements doubted ! It might be correct that truth was great, and would prevail: but the fat Owl was not much given to relying upon truth as a resource. To do him justice, Bunter did want to do the right thing. But still more he did not want to land his precious person in a row. He was in fact on the horns of a dilemma — or a digamma, as he preferred to call it. Finally he sat down on the settee on the landing, to think it over once more. And he remained there !

CHAPTER 26

TOO LATE!

GERALD LODER moved about his study, after class on Monday, restlessly.

Loder had been in an unquiet mood all day.

He had been inattentive in the Sixth form-room: and Dr. Locke, who expected serious attention from so senior a form as the Sixth, had given him more than one expressive glance: though luckily he had left it at that.

After class his pal, Walker, had asked him to his study: which meant that Jimmy Walker was going to produce cigarettes from some hidden recess. But Loder had declined impatiently, and gone to his own study.

Now that he was there, however, he seemed unable to settle down to anything. He moved about the room, his hands driven deep into his pockets, with a frown wrinkling his brow. If Walker or Carne could have seen him then, they would probably had concluded that Loder’s selected “gee” had come in eleventh on Saturday, and left him in a hole.

But it was not that. The sportsman of the Sixth was not thinking of his dingy racing speculations. He was thinking of Joey Banks: but not in connection with the so-called sport of kings.

He stopped at the window, and stood staring out into the autumn sunshine. There were plenty of fellows to be seen in the quad. A crowd of Remove men were punting an old footer at a distance: Harry Wharton and Co. and Vernon-Smith, Redwing, Peter Todd, Squiff and Tom Brown and Ogilvy and Mark Linley, and five or six more. Loder gave the captain of the Remove a scowl as he noticed him.

He had not forgotten that little scene in Quelch’s study when Wharton had interrupted his telephone call, a week ago. But he forgot Wharton the next minute. Other and much more pressing matters were on his mind.

A fat figure rolled into view, and a big pair of spectacles gleamed in the sun. Again

Loder scowled, this time more blackly. His feelings towards Billy Bunter were extremely inimical — though they would certainly have been more so, had he been aware of what the fat Owl knew.

Bunter rolled on and disappeared, and Loder forgot him. Temple, Dabney, and Co., of the Fourth Form, came out of the tuck-shop: and, whether by accident or design, the Remove football shot out of the crowd of juniors like a pip from an orange, and landed on the knees of Cecil Reginald Temple's beautiful bags. There was a yell of protest from Cecil Reginald, and a yell of laughter from the merry Removites. Then a burly figure loomed into view, and the commanding voice of Horace Coker was heard.

"Now, then, stop that. Do you hear?"

The Remove fellows heard — and heeded. They were charging after the ball: but, neglecting the ball for the moment, they charged Horace Coker instead. Coker of the Fifth was strewn spluttering on the earth.

Two tall Sixth-Form men, crossing from the House to the gates, stopped. Wingate rapped out:

"No more of that! Stop it at once."

And the Removites stopped it at once. Coker's behest had caused them to charge Coker over. But Wingate's word was law. They left Coker sprawling and raced after the ball. Wingate and Gwynne walked on to the gates — great men in the eyes of the juniors, and perhaps in their own also.

Loder's eyes followed them from his study window.

His look, as he watched the Greyfriars captain, was one of dislike and resentment: and yet there was something else in it. Wingate and Gwynne disappeared out of gates: and Loder's face grew darker and darker with troubled thought.

The truth was that Loder was uneasy in his mind. Like many fellows, he was not so bad as he supposed himself to be. Under the influence of resentment and rancour, he had sunk low — so low that he had, as he knew, rather startled and shocked Joey Banks, who was far from being a particular gentleman. But over the week-end he had had time to think — and the more he thought, the less he was satisfied with the wretched scheme of revenge he had laid.

It was not the risk that troubled him. Utterly unaware that a pair of fat inquisitive ears had overheard the miserable plot, he saw little risk in the affair: and what risk there might be, he had the nerve to face. It was the baseness of the wretched trickery he had planned that troubled him. Wingate had not been fair to him, he was determined to believe that. But deep down in his heart he knew that it was not for bad qualities, but for good ones, that he disliked the captain of Greyfriars. He did dislike him intensely, and he would gladly have given him all the trouble he could — but — there was a limit, and he knew that he had gone over the limit, and somehow or other it would not let his mind rest. Even Joey Banks thought it was "thick." Was he really lower down than that boozy racing man?

He moved from the window, and moved aimlessly round his study. Suppose, after all, he called it off?

A word to Joey Banks, and the thing was done. Nothing then would happen, and nobody would ever know what had been planned.

He scowled savagely. He was out of the St. Jim's match, and looked a fool to fellows who knew that he had banked on it. Why should he not inflict precisely the same disappointment on Wingate, as he had planned to do? What was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander. Wingate had turned him out — he was going to turn Wingate out — and that was that.

But was it ?

For a long time Loder wandered about the study, thinking and thinking. He left the room at last, and the House.

His mind was not made up: but he was going to walk down to Friardale. He would think it over as he went. Gosling, at his lodge, eyed him rather curiously as he went out. Loder was unconscious of the fact that his harassed thoughts showed in his face. He walked slowly down Friardale Lane, till he came to the little side-gate of the Cross Keys. The building lay well back from the road and Loder was accustomed to slipping in at the side gate, to reach the back way in. He stopped and looked about him very carefully before he opened the gate. A Greyfriars man addicted to "pub-crawling" had to be very careful: especially a prefect of the Sixth. But there was no one in sight: and he put his hand on the gate.

For some moments, he hesitated there. Then, suddenly, he made up his mind, pushed open the gate, and cut in. He made his way quickly to the back of the building, and tapped at a door.

It was opened by a man with a beery face, who gave the Greyfriars senior a grin and a wink. Loder was well known at that delectable establishment.

"Banks in, George ?" asked Loder.

"No, sir," answered George.

Loder set his lips. He had made up his mind. Was there going to be delay in carrying out his change of plan ? He was only too well aware that if there was delay, his mind might veer again. He was almost feverishly anxious to get the thing settled and done with.

"When will he be in ?"

"Not till Wednesday, sir," said George.

"Wednesday ?" repeated Loder. "Where has he gone, then ?"

He realized that he might have thought of that. Mr. Banks' business called him to many places: he was sometimes away for days, sometimes for weeks.

"I believe he's in Sussex now, sir," said George. "Coming back on Toosday, he was, but he says, sir, that another bit of business would keep him over Wednesday, sir, so he won't be back till Wednesday night."

Loder breathed hard. Banks was away for a few days on racing affairs: and Loder could guess what was the "other bit of business" that would keep him away over Wednesday ! It was Loder's own "bit of business".

"Mr. Sanders is 'ere, sir, if you'd care to see him," said George. George took it for granted that the young gentleman from Greyfriars was interested in a horse.

Loder shook his head. Soapy Sanders was of no use to him. It was Banks he had to see — and Banks was not to be seen. He muttered something and turned away, and George, staring, shut the door.

It was too late !

An ill deed was easy to do, hard to undo. Loder moved away into the little side-lane, with a clouded brow. He had done all he could — he could do no more — the thing had to go on ! Unless, somehow, he could get into touch with Banks — he might think of a way — after all, there was a lot of time before Wednesday — he wondered —.

"Well ?" rapped a sharp voice.

Loder jumped.

In his stress of mind, he had forgotten his usual caution. He came out of that side-gate into Friardale Lane without looking about him. Two Sixth-Form men of Greyfriars, walking back to the school from Friardale, stared at him as he came out, and Wingate

rapped out that monosyllable like a bullet.

“Oh !” gasped Loder.

He stared almost stupidly at Wingate. Gwynne shrugged his shoulders: Wingate knitted his brows.

“Well ?” he repeated.

“I — I ——,” Loder stammered. He was fairly caught, coming out at the side-gate of the Cross Keys. What Wingate thought, he could read in the Greyfriars captain’s face. He flushed.

“I — I ——.” He did not know what to say. Certainly he could not tell Wingate why he was there. He tried to collect himself. “It — it isn’t as you think, Wingate —.”

“Isn’t it ?” said Wingate, with a curl of the lip. “What were you doing there, then ?”

“I — I — I took a short cut from the river —.”

“Did you ?” said Wingate, drily: and Gwynne winked at space.

Loder’s face burned. Wingate didn’t know, and certainly never could guess, why he had gone to the Cross Keys on this occasion. He took it for granted that Loder had been “blagging” — as indeed he often did. All the old bitterness and rancour surged up in Loder’s heart again.

“I’ve told you,” he muttered, thickly. “If you choose to report this to the Head, I shall stick to it. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

“I shall not report it to the Head, Loder,” said Wingate, quietly. “I won’t give you the trouble of inventing a string of lies. But I warn you to mind your step ! You’re heading for the sack, Loder. Better take care.”

“I tell you ——.”

“That will do !”

Wingate walked on with Gwynne, taking no further notice of him. Loder stared after him, with smouldering eyes. He was no longer thinking of somehow getting in touch with Joey Banks and washing out that unscrupulous scheme. Never had his feelings towards the Greyfriars captain been so black and so bitter. His mind was savagely made up when he tramped back to Greyfriars — and this time he was not likely to change it again. Wingate was his enemy, and Wingate could take what was coming to him !

CHAPTER 27

BISCUITS FOR BUNTER !

NUGENT Minor, of the Second Form, stared at Billy Bunter, inquiringly and not with welcome.

Dicky Nugent had the honour and distinction of fagging for Wingate of the Sixth, captain of Greyfriars. He was not, perhaps, insensible to that honour and distinction. But a man in the Second Form had plenty of things to occupy his leisure hours: and several other Second-Form “men” were awaiting him, for there was a feast toward in the fag quarters. So Dicky was not in the very best of tempers when he laid the tea-table in his fag-master’s study: he was, at least, hurried and impatient: and in that mood, he seemed to derive no pleasure whatever from seeing a fat face and a large pair of spectacles looking in at the door.

“Well, what do you want ?” he asked, with the accent on the personal pronoun.

Dicky’s manner implied that he had no time for William George Bunter.

Bunter blinked round the study.

“Ain’t Wingate here ?” he squeaked.

“Anything wrong with your gig-lamps ?” inquired Nugent minor.

“Eh ? No ! Why ?”

“If there isn’t, can’t you see that Wingate isn’t here ?” asked Dicky.

Bunter frowned at him.

“Don’t you be cheeky, young Nugent,” he said, warningly. “You cheek Wharton because you’re Nugent’s young brother, but you can’t cheek me.”

“What’s the price of tallow ?” was Dicky’s retort.

“How should I know, you young ass ?”

“Well, you’ve got lots.”

Billy Bunter breathed hard through his fat little nose. However, he had not come to Wingate’s study to wage war on the cheekiest fag in the Second Form. He suppressed his indignation, and squeaked !

“Look here. I’ve got to see Wingate ! Where is he, do you know ?”

“I know he went out with Gwynne, but he forgot to tell me where he was going,” answered Dicky, sarcastically. “If I’d known a Remove kid wanted to know, I’d have asked him, of course.”

“Is he coming in to tea, you cheeky little beast ?”

“Shouldn’t wonder ! I know I’ve got to get it ready !” grunted Nugent minor. “But I can’t make the tea or boil the egg till he comes in, and if he keeps me waiting, I shall jolly well clear, I know that. These pre.’s are all the same — they don’t care how they waste a man’s time.”

Nugent minor continued with his task, regardless of Bunter. The table was set: the egg was ready for boiling, the tea was ready to be made: and Dicky naturally wanted to get through, and rejoin his friends. He had a strong suspicion that, in case of delay, the feast in the Second might be over before he arrived for it. It was annoying: but Dicky was accustomed to Sixth-Form men forgetting that a Second-Form man’s time was of value.

Billy Bunter blinked at him, as he placed a bag of biscuits on the table. Bunter was interested in biscuits. It was quite a large bag, and it seemed to be full. Dicky went to the window, and stared out into the quad. He hoped to see his fag-master coming, in which case he could get through. But Wingate was not to be seen, and Dicky turned from the window with a grunt.

“Blow !” said Dicky.

“Ain’t he coming ?” asked Bunter.

“No !” growled Dicky. “And I jolly well ain’t going to wait ! Blow !”

Billy Bunter cast a last blink at the biscuit bag, and rolled away down the passage. The thought occurred to his fat mind that two or three biscuits would not be missed from such a lot. But even Billy Bunter could not venture to sample Wingate’s biscuits under the eyes of Wingate’s fag. He rolled away, and stopped at the window at the end of the passage.

“Beast !” murmured Bunter, as he blinked from the window to see whether the Greyfriars captain was coming. He was not coming.

Bunter’s fat brow was corrugated with anxious and uneasy thought. Bunter had been doing an unusual amount of thinking that day. It was Monday: and the St. Jim’s match was scheduled for Wednesday. Unless Wingate, somehow, was put wise in time, he was going to be “dished” over that match by Loder’s cunning plot. Unusual as it was for Billy Bunter to bother about any person other than his fat self, he simply could not dismiss it from his mind. Wingate had been jolly decent, and it was simply rotten to let a rotter like Loder score over him.

Bunter, at last, had made up his fat mind. He was going to tell what he knew, and

chance it !

That was Bunter's resolution. But he was aware that his resolutions were liable to come unstuck. He had screwed up his courage to the sticking-point, and arrived at Wingate's study — only to find that the Greyfriars captain was out. Now he was powerfully tempted to give it a miss, roll back to the Remove quarters, and leave things as they were.

As he stood there in a state of doubt and indecision, forgetting even the biscuits in his worried frame of mind, Nugent minor passed him.

Dicky was going. With a feast on in the Second, Dicky was jolly well not going to hang about in a Sixth-Form study — not if Richard Nugent knew it ! If Wingate wanted him, when he came in, he could call "Boy !" and that was that ! Dicky Nugent departed, Bunter's eyes and spectacles watching him as he turned a corner and disappeared.

Then the fat Owl blinked from the window again.

Wingate was not coming. Billy Bunter's courage, which had been screwed up to the sticking-point, oozed. It was Wingate's fault for keeping him on tenterhooks like this ! He made a step to depart.

But he paused again.

Few fellows in the Remove could ever have guessed that Billy Bunter would ever be deeply concerned about any fellow whose name was not William George Bunter. But he was ! He just could not let it go on, and let that beast Loder dish old Wingate in that rotten way.

But he was deeply uneasy and perturbed.

Ten to one Wingate would not believe a word of it. Harry Wharton and Co. didn't, and Peter Todd didn't. It was, in fact, a very steep story, though it happened to be true. Suppose Wingate believed that he had made up that story about Loder ? Would he whop him ?

It was an awful risk !

Once more the worried fat Owl made a step to depart.

Once more he stopped, and blinked from the window. If Wingate would only come in, and let him get it over ! But Wingate was not coming.

Walker of the Sixth came down the passage from his study. He glanced at the fat Owl in passing.

"Don't hang about here," he snapped.

"I — I'm just going, Walker," stammered Bunter.

"Well, get out."

Walker passed on, and Billy Bunter got a move on. He had an excuse now for going: juniors were not allowed to hang about the Sixth-Form studies. But — !

Once more the fat Owl screwed up his courage. He rolled up the passage, into Wingate's study, and shut the door after him. Once more his fat mind was made up: he was going to wait for Wingate to come in, and tell him, and chance it ! If Toddy was right, truth was great, and would prevail ! Anyhow Bunter was going to chance it.

He blinked from the study window. No sign of Wingate yet ! He had to wait ! He sat down in Wingate's armchair to wait.

It was then that his eyes, and his spectacles, fell on the bag of biscuits on the table. Actually, in his stress of mind, he had forgotten those biscuits ! Now he was reminded of them !

Bunter liked biscuits. In fact he liked anything edible. And he was hungry. He had had nothing since class excepting tea in hall, and a coconut he had found in Ogilvy's

study, and some chocolates that Smithy had carelessly left on his table. He was tempted.

For a minute or two he resisted temptation. He remembered his experience in Loder's study, a week ago, and its consequences. His hesitation was brief.

Wingate was not the man to make a fuss like Loder. Besides, this time it was biscuits, not smokes. Wingate would hardly miss two or three from a bag-full — he wouldn't even notice a trifle like that.

Moreover, Bunter was there to do him a service — a very great service — nothing less than preventing him from being “dished” over the biggest football fixture of the season. And he was going to do it at some risk to himself ! That was worth a few biscuits.

He stretched out a fat hand to the bag.

He opened it, and hooked out a biscuit. It was coated with sugar: the kind Bunter specially liked. In a moment it was happily crunching.

Naturally, another followed it, and then another. And then another and another.

Really and truly, Billy Bunter had not come to that study to scoff tuck. He had come there to do the right thing, and chance it ! But when Billy Bunter began to eat, he was like a fellow who stepped on a slippery slope. He found it very hard, indeed impossible, to stop !

Almost unconsciously, biscuit followed biscuit on the downward path. The bag, once bulky, grew flaccid. The fat Owl gave quite a start when, groping for more biscuits, he realized that the bag was almost empty.

“Oh !” breathed Bunter.

There had been at least three dozen biscuits in the bag. Now there were three ! Billy Bunter had a hopeful nature: but he could hardly hope that Wingate would not notice this !

He sat with a biscuit in each fat hand, a sea of crumbs on his fat waistcoat, and a biscuit crunching in his capacious mouth. It was borne in upon his fat mind that he had better not wait for Wingate, after all — he could come back another time and tell him — and at that point, the door opened, and Wingate walked into the study.

CHAPTER 28

NO LUCK !

WINGATE stared at Bunter.

Bunter sat transfixed.

His fat jaws ceased to crunch. His eyes almost popped through his spectacles at the Greyfriars captain. He was caught fairly in the act. Wingate had, undoubtedly, arrived at an unfortunate moment for the Owl of the Remove.

“Why, you young sweep — !” ejaculated Wingate.

Really, he could scarcely believe his eyes. Bunter had been in trouble, not once but many times, for failing to observe the distinction between “meum” and “tuum” in matters of tuck. His manners and his customs were quite well known. But that even Bunter would venture into a Sixth-Form study — the study of the captain of the school — and sit down there in the armchair and coolly scoff the supplies placed on the table for tea, was incredible ! Incredible as it was, there it was — there sat Bunter, an empty bag on the table before him, biscuits in both fat hands, smothered with crumbs !

Wingate was a very good-tempered fellow. But the expression that came over his face

now was quite grim. In fact it was alarming.

“Bunter ! You young rascal — !”

“Oh !” gasped Bunter. “I — I say — oh, crikey !”

“Get out of that chair !”

“Oh ! Yes ! Oh, lor’ !”

Bunter got out of the armchair. Wingate picked up his ash. Bunter eyed that proceeding apprehensively. He had no doubt of what was coming next.

“I — I — I say, Wingate — !” he stammered. “I — I never meant — I mean — I didn’t — I — I wasn’t — I — I — oh, crumbs !”

“Now, look here, Bunter,” said Wingate. “This won’t do, see ! The other day you were snooping in Loder’s study now I’ve caught you snooping in mine —.”

“I — I wasn’t — I — I mean — I —.”

“That kind of thing is called pilfering !” said Wingate, sternly.

“Oh, really, Wingate —.”

“You might be sacked for it.”

“Oh, crikey !”

“There was a fuss the other day about something in Coker’s study, in the Fifth —.”

“I — I don’t know anything about that, Wingate,” gasped Bunter. “I — I don’t know what Coker thinks he’s missed, but I — I certainly never had his apples —.”

“That will do,” said Wingate. He pointed to a chair with the ash. “Bend over that chair, Bunter. I’m going to give you a lesson about snooping in senior studies. You’re in need of one, and you’re going to get it.”

“But I — I — I wasn’t — I — I didn’t !” stuttered Bunter. “I — I never came here for the biscuits, Wingate — I — I — I —.”

Wingate swished the ash.

“I’ve told you to bend over,” he said.

“I — I — I came here to speak to you,” spluttered Bunter. “I — I — I had something to tell you, Wingate —.”

“I said bend over.”

“I — I — I — it’s about Loder,” gasped Bunter.

It was, Bunter realized, a most unfortunate moment for telling his strange story. Still, there was a faint hope that, if Wingate believed it, he might overlook the trifling affair of the biscuits. Certainly Wingate did not look as if he was likely to be a patient listener. He was in fact impatient to give Bunter the “six” he deserved, and have done with him.

But he paused, much to Bunter’s relief, at the mention of Loder’s name. He remembered what he had told Bunter in the Cloisters the previous week.

“Loder !” he repeated. “Do you mean that Loder has been bullying you ?”

“Oh ! No ! ’Tain’t that ! But I — I heard him —.”

“You heard him ?” repeated Wingate, blankly.

“Yes. You see, I — I was behind a tree, and — and he didn’t see me —.”

“What ?” roared Wingate.

“I — I heard all he said, and I — I came here to tell you —,” spluttered Bunter. “I — I came here to tell you, and —.”

“You young rascal ! You’ve been eavesdropping, and you’ve come here to tell me what you overheard !” exclaimed the Greyfriars captain.

“Yes — you see, it was about the football —.”

“Bend over that chair !”

“But — but Loder’s got it in for you, and — and —.”

“Another word, and I’ll give you a dozen instead of six !” exclaimed Wingate,

angrily. "Do you think I want to hear about your eavesdropping, you young rascal ! Bend over that chair !"

"But I — I — I ——."

"Sharp !" snapped Wingate, swishing the ash.

In more auspicious circumstances, the Greyfriars captain might perhaps have given Bunter a hearing. But there was no chance of that now. The fat Owl made one more effort.

"I — I say, Wingate, I — I really came here to tell you about Loder — I — I wasn't after the biscuits —."

I'm waiting !"

"I never touched the biscuits — I — I mean I — I just had one or two while I — I was waiting for you to come in, and I really came here to say — yarooooooh !"

A swish of the ash interrupted Bunter. Wingate seemed to have lost patience. Bunter roared.

"Now bend over that chair, or — !"

Billy Bunter bent over the chair. Evidently it was not a propitious moment for telling Wingate about Loder and his plot. What the fat junior was driving at, Wingate did not know: and he certainly did not want to know. Bending over the chair, the hapless Owl squirmed in anticipation.

Whop !

"Wow !" roared Bunter.

Whop !

"Whooooooop !"

"Six" was not always six. Wingate was not the man to lay it on like Loder. He stopped at the second swipe. But two swipes were quite enough for Billy Bunter, with a little over. He wriggled and roared.

"Now, you young sweep — !"

"Yow — ow — ow — ow !"

"Cut !" snapped Wingate.

"Wow ! Yow ! Ow !"

Wingate pointed to the door with the ash. The fat Owl wriggled doorward, squeaking as he wriggled. Wingate's glance followed him, frowning, till the door closed on him. Then Wingate forgot his existence. Really, he had more important matters to think of. After tea, he was going to post up the list of men for the St. Jim's Match — little dreaming that when that match came to be played, his own name was scheduled to be missing from the list. Bunter could have told him — but Bunter had not told him: and it was improbable that Bunter would make another attempt to tell him. Indeed, if Wingate was "dished" Billy Bunter, for the time at least, as he wriggled squeaking down the passage, couldn't have cared less !

CHAPTER 29

BUNTER'S BRAIN-WAVE

"HARRY, old chap —."

Scat !

"Look here, Wharton, you beast — !"

"Oh, buzz off !" exclaimed the captain of the Remove, impatiently. "I've got to finish this dashed book for Quelch ! Give a man a rest."

And Harry Wharton dipped his pen in the ink, and scribbled on, heedless of William

George Bunter and all his works.

It was Tuesday ! That morning Mr. Quelch had inquired about the “book” that had been on hand so long. And it was the last day of grace.

Quelch was, in his own way, a considerate gentleman. He was aware that a “book” was a tremendous imposition: and he was prepared to allow a reasonable time for the completion of such a task. But a week, in Quelch’s opinion, was quite a reasonable time: so as Wharton had not yet delivered the goods, so to speak, he inquired about it in the form-room after third school. He added that that book must be handed in by tea-time — or else — !

So after dinner, while his friends went out to enjoy more strenuous things in the open air, Harry Wharton sat in No. 1 Study, to finish off that dismal and almost interminable “book”.

He had, on the “instalment” system, already written six hundred and seventy-five lines, arriving at “me fraude petebas.” That left a residue of thirty lines yet hanging over his hapless head. So there he was, making a dash at the remainder, hoping to arrive at “in ventos vita recessit” before the bell rang for class again — when, like a weary mariner, he would see land at last !

Seldom, if ever, had he wanted Billy Bunter’s company less. Bunter, often superfluous, was more so than ever, in the circumstances.

So he bade the fat Owl “scat,” waved him off like a troublesome bluebottle, and continued to transcribe the fourth book of Virgil regardless.

Bunter, however, was no bluebottle to be waved off. He rolled into the study, blinking reproachfully at the captain of the Remove.

“You can chuck that rot for a minute or two,” he said. “You make out that you’re frightfully keen about the First Eleven match to-morrow, don’t you ?”

Harry Wharton gave Virgil a momentary rest, to stare at the fat Owl.

“What do you mean, fathead ?” he asked. “You haven’t come here to talk soccer, I suppose.”

“Fat lot you care if Greyfriars gets licked by St. Jim’s, so long as you get your mouldy lines done,” jeered Bunter.

“You burbling cuckoo—.”

“Well, I care, if you don’t,” said Bunter, loftily. “Greyfriars will get licked all right, if Wingate’s out of the eleven.”

“He won’t be out, you ass ! Why should he be ?”

“I’ve told you that Loder — !”

“For goodness sake, don’t spin that yarn over again,” exclaimed Wharton. “Buzz off and make up another.”

“I didn’t make it up !” howled Bunter.

“Well, buzz off and dream another, if you dreamed it.”

“I didn’t dream it, you beast ! It’s true.”

“Oh, rot !”

“Look here, it’s Tuesday now, and the match is tomorrow,” urged Bunter. “If something ain’t done, Wingate is going to be dished — done right in the eye ! Is that what you want ?”

Harry Wharton laid down his pen, and fixed his eyes on the Owl of the Remove. So far, he had not even thought of believing a word of the strange tale Bunter had told on Saturday. He had, in fact, more or less forgotten it: and by this time, he would have supposed that Bunter had forgotten it too.

Evidently, Bunter had not !

It seemed that it was still a worry on his fat mind. That looked at least as if Bunter

believed it himself. And it was so extremely unusual for Billy Bunter to worry about any fellow but Billy Bunter, that the captain of the Remove could hardly help taking a little heed.

“Look here, Bunter, you’re making some idiot mistake,” said Harry, more mildly.

“You know what an ass you are ! If you’re not telling crammers, you’ve got it wrong. Loder’s a tick, I know, but no Greyfriars man would play a dirty trick like that — there’s a limit, even for a tick like Loder. Just shove it out of your Silly head.”

“And let Wingate be dished to-morrow ?” asked Bunter.

“I tell you there’s nothing in it,” said Harry, impatiently.

“That’s all you know ! If you’d been behind that tree on Saturday, listening to them —.”

“You fat villain, I shouldn’t be behind a tree listening to anybody. You ought to be kicked for it.”

Beast !”

“Now cut off, and let me get my lines done ! I’ve got more coming, if they don’t go in this afternoon.”

The pen resumed scratching. But Billy Bunter did not cut off. He stood blinking at the busy junior at the study table.

“Look here, Wharton —.”

Scratch ! Scratch ! Scratch !

“If it was anybody but Wingate, you know !” said Bunter. “But he’s been jolly decent. Toddy said that if it was true I ought to go and tell him —.”

“So you ought !” said Harry, over his shoulder.

“Well, I — I went to his study to tell him, yesterday,” mumbled Bunter. “I — I had to wait there a long time for him to come in, and — and when he came in, he — he thought I’d scoffed his biscuits —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh, cackle !” snorted Bunter. “As if I’d touch his biscuits ! He wouldn’t even listen to me — I don’t think he really thought I’d come there to speak to him at all, thinking that I’d had the biscuits, you know — anyhow he whopped me —.”

“Serve you right !”

Snort, from Bunter.

“I can jolly well tell you that I had a jolly good mind to let Loder get on with it, after that !” he said, darkly. “Whopping a man, you know, when a man went to his study entirely for his sake. Ungrateful, I call it — like that toothless serpent in Shakespeare, you know —.”

“That whatter ?”

“We had it in English Literature with Quelch,” said Bunter. “How sharper than a thankless child it is to have a toothless serpent —.”

“Oh, my hat !” gasped Wharton. “Do you mean how sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child ?”

“No, I don’t !” yapped Bunter. “Well, Wingate was an ungrateful as a toothless serpent, and he jolly well whopped me, making out I’d had the biscuits, you know. And I tell you I’d a jolly good mind to let Loder rip.”

Scratch ! Scratch ! Scratch !

“Will you chuck that scribbling for a minute, Wharton, blow you ?”

“No ! Shut up.”

“Beast ! He whopped me,” went on Bunter. “But I ain’t going to let that make any difference, see ? I mean to say, look what I should have had from Loder, but for old Wingate ! I’m not going to let Wingate down. I’ll tell you what I’m going to do —.”

“Do go and tell somebody else !”

“Oh, really, Wharton ! I’m going to heap coaly fires on his head,” said Bunter, impressively.

“What ?” yelled Wharton. The pen ceased to scratch.

“Coaly fires!” said Bunter. “He whopped me about those bickers, but I ain’t going to let him down — I’m going to heap coaly fires on his head. See ?”

Harry Wharton did not seem to “see”, for a moment or two. He stared blankly at the fat Owl. Then he grasped it.

“Oh ! Coals of fire !” he gasped. “You’re going to heap coals of fire on his head ! Is that it ?”

“How you pick a fellow up,” said Bunter, irritably. “What’s the difference between coals of fire and coaly fires, I’d like to know. Well, even after he whopped me, I’m going to stick up for him, heaping coaly fires on his head —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh, go on cackling,” said Bunter, sardonically. “You won’t cackle to-morrow when Kildare’s lot walk all over the Greyfriars team, because Wingate’s out. Perhaps that’s what you want.”

“What I want is to finish these lines for Quelch.”

“Blow your lines ! Blow Quelch !” hooted Bunter.

“Blow everything you like — and blow away, and let me get through.”

“Beast ! I mean, do listen to a chap, old fellow. I’m in an awful digamma — Toddy says it’s a dilemma, but I think it’s a digamma — but whatever it is, I’m in it. I want you to help.”

Harry Wharton looked at the worried fat face. He almost began to believe that there was “something in it”. But not quite.

“Look here, you fat ass, it’s too steep,” he said. “I can’t get it down, and I’m jolly sure Wingate couldn’t. Forget it ! How could I help, anyhow ?”

“I’ve been thinking it out,” explained Bunter.

The captain of the Remove forbore to ask him what he had done that with. He waited to hear what had been the result of Bunter’s unusual intellectual exertions.

“It’s no good going to Wingate,” said Bunter. “But suppose I wrote it all down in a letter — dating it to-day, you know. You mind the letter — lock it up in your desk here. See ?”

“Not quite !”

“Wingate’s going to get a telephone-call to-morrow, calling him away —.”

“Rot !”

“They’re going to tell him that his pater’s damaged in a motor-crash, to make him cut off home —.”

“Bosh !”

“Well, that’s what they said !” declared Bunter. “And I jolly well heard every word ! Now, when Wingate gets that spoof call to-morrow —.”

“He won’t!

“Well, if he does, then !” howled Bunter. “If he gets a call to-morrow about his mater in a potor crash — I mean his pater in a motor-crash — he will know it’s all spoof, if he knows I wrote it all down the day before —.”

“Oh !”

“You lock it up in your desk,” went on Bunter, impressively. “That’s important. Wingate would take your word that I gave you the letter to-day, wouldn’t he ?”

“He would if I told him so.”

“He mightn’t believe me,” said Bunter, sadly. “He’s doubted my word before

this ——.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh, do stop cackling ! Can’t you see this is awfully serious ?” hooted Bunter.

“Is it ?” asked Harry, laughing.

“Of course it is, you silly fathead ! Now, when it gets out to-morrow that Wingate’s been suddenly called away ——.”

“It won’t !”

“Well, if it does, you beast ! If it does, you take that letter to him, and ask him to read it, and tell him I gave it to you to-day. See ? Won’t he know it’s all a spoof, when he knows that I knew about it the day before ?”

Harry Wharton stared quite blankly at the fat Owl. Evidently, Bunter had been thinking it out — to some purpose. If there was anything in his extraordinary story, this certainly was quite a brain-wave. For a statement written down on Tuesday, describing news that was to come over the telephone on Wednesday, would be indubitable proof that that news was false. If the whole thing was not some idiotic mistake, some figment of Billy Bunter’s fat imagination, if in fact such a scheme really had been laid, this would undoubtedly put “paid” to it.

“See ?” asked Bunter, blinking anxiously at the captain of the Remove. “If that call to-morrow was genuine, I couldn’t know about it a day ahead, could I ?”

“Hardly !”

“So Wingate will know it’s a spoof, won’t he ?”

“If it happens ——.”

“It will happen all right —— !”

“Um !”

“Well, if it doesn’t happen, you can chuck the letter into the fire. You only take it to Wingate if he gets that call about his pater.”

“Oh !” said Harry.

“I’ll write the letter now, and you can lock it up in your desk,” urged Bunter.

“Well, it won’t do any harm, if it doesn’t do any good,” said Harry, at last. “Squat down and write it, fathead, and I’ll lock it up in my desk —— and chuck it into the fire tomorrow when nothing happens.”

“And now shut up, and let me get on with these dashed lines.”

“Fat lot your lines matter !” snorted Bunter. “Talk about Pontius Pilate fiddling while Carthage was burning ——.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Beast !”

Scratch ! Scratch ! Scratch ! Harry Wharton resumed lines: while Billy Bunter, much relieved in his fat mind, sat down at a corner of the table, took pen and paper, and dropped half a dozen blots by way of a beginning.

“I SAY ——.”

“Shut up !”

“Sic fata gradus ——.”

“Look here ——.”

“—— evaserat altos ——.”

“How many ‘l’s’ in telephone?” howled Bunter.

“One, ass ! Now keep quiet.”

“Sure there ain’t two ?” asked Bunter, doubtfully. “Yes, fathead ! Will you dry up, and let me get these lines done ? Think I want another lot from Quelch ”

“Well, I want to get this right, as Wingate’s going to read it ——.”

“He isn’t going to read it ! It’s going into the fire to-morrow. Now don’t burble any

more.”

“Well, t-e-l-y-f-o-n-e doesn’t sound right to me,” said Bunter, shaking his fat head. “I think it’s a double ‘l’.”

“Oh, my hat !” gurgled Harry Wharton. “Why not make it t-e-l-e-p-h-o-n-e ?”

“That’s rot !” said Bunter, decidedly.

“Have it as you like, old fat man ! Anything so long as you shut up.”

“Beast !”

Two pens scratched in No. 1 Study. Harry Wharton slogged at his lines. Billy Bunter laboured over the letter that was to put paid to Loder’s plot. He laboured over it with inky fingers and a corrugated fat brow.

That letter was going to be read by the captain of the school. Bunter knew that, if Harry Wharton did not. For that “spoof” telephone-call really was coming on Wednesday: and just before the St. Jim’s match, all Greyfriars School would know that Wingate had suddenly been called home. Wharton would have to believe it then, and he would have to take that letter to Wingate. Bunter did not want mistakes in spelling, in a letter that was to be read by the Greyfriars captain. He was quite particular about that letter.

He was not sure whether there was one “l” or two in “telephone.” But certainly he was not going to spell it t-e-l-e-p-h-o-n-e, as Wharton suggested. Bunter knew better than that !

“I say, Wharton —.”

“Don’t !”

“Eh ? Don’t what ?”

“Don’t say ! Just keep quiet.”

“Look here, you make out that you spell better than I do,” yapped Bunter. “I want to get it right —.”

“Irim demisit Olympo —.”

“Do chuck that rot for a minute, and tell a chap how many ‘m’s’ you put in ‘damaged’,” hooted Bunter. “How do you spell it ?”

“D-a-m-a-g-e-d,” said Harry.

The fat Owl gave him a reproachful blink.

“Oh, all right,” he said, bitterly. “If you won’t help a chap, you won’t ! I think you might, as Wingate’s going to read it. But if you won’t, you won’t ! Trying to pull my leg —.”

“You howling ass !” hooted the captain of the Remove. “D-a-m-a-g-e-d spells damaged, if that’s what you want.”

“No ‘i’ in it?” asked Bunter, sarcastically.

“Of course not, fathead! How could there be an ‘i’ in it ?” shrieked Wharton.

“Well, there jolly well is,” said Bunter. “I know that all right, even if I ain’t sure about the ‘m’s’. D-a-m-m-i-d-g-e-d is how I spell it, but I ain’t sure if it’s a double ‘m’ —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“You can cackle, but you can’t pull my leg !” snorted Bunter. “I think I’ll make it a double ‘m’ and chance it. I’m jolly well going to put in two ‘m’s,’ Wharton.”

“Put in three, if you like,” said Harry, laughing. “Or four !”

“Yah !”

Billy Bunter resumed his labours. With the suspicion in his fat mind that the captain of the Remove was pulling his fat leg in the matter of spelling, he relied on his own efforts, and Wharton was left in peace to finish his lines. He arrived, at last, at “in ventos vita recessit”, which was the end of that almost endless “book”, and rose from the table with a sigh of relief.

“That’s done,” he said, gathering up the sheets. “Finished, fatty ?”
“Just on,” said Bunter. “Don’t go down yet — you’ve got to lock this up in your desk, you know.”
“Buck up, then ! I t’s only five minutes to class.”
Billy Bunter finished his letter. He dropped a final blot and added a last smudge, and rose in his turn.
“Look at that !” he said. “I fancy that’s O.K. The spelling’s all right, anyhow.”
Harry Wharton looked at the letter. He grinned as he looked at it. Bunter gave him an exasperated blink.
“What are you sniggering at ?” he demanded. “ ’Tain’t funny.”
Harry Wharton chuckled. Apparently he could see at least an element of the comic in Bunter’s effusion. It ran:

Deer Wingate,

I am riting these phew lines to put you on your gard because Loder is gowing to dish you over the St. Jim’s match on Wensday and I kno because I herd it all behind a tree. Loder has phixed it up with that man Banks to give you a tellyfone call half an hower before kikk-off and he is gowing to tell you that your pater has been dammided in a motor crash but it will not be troo because it is all a spoof to get you to kleer off just before the game.

I am riting this down on Tuseday and Wharton is gowing to lock it up in his desk and kepe it safe till he heers that you are cawled away, and the he will give it to you to reed so that you will kno.

I wood have toled you myself but you wood not lissen thinking I had had the biskits in your studdy, also the phellows think you wood not believe it but you will when you reed this letter because if it was strate how cood I kno the day before?

W. O. Bunter.

Harry Wharton could not help chuckling. Othographically, that letter was enough to make a stone image chuckle. But having read it, his face grew more serious, as he looked at the fat anxious Owl.

“Blessed if I make this out,” he said. “You’ve got it all pat, whether it’s true or not. But — it can’t be —.”

“I tell you I heard Loder fix it up with Banks —.”

“I expect you heard Loder blowing off steam, and fancied the rest,” said Harry, shaking his head. “It’s too jolly steep. If Wingate saw this letter I think he would have a fit.”

“He will jolly well see it to-morrow, after that phone call comes —.”

“If it comes !” said Harry, laughing. “I’ll wait till it comes, before I believe it, Bunter. Anyhow it won’t do any harm to lock this up in my desk, and keep it till to-morrow before I chuck it in the fire.”

“Yah !” retorted Bunter. “Just mind you lock it up safely. If it got lost —.”

“It won’t get lost — till it goes into the fire to-morrow,” answered Harry. “Here goes.”

He dropped the letter into his desk, shut the desk, and turned the key in the lock. Billy Bunter watched him with owlish concentration, till the key was restored to his pocket. “That’s all right !” he said, in great relief.

“Right as rain!” agreed Harry. “Now you’d better cut, if you don’t want to be late for Quelch.”

The bell was ringing. Harry Wharton picked up his imposition, and cut out of the study — followed at a more leisurely pace by the fat Owl. They joined the Remove

fellows at the door of the form-room, as Mr. Quelch came along to let them in. Both of them were looking very cheery as they went in: Harry Wharton because that interminable “book” was finished at last, and he had his completed imposition to lay on Quelch’s desk: and Billy Bunter because, thanks to that brain-wave, he was no longer in what he called a digamma. Whether it was a digamma or a dilemma, he was out of it now, and the worry, at long last, was off his fat mind.

CHAPTER 31

NOT GOOD ENOUGH!

“WE’VE got to be good this morning !”

Bob Cherry made that announcement after breakfast on Wednesday. He made it seriously, indeed solemnly: and his friends nodded assent.

It was, in fact, quite a serious matter.

That Wednesday was a great day: indeed a day of days. It was the date of the most impressive First-Eleven fixture in the Greyfriars list. Kildare’s team from St. Jim’s were due in the afternoon to play Wingate and his merry men: a battle of the giants. Hardly a man at Greyfriars School was willing to miss that match. Harry Wharton and Co. were tremendously keen on their own matches, which were great occasions in the Lower School. But on such a day as this they forgot junior soccer, important as it was on other dates. The St. Jim’s match filled all thoughts, and on it was concentrated all interest. Any fellow who got a detention that afternoon was much to be pitied.

The mere thought of “Extra School” on that great day was dismaying. The Famous Five were going to join the throng of Greyfriars men round the field, and cheer the Greyfriars goals, and swell the chorus of triumph when St. Jim’s were beaten — as no patriotic fellow doubted that they would and must be. It was true that St. Jim’s had somehow pulled it off last time: but history was not going to repeat itself. The Greyfriars side were in great form: Wingate alone was a tremendous tower of strength: worth any two men from St. Jim’s, if not any three ! Anyhow it was going to be a great game: and even slackers like Skinner and Snoop, lazy fellows like Lord Mauleverer, were going to be there: even Billy Bunter was going to be there. The Famous Five would not have missed it for worlds, or whole universes. Hence Bob Cherry’s remark that they were going to be good that morning ! If the gimlet-eye in the form-room fell on them, it was going to discern them on their very best behaviour ! There was not going to be the faintest, remotest reason for Quelch to rap out that dreaded word “Extra.”

“No larks,” said Bob, impressively. “No whispering in class ! No buzzing ink-balls ! No dropping books, even. Or blots ! In fact, no anything ! We’ve got to be as good as gold. See ?”

“The goodfulness shall be terrific, my esteemed Bob,” assented Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, “And the absurd Quelch will be Punchfully pleased.”

“Don’t let Quelch have to say a single word to any of us !” went on Bob. “Not a single syllable !”

“Not even to tell you not to shuffle your feet !” remarked Johnny Bull.

“Fathead !” answered Bob, politely.

“If Bob can keep his feet still, through a whole lesson, it will be rather a record,” remarked Nugent. “Think you could do it, old bean ?”

“Look here, you ass —.”

“There’s the bell !” said Harry Wharton, laughing. “Stick to it, you fellows — this

morning we've all got to be like Good Little Georgie who loved his kind teachers — positively for one occasion only — !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

And the Co. having come to that excellent resolution, walked to the House, with the firm intention of being as good as gold, or even a little better, all through first, second and third lessons: which would no doubt be very gratifying to Mr. Quelch, as well as slightly surprising.

Thud !

“Blow !”

The sound of a falling book, thudding on old oak, followed by an exclamation of annoyance, greeted them as they came into the form-room passage. A little ahead of them was Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form. Coker had books under his arm, and one of them had slipped and crashed.

“Blow !” repeated Coker, irritably.

He stooped to recover the book. Being Coker, he naturally let the others slip as he stooped.

Thud ! Thud !

“Blow !” hooted Coker, much annoyed.

Coker's burly form, bent double, almost barred the passage. A joyous grin came over Bob Cherry's face. Coker of the Fifth, quite inadvertently, had placed himself in an excellent position for leap-frog. It was a temptation not to be resisted.

“Follow your leader !” exclaimed Bob.

And he rushed.

The form-room corridor, assuredly, was not the place for playing leap-frog. Bob might have realized that, had he paused to reflect for a moment. Unfortunately, he did not pause to reflect. The cheery Bob was rather given to acting first and reflecting afterwards.

In a moment his hands were on Coker's bent shoulders, and he was leap-frogging over his back. After him flew the others, following their leader, leap-frogging over Coker in their turn. There was a shout of laughter from fellows up and down the corridor, and a roar of surprise and wrath from Horace Coker.

“What's that — what — who — how — great pip ! What —.”

Coker hardly knew what was happening for a moment or two. Bob Cherry was over, followed by Harry Wharton, Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, and Frank Nugent, all safely landed on the other side of Coker. Johnny Bull was leaping, as Coker seemed to realize what was going on, and straightened up.

“Tuck in your tuppenny, Coker!” shouted Vernon-Smith, from the door of the Remove room.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

But Coker did not tuck in his tuppenny ! As he realized that juniors were leap-frogging over his back, Coker of the Fifth surged up in towering wrath. Johnny Bull, for a second, seemed booked for a crash: but luckily he caught Coker round the neck in time, and clung. They went over together, Coker sprawling on his back, Johnny sprawling on Coker.

“Oh, my hat!” gasped Bob Cherry. “Johnny, old man —.”

“O.K.,” gasped Johnny Bull. He detached himself from Coker, and rejoined his friends, breathless but otherwise undamaged.

Coker, however, seemed a little damaged. The Bull of Bashan, doing his best, had simply nothing on Coker as he roared. Coker scrambled up, and made a rush at the Famous Five.

“You young ticks ! Jumping over a Fifth-Form man! I — I — I’ll pulverize you — I — I’ll spiflicate you — I’ll —”
“COKER !”



A SHARP VOICE RAPPED OUT, EVEN COKER PAUSED AT THE VOICE OF MR. QUELCH.

A sharp voice rapped out. Even Coker paused, at the voice of Mr. Quelch. In another moment, something like a battle-royal would have been raging in the form-room corridor. But Quelch rapped out in time. Coker spun round, and almost glared at the Remove master.

“Look here,” he bawled. “Those young ticks— .”

“That will do, Coker ! I saw what occurred, and I shall deal with these boys of my form !” rapped Mr. Quelch.

Horace Coker breathed hard, and he breathed deep. He would much, very much, rather have dealt with those boys of Quelch’s form himself. Pulverizing and spiflicating was the least they deserved, for leap-frogging over the majestic back of Horace Coker of the Fifth Form. However, he had to leave it to Quelch, and he gathered up his books and stalked away to the Fifth form-room — leaving five dismayed juniors behind him, wishing from the bottom of their hearts that they had not leap-frogged over him. But how could they have foreseen that Quelch would turn a corner just in time to witness the performance ?

Quelch’s eyes fixed on the dismayed five, and never had they seemed so much like gimlets.

“Wharton !”

“Oh ! Yes, sir !”

“Do you think the form-room corridor a proper place for such unseemly horse-play ?”

“Oh ! No, sir.”

“We — we didn’t think, for a minute, sir — !” stammered Bob.

“You must learn to think, Cherry !”

“Oh ! Yes, sir ! Certainly.”

Wharton, Cherry, Nugent, Bull, Hurree Singh, you will go into Extra School for two hours —.”

“Oh !”

“But, sir — !” gasped Bob.

“That will do !” snapped Mr. Quelch.
He unlocked the form-room door, and the Remove went in. Five members of that form, generally merry and bright, looked sad and solemn: indeed, every one of the Famous Five seemed, just then, to be understudying the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance ! They had made good resolutions: they had been going to be good, very, very good, superlatively good, that morning ! Quelch had been going to be as pleased as Punch with at least five members of his form ! And this was how it had worked out !

CHAPTER 32

GOOD OLD WINGATE !

“I SAY, you fellows !”

“Oh, blow away, Bunter !” snapped Bob Cherry.

It was quite unlike Bob to snap. Even Billy Bunter, as a rule, could not ruffle his sunny temper. His unlimited good nature made it easy for him to observe the ancient text, and “suffer fools gladly.” Seldom, if ever, did he frown, or snap. But now he did both — and Billy Bunter blinked at him indignantly through his big spectacles.

“Oh, really, Cherry — !” he squeaked.

“Buzz off, bluebottle !” grunted Johnny Bull.

“Oh, really, Bull —.”

“Give us a rest, Bunter, for goodness sake,” said Harry Wharton, impatiently.

“Hook it !” said Frank Nugent.

“And hook it at oncefully,” added Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

“Eh ! Anything the matter ?” asked Bunter.

“Br — r — r — r — r !”

“Oh, really, Wharton —.”

“You fat ass, we’re booked for Extra !” hooted Bob. “Now roll away ! I want to kick somebody ! You’re asking for it.”

“Oh !” said Bunter. “Well, it was your own fault, you know — leap-frogging outside the form-room, just as Quelch was coming round the corner. What did you expect ?” Five separate and distinct glares were fixed on the fat Owl.

The Famous Five were, in fact, feeling extremely disgruntled after dinner that day. Of all the half-holidays in the term, that one was the one they were least inclined to spend in “Extra”. The fact that it was, as Bunter pointed out, their own fault, seemed of no great comfort to them.

Extra School was from three to five. They would be going in, just as the ball was kicked off in the St. Jim’s match. And the game would be over well before they came out.

They were feeling like kicking themselves. They were feeling still more like kicking Coker of the Fifth. And as Bunter so tactfully pointed out that it was their own fault, they looked as if they were powerfully tempted to kick Bunter.

“You asked for it, you know !” went on Bunter, apparently in the role of Job’s comforter.

“You blithering, blethering, benighted bandersnatch !” said Bob Cherry. “Think that makes it any better ?”

“Oh, kick him !” grunted Johnny Bull.

Billy Bunter backed away warily.

“I say, you fellows, you needn’t get shirty, because Quelch has stuck you in Extra,”

he said, warmly. “ ’Tain’t my fault, is it ? Look here. I’ve been looking for you since dinner —.”

“Now go and look for somebody else, you fat ass !”

“Look here, Wharton— .”

“Oh, scat !”

“It’s about that letter,” hooted Bunter. “It’s a quarter past two now. You’d better go up to your study and fetch it —.”

“Bother you and bother your silly letter,” howled the captain of the Remove. “Roll away and don’t worry. Look here, you chaps, if we went to Quelch, and asked him to let Extra stand over till Saturday ——”

“Um !” said Nugent, dubiously.

“He might stretch a point. I don’t suppose he remembered the St. Jim’s match, just at the moment, when he yapped at us in the passage this morning. He must have remembered it since, and he might — !”

“The mightfulness is preposterous !” murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“He might think that we ought to have remembered it !” said Bob, ruefully.

“Um ! Yes ! But —.”

“I say, about that letter, Wharton — !” squeaked the Owl of the Remove.

“Shut UP !” roared Wharton.

In the present distressed circumstances, the captain of the Remove was not likely to be interested in the mysterious document locked up in the desk in his study. He had in fact forgotten it: and he seemed to derive no pleasure whatever from being reminded of it. There were much more pressing matters to think about, than the fat Owl’s fantastic story of a plot overheard behind a tree.

He had mentioned it to his friends the evening before, and they had laughed. But they were not feeling like laughing now. They were going to be stuck in Extra while the St. Jim’s match was played: and, like the old Queen, they were “not amused”. It was, in fact, a very disconsolate and disgruntled group of juniors under the old Greyfriars elms: not at all in a mood to “suffer fools gladly”. Billy Bunter, just then, had the effect of a buzzing and very irritating insect. But Bunter, never much disposed to shut up, was less disposed than ever to do so now. He knew that a crisis was at hand, if the Famous Five did not.

“You’d better have it ready, you know.” urged Bunter.

“Will you dry up ?”

“No, I won’t ! It will be wanted soon —.”

“Fathead ! Now, you chaps —.”

“I suppose you’re not going to let old Wingate be dished, after all, Harry Wharton, just because Quelch has stuck you in Extra !” exclaimed the fat Owl, indignantly.

“Don’t be a rotter, old chap !”

“— if we go to Quelch —,” went on Wharton, Unheeding.

“Can’t you keep to the point ?” yapped Bunter. “Anybody would think that no chap had ever been stuck in Extra before, the fuss you fellows make. Look here, you cut up to your study now —.”

“Some fellows keep on asking for it !” said Bob Cherry. “He won’t be happy till he gets it ! Let’s all kick him together.”

“Good egg !”

“Let’s !”

“Beast !” roared Bunter.

He departed without waiting to be kicked. But his fat brow was corrugated by a deep and indignant frown as he rolled away. Time was getting on, and if that “spooof”

telephone-call was coming, it must be coming soon. And Billy Bunter knew that it was coming, if Harry Wharton and Co. did not.

Extra for the Famous Five was a trifle light as air in comparison, in Bunter's estimation. And indeed the Co. would have thought the same, had they had any belief in Bunter's strange tale. But they hadn't ! — and Extra was the single problem that weighed on their minds.

"It's rotten !" groaned Bob Cherry. "Stuck in Extra while old Wingate is getting the goals for Greyfriars —."

"The rottenfulness is terrific !"

"Just putrid !" growled Johnny Bull. "You were a silly ass, Bob, this morning, and we were silly asses to follow your lead, and we jolly well asked for it, just as that fat ass said —."

"That doesn't help much !" sighed Frank Nugent.

"We might try it on with Quelch — !" said Harry, not very hopefully.

"Old Wingate's at the top of his form, too !" sighed Bob. "I wouldn't miss seeing him play for Greyfriars for anything in the jolly old universe. I can tell you that Wingate will get the goals !"

"Thanks !" said a laughing voice.

"Oh !" ejaculated Bob.

The juniors spun round at that voice behind them. It was Wingate of the Sixth, and evidently he had heard Bob's remark, as he came along. He was smiling.

"Thanks !" he repeated. "I'll do my best to come up to your expectations, Cherry ! Mind you cheer all those goals !"

"Wouldn't we just !" said Bob. "But we shan't have a chance, Wingate — we're stuck in Extra ! Ain't it perfectly and properly putrid ?"

"Rough luck !" said Wingate. "What have you been doing, you young sweeps ?"

"Well, nothing really," said Bob. "Only that ass, Coker, was picking up a book, and we caught him bending and — and leap-frogged —."

Wingate laughed.

"Not a very serious crime !" he remarked.

"Well, it was the form-room passage, and as it happened, Quelch came along, and — and — I — I suppose we asked for it —."

"You certainly did," said Wingate. "There's a limit, you young ass ! All the same, if you're keen to see the game this afternoon — !"

"If !" said Bob, eloquently.

"Well, look here, if you like I'll speak to Quelch, and ask him to let it stand over till Saturday, as this is St. Jim's day. I think he probably would if I put it to him."

"Oh, crumbs ! If you'd do that, Wingate — !" gasped Bob.

"I'll see what I can do," said Wingate. "I'll go in and speak to him now, and let you know."

"Oh ! Thanks !"

"The thankfulness is preposterous !"

Wingate smiled and nodded, and walked off to the House. The chums of the Remove exchanged blissful glances, and followed him.

"Ain't he a nut ?" breathed Bob Cherry. "Ain't he a prize-packet ? Ain't he the jolly old goods, and then some ? Ain't he a Briton ? Good old Wingate !"

Never had the popular captain of Greyfriars been so popular with the Famous Five. A quintette of clouded faces had brightened, like the sun coming out suddenly in a murky sky. There was little doubt that a word from old Wingate would be enough: Quelch could hardly refuse, or wish to refuse, such a request from the captain of the

school. It was, they agreed, just like old Wingate: the best fellow that had ever breathed or ever would ! In a very hopeful group, they waited on the steps while the Sixth-Form man went into the House to speak to Quelch.

They did not have to wait long. Two or three minutes later, Wingate's smiling face looked out at the doorway.

"Is it all right ?" gasped Bob.

"Quite ! You go into Extra on Saturday instead of to-day !"

"Hurrah !"

"The hurrafulness is terrific."

"Oh, what jolly luck!"

"Thanks, Wingate"

The Greyfriars captain nodded and smiled, and turned away — almost turning into Trotter, the House page, who was coming to the door.

"If you please — !" began Trotter. Apparently he had a message for the Greyfriars captain.

"What is it, Trotter ?" asked Wingate.

"You're wanted on the telephone in the 'Ead's study, sir. It's a trunk call from Belwood, sir."

"Oh ! That's from home, then," said Wingate. "Thanks, Trotter." He hurried away to take the call.

Harry Wharton caught his breath. Four other faces, which had been registering happy satisfaction, suddenly became serious. The Famous Five looked at one another, in startled silence. According to Bunter, and the document locked up in No. 1 Study, Wingate was to get a telephone-call from home just before the St. Jim's match. And — it had come ! Bunter had known !

"Good heavens !" breathed Harry Wharton. "Is it possible — ?"

It was borne in upon his mind that it was not only possible — but that it was true !

CHAPTER 33

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

DR. LOCKE'S kind old face was very grave, as George Wingate entered his study. Wingate came in with a cheerful face. A telephone-call from Belwood in Sussex could only mean a call from home: but there was nothing alarming in that, so far. Possibly the old Colonel had rung up to wish him luck in the big soccer match that day. It was not in anticipation of bad news that he came to the headmaster's study. But as he saw the grave expression on Dr. Locke's face, some of the cheerfulness faded out of his own. It came into his mind that that call from home might mean that something was wrong.

"You sent for me, sir — !" he began.

"Yes, Wingate," said the Head, gravely. "A trunk call has come through from Belwood. A man named Finn—."

"Not my father, sir ?"

"No, Wingate ! I am afraid that you must prepare yourself for bad news, my boy. From what the man says, there has been an accident —."

"Oh !" breathed Wingate.

"I sent for you at once, Wingate. Please take the call. I am looking out a train for you."

"A train ?" muttered Wingate. He saw that Dr. Locke had a time-table in his hand.

“My father — !”

He broke off, and picked up the receiver. All the bright cheerfulness had faded out of his face. There was a tremor in his voice as he spoke into the phone. Gerald Loder must have felt a pang of remorse, if he could have seen the face, suddenly strained and almost haggard, that bent over the telephone.

“Wingate speaking from Greyfriars ! Is that Finn ?”

“Yes, sir, that’s me, sir,” came a husky voice from the distance. “I’m sorry to ’ave bad news for you, sir —.”

“What is it, Finn ? What is it ? Quick ?”

“The Colonel, sir —.”

“What has happened ?” breathed Wingate.

“The car hit a lorry, sir —.”

“Good heavens !”

“Don’t you take it too bad, sir! The master’s had a ’ard knock, and they put him to bed, and the doctor’s with him now —.”

“Oh !”

“The doctor says you better come at once, sir, jest in case — but you ain’t to think it’s too bad, sir — only you better come as soon as you can —.”

“I understand,” muttered Wingate. “Can I speak to the doctor, Finn ?”

“He’s with the master, sir, and as he couldn’t leave him, in his state, sir, he told me to ring up the school, and tell you —.”

“Yes, yes, I understand. Tell him I’m coming home by the first train. I shall not lose a second.”

“Yes, sir! I’m sorry, sir —,” mumbled the husky voice. As a matter of fact, Mr. Banks, in far-off Sussex, was feeling sorry ! He was very far from enjoying the miserable task Loder had given him to perform.

“I’m coming at once.”

Wingate put up the receiver. His face was pale as he turned from the telephone. But he was keeping a cool head. The sudden blow was almost overwhelming: but he had to act now, not to give way.

He turned to the headmaster. Dr. Locke was making notes from the time-table on a slip of paper. There were trains to catch, and changes of trains, for the journey from the coast of Kent to Sussex: and the kind old Head had looked them all out, to save minutes.

“You’ll give me leave, sir ?” muttered Wingate. “I — I must get home at once — my father —.”

“You will not lose a moment, Wingate. Here are the trains. There is a train from Courtfield at two-forty-five— you have more than ample time for that. I will phone a taxi to take you to the station, while you are packing your bag. I hope and trust that you will have better news when you reach home.”

“Thank you, sir,” muttered Wingate.

He left the study, the slip of paper crumpled in his hand. His face was pale and strained as he went down the corridor. Only a few minutes ago he had been happy and carefree: the soccer match that afternoon the most important thing on his mind. And now — !

“Wingate !”

It was Loder’s voice.

Loder, his hands in his pockets, was lounging at the corner of the corridor, as Wingate came away from the Head’s study. It was not likely to occur to Wingate that Loder was waiting for him there. He gave him a hasty glance — he had no time for Loder

now.

“I can’t stop, Loder — I’m in a hurry —.”

“St. Jim’s are not here yet,” said Loder, casually.

“St. Jim’s !” repeated Wingate. “Oh ! Yes ! No ! I must speak to Gwynne about that before I go, of course — I can’t stop now Loder —.” He went on, and Loder, with a rather strange expression on his face, walked by his side.

“Did you say before you go, Wingate ?” he asked.

“Yes, yes.”

“I don’t quite catch on. You’re not going anywhere just before St. Jim’s get here for the match, surely.”

“I’m called away — bad news from home — Gwynne will have to carry on: I shall leave it to him. Leave me alone now, Loder.”

“Oh ! Sorry !” muttered Loder. “I — I hope it’s not too bad — you look rather sick — well, I — I’m sorry.”

Wingate hurried on, Loder looked after him strangely as he went. Wingate, undoubtedly, did look “sick”: the most casual glance could have seen that he had had a heavy blow. Loder had said that he was sorry: and there was some truth in it, for that look on Wingate’s honest, rugged face made him realize, much more clearly than he had done so far, the baseness of the miserable trick he had played. Gerald Loder was not feeling comfortable in his mind as he lounged away — he was feeling a rather unexpected twinge.

He had succeeded ! The wretched plot had worked like a charm ! He knew that now. Banks had put through that false telephone-call: and the Greyfriars captain had had no doubt — no suspicion ! Indeed, how could he have had ? —who could have suspected such trickery ? The scheme had worked — Wingate was hurrying off on a long journey, and the St. Jim’s match would be played in his absence: he had turned Loder out of the team, and now he was turned out himself by Loder’s cunning. It was tit for tat, a Roland for an Oliver: it was what Loder had schemed, and now he had succeeded: everything was going his way. And yet — somehow it left a bitter taste in his mouth. Loder’s face was clouded as he lounged out into the quad: he was not feeling as he had expected to feel in the hour of success.

Wingate forgot Loder’s existence, as he hurried on to the Sixth-Form studies. His mind was full of the overwhelming news, that had come like a bolt from the blue. But he had to see Gwynne — Patrick Gwynne had to carry on in his absence. He found him chatting by the passage window with Sykes, and North, Blundell and Potter, and several other members of the First Eleven, and called to him.

“Gwynne, old man.”

The whole group stared at his pale face. Gwynne ran towards him.

“Wingate ! My dear chap, what’s up ?”

“Bad news from home.” Wingate spoke as calmly as he could. “I’ve just had it on the phone — my pater in a motor-crash — I’ve got to cut. You’ll have to carry on, Gwynne.”

“My dear fellow, what rotten luck —.”

“The Head’s phoned for a taxi. I’ve got to pack a few things, and catch the two-forty-five at Courtfield — that’s the earliest train —.”

“Bags of time,” said Gwynne, glancing at his watch. “It’s a quarter past — the taxi will do it in five minutes — Brace up, old man ! I’ll come and help you pack.”

He followed Wingate into his study. The others looked at one another, with clouded faces, and went quietly away. In a few minutes more, the news was all over Greyfriars.

CHAPTER 34

AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR

HARRY WHARTON tapped at the door of Wingate's study. His tap was unheeded. He could hear a sound of voices and of movement within. And as no answer came to his tap, he opened the door.

Wingate and Gwynne were in the study. An open suitcase lay on the table, half-packed. Evidently, Wingate was preparing for a hurried departure.

The two seniors glanced round as the door opened. Gwynne waved the junior impatiently away.

"What do you want, Wharton? Clear off."

"I must speak to Wingate, Gwynne," said Harry.

"Don't bother now, kid," said Wingate. With all the stress that was on his mind and his heart, his manner was kind. "I haven't a minute to spare now — cut off!"

Wharton stepped into the study. Up to ten minutes ago he had not believed a word of Bunter's strange tale. But he simply had to believe it now. And Wingate had to know. "I must speak, Wingate," he said. "For goodness sake, let me speak! You're going home —?"

"Yes, yes! Go away now."

"You've had a telephone call —. It came from Belwood in Sussex —." persisted Wharton.

"Yes, yes! Don't bother."

"Was it about your father in a motor-crash?"

"Yes, yes, yes! Shut that door!"

"I've got to speak, Wingate! It was not a genuine call," said Harry Wharton. "It's a fake from beginning to end, Wingate."

"What?"

Wingate stared at him blankly. Gwynne gave him a glance.

"You young ass!" he roared. "What do you mean? Have you come here to bother Wingate with a lot of nonsense? What —?"

"No!" said Harry, quietly. "I've come here to tell Wingate that he has been taken in by a villain telephoning him false news. There's a fellow in the Remove who knew days ago that that call was coming. He told us, but we could not believe it. But it's true — we know that now! Wingate, I tell you that there's been no motor smash at Belwood — your father's not been hurt — it's a trick to get you away —."

"Are you mad?"

"I can prove it," said Harry. "For goodness sake listen to me, Wingate. I tell you that it was known days ago that someone would phone you just before the St. Jim's match to tell you that story —."

"Nonsense!"

"It's true," said Harry. "Bunter —."

"Bunter?" repeated Wingate, blankly.

"Yes, Bunter! He heard it fixed up —."

"Rubbish!"

"We couldn't swallow it — and you couldn't have, if he'd told you — though he did try to tell you once. Wingate, you must listen to me! Look at this letter."

Wingate and Gwynne stared at a smudged and blotted sheet of paper that the captain

of the Remove held out.

“This was written yesterday,” said Harry. “Bunter came to my study, and wrote it down there. I was to give it to you if you were called away on the telephone by a story of a motor accident to your father. I just couldn’t swallow it — but now it’s happened. Wingate, read that.”

“Impossible — !”

“Read it, old man,” said Gwynne. “If there’s anything in what the kid says —.”

“Impossible,” repeated Wingate.

“Read it !” said Harry.

Wingate took the letter, and stared at it blankly. Gwynne stared at it too. At any other time, Billy Bunter’s original style in orthography, and his impressive collection of blots, smudges, and smears, might have made them smile. But they did not smile now. Their eyes almost bulged at what they read.

Dear Wingate,

I am riting these phew lines to put you on your gard because Loder is gowing to dish you over the St. Jim’s match on Wensday and I kno because I heard it all behind a tree.

“Loder !” muttered Wingate. He recalled something of Billy Bunter’s babble on the occasion of the biscuits. He went on reading: Loder has phixed it up with that man Banks to give you a tellyfone call half an hower before kikk-off and he is gowing to tell you that your pater has been dammidged in a motor crash but it will not be troo because it is all a spoof to get you to kloor off just before the game.

Gwynne gave a prolonged whistle at that point. They went on reading: Harry Wharton standing in silence watching them.

I am riting this down on Tuseday and Wharton is gowing to lock it up in his desk and kepe it safe till he beers that you are cawled away, and then he will give it to you to reed so that you will kno.

“Good heavens !” breathed Wingate. “If it’s possible —.”

I wood have toled you myself but you wood not lissen thinking I had had the biskits in your study, also the phellows think you would not believe it but you will when you reed this letter because if it was strate how cood I kno the day before?

W. G. Bunter.

A dead silence, for a moment or two, followed the perusal of that remarkable letter. Then Gwynne whistled again.

“Wingate, old man, if that’s straight — !”

Wingate breathed very hard.

“Wharton !” he rapped.

“Yes, Wingate,” said Harry, quietly.

“You say that this letter was written in your study yesterday, Tuesday ?”

“Yes !”

“Bunter could not have known yesterday what I was going to hear on the telephone to-day, unless — unless he heard it fixed up, as he says —.”

“Just that !” said Harry. “I couldn’t believe it, but he was earnest about it, and I told him I’d lock the letter in my desk, and bring it to you if you had such a telephone-call to-day — and you have —.”

“You give me your word that this letter was written yesterday ?”

“Yes, Wingate ! It’s been locked in my desk since Bunter wrote it in my study yesterday afternoon, just before class.”

“He knew !” muttered Wingate. “Then — then that call from Belwood was a trick — my pater’s all right — good heavens ! I — I can’t believe it ! I I —.”

Gwynne caught him by the arm.

“Cut into Common Room, old man, and get through on the phone — quick ! A word to your pater at home —.”

“But — my train — !”

“Bags of time, I tell you! Anyhow, better risk losing the train, than risk flying off home on a fool’s errand. But you’ll do it all right, if you don’t lose a minute. Come on.”

Gwynne fairly dragged his chum from the study. Harry Wharton followed them as far as the door of Common Room.

Several masters were there — Prout, Capper, and Hacker. They glanced at the two Sixth-Formers, and at the junior standing in the doorway. Wingate did not heed them. He almost ran to the telephone.

He had to wait for the trunk call. Minute followed minute: and never had minutes seemed so long to the Greyfriars captain. Hope and doubt alternated: but Wharton, looking at him from the doorway, could see that hope predominated. Wingate believed — he had to believe — what was written in Bunter’s letter — for unless the fat Owl had prophetic gifts, it had to be true. But he was almost feverishly anxious to be assured. The ring came through at last. There was a shake in Wingate’s voice as he spoke into the transmitter.

“George Wingate speaking from Greyfriars — my father —.”

“Your father speaking !” came back a deep voice.

“What is it, George ?”

Wingate almost tottered.

“Your pater ?” breathed Gwynne.

“Yes ! He’s on the phone — he’s all right !”

“Oh, good !”

That was enough for Harry Wharton. He turned, and went out into the quad, to tell his friends the good news.

CHAPTER 35

THANKS TO BUNTER !

“I SAY, you fellows !”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo ! Dear old Bunter !”

“The dearfulness of old Bunter is terrific !”

“Good old porpoise !”

“Worth his weight in gold !”

“Anybody know what a ton of gold is worth ?”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

Billy Bunter blinked suspiciously at the Famous Five through his big spectacles — suspiciously and warily. He was not accustomed to such effusive greetings. In his last interview with the Co. he had narrowly escaped kicking. Now they beamed on him, as if William George Bunter was a man they delighted to honour. It was a rather startling change.

“Look here, you fellows —,” he squeaked.

“Looking !” grinned Bob Cherry. “Never been so glad to see a porpoise outside the Zoo.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“You silly ass !” roared Bunter.

The fat Owl had run the Co. down on Big Side. A swarm of fellows were gathering there, and the Famous Five were in front places. St. Jim’s had arrived, and were in the changing-room. The kick-off was almost due, and the excitement was great.

All Greyfriars had heard that Wingate had been suddenly called away, and would not be playing in the match — which was a severe jolt to all Greyfriars. But other news had followed: that there had been a mistake of some sort, and that the Greyfriars captain would after all lead his men into the field. Exactly what had happened, few knew: but everyone was deeply interested and greatly excited, and a host of eyes watched and waited anxiously for Wingate to appear. Harry Wharton and Co., at all events, knew how matters stood, and they were in great spirits. And when Billy Bunter rolled up, nobody even thought of saying “Scat !” or “Blow away, Bunter.” Probably for the first time in history, William George Bunter was popular.

Billy Bunter had saved the situation ! At the eleventh hour, as it were, Bunter had done it ! But for Bunter, George Wingate would, in those very moments, have been speeding away in a train for Sussex. Now it was “all clear” — thanks to Bunter ! Billy Bunter, for once in his fat career, was the “goods”.

So the Famous Five beamed on him. Bunter, quite unused to seeing faces beam when he appeared, was wary.

“I say, you fellows, I’ve been looking for you — !” squeaked the fat Owl.

“Glad you’ve found us !” said Harry Wharton, laughing.

“The gladfulness is preposterous !” grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “The beholdfulness of your fat and ridiculous countenance is a boonful blessing, my esteemed and idiotic Bunter.”

“Oh, really, Inky —.”

“The absurd Bunter had been the stitch in time which saves ninepence, as the English proverb remarks —.”

“Good old English proverb !” chuckled Bob.

“Look here, Wharton, is it all right ?” demanded Bunter. “I suppose you’ve heard that Wingate’s been called away — it’s all over the school —.”

“Yes, we’ve heard that one !”

“He’s had that telephone-call, just like I said. Didn’t I tell you fellows it was coming ?”

“You did !” agreed Frank Nugent.

“I wrote it all down in that letter in your study yesterday, Wharton ! Hasn’t it happened just as I said ?”

“It has, old fat man.”

“Some of the fellows are saying that Wingate isn’t cutting off after all —,” went on Bunter.

“Some of the fellows are right !” grinned Bob. “Wingate’s in the changing-room now, and he isn’t cutting off anywhere further than Big Side.”

“Then it’s all right ?” asked Bunter.

“Right as rain !”

“You gave him that letter, Wharton ?”

“I did !”

“Oh, good !” said Bunter, evidently in great relief. “As soon as Wingate saw that, he would know it was all spoo. I jolly well wasn’t going to let old Wingate be dished, you know.”

“Good old porpoise !” said Johnny Bull.

“The goodfulness of the esteemed and ridiculous old porpoise is —.”

“Terrific and preposterous !” chuckled Bob.

“Wingate’s seen that letter, old fat man,” said Harry. “And he’s been through to home on the telephone since, and found out that his pater’s all right. You’ve been jolly useful for once, Bunter. You had it right — and it’s worked.”

“You didn’t believe me !” said Bunter, accusingly. “You needn’t deny it, you fellows — you doubted my word !”

“Guilty, my lord !” said Bob.

“Perhaps you’ll believe me another time !” said Bunter, loftily.

“Perhaps !” said Johnny Bull. He seemed to doubt it !

“The perhapsfulness is terrific.”

“Beats me,” said Johnny. “Bunter was telling the truth all the time. Look here, Bunter, now you’ve started, why not keep it up ?”

“Oh, really, Bull ! I say, you fellows, Loder will feel pretty sick when he sees Wingate in the field !”

“The sicker the better !” growled Johnny.

“I’ll bet Wingate was jolly glad to see that letter !” said Bunter. “He whopped me because he fancied I had his bikkers ! But was I going to let him down ? Not me ! Kindest friend and noblest foe — that’s me !”

“Oh, my hat !”

“I’ve jolly well heaped coaly fires on his head ——.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“You can cackle,” said Bunter. “Wingate would have been properly dished, but for me ! You fellows couldn’t do a thing ! It was me from start to finish ! Alone I did it, like Brutus in Shakespeare —.”

“Like whom ?” ejaculated Nugent.

“Like Brutus, in the Merchant of Venice, you know —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Blessed if I see anything to cackle at —.”

“Wasn’t it Coriolanus ?” asked Nugent.

“No, it wasn’t ! It might have been Hamlet, but I think it was Brutus. Anyhow, alone I did it !” declared Bunter. “You fellows can’t get over that ! Wouldn’t old Wingate have been dished but for me ?”

“He would !” agreed Harry Wharton. “In fact the dishfulness would have been terrific.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“I jolly well did it !” said Bunter. “I’ll bet Wingate jumped when he saw that letter —.”

“The spelling was enough to make him jump !” agreed Harry.

“Eh ? The spelling was all right,” said Bunter, blinking at him. “I was jolly careful with that, as it was for Wingate. There were some jolly long words in that letter, and I’d bet you fellows couldn’t have spelt them as I did.”

“You’d win that bet.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“You jolly well tried to pull my leg about the spelling, when I was writing it in your study,” said Bunter, severely. “Rotten, I call it, when it was going to be read by the captain of the school. But you couldn’t take me in — making out that there was only one ‘I’ in telephone —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“And that there wasn’t an ‘i’ in ‘damaged’ — !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh, cackle,” said Bunter. “But you couldn’t take me in — I spelled that letter all right. You couldn’t spoof me. I’m pretty wide.”

“You are !” chuckled Bob

“The widefulness is terrific.”

“Widest fellow I’ve ever seen ?” said Johnny Bull. “Wider than you are long.”

“You silly asses !” hooted Bunter “When I say wide, I mean wide, not wide ! You can cackle, but you couldn’t have saved Wingate from being dished, like I did. That was me all the time ! Alone I did it, like Hamlet — I mean Julius Caesar. Did I do it or didn’t I ?”

“You did, old fat frump,” grinned Bob. “Remind me of it, next time I’m going to kick you, and I won’t.”

“And come up to the study after the game, old bean,” said Harry Wharton, laughing. “There’s going to be a feed.”

“Oh ! Good !” Billy Bunter’s face beamed. “I say, you fellows, what are you going to have ? Cake ——.”

“A big cake,” said Bob, with a chuckle. “And jam tarts ! And cream puffs ! And a bag of doughnuts. And all in your honour, old fat man. All because alone you did it, like Brutus and Hamlet and Julius Caesar and Coriolanus.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo ! There’s Loder !” murmured Bob Cherry.

The juniors looked round. Loder of the Sixth had appeared among the crowd on the football ground. He took no notice of the group of juniors: but they eyed him curiously — knowing what they now knew ! His brows were knitted, and his eyes glinting. They could guess what was in his mind, if other fellows could not. Loder, of course, must have heard that Wingate had been suddenly called away, and known that his unscrupulous scheme had succeeded. They could guess what he would feel like, when he heard that the Greyfriars captain was not going, after all. They heard him speak to Greene of the Fifth.

“What’s this about Wingate, Greene ? I — I heard that he had been called away — — a phone call from home, I believe —.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Greene. “That’s washed out.”

“I — I’ve just heard that he’s in the changing-room,” Loder tried to speak casually, without much success. “Is he playing after all ?”

“You bet he is,” said Greene.

“But — but wasn’t there — something wrong at home — I heard —.”

“So we all heard,” said Greene, with a nod. “But it turns out that there was a mistake or something — and Wingate’s playing all right.”

“Oh !” said Loder.

He said no more, and moved away. The juniors, watching him, could see the colour changing in his face. A mistake of some kind ! — Loder knew that there could have been no “mistake” — he knew that Wingate, in some inexplicable manner, must have discovered the trick that had been played. How, was an utter mystery to Loder.

Wingate had not had the slightest doubt or suspicion, when he left the Head’s study after taking that call: Loder knew that. What could have come to light since then ?

Somebody, somehow, had found out something — who that “somebody” was, Loder could not begin to guess — and certainly he did not think of a fat junior who was blinking at him through a big pair of spectacles, and grinning all over his fat face !

“I say, you fellows, does Loder look sick ?” chuckled Billy Bunter. “He, he, he !”

“The rotter !” murmured Johnny Bull.

“I don’t envy him, when Wingate has time to deal with him.” said Harry Wharton.

“Hallo, here they come ! There’s Wingate !”

“Good old Wingate !”

“Hurray !”

The players were coming into the field. And Harry Wharton and Co. forgot all about Loder, concentrating on the field of play: and even Billy Bunter, though no great soccer enthusiast, concentrated too. The Greyfriars First Eleven, in the St. Jim’s match, had the unusual honour of being watched from start to finish by a little pair of round eyes and a big pair of round spectacles.

CHAPTER 36

WINGATE’S WIN

“GOAL !”

“Good old Wingate !”

“Goal !”

It was a roar that awoke all the echoes.

“Goal !” chortled Bob Cherry. “Did I say that old Wingate would get the goals, you men ?”

“You did !” agreed Harry Wharton. “So did we all !”

“I told you so !” chuckled Johnny Bull.

Bob Cherry hurled his cap into the air, careless where it came down. Indeed at that moment he did not care whether it ever came down at all.

“I say, you fellows !” came a fat squeak.

Hundreds of eyes round the field had watched that goal — the winning goal in the game. Bunter had missed it, as he had been cramming bull’s-eyes into a capacious mouth at the psychological moment. Soccer was soccer, but bull’s-eyes were bull’s-eyes: and first things came first. Still, Bunter was interested.

“I say, you fellows, was that a goal ?” squeaked Bunter.

“Was it ?” gasped Bob.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Sort of !” chuckled Frank Nugent.

“Good old Wingate !”

“Goal ! Goal !”

It had been a great game. From start to finish it had been hard and fast. Kildare, the St. Jim’s captain, had been at the top of his form: and Darrell, and Langton, and the rest of the St. Jim’s men, had backed him up nobly.

Wingate and Co. were playing the game of their lives: but in the St. Jim’s footballers they met foemen worthy of their steel. At the interval St. Jim’s led by a goal: but early in the second half Greyfriars equalized with a goal from Potter of the Fifth: and then it was ding-dong right to the finish: a battle of the giants of which every turn was watched by countless eager eyes. The two teams were in fact so equal that it was anybody’s game — till in the last few minutes the ball went in from Wingate’s foot, and the game was won. Wingate had led his men to victory, and kicked the winning goal — Wingate, who had so narrowly escaped missing the match, and without whom, where would Greyfriars have been ? Almost every throat at Greyfriars joined in the tremendous roar that woke the echoes far and wide. Even Billy Bunter would have added a fat squeak, had not the bull’s-eyes been in the way.

“Goal ! Goal ! Goal !”

“I say, you fellows.” Billy Bunter’s voice came muffled through a barrage of bull’s-eyes. “I say — grooogh —”

“Good old Wingate !”

“Goal ! Hurray !”

“I say.” Bunter cleared the impediment. “I say, you fellows, we’ve jolly well beaten them —”

“We have — we has !” chuckled Bob Cherry. “It was a close thing, really — they know how to play soccer at St. Jim’s — but we’ve beaten them, old fat man — beaten them to the wide ! Hurray !”

“Good work all round,” said Harry Wharton. “But we win !”

“The winfulness is terrific.”

“We win all right !” chuckled Johnny Bull.

“We do — we does !” chortled Bob. “Hurray !”

It might almost have been supposed that the heroes of the Remove had played in the game themselves !

Certainly they rejoiced as much in Wingate’s victory as ever they had in their own on Little Side. All the more because the game had been hotly contested all through, it was a glorious victory for Greyfriars School. Even Billy Bunter rejoiced. Was it not all through Bunter that old Wingate had played at all ? Indeed Billy Bunter’s view was that that glorious victory was practically the work of his own fat hands.

“He, he, he !” chuckled Bunter. “I wonder what Loder’s feeling like !”

“Oh, blow Loder ! Hurray !”

“We shouldn’t have won without Wingate, you fellows—.”

“Hardly ! Hurray !”

“And Wingate jolly well wouldn’t have played, but for me ! It was me all the time —!”

“So it was, old fat man !” chuckled Bob. “Come to my arms, my beamish boy !”

“You silly ass — ow — wow ! Leggo !” roared Bunter, as the exuberant Bob grasped him, and waltzed him round. “Wow ! Leggo, you silly idiot !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Grooogh ! Will you leggo ?” shrieked Bunter, as he whirled. “You’ll make my specs fall off — I’m out of breath — urrrggh — leggo — woogh !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Gooogh ! Leggo ! You’ll bump me into somebody — Yaroooh !” yelled Bunter, as he bumped.

“Here, look out !” howled Vernon-Smith, as he staggered. “Keep that porpoise to yourself.”

“Oh, crikey ! Wow !” gasped Bunter. He sat on the earth and spluttered. “You mad ass — wow ! You silly idiot — yow-ow ! You — you — you — grooogh !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Give old Wingate another yell !” chuckled Bob. “Hurray !”

“Grooogh — oooh — oooh !”

“Hurray !”

The Famous Five made their voices heard, in the roar of cheering that followed the footballers off the field — what time Billy Bunter sat and spluttered for his second wind. But in the cheering swarm of Greyfriars men, there was one whose face was dark and bitter as he tramped away. Loder of the Sixth had watched the match, till the winning goal was kicked by the fellow against whom his wretched plot had so unexpectedly and inexplicably failed. He tramped away to the House with deep feelings, stamped into his study, and slammed the door after him.

While the rest of Greyfriars bubbled with excitement and happy satisfaction, Gerald Loder remained alone in his study, with gloomy thoughts for company. Somehow, he could not imagine how, the whole thing had gone wrong. Everything had been successful almost up to the last minute: and then, in some mysterious way, the whole thing had fallen to pieces like a house of cards. Something, somehow, had happened: and he was not likely to guess that it was a brain-wave on the part of an inconsiderable junior in the Remove whose existence he hardly remembered. But he was, at least, safe: nobody would ever suspect the part he had played ! He sat moodily meditating in his study, long after the St. Jim's footballers were gone: and that comforting thought was in his mind, when a tap came at his door. He glared at the door: he was in no mood for visitors. It opened and Wingate of the Sixth came in.

Loder stared at him. Why Wingate had come, he could not begin to guess: but he felt an uneasy twinge. Yet Wingate could know nothing — suspect nothing ! The Greyfriars captain shut the door behind him, and stood looking at Loder. There was a grim expression on his face.

“Well?” Loder sneered. “Have you torn yourself away from the general rejoicings, to pay me a visit, Wingate?”

“Yes! I've something to say to you!” said Wingate, quietly. “You know about the spoof telephone-call that very nearly caused me to cut the St. Jim's match.”

“I know what you told me — that's all!” muttered Loder.

“I think you know more than that, Loder,” said Wingate, in the same quiet tone. “Did you fix it up with Joe Banks to put that call through?”

Loder gave a violent start. His eyes almost bulged at the Greyfriars captain. How could Wingate know anything about Banks?”

“I see that that's hit the mark,” said Wingate, contemptuously. “I'll save you the trouble of lying, Loder — you were heard, that day in Friardale Wood, fixing it up with Banks — and luckily the fellow who heard you warned me in time. Do you deny it?”

“Of — of course I do!” Loder stammered, haltingly. I — I know nothing about it — nothing ——.”

“You stick to that?”

“Yes!” breathed Loder.

“Very well! Come with me to the Head now,” said Wingate. “If you deny it, Dr. Locke is the man to investigate: and you're the man who's going to be kicked out of Greyfriars for playing the dirtiest trick I've ever heard of. Come!”

Loder did not stir.

“I'm not anxious for the school to be disgraced by the story of what you've done,” went on Wingate, with a scorn in his voice that brought a flush of colour to Loder's pale face. “If you own up, I shall deal with you myself — if you persist in lying, the Head will inquire — and you must know what that means. Take your choice!”

Loder sat quite still, looking at him. His brain was in a whirl. Wingate knew — somebody else knew — and if it went before the Head — he trembled at that thought. He would not have expected Wingate, if he learned the truth, to give him a chance — but Wingate was giving him a chance. Inquiry, since they knew so much, could only elicit the facts: he had to jump at that chance, while it was offered, like a drowning man clutching at a plank.

“Well?” rapped Wingate.

“I — I — I — !” Loder could hardly utter the words.

“Do you admit it or not?”

“I — I — Yes !” breathed Loder, almost inaudibly.

“You worm !” said Wingate. His look, and tone, stung the wretched defeated schemer like a whip-lash. “I shall say nothing, then — and I’ll keep the juniors who know from saying anything, so far as I can — it’s not the kind of story I want talked up and down the school. You won’t go to the Head — you’ll answer to me. You’ll come with me now, Loder — as far as Friardale Wood. Nobody will see us there.”

Loder licked his dry lips.

“What for ?” he muttered.

“I’m going to thrash you, you rat ! That’s what for.”

“I — I won’t —.”

“Either that or you’ll go to the Head !”

“I — I’ll come.”

Wingate and Loder were missing for the next hour: or rather, Wingate was missed, and fellows wondered where he was: nobody thought of missing Loder. When the Greyfriars captain was seen again, there were certain signs visible, which seemed to indicate that he had been scrapping — if the captain of the school could have been supposed to scrap like a junior in the Remove or the Fourth ! When Loder was seen again, fellows stared at him: and Walker asked him whether he had stopped a lorry with his face — without receiving an answer. Loder almost crawled into his study and was not seen again that evening.

But if the sportsman of the Sixth was not enjoying life, everybody else seemed to be. Most joyful of all was a fat junior whose little round eyes beamed through big round spectacles at the feast that was spread in No. 1 Study in the Remove.

The St. Jim’s match had been played and won: and if it was Wingate of the Sixth who had kicked the winning goal, it was William George Bunter of the Remove who had enabled him so to do. And Harry Wharton and Co. showed their appreciation in a way that Bunter could appreciate: and it was a happy, shiny, and sticky fat Owl that travelled through cake, and jam tarts, and cream puffs, and doughnuts, and left hardly a plum or a crumb.

CHAPTER 37

NOT A WHOPPING !

“BUNTER !”

Oh, go and eat coke.”

“You’re wanted —.”

“Rats !”

“Wingate — !”

“Oh, crikey !”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo ! What have you been up to now, Bunter ?”

“Nothing ! If Coker says I’ve been in his study —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

It was the following day, after class.

Greyfriars fellows were still talking about the St. Jim’s match. Harry Wharton and Co., and Peter Todd, and Vernon-Smith, and Tom Brown and Squiff, and other Remove men, were in a chatting group on the Remove landing, playing the match over again, as it were.

Billy Bunter was there — but his interest in the previous day's glorious victory was at a low ebb. Bunter was not thinking of soccer. Another matter, nearer his fat heart, occupied his thoughts.

Owing, perhaps, to some delay in the post, or perhaps to some other reason, the postal order he was expecting had not arrived. It was near tea time. A magnificent feed, the previous day, had followed the victory of the Greyfriars footballers. Billy Bunter would have liked more of the same. But more of the same was not available. But considering that, only the day before, he had been a fellow whom the Famous Five delighted to honour, it seemed to Bunter that one of the Co., at least, might lend him a humble hall-crown to tide him over till his postal order came.

So there was Bunter, trying to make his fat squeak heard amid the hubbub of "soccer jaw," when Nugent minor of the Second Form came up the stairs, with the announcement that Bunter was wanted in Wingate's study.

Which was not exhilarating news to W. G. Bunter. He had not been in Wingate's study since the affair of the biscuits. Neither did he want to visit that apartment again. There were too many sins in his fat conscience for Bunter to be eager for an interview with the head prefect.

"I — I — I say, what does Wingate want me for, young Nugent?" he asked.

"Oh, I expect it's a licking," answered Dicky Nugent, cheerfully. "What does a pre. generally want a man for?"

Oh, lor'!"

Dicky Nugent went down the stairs again. Billy Bunter blinked dolefully at the group of Remove fellows. He forgot even the postal order that hadn't come, and the problem of raising the wind.

"I — I — I say, you fellows, think Coker has told Wingate about that pie?" he mumbled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" yapped Bunter. "I expect it was Potter or Greene had that pie. I never touched it! I never even knew that Coker had a pie."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I — I wonder if Temple's missed those chocs. Think he'd tell Wingate, if he fancied I'd been in his study?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cackle!" hooted Bunter. "You wouldn't cackle if you were going to Wingate's study to get six on the bags! After all I've done for him, too! Talk about a toothless serpent —."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'd better not keep Wingate waiting, old fat man," advised Bob Cherry. "Pre's don't like to be kept waiting! Better cut off."

"Oh, crikey!"

Billy Bunter realized that he had better cut off. He rolled away dismally down the stairs: the Remove fellows, with a heartless disregard for Bunter's probable fate in the captain's study, resuming soccer "jaw." The fattest face at Greyfriars School was dismal and doleful, as the Owl of the Remove arrived at Wingate's study in the Sixth. Bunter blinked into that study through his big spectacles. He hesitated in the doorway. He was feeling rather like Daniel at the entrance of the lion's den: and Bunter was not a fellow who dared to be a Daniel!

Wingate glanced at him.

"Oh, Bunter!" he said. "I sent for you! Come in."

“I — I say, Wingate —,” Bunter stammered from the doorway. “It — it’s all a mistake —.”

“If Coker says I had his pie —.”

“What ?”

“I never had it, Wingate ! I haven’t been near his study. Coker might think I’d been there, just because he saw me coming out —.”

“You young ass ! Do you think I’ve sent for you about a pie ?” exclaimed Wingate, staring at the fat Owl.

“Oh ! If it’s the chocs —.”

“The chocs ?”

“I expect Temple ate them, and forgot all about it —.”

“You’d better say no more, I think, or I shall have to whop you, Bunter,” said Wingate, laughing.

“Oh !” A fat face brightened. “Isn’t it a whopping. Wingate ?”

“No, you young ass ! Come in.”

Bunter rolled in quite cheerfully. If it was not a whopping, he could only wonder what it was. Anyhow, as it wasn’t a whopping, it was all right !

“I owe you something for putting me wise yesterday, Bunter,” said Wingate. “And I’ve got something for you.”

“Oh !” said Bunter. He began to understand.

Wingate stepped to the study cupboard. He lifted therefrom a parcel — quite a large parcel. It was wrapped: but even through the wrappings an aromatic scent exuded. Billy Bunter’s eyes glistened behind his spectacles. He knew what was in that parcel. It was a cake — almost the biggest cake that the fat Owl had ever seen. He realized now why he had been sent for to the captain’s study. It was not a whopping — it was far from that ! He was going to be rewarded for his eminent services. And the reward was in a shape that went straight to his fat heart.

Billy Bunter beamed.

Wingate smiled.

“There you are, Bunter —— !”

“Oh !” gasped Bunter.

“It’s a cake ! You like cake, I think !”

“Oh ! Yes ! What-ho !” chirruped Bunter.

“And thanks !” added Wingate. “Now you can cut !”

Billy Bunter cut — with the cake. His fat face, which had been so disconsolate when he arrived, beamed like the sun at noonday as he departed.

It was a tremendous cake ! It was stacked with plums, and had marzipan on top ! It was a thing of beauty, and a joy for ever — or, at all events, a joy so long as it lasted ! And so long as it lasted, life, for William George Bunter, was one grand sweet song !

THE END