

BILLY BUNTER AFLOAT

By
FRANK RICHARDS

*Illustrated by
C.H Chapman*



BUNTER UTTERED A SERIES OF PAINFUL SQUEAKS

CHAPTER 1 BUNTER'S HAMPER?

'I SAY, YOU fellows!'

Nobody heeded Billy Bunter's fat squeak. Nobody gave him a glance.

He stood in the doorway of No. 1 Study in the Remove, and blinked into that study through his big spectacles at five fellows, not one of whom revealed the smallest spot of interest in his fat existence.

Harry Wharton and Co. were all busily occupied. Their occupation was rather a peculiar one. They were all going through their pockets, as if in search of something very elusive. Whatever it was they were seeking, it did not seem to materialise, for after much industrious rummaging and groping, ten hands reappeared with nothing in them.

'Nix,' said Bob Cherry, sadly.

'Nix,' said Johnny Bull, like an echo.

'Nix,' said Frank Nugent, like another echo.

'The nixfulness is terrific!' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head.

Harry Wharton laughed.

'Same here,' he said. 'We seem to have struck a stony patch all round. And we're late for tea in hall.'

'Not even doorsteps and dishwater,' sighed Bob Cherry. 'And a fellow gets an appetite, pulling on the river.'

'A fellow does, and no mistake!' agreed Harry Wharton. 'The tuck-shop's still open, if we had any tin—.'

'I say, you fellows!' squeaked Bunter, again. Still he was not heeded.

Five fellows had come in hungry after a pull on the Sark. They had come in too late for tea in hall. The study cupboard, like Mother Hubbard's, was bare. And they had made the painful discovery that every member of the Co. was in the sad and sorrowful state known as 'stony'. Hope springs eternal in the human breast: and very one of them had made a careful search of pockets in quest of coins that might—improbably—have been overlooked. And not a single, solitary coin of the realm had come to light. In such circumstances, they were not likely to be interested in fat squeaks from a fat Owl.

'Might scrounge something along the passage,' suggested Bob Cherry. 'Smithy's always got lots—.'

'Or old Mauly—,' said Nugent.

'I say, you fellows, I'm speaking to you!' howled Billy Bunter. 'Can't you listen to a chap for a minute?'

'Oh, buzz off, bluebottle!' said Bob Cherry, taking note of the fat Owl's existence at last.

'Nothing to eat here.'

'You've come to the wrong shop for tea, old fat man,' said Harry Wharton, laughing.

'Try another study before it's too late.'

'Think I've come here to tea?' hooted Bunter, indignantly.

'Haven't you?'

‘No, I jolly well haven’t! Fat lot of good it would be, when you’re all stony,’ snorted Bunter. ‘I came up to ask you fellows—.’

‘Speech taken as read!’ interrupted Bob Cherry. ‘We don’t want to hear anything about the holidays, old fat man.’

‘Tain’t about the hols,’ hooted Bunter. ‘I came up to ask you fellows—.’

‘Nothing doing!’ Bob interrupted again. ‘We’re all as stony as the Sahara—.’

‘Tain’t that either!’ yelled Bunter. ‘I came up here to ask you fellows to a spread!’

‘What?’

The Famous Five uttered that ejaculation all at once. They stared at Billy Bunter. It is the unexpected that often happens: but this was altogether too unexpected. Certainly, an invitation to a ‘spread’ was a windfall to five hungry and stony juniors: but from Billy Bunter it came as a surprise. When Billy Bunter was in possession of edibles, those edibles generally disappeared inside Billy Bunter at record speed.

If Billy Bunter had arrived in No. 1 Study to ask himself to tea it would not have been surprising. If he had arrived to discuss the ‘hols’ it would not have come as a surprise: for Greyfriars School was shortly to break up for the summer holidays, and Bunter’s plans for the ‘hols’ were as yet in a fluid state. But it appeared that neither of these reasons had brought the fat Owl of the Remove to Harry Wharton’s study. He had, it seemed, arrived to ask five hungry fellows to a ‘spread’: and that was not only surprising: it was amazing. The Famous Five could hardly believe their ears.

They had to believe their ears: but they did not quite believe Bunter!

‘Gammon!’ said Johnny Bull, after an astonished pause. ‘I say, you fellows—.’

‘The gammonfulness is terrific,’ remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. ‘We had betterfully go along to the esteemed Mauly’s study—.’

‘Like five jolly old lions seeking what they may devour,’ said Bob Cherry. ‘Come on! Roll out of the way, Bunter.’

Billy Bunter did not roll out of the way. His ample form blocked the doorway, and he blinked indignantly at five doubting Thomases.

‘I say, you fellows, I’m asking you to a spread!’ he squeaked. ‘Wouldn’t you like a jolly good spread, when you’ve missed tea?’

‘Oh, no end,’ said Bob Cherry. ‘Where is it? Got it in your waistcoat pocket?’

‘If you fellows will carry up the hamper—.’

‘The what?’

‘The hamper! It’s down in the lobby,’ explained Bunter. ‘It’s too heavy for me. But if you fellows will carry it up, we’ll whack it out all round.’

‘Oh, my hat!’ said Bob, blankly.

‘And I think you fellows might at least say “Thank you”, when a fellow asks you to whack out a hamper from home,’ added Bunter, warmly. ‘I take all the trouble to fag up the stairs to tell you fellows my hamper’s come, and all you can say is—.’

‘Gammon!’ said Johnny Bull.

‘Oh, really, Bull—.’

‘Dash it all, I suppose Bunter knows whether he’s had a hamper or not, Johnny,’ said Bob Cherry, ‘and if he’s going to whack it out, it’s jolly decent.’

Grunt, from Johnny Bull. He did not, apparently, believe in that hamper. Certainly Bunter’s statements, as a rule, were not very reliable. Indeed, it was said in the Remove that if Bunter remarked that it was raining, a fellow had to look out of the window before

he believed him! But really it was improbable that even the unveracious Owl had rolled into No. 1 Study with a statement that could be proved or disproved by stepping down to the lobby, unless that statement was, for once, founded on fact.

‘Well, if you mean it, Bunter—,’ said Harry Wharton.

‘Of course I mean it,’ yapped Bunter. ‘You fellows make out that I butt in at other fellows’ spreads, and never stand one—.’

‘No making out about it!’ said Johnny Bull. ‘You do — and you don’t!’

‘Well, now I’m standing one, if you fellows will carry up the hamper,’ said Bunter.

‘Perhaps you’ll believe it when you see it, Bull.’

Another grunt from Johnny, indicating that he mightn’t believe it, even then!

‘Well, who’s going to carry up that hamper?’ asked Bunter.

‘Little me!’ said Bob Cherry. ‘I’ll cut down for it now.’

‘If it’s there!’ said Johnny Bull, still sceptical.

‘If it isn’t there, I’ll boot Bunter all over the studies when I come up!’ said Bob: and he circumnavigated the fat Owl in the doorway, and departed.

Three members of the Co. waited hopefully, and one member doubtfully, for his return with the hamper. But they had not long to wait. There was a heavy tramp in the passage, and Bob Cherry reappeared: heavy-laden. Three faces brightened, and one stared blankly, as he dumped down a hamper on the well-worn carpet in No. 1 Study. Billy Bunter grinned.

‘There you are!’ said Bob, a little breathlessly.

‘Sure it’s Bunter’s?’ asked Johnny Bull: really like a fellow clinging to straws.

‘Look at the label!’ answered Bob.

Johnny looked at the label tied on the hamper. It was addressed in capital letters: and undoubtedly it was addressed to W. G. Bunter, at Greyfriars School, near Courtfield, Kent. Johnny looked at it, stared at it, stared at it harder, and continued to stare at it, as if he doubted whether seeing was believing after all!

‘I say, you fellows, get it open!’ chirruped Billy Bunter.

The juniors were not long in getting that hamper open. Faces which had already brightened, brightened still more at a view of the contents. It was quite a large hamper, and it was packed, in fact crammed, with excellent things. Bob lifted out a cold chicken: Nugent a bundle of ham: Hurree Singh a large cake: Harry Wharton a pie: while Billy Bunter gathered up oranges and apples and bananas with both fat hands—Johnny Bull still staring blankly.

‘I say you fellows, ain’t it prime!’ chirruped Bunter. ‘The primefulness is terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter.’

‘Topping!’ said Nugent.

‘Good for the old folks at home!’ said Bob Cherry.

‘By gum, this is just like one of the hampers that Coker gets from his Aunt Judy.

Gentlemen, chaps, and fatheads, it was just luck that we missed tea—this is going to be a feast of the gods!’

It was quite a joyous party in No. 1 Study. Billy Bunter, for once, amazing to relate, the founder of the feast, beamed. Four other faces beamed: even Johnny Bull’s sceptical visage began to beam a little. Everybody was hungry, and there was more than enough for everybody: and it was all of the very best: and there was going to be, as Bob

expressed it, a feast of the gods! But—
Unluckily, there was a ‘but’!

CHAPTER 2 OR COKER’S ?

‘THROUGH?’ asked Potter.

‘Finished?’ inquired Greene.

Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form at Greyfriars, did not take the trouble to answer those questions.

Really, they hardly needed an answer. Potter and Greene, coming into the study, could see for themselves that Coker was neither ‘through’ nor ‘finished’. Had Coker been through or finished, Coker would not have been still sitting at the study table, pen in hand, Virgil propped open before him, wearily and drearily transcribing line after line of the *Æneid*.

Coker, heedless of superfluous questions, slogged on at his lines. Potter and Greene stood looking at his bent head, with expressive expressions.

No doubt they sympathized with Coker, who had two hundred lines to write for his form-master, Prout. But their looks, at the moment, did not express sympathy. Their looks expressed impatience and irritation.

Coker was a slow worker. Any other fellow in the Greyfriars Fifth would have finished that impot, and taken it down to Prout before tea. Long after teatime, Coker was still slogging at it. The bell had passed him unheeded, —not that Coker would have heeded the bell in any case, for Coker seldom or never joined the scramble in hall. Coker’s study was like unto a land flowing with milk and honey: and he disdained the commons in hall. Which really was the reason why Potter and Greene were anxious for him to get through and finished: for they were more than ready for tea in the study, and Coker had to get through and finished first.

Potter and Greene had looked in again and again, hoping to find that Coker was through. Now, at length, they came in, feeling that they had waited quite long enough for Horace Coker to complete the collection of scrawls and smudges he was doing for Prout.

‘Much more?’ asked Potter.

No reply from Coker.

‘What about leaving the rest till after tea?’ asked Greene. At that Coker looked up.

‘Did Prout say teatime for these lines?’ he asked. ‘Did you hear him, or didn’t you?’

‘Oh! Yes! But—.’

‘I’m late with them already. Like him to double them, and give me four hundred of this tosh to do?’

‘Oh! No! But—.’

‘Shut up, then,’ said Coker.

After which brief interlude, Horace Coker resumed slogging at lines, and Potter and Greene resumed contemplating his bent head expressively.

‘Well, look here, we’re jolly late for tea,’ said Potter, restively. ‘Mind if we have some of the table? You don’t want it all to write lines.’

‘Don’t mess about with the table,’ snapped Coker. ‘Don’t shift that inkpot. Leave those papers alone. For goodness sake, keep quiet, when a fellow’s swotting at lines.’

‘But I say—!’

‘I said keep quiet!’ snapped Coker.

Horace Coker spoke as one having authority, saying ‘Do this!’ and he doeth it. That was one of Horace Coker’s little ways. Only the circumstance that Potter and Greene looked to Coker for tea in the study, saved him from having his head jammed down, hard, on those lines for Prout.

Coker often had narrow escapes without knowing it. On this occasion his escape was very narrow indeed: for Potter and Greene were hungry and annoyed, and growing hungrier and more annoyed every minute. However, though they regarded the top of Coker’s head with almost ferocious looks, they refrained from jamming it down on the table.

Coker condescended to look up at last.

‘I’m nearly through,’ he announced. ‘You fellows ready for tea?’

‘Are we!’ sighed Greene, almost pathetically.

‘Well, instead of hanging about the study doing nothing, I think you might fetch up my hamper while I’m finishing my lines.’

‘Oh! Is there a hamper?’ asked Potter, and his brow cleared. Greene’s cleared at the same moment. If Horace Coker had a hamper—one of those well-packed, gorgeous hampers from his Aunt Judy—Potter and Greene were prepared to banish all desire to jam his head on the table, and indeed to love him as a brother. They knew those hampers.

‘Where is it?’ asked Greene.

‘Gosling’s put it in the lobby,’ answered Coker. ‘If you two aren’t too busy loafing about the study doing nothing —,’ added Coker, sarcastically.

‘We’d have brought it up if you’d told us—.’

‘Don’t jaw while I’m finishing my lines.’ Coker was slogging again. ‘For goodness sake, let a fellow get through. *Nam si vestra manus violasset dona Minervae.*’

‘Come on, Greeney,’ said Potter.

They left Coker to slog. He slogged on wearily, the expression on his rugged face indicating that Virgil’s deathless verse had no appeal for him whatsoever. He was on the 200th line of the Second Book of the *Æneid*, when Potter and Greene came back—empty-handed.

‘—improvida pectora turbat—!’ Coker scrawled it off, dashed down his pen, grabbed up the *Æneid*, and hurled it into a corner of the study with a crash, and rose from the table.

‘That’s done! You fellows, get the hamper unpacked, while I take this tosh down to Prout. Why—what—why haven’t you brought it up?’

‘Only because it isn’t there,’ said Potter, tartly.

‘Don’t be an ass, Potter.’

‘There’s no hamper in the lobby,’ said Greene.

‘Don’t be a fathead, Greene.’

‘I tell you—,’ hooted Potter.

‘It’s no use telling me that my hamper isn’t in the lobby, when Gosling put it there,’ hooted back Coker. ‘Are you fellows blind as well as silly? Look here, I want my tea, if you fellows don’t. Go and get that hamper while I take my lines to Prout.’

‘There isn’t any hamper—.’

‘We’ve looked—.’

‘Oh, don’t talk rot,’ yapped Coker. ‘Think I don’t know whether there’s a hamper or not,

when I tipped Gosling a bob for shoving it in the lobby? Perhaps it's walked away!' said Coker, sarcastically. 'Or perhaps it's taken unto itself wings and flown away. Think that's likely?'

'There isn't any hamper—.'

'Not a sign of one—.'

'Oh, pack it up,' snapped Coker. He gathered up his lines. 'I've got to take this to Prout, or he'll be shirty:

then I'll come with you to the lobby, and point it out to you, if you're too blind and silly to see a hamper nearly a yard high.'

With that, and a snort in addition, Horace Coker stalked out of the study with his lines.

Potter and Greene exchanged a glance, breathed very hard, and followed him.

They followed him to Masters' Studies, where the lines were duly delivered to Mr. Prout, and waited for him at Prout's door. Then they followed him to the lobby, Coker stalking ahead, impatient and angry with fellows who couldn't see a hamper nearly a yard high.

Coker stalked into the lobby, fully expecting that hamper to be on view, and ready to pour scorn on fellows whose careless eyes had somehow missed it. Then, as the poet has expressed it, a change came o'er the spirit of his dream. He stared round the lobby quite blankly. He knew that the hamper was there. He had tipped Gosling, when the old Greyfriars' porter had landed it there. So it was there—it had to be there. Only—it wasn't there! Nothing even remotely resembling a hamper met Coker's eyes, as he stared round.

'Well!' said Potter.

'Just point it out, Coker,' said Greene.

'It's gone!' said Coker. 'Hallo, what's this?' He pounced upon a thin cardboard strip in a corner, and held it up. It was a luggage label, and it was addressed in Miss Judith Coker's hand, to H. J. Coker at Greyfriars School. 'Look! That's the label. Somebody's taken it off the hamper, and chucked it in that corner. But—where's the hamper?'

Potter and Greene stared at the label. Evidently it had once been attached to Coker's hamper. But where was the hamper? There was not the ghost of a hamper to be seen. Like the Cheshire Cat in Wonderland, that vanished leaving only its grin behind, Coker's hamper had vanished, leaving only its label behind.

'Blessed if I make this out!' said Coker. His rugged brow grew wrathful. 'Somebody's taken that label off, and walked off with the hamper. My hamper! Who's walked off with my hamper?'

Coker glared at Potter and Greene, as he asked that question, as if he expected them to know. But they could only shake their heads.

'Walked off my hamper!' Coker's voice was sulphurous. 'Hooked off the label, and walked it off! Why, I—I—I'll pulverize him—I'll spiflicate him—I—I—I'll—.' Words seemed to fail Coker.

'Who the dickens—!' said Potter.

'I'll jolly well find out, and spiflicate him!' gasped Coker. 'Come on—we've got to find that hamper.'

'I say, the tuck-shop isn't closed yet,' said Greene. 'What about teeing at the tuck-shop, Coker, and looking for the hamper after tea?'

'Jolly good idea, Coker, what?' asked Potter.

Coker gave them a glare.

'I'm going to find that hamper if I have to go over all Greyfriars with a small comb,' he

hooted. 'Never mind tea—come on!'

'But I say—.'

'Look here, Coker—.'

Coker passed those remarks by like the idle wind which he regarded not. He stalked out of the lobby, breathing wrath. This time Potter and Greene did not follow on. Coker had said, 'Never mind tea!' but in point of fact his friends did mind it—they minded it considerably. Hunting for a hamper did not appeal to them so much as tea at the school shop. They left the lobby by the door on the quad, and headed for Mrs. Mimble's establishment, leaving Horace Coker to hunt for that hamper, with or without the aid of a small comb, as long as he liked.

3

UNFINISHED !

'ABOUT THE HOLS, you fellows.'

'Hem!'

'Um!'

'Pass the jam this way.'

'This is a jolly good cake.'

'I say, you fellows, about the hols—.'

It was a little awkward for the Famous Five. Just before break-up at Greyfriars School, nobody really wanted to hear anything from Billy Bunter on the subject of the holidays. Remove fellows were asking one another for the hols: but nobody, so far, had displayed any desire for the fascinating company of William George Bunter. All over the form, fellows were making arrangements about the hols: but the fattest member of the form was not included in any of those arrangements. Bunter, naturally, wanted to get 'fixed up' for the hols: but the general idea seemed to be to leave him in an unfixed state.

Bunter did not really need asking for the hols. He was prepared to ask himself. All Bunter wanted was to get 'fixed up'. All Harry Wharton and Co. wanted was to leave him still unfixed. But it was a little awkward, sitting round the table in No. 1 Study, enjoying a tremendous spread, with Billy Bunter the unexpected founder of the feast.

It was undoubtedly a gorgeous spread. Five fellows were hungry, and had seldom been hungrier: and the table groaned, as a novelist would say, under the goodly viands. Often as Bunter had talked of the wealth and plenty that reigned at Bunter Court, no such hamper had ever arrived at Greyfriars before for Bunter. Even Smithy never had a consignment like this. In fact the only fellow at Greyfriars who ever had such hampers was Coker, of the Fifth Form, whose affectionate Aunt Judy firmly believed that nothing could be too good or too ample for her beloved Horace. For once, No. 1 Study in the Remove was as amply supplied as Coker's study in the Fifth: and it was Billy Bunter who was the open-handed and generous provider.

In such circumstances, the Famous Five would have preferred to steer clear of the subject of the 'hols'. But Bunter, having eaten enough for three or four fellows, had taken the keen edge off his appetite, and had leisure for conversation.

'About the hols, you fellows,' he began again.

'Oh! Yes! Try the meringues, Bunter,' suggested Bob Cherry. 'They're jolly good.'

'Shove 'em this way,' said Bunter.

There was a brief respite, while Bunter polished off a bag of meringues. But it was only a respite.

‘I say, you fellows, we’ll stick together for the hols, what?’ said Bunter, breezily.

‘Oh! Ah! Um!’

‘I should rather miss you chaps, if I didn’t see you again till next term. After all, we’re pals, aren’t we?’

‘Ah! Um! Oh!’

‘Going home, or going places?’ asked Bunter. ‘I heard you saying something the other day about a trip on the Thames in the hols. Is that the idea?’

Grunt, from Johnny Bull.

‘Is there anything you don’t hear, Bunter?’ he inquired.

‘Oh, really, Bull—.’

Harry Wharton interrupted hastily.

‘It’s not settled yet,’ he said. ‘We don’t know whether the cash would run to it. It’s pretty expensive to hire a boat for weeks on the river. We shall have to think that out.’

‘The thoughtfulness will probably be terrific,’ remarked Hurree Janset Ram Singh. ‘The tripfulness would be joyful, but the cashfulness is a boot on the other leg.’

‘I’ve heard that Coker is going up the river these hols,’ said Bunter.

Johnny Bull opened his lips: perhaps to inquire again whether there was anything that Bunter didn’t hear. However, this time he closed them with the question unuttered.

‘Old Coker can do these things,’ said Bob.

‘I expect his Aunt Judy will foot the bill,’ said Bunter.

‘Lucky bargee!’ said Bob. ‘I’ve got two or three uncles I’d swop for Coker’s Aunt Judy.’

‘Well, look here, let’s fix it up,’ said Bunter. ‘It’ll be a topping trip on the river, and I’ll tell Mauly I can’t come home with him. I’d really rather do the Thames with you fellows.’

At which there was a general grin round the table in No. 1 Study. The Co. had seen Lord Mauleverer, who hated saying ‘No’, even to a pertinacious fat Owl, dodge round corners when he saw Bunter coming. So they did not think it would be very necessary for Bunter to tell Mauly that he wouldn’t be coming home with him!

‘It’ll be jolly,’ went on Bunter. ‘We’ll fix it up for a boat to be ready for us at Richmond, or Sunbury, or Cookham, or somewhere—what? Better take a tent, for camping: and we shall want a pretty roomy boat, for the six of us. You fellows can take it in turns to tow the boat, and wash, and that. Mind, we shall have to take plenty of grub. That’s important. Let’s fix it up now, Harry, old chap.’

It was an awkward moment for Harry old chap. But at that moment, there came an interruption. Herbert Vernon Smith looked into the study: and, having looked, he burst into a laugh. The Co. stared round at him.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo! What’s the jolly old joke, Smithy?’ asked Bob.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ roared the Bounder.

‘What the dickens—?’ exclaimed Harry Wharton.

‘Ha, ha, ha! I looked in to ask you fellows if you’d heard anything about a missing hamper! Ha, ha, ha! I needn’t ask you now.’

‘A whatter?’ ejaculated Bob.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ Smithy fairly yelled. ‘You fellows had it! Are you picking up Bunter’s manners and customs? Look out for Coker!’

‘Coker!’ repeated Frank Nugent, blankly. ‘What about Coker?’

‘Ha, ha, ha! Old Coker’s going up and down and round about hunting for his hamper. He’s describing it to every fellow he meets. Ha, ha, ha!’ Smithy pointed to the open hamper. ‘That hamper sort of seems to fit the description. Look out for Coker! He’s on the jolly old war-path!’

And the Bounder, still laughing, walked on up the passage. He left a dead silence behind him in No.1 Study. Harry Wharton and Co. looked at one another. Then they looked at Billy Bunter.

‘I—I say, you fellows, shut the door,’ gasped Bunter. ‘Why?’ asked Harry Wharton.

‘Well, suppose Coker looked in—.’

‘Why shouldn’t he look in?’

‘Well, if he saw that hamper, he might think it was his —.’ stammered Bunter. ‘I—I—I mean to say, hampers are much alike, you know, and—and Coker might think it was his, if—if—if he’s lost one—.’

‘You fat, footling, fozzling, frumptious fraud—’

‘Oh, really, Wharton—!’

‘Is that Coker’s hamper?’ roared the captain of the Remove.

‘Eh? No! Of—of course not! The—the pater sent it specially from Bunter Court—tain’t Coker’s—.’

Snort from Johnny Bull.

‘Bunter’s had a hamper—and Coker’s missed one!’ he said. ‘We might jolly well have guessed—.’

‘Oh, really, Bull—!’

‘But it was addressed to Bunter!’ exclaimed Bob Cherry. ‘There’s the label on the lid now—it’s Bunter’s all right— think I’d have walked it up here if I hadn’t seen Bunter’s name on it—?’

‘Of—of course it’s mine,’ gasped Bunter. ‘I think you might be civil about it, Bull, when I’m whacking out that hamper in this study. I say, do give that door a shove, Cherry! If Coker looked in—.’

‘It’s Coker’s!’ growled Johnny Bull.

‘Tain’t!’ yelled Bunter. ‘I tell you it came from my uncle only this morning—.’

‘Your uncle as well as your pater?’ snorted Johnny.

‘I—I mean my pater. How could it be Coker’s, when it’s addressed to me?’ howled Bunter. ‘Can’t you read that label? Think I wrote that myself?’

‘Wha-a-at,’ gasped Bob Cherry.

‘Oh, my only hat!’ ejaculated Frank Nugent. ‘Is that it? Did you take the label off, and put another one on?’

‘Oh, really, Nugent—!’

‘Did you?’ roared Johnny Bull.

‘He did!’ gasped Harry Wharton. ‘That’s why it’s in Capital letters — we should have known his fist! You fat villain—!’

‘Oh, really, Wharton—!’

‘Coker’s hamper!’ said Bob Cherry, almost dazedly.

‘Coker’s, and he’s after it! We’ve been scoffing Coker’s tuck—. You pernicious porker—!’

‘Oh, really Cherry—!’

‘You piratical porpoise, you’ve pinched Coker’s hamper,’ yelled Bob.

‘I—I haven’t. I—I never touched it, except to put a new label on,’ gasped Bunter. ‘If—if Coker kicks up a row about that hamper, Cherry, don’t you get making out that I brought it up here!’

‘What?’ stuttered Bob.

‘You jolly well brought it up, as you jolly well know,’ said Bunter, warmly. ‘Don’t you get putting it on me!’

‘You said it was yours!’ shrieked Bob.

‘Oh! Yes! So it is mine,’ said Bunter. ‘It came specially from my uncle pater—I mean my pater uncle— I—I mean—.’

‘You changed the labels!’

‘Well, would you have fetched it up, if it had had Coker’s name on it? You jolly well know you wouldn’t.’

‘Then you did change the labels?’

‘Oh! No! Nothing of the kind. Never thought of such a thing. I say, you fellows, what are you getting shirty about?’ gasped Bunter. ‘Here I am standing you the spread of the term, and you can’t even be civil to a chap. Talk about a thankless serpent being sharper than a toothless child! I say, shut that door—Coker may come up here after that hamper—.’

‘No “may” about that,’ said Nugent. ‘Listen!’

A voice, not unlike that of Stentor of old, was heard from the passage. It was the voice of Horace Coker of the Fifth Form, and it sounded excited.

‘I’m looking for a hamper. Somebody’s pinched my hamper from the lobby. Any of you seen a hamper?’

The Famous Five looked at one another in utter dismay.

They knew, now. It was Coker’s hamper. They had been ‘scoffing’ Coker’s lavish supplies from his Aunt Judy! Bunter, no doubt, had spotted that attractive hamper in the lobby. It had tempted him, and he had fallen. He had not ventured to ‘walk it off’ personally. He had simply taken off the old label and put on a new one, leaving the rest to other hands. Really, it was the limit, even for the voracious and unscrupulous fat Owl of the Remove. Not that Billy Bunter realized that there was anything particularly questionable in such a proceeding. Billy Bunter’s fat brain moved in mysterious ways its wonders to perform. Besides, a fellow couldn’t think of everything. Bunter’s fat mind ran on tuck: and that banished all lesser considerations.

‘Seen a hamper about?’ Coker was bawling again. ‘Somebody’s got my hamper. I want that hamper!’

‘I—I say, you fellows, better lock the door!’ gasped Bunter. ‘We—we don’t want Coker in here. We haven’t half finished yet. I say, lock that door, and get on with the spread, and we’ll settle about the hols—.’

The Famous Five were not disposed either to get on with the spread, or to settle about the hols. They looked at Bunter as if they could have eaten him.

‘We shall have to explain to Coker somehow—!’ gasped Wharton.

‘I say, don’t you get putting it on me!’ howled Bunter, in alarm. ‘I’m not going to have Coker after me, making out I scoffed his hamper—.’

‘Scrag him!’ roared Johnny Bull.

‘Spiflicate him!’ yelled Bob Cherry.

‘Scrag him terrifically!’ gasped the nabob of Bhanipur.

‘Burst him!’ exclaimed Nugent.

Another moment, and the Owl of the Remove would have been suffering for his sins. But there was a heavy tramp in the passage, and a red, excited face glared into the study.

Coker’s powerful voice woke the echoes.

‘I’m looking for a hamper. Somebody’s walked off my hamper. Have you seen a hamper about? Why—what— there it is!’

Coker of the Fifth had reached the end of his quest. Up and down and round about he had hunted for that hamper. Now he had found it! There it was, in No. 1 Study in the Remove, staring him in the face!

The Famous Five all jumped to their feet. It was a difficulty matter to explain, but they were ready to do their best, if Coker gave them time. He did not look like giving them time. The sight of his hamper in a Remove study was enough for Coker.

‘My hamper!’ he roared. ‘That’s my hamper. So it was you who walked it off, and you’re scoffing it now! By gum! You fancy you can walk off with a Fifth-form man’s hamper—!’

‘You see—!’ gasped Harry Wharton.

‘We—!’ began Bob Cherry.

There was no time for more.

‘I’ll jolly well show you!’ roared Coker. ‘I’ll let you know whether you can walk off my hamper or not! Why, I’ll wallop the lot of you, all round!’

With that, Coker rushed.

Words were of no avail, with a big, burly, beefy, infuriated Coker bent on walloping them all round! In a moment, the Famous Five were mixed up with Coker of the Fifth, and No. 1 Study was a hectic scene of battle.

A fat figure backed out from the seat of war, into the passage. Billy Bunter had not yet filled the inner Bunter to capacity; and he was unwilling to leave that gorgeous spread: but even Bunter realized that he had better not linger for more. That gorgeous spread had to remain, like Schubert’s celebrated symphony, unfinished. Billy Bunter sagely followed the example of the guests in Macbeth: he stood not upon the order of his going, but went at once. Harry Wharton and Co. were left to deal with Coker of the Fifth, while William George Bunter disappeared into space.

CHAPTER 4 DOGGO !

‘SEEN Bunter?’

‘Oh, crikey!’ breathed Billy Bunter.

His fat face registered alarm and despondency.

Billy Bunter, at the moment, was reposing his fat limbs on the old stone seat under the wall, in the old cloisters. It was a retired and quiet spot: and a retired and quiet spot was just what Bunter wanted, in the circumstances. He had an idea that the Famous Five, when they were through with Coker, might be looking for him. If so, he did not want to be found. It was only judicious to give them time to cool down: and Bunter was going to remain in that retired and quiet spot till the bell rang for calling-over: by which time, he hoped at least, the cooling-down process might be well on its way. Sitting on the old stone seat, leaning back against the thick masses of ivy that clustered on the wall, Billy

Bunter felt quite comfortable and fairly secure: till a distant calling voice impinged upon his fat ears. Then he sat up suddenly and took notice.

It was Bob Cherry's voice that he heard. Bob was not in sight: but evidently he was in the cloisters, and equally evidently he was not alone, for an answering voice came back: 'No! But he's about somewhere.' That was Harry Wharton's voice.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Seen anything of Bunter, Johnny?'

'No! But I'm going to.'

'Must be spotted about somewhere.' It was Nugent's voice. 'Skinner said he saw him coming this way.'

'We'll jolly well find him!'

'And jolly well scrag him!'

'The scragfulness will be terrific!'

'Let's root through the cloisters. I daresay he's dodged behind one of the pillars. Come on!'

'Oh, crumbs!' breathed Billy Bunter, faintly.

Obviously, they were looking for him: with the full intention of 'scragging' him. Bunter did not want to be found: still less did he want to be scragged! He could hear their footsteps: and it was only a matter of minutes, perhaps only of moments, before vengeful eyes would fall upon him. Seldom did Billy Bunter's fat brain work rapidly: but now imminent peril spurred it on. He rose from the stone seat, and squeezed into the thick clustering ivy.

It was not the refuge he would have chosen, as a matter of taste. That thick ancient ivy afforded good cover: but it was inhabited by innumerable small inhabitants of the insect tribes, and long-legged spiders roamed in its dusky recesses. Insects and spiders at close quarters were neither grateful nor comforting: but they were preferable to scragging! Heedless of the small inhabitants he disturbed, Bunter wedged into the ivy, and it clustered round him, and the fattest form at Greyfriars School vanished from sight. He was just in time. Only a few moments later footsteps and voices came along. The fat Owl scarcely breathed. Something tickled his fat neck: and he shuddered. But he dared not lift a fat hand to knock off the spider. A rustle in the ivy would have betrayed him. That inquisitive spider wandered round his collar unchecked.

'Not here!'

'Where the dickens is he?'

'By gum, we'll scrag him bald-headed when we find him. Diddling us into scoffing Coker's hamper—!'

'It's the limit, even for Bunter! Quelch would send him up to the Head, if he knew.'

'Well, Quelch won't know; but Bunter is going to have the lesson of his life! Ow! My nose! That idiot Coker landed his silly fist on it, hard.'

'Well, I landed mine in his eye.'

'It's too thick! If that ass Coker had had sense enough to let us explain—.'

'Catch Coker having any sense!'

'All Bunter's fault—.'

'The fat villain!'

'Where the dickens is he? We've rooted over the House and the quad. But he doesn't seem to be about here.'

'We've got to find him.'

‘Yes, rather!’

‘The ratherfulness is terrific!’

Every word came to Bunter’s fat ears. The chums of the Remove had stopped, not a couple of yards from him. Only the ivy, screening his fat form, intervened between him and scragging. If, as Bunter hoped, the Famous Five were going to cool down, that process clearly had not started yet. They were simply yearning to collar him and deal with him as he deserved. The spider crawled inside Bunter’s collar, but he dared not even shudder. He hardly dared to breathe.

‘Well, he’s not here,’ said Bob Cherry. ‘Better have a scout round—he’s keeping doggo somewhere.’

‘Come on!’

Footsteps again. They were leaving the spot: but Billy Bunter did not think of emerging from cover. They were going to root through the old cloisters for him, and Bunter had to remain a fixture. He could still hear footsteps, and every now and then a calling voice.

‘Oh, crumbs!’ moaned Bunter, under his breath.

He ventured, at last, to disinter the spider from the inside of his collar, and hurl that unpleasant creature away. Then, perspiring in his hide-out, he listened intently with both fat ears, longing to hear the sounds of departure. At last—long last—there was silence.

Were they gone?

The hapless fat Owl could not feel sure. He waited, and listened: but there was no sound. At length he ventured to project a fat head from the screening ivy, rather like that of a tortoise from its shell. He blinked round fearfully through his big spectacles. Nobody was to be seen—and there was silence. They were gone.

‘Beasts!’ groaned Bunter. ‘Looking for a chap to scrag him, after that splendid spread! Beasts!—I wonder if they’re going to keep it up till calling-over. Beasts!’

It was clearly Bunter’s best guess to remain out of sight till the latest possible moment. However, now they were gone, it was a relief to be able to emerge from the dusty, spidery ivy: and the fat Owl was about to do so, when footsteps once more came to his fat ears.

‘Oh, crikey!’ gasped Bunter.

Promptly he backed into the shelter of the ivy again. He backed so promptly and suddenly, that he shook out at least a dozen of the varied small inhabitants, and they clustered on him. Once more he had to take his chance with spiders and gnats and beetles. If those beasts were coming back—!

But the heavy tread he heard was not that of a Remove Junior. A well-known dreaded voice came to his ears:

‘Sit down here!’

Billy Bunter was glad, from the bottom of his fat heart, that he had plunged back into cover in time, as he heard the loud voice of Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form. The Famous Five had been bent on scragging him: but what they would have handed out was as moonlight unto sun-light, as water unto wine, compared with what Coker was likely to hand out to the raider of his hamper. The hapless fat Owl trembled in his lair, as he heard Coker sit down on the old stone seat, and two other fellows follow his example.

‘Now, about the hols—!’ came Coker’s voice.

Billy Bunter could have groaned, if he had dared to groan. Apparently the Fifth-form men had sat down for a chat: and so long as they sat and chatted, Bunter was a prisoner in the

dusty, spidery, gnatty ivy. He dared not stir, as a beetle crawled round a fat ankle, and a gnat buzzed in a fat ear, and a spider trailed over a fat nose: and perspiration trickled down a fat neck. So long as Coker was sitting there, Bunter had to keep 'doggo': and he perspired in his spidery lair and suffered for his sins.

CHAPTER 5 CUT AND DRIED

HORACE COKER sat on the old stone seat, his long legs stretched out, the back of his bullet head brushing against a mass of clustering ancient ivy—to the alarm of a fat junior parked in its recesses. As he sat, he rubbed his right eye, which persisted in winking. A fist had landed in that eye, during the rough and tumble in No. 1 Study: and Coker had collected a few other damages. In fact it was not until Coker had been overcome by force of numbers, and pinned down by five juniors sitting on him, that breathless explanations had been possible, and peace, or at least an armistice, ensued. Coker was still feeling the effects of undertaking to 'wallop' the Famous Five all round: most of the 'walloping' having been what Hurree Singh would have called a boot on the other leg. Coker had a winking eye, a rather crimson nose, a painful ear, and a considerable number of aches and pains distributed over him: it was quite a casualty list.

'Cheeky little scoundrels,' said Coker, as he rubbed his eye. 'One of them bunged me in this eye—wow! They had the cheek to collar me, when I found the hamper in their study, and pitched into them! It turned out that that young villain Bunter took them in, putting a new label on the hamper. By gum! Wait till I see Bunter! I've got this stump for him!' A fat Owl huddled among spiders and gnats in the ivy realized that Coker had a cricket stump with him. Bunter barely breathed.

'But about the hols——,' said Potter.

'I'm coming to that,' said Coker.

Potter and Greene were glad to hear it. They had already heard all they wanted to hear about the mix-up in the Remove study, and a little over. They were more interested in plans for the summer holidays. Coker's idea of a holiday up the river quite appealed to them. Such trips, as Harry Wharton and Co. had discovered, came a little expensive: but that was a trifle light as air to Coker. There was only one drawback in such a trip—Coker! But a chap who was accustomed to let money run like water was undoubtedly a useful chap to know in holiday time. Coker was going to stand the trip, and Potter and Greene were going to stand Coker: so it was fair all round.

'It's all fixed up,' went on Coker. 'I've seen to everything. Nothing for you fellows to bother about. I've got the whole thing cut and dried.'

Coker rubbed his eye again. Taking advantage of that preoccupation, Potter and Greene exchanged a glance across him, as they sat on either side of their great leader. It was a somewhat expressive glance they exchanged. It did really seem to Potter and Greene that old Horace might have consulted them in the matter, as they were going to form two-thirds of the crew of that boat up the Thames. A little discussion of details would not have been out of place. But Horace Coker never had any use for discussion. Being the fellow who knew best, in all matters, at all times, and in all circumstances, opinions from others had only an irritating effect on him. The whole thing was cut and dried, and that was that!

‘First week in August,’ resumed Coker. ‘I’ve settled that. Lots of time to do the river right up to Lechlade if we want to.’

‘Might start from Richmond,’ suggested Potter.

‘Staines,’ said Coker.

‘There’s some jolly good stretches up from Richmond,’ ventured Greene.

‘I think I said Staines,’ said Coker, distinctly. That was final!

‘Well, if you’d asked me—,’ said Potter.

‘If you’re going to argue about it, George Potter—.’

‘Oh, make it Staines,’ said Potter, resignedly. ‘Any old thing.’

‘I’ve made it Staines,’ answered Coker, calmly. ‘Didn’t I mention that everything was settled? Our boat will be waiting for us at Mawson’s boat-yard at Staines, packed with everything we’re likely to want. I’ve seen to it all.’

‘You have?’ asked Potter.

‘Well, I mean, my Aunt Judy’s made the arrangements with Mawson’s,’ explained Coker. ‘I’ve written her a good many letters, and told her everything that will be wanted. Of course I couldn’t get away from Greyfriars to see to it personally. But I’ve fixed up everything in my letters to my Aunt Judy, and she’s fixed it up with Mawson’s. My Aunt Judy’s jolly sensible—for a woman, I mean—and she has sense enough to carry out all my instructions.’

Potter and Greene wondered, as they had often wondered before, what Miss Judith Coker could possibly see in her nephew Horace, to make her so devoted to him. It was quite a mystery to Potter and Greene.

‘The boat’s named the Nautilus,’ went on Coker. ‘It’s a good boat, and roomy—I was particular about that. We shall want room to move, and we’re taking a lot of things.’

‘Might be a bit heavy to tow—,’ suggested Potter.

‘If your idea of a trip on the river is to loll in a boat, and never do a spot of work, Potter—.’

‘Oh! Not at all,’ said Potter, hastily. ‘After all, we all want room in the boat, with what we have to carry.’ He glanced at Coker’s feet as he spoke. Greene, following his glance, grinned. Coker, fortunately, observed neither the glance nor the grin. Certainly it was true that, considering the length of Coker’s legs, and the extent of his feet, it was just as well that the Nautilus was roomy.

‘There’ll be some cargo, of course,’ Coker was going on. ‘There’s a canvas cover for the boat, which we shall fix up at night when we don’t feel like camping on shore. And ground-sheets and blankets and things. And cooking things, and a stove, and all that. And there’s grub, too. We can get lots of meals at riverside inns, and so on: but we can’t depend on that. I was very particular to tell Aunt Judy about packing the locker with grub. I sent her a list: and it was a pretty long list, too.’

Potter and Greene gave Horace Coker almost affectionate looks. A boating trip at Aunt Judy’s expense, with lunches and dinners at riverside inns, and unlimited supplies in the boat, was extremely attractive. It was almost enough to make Coker attractive.

‘And we start first week in August,’ said Potter. ‘Which day?’

‘I haven’t decided yet,’ said Coker. ‘About the third or fourth, I think: but I’ll let you fellows know, so that you can turn up at Staines on time. Just wait till you hear from me, see?’

It did not occur to Coker that Potter and Greene might have anything else to do in the first

week in August, apart from waiting to hear from him!

‘Oh!’ said Potter.

‘A fellow would like to know,’ hinted Greene.

‘You’ll know when I tell you,’ said Coker, dismissing the subject. He groped in his pocket. ‘I’ve a letter here from Mawson’s. You’ll see from it that everything’s fixed up all right.’

Potter and Greene looked at the rather crumpled letter Coker produced from his pocket.

Mawson’s Yard,
Staines.

Dear Sir,

The boat Nautilus will be ready to be called for on and from the 1st August, with all fittings, supplies, etc., as per instructions received.

Yours faithfully,
Mawson and Co.

‘That’s all right, what?’ said Coker.

‘Right as rain!’ agreed Potter.

‘You fellows will turn up at the railway station at Staines, when I let you know the date, and—,’ Coker broke off suddenly. He turned his head, and stared blankly at the clustering old ivy behind that head. Up to that moment, the ivy had been perfectly still, as was naturally to be expected of ancient ivy that had grown and clustered there for unnumbered years. But all of a sudden it seemed to be endowed with life and motion, for it rustled and swayed and brushed Coker’s back hair.

In utter astonishment, Coker stared at the rustling, Swaying ivy.

‘What the thump—!’ he gasped.

Potter and Greene stared too. They were as astonished as Coker. But the next moment came enlightenment.

‘Urrrrrgh!’

It was a gurgling gasp from the depths of the clustering ivy. Somebody, evidently, was there!

Coker, staring blankly, laid the letter from Mawson’s down on the stone seat, reached across, and dragged at masses of ivy. He dragged them aside, and a hidden inhabitant was revealed. Then there was a roar from

Horace Coker, and he grasped his cricket stump.

‘Bunter!’

CHAPTER 6 SIX !

BILLY BUNTER could not help it.

Nothing would have induced Bunter to reveal his presence, if he could have helped it.

But he couldn’t.

For how long he had huddled there, tangled in ivy, crawled over by spiders, bitten by

gnats, Bunter did not know: but it seemed to him like whole days, if not weeks. With Coker and his cricket stump only a yard away, he had to stay there, and keep still and silent—if he could! He stood it heroically—till it could be stood no longer. His clothes, his hair, his ears, his fat neck, were getting altogether too thickly populated. But it was not till something stung him, that the unhappy fat Owl inadvertently jumped, and betrayed himself. Now, as Coker dragged the ivy aside, he stood revealed—red and breathless and dusty and perspiring: and Potter and Greene stared at him in astonishment, and Coker in dire wrath.

‘Bunter!’ repeated Coker. ‘Bunter! That fat frog! Hiding in the ivy! By gum! I suppose he saw us coming, and dodged out of sight! You knew what to expect, did you, you diddling fat tick? You’re getting it now.’

‘I—I—I say—!’ gasped Bunter.

Coker flourished the stump.

‘Come out of that!’ he hooted.

‘I—I—I say, I—I never—I say—yaroo!’ yelled Bunter, as Coker, stump in right hand, reached with his left, and grasped a fat ear. Bunter was hooked out of the ivy, like a fat wrinkle out of a shell.

‘Now, then.....!’ said Coker, grimly.

‘Wow! I say—leggo!’ yelled Bunter. ‘I say, I never had that hamper! I—I never saw it in the lobby, and never thought of changing the label, and—.’

‘Bend over that seat!’ said Coker, magisterially. He released the fat ear, and pointed to the stone seat, with the stump: just as a Sixth-form prefect might have pointed to a chair with his ashplant.

‘Look here—!’ gasped Bunter.

‘I said bend over!’

‘Think you’re a pre!’ gasped Bunter.

‘I’m going to give you six, with this stump, for scoffing my hamper,’ said Coker. ‘Now, then, bend over!’

Potter and Greene exchanged a grin. Horace Coker seemed to fancy himself in the role of a prefect, ordering a junior to bend over and take six. Certainly, Coker had no more authority to give Bunter six, than Bunter had to give Coker six: but Coker was not bothering about that. Bunter had scoffed his hamper, and landed him in a rough-and-tumble in a junior study: and Coker was going to mete out just punishment. He had provided himself with a cricket stump for that especial purpose when he came across Bunter. Now he had come across him.

‘Do you hear me, Bunter?’

‘Look here, you can’t give a chap six, like a pre—,’ gasped Bunter.

‘Can’t I!’ said Coker, grimly. He seemed to think that he could!

His belief on that point was well-founded. As Bunter did not bend over of his own volition, Coker’s large hand grasped his collar, and bent him over. In Horace Coker’s mighty grasp, the fat junior had no more chance than a fat rabbit in the grasp of a gorilla. Spluttering, Bunter was bent over the stone seat, sprawling over the letter from Mawson’s, which Coker had left there, and quite forgotten in the excitement of the discovery in the ivy.

Then the stump went up, and came down. Whop!

‘Wow!’ yelled Bunter.

Whop!

‘Whooooooop!’

Whop!

‘Yaroooooh!’

Whop!

‘Yow-ow-ow! Leggo!’ raved Bunter. ‘Beast! Leggo! Oh, crikey! Look here, if you don’t leggo, I’ll jolly well go to Quelch and say—yow-ow-ow-ow-ow!’

Whop!

‘Oh, lor’! Ow! ow! wow!’

WHOP!

The last whop rang on Bunter’s fat trousers like a rifleshot. Coker put his beef into it, and Coker had plenty of beef. It fairly curled Bunter up, and he sprawled over the stone seat, yelling. The old cloisters echoed to Bunter on his top note.

‘Ow ow! ow! wow! Beast! Oh, crikey! wow! wow! Whooooooh! Ow! wow!’

Coker tucked the stump under his arm.

‘I’ve a jolly good mind to give you a few more,’ he said. ‘I’ll let you know whether you can scoff my hampers or not! Stop that row!’

‘Yoo-ow-ow-ow-ow!’ yelled Bunter. He was not feeling like stopping that ‘row’. It did not stop: rather it increased in volume. ‘Yow-ow-ow-ow-ow!’

Potter and Greene exchanged a glance, and moved away. Coker stared round at them.

‘Where are you going?’ he asked.

‘Yow-ow-ow-ow-ow!’ from Bunter.

‘We shall have all Greyfriars here soon, if this row goes on,’ said Potter, rather tartly.

‘Come on, Greeney.’

He walked away with Greene.

‘Yoo-ow-ow-ow-wow!’ followed them from Bunter, as they departed.

Coker gave an angry snort. Coker, apparently, did not care if Bunter’s yells brought all Greyfriars to the spot, with all the county of Kent in addition. And he had not yet finished talking to Potter and Greene.

However, he could not continue a talk addressed only to two disappearing backs, so having snorted, he followed Potter and Greene.

Billy Bunter was left alone, to continue waking the echoes of the old cloisters. He continued to wake them for a good many minutes after the Fifth-form men were gone.

Finally, he wriggled off the old stone seat, and stood gasping. He wriggled as he gasped.

Coker, undoubtedly, had laid on that ‘six’ with a heavy hand. Billy Bunter, no doubt, deserved it, but that was no comfort to him. Even Mr. Quelch, in his grimmest mood, had never laid it on like Coker. It was likely to be quite a long time before Bunter forgot that stump.

‘Ow! Beast!’ groaned Bunter. ‘Ow! wow!’

He sat down on the stone seat: but jumped up again immediately, almost as if the old stone were red-hot. Billy Bunter seldom stood if it was possible to sit: but at the moment, he preferred to stand.

‘Ow!’ gasped Bunter. ‘Beast! I’d jolly well punch his head, if—if—if I could! I’d jolly well go to Quelch, only—only he would make a fuss about that hamper. Ow! Cheeky beast, giving a man six just as if he was a pre. Ow!’

It was then that Bunter noticed the letter lying on the seat where Coker had left it. He

blinked at it through his big spectacles. Parked in the ivy behind the seat he had, of course, heard every word uttered by the Fifth-form men, and knew what that letter was. It had been concealed from sight by the fat junior sprawling over it, and Coker, evidently, had forgotten all about it.

‘Beast!’ yapped Bunter.

He grabbed up the letter, crumpled it in a fat hand, and jammed it into the thick depths of the ivy.

Whether Coker had any further use for that letter, and wanted it, Bunter did not know: but he hoped so! In that case, Coker could hunt for it! That was a solace, if a small one, for the whopping he had received.

Having thus disposed of the letter from Mawson and Co., Bunter resumed wriggling, apparently finding some relief in understudying an eel. He was still busy as a contortionist, when there was a tramp of feet in the cloisters.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’

‘Here he is!’

‘That terrific toad!’

‘We’ve found the fat villain!’

‘Bag him!’

The Famous Five came up with a rush. But Billy Bunter did not even attempt to dodge, as they surrounded him. He only wriggled and groaned. And hands that were outstretched to collar him, dropped, as the chums of the Remove stared at the dismal, dolorous, sadly suffering Owl.

‘Looks as if he’s been through it already,’ remarked Bob Cherry. ‘Smithy said he heard somebody yelling about here. Was it you, Bunter?’

‘Ow! wow!’ moaned Bunter. ‘That beast Coker—ow! wow! He pitched into me with a stump—wow!’

‘Serve you jolly well right!’ grunted Johnny Bull.

‘Beast!’ moaned Bunter.

‘The rightfulness was terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter.’

‘Ow! Beast! Making out I scoffed his hamper!’ moaned Bunter. ‘I say, you fellows, he gave me six with a stump, just as if he was a prefect! Ow! Wow! I shall have to stand up to prep—ow!’

Harry Wharton laughed.

‘Well, if Coker’s given you toco, we’ll let you off the scragging,’ he said. ‘Did he lay them on hard?’

‘Ow! Yes! Just as if he was beating a carpet—ow!’

‘Good!’

‘Beast!’

The ‘scragging’ was off, which was, perhaps, a comfort to the sad and suffering Owl. Bunter certainly looked as if he had had enough: and the Famous Five left it at that: and the dolorous Owl was left to mumble and wriggle. He was still mumbling and wriggling, when the bell rang for calling-over: when he sadly and sorrowfully mumbled and wriggled out of the cloisters, and mumbled and wriggled his way to hall.

CHAPTER 7 MYSTERIOUS !

'HE, he, he!'

Mr. Quelch gave quite a jump.

Remove fellows looked round.

A sudden cacchination from a member of the form, while lessons were in progress, was rather surprising.

Billy Bunter, who cacchinated, became the cynosure of all eyes in a moment.

Mr. Quelch's gimlet-eyes fixed on him. Almost every other eye in the Remove form-room followed Quelch's. Harry Wharton, who was on 'con', ceased to translate, and stared. Wharton was at that point in the *Æneid* where the 'pius Æneas' begins his lengthy narrative to the Queen of Carthage: and there was nothing in that narrative, so far as Wharton or anyone else could see, to cause a sudden irrepressible outburst of merriment. It might perhaps have made fellows yawn, but there was no reason why it should make them chuckle. Nevertheless, Billy Bunter interrupted Wharton's 'con' with a sudden and unexpected 'He, he, he!'

Bunter, of course, ought to have been following the 'Con', ready to take his turn if called upon to translate. But Bunter, as a matter of fact, was doing nothing of the kind.

It was not uncommon for Billy Bunter to allow his fat thoughts to wander, in class. Often and often his form-master had to call him to attention. There were things so much more interesting than Latin: such as the recollection of breakfast, or the prospect of dinner.

On the present occasion, however, Billy Bunter was not, for once, thinking of food. And certainly he was not thinking of the lesson. If he heard the voice of the junior who was on 'con' at all, he heard it merely as a drone: his thoughts were far away. Indeed, he seemed to have forgotten that he was in the form-room. Apparently something of a comic nature had materialised in his fat mind, for a grin overspread his plump features, and that cacchination came suddenly and irrepressibly.

'Bunter!' Quelch's voice was deep.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. He seemed suddenly to realize where he was, and he gave his form-master a startled blink. 'Oh! Yes, sir!'

'What do you find so amusing, Bunter, in the passage Wharton is now construing?'

'Eh? Oh! Nothing, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I wasn't laughing, sir—.'

'What!'

'I was—was—was coughing, sir,' gasped Bunter.

'Are you attending to the lesson, Bunter?'

'Oh, yes, sir! I—I heard every word you were saying, sir—.'

'I was saying nothing, Bunter.'

'Oh! I—I—I mean, I—I—I—I heard every word Wharton was saying, sir! I—I wasn't thinking about anything else, especially Coker—.'

'Coker?' repeated Mr. Quelch, blankly.

'Yes, sir! I mean, no, sir! I—I'd forgotten all about Coker, sir, and I—I wasn't thinking that it would serve him right to dish him—.'

'Wha-a-at?'

'Besides, I—I wouldn't, sir. I don't know what he's doing in the hols, sir. I never heard him talking to Potter and Greene yesterday—.'

'That will do, Bunter! It is plain that you have been giving no attention to the lesson, and have been thinking about some wholly extraneous matter,' said Mr. Quelch, severely.

'You will go on where Wharton left off, Bunter.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

Harry Wharton sat down. Billy Bunter blinked at Virgil through his big spectacles. He had not the remotest idea where Wharton had left off. Evidently his fat thoughts had been deeply and exclusively occupied with some matter in connection with Coker and the 'hols': though why Bunter of the Remove should be thinking about Coker of the Fifth in connection with the holidays, was rather a mystery. He blinked dismally at a page of Latin that was, to Bunter, rather a mystery also.

'You will go on, Bunter,' rapped Mr. Quelch.

'I—I—I've lost the place, sir—!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I wasn't thinking about anything but the lesson, sir— nothing at all about Coker—.'

'You will go on from Line 371,' rapped Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Yes, sir!'

Bunter blinked at Line 372. Had Bunter found time for 'prep' the previous evening, he might have had some vague idea of the meaning of 'O dea, si prima repetens ab origine pergam'. He might even have guessed that it meant 'o goddess, if retracing from the beginning I go on to relate.', which was the good Æneas's preliminary canter, as it were, in his tale of woe. But in prep, Bunter had been chiefly occupied in wriggling from the effects of Horace Coker's stump, which, added to his natural laziness, had caused him to give prep a miss, and chance it with Quelch. Now he rather wished that he hadn't chanced it.

'Oh, dear!' began Bunter.

'Construe,' snapped Mr. Quelch.

'Oh, dear!' repeated Bunter.

'I have told you to translate, Bunter.'

'Yes, sir: I—I am translating,' gasped Bunter.

'Wha-a-t!'

There was a chuckle in the Remove. Billy Bunter, apparently, was under the impression that 'Oh, dear!' was a translation of 'O dea!'

'It's "Oh goddess", fathead!' whispered Peter Todd.

'Bunter—!' boomed Mr. Quelch.

'Oh, yes, sir, I—I've got it now! Oh goddess, fathead!' gasped Bunter; taking Toddy's whisper rather too literally.

'Ha, ha, ha!' came from the whole form.

'Bless my soul!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch. 'Silence in the form! Bunter, you will write out the lesson twenty times, after class. Redwing, you will go on.'

'Oh, lor!' mumbled Billy Bunter.

The fat Owl sat with a glum brow, for several minutes. But, strange to relate, after that brief interval, a grin returned to his fat face, though he did not surprise his form-master with another cacchination. Bunter was not thinking of the task before him, of writing out the lesson twenty times after class: that, certainly, would not have amused him. But something of a highly entertaining nature was evidently in that fat mind. When dismissal came, the fat Owl was grinning as he rolled out with the Remove: a grin so wide that it seemed almost to stretch from one fat ear to the other.

'What's the jolly old joke, fatty?' asked Bob Cherry. 'Think it's funny to get Quelch's rag out in form?'

'He, he, he! Blow Quelch,' answered Bunter. 'I was thinking about Coker—he, he, he!'

‘What about Coker?’ asked Bob.

‘Oh! Nothing!’ said Bunter, hastily. ‘I mean, I wasn’t thinking about Coker. Don’t you get the idea that I’ve been thinking of dishing him in the hols, to pay him out for stumping me.’

‘How on earth could you dish Coker in the hols?’ asked Harry Wharton, staring at the fat Owl.

‘He, he, he! I know what I know,’ chuckled Bunter. ‘I mean, they’ve never seen Coker—they don’t know him from Adam.’

‘Who don’t?’ asked Frank Nugent.

‘Oh! Nobody. I never heard him saying anything to Potter and Greene yesterday: I never heard a word they said while I was in the ivy. Besides, I wasn’t in the ivy. All the same, that beast Coker may be sorry for stumping a chap, later on, in the hols. He, he, he!’

‘What the dickens have you got in your fat noddle now?’ asked Bob.

‘Oh! Nothing. I mean, that’s telling!’ grinned Bunter.

‘I may be going to dish Coker in the hols, and I may not. I may be going to make him sit up for stumping a chap, and I may not. That’s telling! He, he, he!’

And Billy Bunter rolled away chuckling, leaving the Famous Five staring. Evidently some scheme of retaliation on Coker, for that stumping, was working in Billy Bunter’s fat mind: and that scheme, it appeared, was to take effect in the holidays. That was the prospect that so highly entertained the Owl of the Remove. Precisely what he meant, if he meant anything, the Co. did not know: neither did they care: and they went out into the sunny quad, and forgot all about Billy Bunter and his mysterious remarks. But they were to be reminded of them later, in a very unexpected way.

CHAPTER 8 BUNTER’S BOAT

‘I SAY, YOU fellows!’

‘Hook it!’

‘Oh, really, Wharton—!’

‘Buzz!’

Five fellows were in serious consultation in No. 1 Study after class. Billy Bunter, as so often happened, was superfluous.

Neither was Bunter persona grata in that study. The episode of Coker’s hamper was too recent. Bunter, having suffered for his sins under Coker’s stump, had been let off the ‘scragging’ he richly deserved: but every member of the Co. was still feeling very much disposed to plant a boot on the plumpest trousers at Greyfriars School. Moreover, the Famous Five were deep in a financial problem in the study—they were in fact, at the moment, a committee of ways and means. Whether their financial resources would run to a boat on the Thames in the holidays was the problem: and it looked as if their financial resources wouldn’t. So five separate and distinct frowns were directed at Billy Bunter, as he rolled into the doorway: and Harry Wharton told him briefly to hook it and buzz, while Bob Cherry reached for a cushion, and Johnny Bull for a Latin dictionary.

Billy Bunter could not have been left in any doubt as to whether his plump presence was desired in No. 1 Study. But a trifle like that did not worry Billy Bunter. He neither hooked it nor buzzed: but kept a wary outlook through his big spectacles for the cushion

and the Latin dictionary.

'I say, you fellows, don't be shirty,' he urged. 'After all, I stood you a jolly good spread yesterday, when you were all stony—.'

'Coker did, you mean, you fat fraud!' said Bob Cherry. 'Stop this one!' The cushion flew as he spoke.

Billy Bunter did not 'stop that one'. He dodged actively, and the cushion flew past him and landed in the passage.

'Rotten shot!' said Johnny Bull. 'Stop this one, Bunter.' The Latin dictionary whizzed. Bunter hopped like a kangaroo, and Johnny's shot proved no better than Bob's. The dictionary whizzed a foot from a fat head, and flew across the passage. It was just Smithy's ill-luck that he was coming along from his study up the passage at the moment. Every bullet has its billet: and probably the same natural law applies to Latin dictionaries. That dic., missing Bunter's fat head, landed on Vernon-Smith's ear, and there was a startled and enraged yell from the Bounder.

'Oh! Oooh! What—!'

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter. 'He, he, he!'

'Oh, my hat!' ejaculated Johnny Bull. 'Is that Smithy? Sorry, old man, I was chucking it at Bunter—.'

Whiz! Herbert Vernon-Smith did not seem impressed by Johnny's explanation that he had been 'chucking' it at Bunter. As he cared about, apparently, was the circumstance that the dictionary had landed on his ear. He glared into the study, and the dictionary came back like a cannonshot, interrupting Johnny's explanation by crashing on his chin.

'Yooo-hoop!' roared Johnny Bull, as it crashed.

Smithy walked on, rubbing his ear.

'He, he, he!' cachinnated Bunter.

Johnny Bull jumped to his feet, and Bunter, suddenly ceasing to cachinnate, disappeared from the doorway.

Four fellows in No. 1 Study were laughing: but Johnny did not seem amused. However, he sat down again, rubbing his chin, and the committee of ways and means resumed its functions.

'It would be jolly on the river,' said Bob Cherry. 'But—.'

'Topping, if we could fix it up,' said Frank Nugent. 'But—.'

'The topfulness would be terrific,' agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'But—.'

'But—!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'We should want a decent boat,' said Harry Wharton, thoughtfully, 'and hiring a boat on the Thames in the summer, for weeks on end, would be rather a big item. We're not rolling in money like Smithy, or old Mauly. We have to cut our coat according to our cloth—.'

'But if it would run to it—,' said Bob. 'If some Good Samaritan would lend us a boat, we could manage everything else.'

'Easily. But—!'

'I say, you fellows!' It was Bunter again. A pair of big spectacles glimmered cautiously round the doorway.

Five glares were turned on a fat face. Bunter, impervious to glares, but wary of cushions and dictionaries, blinked into the study.

'I say, you fellows, do let a chap speak!' he urged. 'It's important. I jolly well know

you're in a jam about the hols. You might be civil to a chap who's going to see you through.'

'Buzz off, you fat ass, before you're booted.'

'Well, I like that!' said Bunter, warmly. 'I can jolly well tell you that there's plenty of fellows in the Remove who would jump at it, if I offered to stand them a boat for a holiday up the Thames this vac.'

'What?'

'That's what I came here to tell you fellows,' said Bunter, while the Famous Five stared at him. 'I'm asking you chaps first, because we're pals. I'd like you to come in my boat.'

'Your boat!' repeated Bob, blankly.

'Well, not exactly my boat—I mean, I'm having it for the summer,' explained Bunter.

'It's going to be lent to me for the hols.'

'Gammon!' said Johnny Bull.

'Oh, really, Bull—!'

'And who's lending you a boat on the Thames for the summer?' asked Nugent.

'Oh, somebody I know,' answered Bunter. 'Mind, it's a jolly good boat—roomy, and all that. It's going to be fixed up okay for a trip up the river—no expense spared. Plenty of grub packed in the locker ready. That boat won't cost anybody a penny. I'm standing it. You fellows can meet any little day-to-day expenses that crop up. As I'm standing the boat, that will be fair all round.'

Harry Wharton laughed.

'Quite!' he agreed. 'Couldn't be fairer—if there was a boat! But now you've told your funny story, run away and play.'

'Oh, really, Wharton—!'

'Buzz off!' roared Johnny Bull.

'Look here, you fellows, I mean it—.'

'Oh, hook it, Bunter,' said Bob Cherry. 'We've had enough of your hampers, and we don't want to hear about your boats. Travel!'

'But I tell you I mean it,' hooted Bunter. 'I'll tell you all about the boat. It's named the Nautilus—.'

'Shut the door after you.'

'There's a canvas cover for the boat, when we don't feel like camping on shore—.'

'Travel!'

'And a stove, and cooking things, and all that, and the locker will be crammed with grub, and all of the best, too, I can tell you. Regardless of expense,' said Bunter, impressively.

'Has your postal order come?' asked Nugent, sarcastically.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'And it will be ready and waiting for us at Staines, when we call for it,' went on Bunter.

'I—I mean, when I call for it. If you fellows are ready to start on the first of August, I'll have that boat all ready for you.'

Bob Cherry chuckled.

'Doesn't he roll it out as if he believed it himself?' he said.

'Oh, really, Cherry! Think I'm pulling your leg?' demanded Bunter. 'I tell you, it's honest Injun. That boat will be ready for us at Mawson's boat-yard at Staines, on and from the first of August—.'

'Pile it on!'

‘Look here, if you fellows don’t believe me—.’

‘Believe you! Ha, ha, ha!’

‘The believfulness is not terrific, my esteemed fat fibbing Bunter,’ chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘Like me to show you the letter from Mawson’s about the boat?’ demanded Bunter.

‘They’ve written to say that it will be ready for—for me. I’ll show you their letter, if you like.’

‘Oh, do!’ grinned Bob.

‘So I jolly well will!’ said Bunter.

He groped in a pocket. The Famous Five watched him with grinning faces. Not for one moment did they think of believing in Bunter’s boat: and they had no doubt that he would fail to find that letter, with a lame explanation that he had lost it. It was somewhat of a surprise, therefore, to see him draw a crumpled letter from a sticky pocket.

‘Here it is,’ said Bunter, cheerily. ‘Like to read it?’

‘Oh, let’s!’ said Bob.

Bunter tossed the letter on the table. Harry Wharton picked it up, and the Famous Five read it, all together. Amazement came into their faces as they read. Certainly, no one in No. 1 Study was likely to guess that that letter had been left on the stone seat in the cloisters by Coker of the Fifth, that Billy Bunter had pitched it into the ivy: and that later, when this tremendous scheme for ‘dishing’ Horace in the hols had germinated in his fat brain, he had groped for it there and retrieved it. They took that letter at face value, as it were: and at face value it was astonishing—but convincing!

Mawson’s Yard,
Staines.

Dear Sir,

The boat Nautilus will be ready to be called for on and from the 1st August, with all fittings, Supplies, etc., as per instructions received.

Yours faithfully,

Mawson and Co.

‘Well, my only hat!’ said Bob Cherry, after a long minute of astonished silence. ‘This beats the band!’

‘Beats it hollow!’ said Nugent.

‘The beatfulness of the esteemed band is terrific,’ concurred Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘Looks okay, and no mistake,’ said Harry Wharton.

Grunt, from Johnny Bull.

‘Catch in it somewhere,’ he said. ‘We know Bunter.’

‘Oh, really, Bull—.’

‘Well, there it is in black and white,’ said Bob.

That settled it! There it was, undoubtedly, in black and white. Billy Bunter had solved the problem: and all was calm and bright!

CHAPTER 9 ON THE THAMES

'It was August the First,
And quite soft was the skies!'

Bob Cherry quoted that remark of Truthful James, as he stood with his hands in his pockets, gazing at a glimmering river, dotted with craft of all sorts and sizes, and a sky of cloudless blue. Father Thames, on that bright sunny day, was looking his best. The river glowed and rippled in the sunshine: Middlesex on one side, Surrey on the other, basked in the summer rays. It was warm: it was sunny: the weather was fine, and looked like keeping fine: and a fine August on the river really was something for any fellow to enjoy. Boats and skiffs and punts, white flannels and gay parasols, met the eye in great numbers. And it was August the first, the day appointed for the Famous Five to meet Bunter in his boat, and begin that trip on the Thames which had been planned for the hols. And there they were—on the tow-path above the bridge at Staines — five of the six who were to form the crew of the Nautilus. The sixth—Billy Bunter to wit—had not yet put in an appearance.

Why Bunter had arranged to pick them up on the towpath above Staines, the Famous Five did not know. No reason was apparent why they should not all have walked into Mawson and Co.'s boat-yard at Staines, and there pushed out the Nautilus. Bunter, however, had been very particular about it: and as Bunter was standing the boat, it was not a matter for argument. So the Famous Five had foregathered from various parts at Staines station, walked over the bridge, and there they were—waiting for Bunter and his boat. They had been waiting now quite a little while: but it was very pleasant on the tow-path, looking at the river, watching the passing craft, and no one was disposed to grouse—only on Johnny Bull's brow was a thoughtful frown.

Johnny seemed to have a lingering doubt about Bunter and his boat. Even Johnny had to admit that definite arrangements, in black and white, must be regarded as reliable. That letter from Mawson and Co. had settled the matter. All the Co. would have regarded Billy Bunter's generous offer to 'stand' the boat for a holiday on the Thames, as nothing more or less than a figment of the fat Owl's imagination: but for the letter from Mawson's. But though Billy Bunter might indulge in airy flights of fancy, it was absurd to suppose that a practical firm of boat-builders could or would. That letter from Mawson's was indubitable and incontrovertible proof that the boat Nautilus was ready at the boat-yard on August the first, requiring only to be called for. Yet somehow a doubt lingered in Johnny's mind.

It was an unusual, indeed a surprising, state of affairs, no doubt. Seldom or never was William George Bunter known to stand his 'whack' in anything. He was the man to push in, and stick on: and to take the lion's share of whatever might be going: but he was not, as a rule, the man to stand his whack. On this occasion he was standing his full whack. Bunter was supplying the boat, and incidental expenses were to be met by the other fellows: which was, as the fat Owl had said, fair all round. Arrangements that were fair all round were not customary with W. G. Bunter: but this time there certainly seemed no room for doubt.

Johnny Bull shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked down the river.

'No sign of Bunter yet,' he remarked.

'Oh, he's coming!' said Bob, cheerily.

'Better late than never!' said Frank Nugent.

‘The esteemed and absurd Bunter is always late,’ remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. ‘But the lateness is better than the neverfulness.’

Grunt from Johnny Bull. Harry Wharton, seated on his bag on the grassy bank, glanced at him, and laughed.

‘Don’t you expect to see Bunter and his boat, Johnny?’ he asked.

‘I’ll expect him when I see him!’ answered Johnny.

‘Rot!’ said Bob Cherry. ‘Mean to say you’ve come all this way, not expecting to see the jolly old boat at all?’

‘Well, no!’ said Johnny, after a thoughtful pause, ‘I suppose it’s okay. But—.’

‘Is the butfulness terrific?’ grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘Well, I came because you fellows came,’ said Johnny. ‘But—.’

‘But what, which, and how?’ asked Bob.

‘Well, I don’t get it,’ said Johnny Bull, shaking his head. ‘Why couldn’t we all turn up at Mawson’s boat-yard with Bunter and get out the boat?’

‘Bunter fixed it up this way,’ said Harry. ‘Blessed if I know why: but what does it matter?’

‘It doesn’t,’ admitted Johnny. ‘But—.’ He shook his head. ‘We’ve had a walk, carrying our bags: and might as well have stepped into the boat at Mawson’s—if there’s a boat!’

‘If!’ repeated Harry. ‘My dear chap, do you think Mawson’s would have written that letter to Greyfriars, if everything wasn’t fixed up?’

‘Well, no!’ Johnny shook his head again. ‘Anyhow, I’ll expect to see Bunter in that boat when my eyes fall on him in it—not before.’

‘Rot!’ said Nugent.

‘The rotfulness is terrific, my esteemed Johnny.’

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’ roared Bob Cherry, suddenly.

Four juniors looked round.

‘What—?’ began Harry Wharton.

‘Bunter!’ roared Bob. ‘Jolly old Bunter! Look!’ Bob pointed across the shining water.

‘Feast your eyes, my beloved ’earers! There’s jolly old Bunter, as large as life and twice as natural!’

‘Oh!’ ejaculated Johnny Bull.

The Famous Five all stared in the direction of Bob’s pointing finger. From a boat on the river, a big pair of spectacles flashed back the sunshine. A fat face, with a smear of jam round a capacious mouth, met their eyes. A burly man in a jersey was puffing the boat across from the Middlesex side. Billy Bunter sat in the stern. He was not looking towards the juniors on the bank. He was busily occupied, in an occupation which did not surprise the Famous Five: helping himself to jam-tarts from a paper bag. Possibly that was the reason why Bunter was a little late. No doubt there had been a pause for light refreshment at Staines, before Bunter bothered about lesser matters.

But there, at all events, he was! Even Johnny Bull had to expect Bunter now—now that his eyes actually fell on him!

‘Looks a jolly good boat,’ remarked Nugent.

‘Top-hole!’ said Bob. ‘Room for the lot of us, and a little over. Whoever stood Bunter that boat knew how to pick it out.’

‘But who the dickens did?’ said Johnny Bull.

‘Well, that’s Bunter’s affair, not ours,’ said Harry Wharton. ‘There’s the boat, at any rate:

and there's Bunter in it.' He waved his hand. 'This way, Bunter!'
'Halo, hallo, hallo!' roared Bob Cherry. 'Here we are, old fat bean!'
Billy Bunter lifted his eyes and spectacles from the bag of jam-tarts, and blinked at the group on the tow-path. He grinned, and waved a fat hand. Then that fat hand returned to the paper bag, and another jam-tart was transferred to the capacious mouth.
The boat pulled into the bank. The man in the jersey laid in the oars, and looked round. 'This your party, sir?' he asked.
'That's right!' chirruped Bunter. 'Chuck them the painter. You can get back now.'
The man in the jersey stepped out, and handed the painter to Harry Wharton. Apparently he was to walk back to Mawson's by way of the bridge. But he did not start immediately. He stood looking at Bunter, who, neglecting the bag of jam-tarts for the moment, ran fat hands through his pockets. He did not seem to find anything in those pockets, and the look of the man in the jersey became a little expressive.
'Ten bob, sir!' he remarked, casually.
'That's all right, my man,' said Bunter. He blinked at the Famous Five. 'I say, you fellows, it's ten bob for pulling this boat across. One of you pay this chap, will you—I've run out of change.'
A faint grunt was audible from Johnny Bull. But the Co. came up smiling, as it were. Incidental expenses were to be met by the Co. and this apparently was one of the incidental expenses. Four half-crowns were produced from various pockets, and handed to the man in the jersey, who touched his cap and departed. And the chums of Greyfriars were left in possession of the boat in which they were to enjoy the summer's holiday on the Thames: and even Johnny Bull, with all his lingering doubts, did not dream of dreaming whose boat it was.

CHAPTER 10 FALSE ALARM

BILLY BUNTER grinned.
Bunter had reason to grin.
He lolled on cushions in the stern seat of the Nautilus, chewed pineapple, and grinned. Life, that sunny day, looked good to Bunter. Already he had explored the well-stored locker, and found that Coker's Aunt Judy had not failed to supply all the excellent articles enumerated in the long list Horace had mentioned, in that talk with Potter and Greene in the old cloisters at Greyfriars. Such a supply, indeed, had never met Bunter's eyes and spectacles, outside a tuck-shop. Needless to add, the fat Owl did not delay in sampling those ample supplies. It had never been Bunter's way to wait for a meal, if he could help it, till a mealtime came round.
The boat was rolling up to Datchet. Frank Nugent steered, and Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull walked with the tow-rope, towing the Nautilus. Harry Wharton and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh were sorting out things in the boat: surprised, indeed astonished, to find it so amply provided with everything that a boating party camping along the Thames could possibly require. It seemed to them that whatever friend or relative had lent Bunter that boat for the summer, had looked after him remarkably well, regardless of expense. Undoubtedly that boat, with its ample cargo, was a substantial contribution to the trip on the Thames: and it was only fair for the Co. to stand everything else. Not that they were

likely to have much choice in that matter, for the incident of the man in the jersey indicated that Bunter had arrived in his accustomed impecunious state.

Billy Bunter, his fat limbs sinking in soft cushions, grinned over the excellent pineapple that belonged to Horace Coker. Every now and then he chuckled.

The effects of Coker's stump had long since worn off. But Bunter had not forgotten that stumping. If Coker of the Fifth fancied that he could make a Remove bend over and take 'six', just as if he was a Sixth-form prefect, without something coming back for it, Coker had another guess coming! It was, in fact, while debating in his fat mind how to 'get back' on Coker, that Bunter had evolved the amazing scheme that was now in operation. It had been easy—almost too easy.

The boat, at Mawson's boat-yard at Staines, was ready to be called for on and from the first of August. Coker planned to call for it on the third or fourth, according to what he had said to Potter and Greene. Personally, he was quite unknown to anyone at Mawson's. Any fellow calling himself Coker could turn up at the boat-yard, and Mawson and Co. would be none the wiser. Any doubt on the subject would be dispelled by showing that letter, which Mawson and Co. had written to Horace Coker at Greyfriars School. All that Bunter had to do, was to turn up at the boat-yard before Coker did, with that letter in his pocket.

He had not evolved the whole brilliant scheme all at once. Bunter's fat brain worked rather slowly. His first idea had been to call for the boat, walk it off, and leave it somewhere along the Thames for Coker to hunt for. But that scheme, like the little peach in the orchard, grew and grew, in Bunter's fat mind, till it assumed its present shape. Coker's carelessness with that letter from Mawson and Co. gave him a trump card. The Famous Five had fallen for it: taken it, in fact, like gudgeons taking bait. The wily fat Owl was not merely 'dishing' Coker as just retaliation for that stumping. He was booked for a summer holiday on the Thames, all expenses paid. It was no wonder that he grinned over Coker's pineapple.

What Harry Wharton and Co. would have said—and done !—had they suspected the facts, Bunter did not know, though he could not doubt that it would have been something emphatic. But that cut no ice, because they were not going to know. Bunter, certainly, wasn't going to tell them: and how could Coker? Starting on the first of August, they would be miles and miles and miles up the river, before Coker looked in at Mawson's on the third or fourth. The Nautilus would have vanished among the countless holiday craft on Father Thames. So far as Billy Bunter could see—which was not, perhaps, very far, even with the aid of his big spectacles—the outlook was set fair.

So he enjoyed Coker's pineapple and grinned over it, a fat and contented Owl. But the cheery grin faded a little on the fat face, as Harry Wharton, glancing back on the river, remarked:

'Hallo, we know the three fellows in that boat!'

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh followed his glance, and nodded his dusky head.

'The knowfulness is terrific,' he assented.

Frank Nugent glanced back over his shoulder.

'Oh, that lot!' he said. 'No rows in the hols, you fellows! We're not at Greyfriars now—we don't want any rows.'

'Right as rain!' agreed Harry. 'I'll give them a wave as they pass—they'll soon be passing us, as they're pulling. No rows in the hols.'

Billy Bunter felt his fat heart sink. Coker's pineapple suddenly seemed to lose its excellent flavour. He gave the juniors a startled blink, and then twisted his fat head round to blink back along the river. A boat was coming on behind, with three fellows in it, whom the Greyfriars juniors knew! Bunter's thoughts jumped at once to Coker and Potter and Greene. Was it possible—was it awfully, fearfully, perilously possible—that Coker had decided on an earlier date, that he had already dropped in at Mawson's, discovered that his boat had been raided, and started in pursuit? The awful possibility made William George Bunter feel quite faint.

He concentrated his eyes and his spectacles on the following boat, at which the juniors were looking.

There were three fellows in it, in white flannels, and Panama hats. Two of them were pulling at the oars: one sat in the stern. But the boat was still at a distance: and though Harry Wharton, Nugent, and Hurree Singh recognized the three fellows in it, the Owl of the Remove could not make them out clearly. Were they the Fifth-form trio of Greyfriars?

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

He had not forseen any such awful possibility. Coker, in the cloisters, had distinctly said the third or fourth. Had he, after all, started on the first, and was he now just behind the fat Owl who had borrowed his boat?

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

'Hallo, they've seen us!' said Harry. 'They're putting it on! Looks as if they want to catch us up.'

Frank Nugent laughed.

'Looks like it,' he said. 'We don't want any rows in the hols, but perhaps they do!'

'If they do, they can have all they want,' said Harry; 'I'd rather steer clear of them in the hols, but it's up to them.'

'I—I say, you fellows, let's steer clear!' gasped Bunter. 'We—we don't want any rows on a holiday! Lets get away before they come up.'

'Couldn't be done, as they're pulling and we're towing, answered Harry.

'Call to Bob and Johnny to jump in! Quick!' exclaimed Bunter. 'Look here, with all you fellows puffing, we could get away from them all right.'

Harry Wharton stared at him.

'Likely!' he said. 'Think we're going to run away from them?'

'The runawayfulness is not the proper caper, my esteemed fat funky Bunter,' remarked Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

'Look here—!' howled Bunter.

'Don't get into a flap, old fat man,' said Frank Nugent, soothingly. 'If they want a row, we can handle them all right: you just look on.'

'I tell you we ain't going to have a row with Coker—!' howled Bunter.

'Coker!' repeated Harry, blankly. 'Who's talking about Coker?'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. 'Ain't it Coker in that boat?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled Nugent. 'Think Coker's after you in the hols with that stump, Bunter?'

'Oh!' stuttered Bunter. 'There's three of them—you said you knew them—I—I thought it was Coker and his pals—'

'Nothing to worry about, if it was,' said Harry, laughing. 'Old Coker's forgotten all about

that hamper long ago, fathead.'

'Oh! Yes! No! I—I mean—I—I thought—,' stammered Bunter. 'I—I mean, I—I'm not afraid of Coker, Of—of course. But if it ain't Coker, it's all right.' He blinked at the following boat. 'I can't make them out yet—.'

'Highcliffe men,' said Nugent. 'Ponsonby and Gadsby and Monson. Nothing to get into a flap about.'

'Oh!' said Bunter. Greatly relieved, the fat Owl sat down on his cushions again. The bare idea of Coker turning up suddenly and unexpectedly was terrifying. But there was nothing terrifying about three members of the Fourth Form at Highcliffe School. It was only a false alarm, and Billy Bunter resumed chewing Coker's pineapple, easy once more in his fat mind, and quite indifferent to Pon and Co.

There was a hail from the bank. Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull, at the tow-rope, had sighted the following boat, and recognized its occupants.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' called out Bob, 'Highcliffe cads in that boat! Give them a yell as they go by, what?'

'Wash it out!' called back Harry Wharton. 'No rows in the hols.'

'Oh, all right!'

At Greyfriars, there was often—more often than not—war between the Famous Five and Ponsonby and Co. of Highcliffe. So it was really quite laudable, on the part of the Greyfriars juniors, to be bent on peace, perfect peace, at this chance encounter in the holidays. Pon and Co., apparently, were doing the Thames in the hols, just as Harry Wharton and Co. were doing it: and the chums of the Remove were prepared to let them pass, without a single uncomplimentary remark, and even with a friendly wave of the hand!

But Harry Wharton, as he watched the Highcliffe boat drawing nearer, doubted whether Pon and Co.'s intentions were equally pacific. Ponsonby, who sat in the stern, was staring at the Greyfriars' boat, and Monson and Gadsby, at the oars, had looked round over their shoulders. Evidently they recognized the Greyfriars' party: and they had, as Wharton noted, speeded up the oars, and were pulling faster, to overhaul the Nautilus. He noted, too, that Pon made some grinning remark to his comrades. The captain of the Greyfriars Remove frowned a little. Really and truly, he did not want a row with old enemies, in holiday time: he would have been well content to see Pon and Co. pull on and disappear up the Thames. But that was a matter for the Highcliffians to decide, for their boat, under oars, had the advantage of speed over the Nautilus, floating on at the end of the tow-rope. The Highcliffe boat came on fast, and in a few more minutes, it was level with the Nautilus. Then Gadsby and Monson, at a sign from Pon, slowed down with the oars.

'Greyfriars cads!' called out Ponsonby.

'Highcliffe rotters!' called back Nugent, cheerily.

'What's that you've got on board?' went on Ponsonby. 'Is it a porpoise, or a walrus? Did you get it at the Zoo?'

Billy Bunter ceased to chew Coker's pineapple, and gave Cecil Ponsonby a glare that might almost have cracked his spectacles.

'Yah' he hooted. 'I say, you fellows, chuck something at those Highcliffe swobs.'

Whiz!

Ponsonby groped in a bag at his feet. His hand came up with something in it. It was a ripe red orange. Before the Greyfriars fellows knew what he was going to do, it was done.

Pon seemed to be a good marksman. That orange came straight as a bullet, and it caught Harry Wharton unexpectedly on the nose. Squash!

Taken quite by surprise, the captain of the Remove tottered, and sat down suddenly, with a bump that rocked the Nautilus.

‘Oh, my esteemed hat!’ ejaculated Hurree Janset Ram Singh. ‘Ow!’ he added, the next moment, as another accurately aimed orange crashed on his ear, and he went sideways. There was a yell of laughter from Gadsby and Monson.

Frank Nugent jumped to his feet.

‘You cheeky cads!’ he roared. ‘You—whoo-hooop!’

A third orange whizzed, and squashed in the middle of his features. Nugent sat down in the stern seat again without intending to do so.

‘Oh, crikey!’ gasped Bunter. ‘Urrrh! Oh! Ooogh! Goooooogh!’ He broke off, spluttering, as yet another orange whizzed, and impinged on his fat little nose. He dropped the remnant of Coker’s pineapple, and clasped that fat little nose with both fat hands. ‘Ow! Oooogh! Wooooh!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ came from the Highcliffe boat.

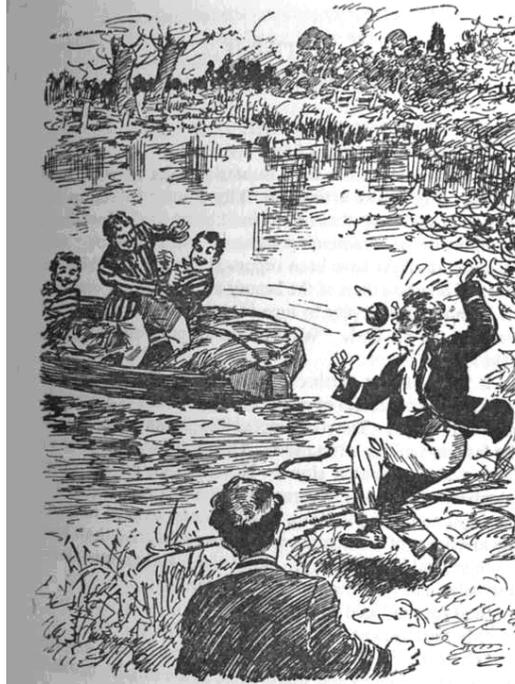
Harry Wharton scrambled up, his face red with wrath.

He was no longer thinking of a friendly wave to the Highcliffians as they passed! He stared round for something to hurl back at the enemy. But Pon made a sign to Gadsby and Monson, and their oars dipped again, and their boat shot past the Nautilus.

‘Oh, my hat!’ exclaimed Bob Cherry, staring from the bank. ‘Those Highcliffe cads—.’

‘Look out!’ gasped Johnny Bull.

The playful Pon seemed to be in great form. Leaving the Nautilus astern, the Highcliffe boat pulled on past the two juniors at the tow-rope: and as it passed, Ponsonby groped in the bag again, and rose with a juicy orange in either hand. It was too late for Bob to ‘look out’ as the missile came, and he gave a roar as it landed in his eye. The next moment the other orange was squashing in Johnny Bull’s neck. Then the Highcliffe boat shot onward, the three young rascals yelling with laughter as it went. They left an enraged and exasperated Greyfriars party behind them, as they disappeared amid innumerable craft up the river.



CHAPTER 11 “WHAT’S THE HURRY?”

‘LOVELY night!’ said Billy Bunter.

Five fellows looked at him.

It was quite unlike Billy Bunter to take note of such details. Night was a time for Billy Bunter to clamp his eyes shut, and keep them shut, indifferent to the loveliness or otherwise of surrounding scenery. And as Bunter was yawning, it might have been supposed that he was thinking more of blankets than of the beauty of the summer evening.

‘Seems rather a pity to turn in, on such a lovely night,’ went on the fat Owl. ‘What about keeping on by moonlight?’

It was, in fact, rather lovely on the Thames at the moment. The shades of night, as the poet has expressed it, were falling fast. The river rippled like gleaming gold under the last rays of the setting sun. The moon was peeping up from a sky without a cloud.

Nevertheless, all the other members of the boating party were thinking of tying up for the night and going to sleep. Only Bunter seemed to think the loveliness of the coming night more attractive than bed.

‘Um!’ said Bob Cherry. ‘Jolly night, and no mistake—but we’ve had rather a long day, Bunter.’

‘Bed for me,’ said Johnny Bull.

‘Me too!’ yawned Nugent.

‘The early bedfulness and the early risefulness are the way to wealthfulness and wisefulness, as the English proverb remarks,’ said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘I say, you fellows, don’t be slackers,’ urged Bunter ‘What’s the good of a holiday up the river, if you’re going to slack about?’

‘Who’s slacking about?’ inquired Johnny Bull, in a voice not unlike that of the Great

Huge Bear.

‘You jolly well are!’ retorted Bunter. ‘It’s going to be a lovely night, and we could be miles and miles further up by morning.’

‘What’s the hurry?’ asked Harry Wharton. ‘This is a camping trip, not a boat race.’

‘Oh! Yes! But—.’

‘But what?’ grunted Johnny Bull.

‘Oh! Nothing!’ said Bunter, hastily.

Really, Bunter could not explain the cause for haste. He was anxious, very anxious, to get as far as possible from Staines, in the shortest possible time. It might be a day or two before Horace Coker arrived at Mawson’s boat-yard in quest of his boat. Bunter had a good start. But he was anxious to make the most of it. He had had one alarm that day: a false alarm as it had proved. He did not want to risk having another. The further he was from Staines, the more Billy Bunter was likely to feel at ease. He would have liked to be on the upper reaches of the Thames by the time Horace Coker arrived on its lower reaches. But he certainly could not explain all this to Harry Wharton and Co.

Johnny Bull eyed him.

‘I’d like to know what the hurry’s about,’ he grunted. Bunter was grousing because we stopped to have a look at Runnymede —.’

‘Blow Runnymede?’ said Bunter, peevishly. ‘Think I care a bean whether King James signed Magna Charta at Runnymede or anywhere else?’

‘Wasn’t it King John?’ grinned Nugent.

‘No, it wasn’t’ said Bunter. ‘Better not tell Quelch that in form, Nugent.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Blessed if I see anything to cackle at. You fellows are slacking,’ said Bunter. ‘I’ve asked you half-a-dozen times to pull instead of towing, but you prefer crawling along like a lot of snails.’

‘Nobody’s stopped you pulling, if you want to!’ said Johnny.

‘Oh, really, Bull—.’

‘This old bus is a bit heavy for pulling, Bunter,’ said Bob Cherry. ‘And we’re doing the river, not racing up to Oxford. And we’re all a bit tired now, and ready to turn in.’

‘Slackers!’ said Bunter.

Johnny Bull breathed hard.

‘If Bunter keeps on asking to be kicked, I shall kick him’ he said. ‘The fat image has sat there all day, eating most of the time, and never lending a hand with anything. And now—.’

Bob Cherry chuckled.

‘Not a bad idea to keep on, if Bunter likes the idea,’ he said. ‘It’s a lovely night, as he says, and there’s going to be a jolly old moon. One fellow can tow the boat, while the others turn in. That all right, Bunter?’

‘That’s all right,’ agreed Bunter. ‘You’re not such a slacker as the other fellows, Cherry.’

‘Oh, yes, I am—just!’ said Bob. ‘I’m going to turn in, while you do the towing.’

Billy Bunter jumped.

‘Wha-a-t?’ he ejaculated.

‘Good egg!’ exclaimed Harry Wharton, heartily. ‘Jump to it, Bunter. Give him the line.’

Billy Bunter did not stir. He made no move to take possession of the tow-rope. He sat and blinked at the Famous Five in speechless indignation.

‘Ready, Bunter?’ asked Nugent, laughing.

‘Think I’m going to tow, while you fellows go to sleep?’ gasped Bunter, finding his voice at last.

‘You’re going to tow, if anybody’s going to!’ said Bob. ‘Why not?’

‘The whynotfulness is terrific!’ chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Billy Bunter seemed to be able to see quite a lot of reasons why not. Exertion in any shape or form never had any appeal for Bunter. And the bare idea of plodding along the tow-path under the moon, towing a heavy boat with other fellows asleep in it, really seemed to take the fat Owl’s breath away.

‘Oh, don’t be silly asses!’ he yapped. ‘If you’re too jolly lazy to keep on, we’ll tie up. Mind, we start again at daylight. None of your slacking about after the sun’s up.’

‘Bunter the early riser!’ chuckled Bob. ‘You fat image, I don’t suppose you’ll open your eyes before nine or ten.’

‘I don’t suppose he’ll open them at all, as there’s no rising-bell on the Thames,’ remarked Nugent.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘You can jaw,’ said Bunter. ‘But we’re not going to hang about and waste time, this side of Reading at any rate.’

‘What’s the special attraction of Reading?’ asked Bob. ‘The biscuits?’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘I mean, Reading’s a good step from Staines—.’

‘Quite,’ said Harry Wharton. ‘But we’re a good step from Staines already: and what’s the matter with Staines, anyway?’

‘Oh! Nothing! There’s no hurry, of course,’ stammered Bunter. ‘Don’t you fellows get the idea that I’m in a hurry to get a long way from Staines. Nothing of the kind, of course’

‘My only hat!’ said Bob, in wonder. ‘Anybody might think that Bunter had been up to something at Staines, and was afraid of a bobby coming after him.’

‘Oh, really, Cherry—.’

‘Blessed if I make the fat chump out,’ grunted Johnny Bull. ‘Is there anybody at Staines you’re funky of, Bunter?’

‘I—I ain’t afraid of Coker, of course—.’

‘Coker!’ repeated the Famous Five, with one voice.

‘I—I—I mean—!’ stammered Bunter.

‘Well, what on earth do you mean?’ exclaimed Harry Wharton, quite mystified. ‘You fancied it was Coker in that Highcliffe boat this afternoon, and now you seem to fancy he’s at Staines. So you fancy he’s after you in the hols about that hamper?’

‘Oh! No! Not about the hamper—I—I mean. I—I don’t fancy he’s after me at all,’ gasped Bunter. ‘But—but if he did turn up—.’

‘Well, he might, I suppose, as we’ve heard that he’s doing the Thames these hols,’ said Harry. ‘But what would it matter if he did? Coker doesn’t bite.’

‘He—he might cut up rusty—.’

‘Even Coker wouldn’t cut up rusty without a reason, fathead. And if he did, we’d dip him in the Thames to cool his temper.’

‘Oh! Yes! But—.’

‘But what?’

‘Oh, nothing!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I—I say, you fellows, I’m going to turn in. If you’re too jolly lazy to keep on, you’d better tie up.’

Billy Bunter said no more. He was rather afraid that he might have said too much already. He proceeded to select a comfortable spot to roll himself in blankets, leaving the selection of the tying-up spot, and the process of tying up to the other fellows.

Why Billy Bunter feared that Horace Coker, of the Greyfriars Fifth, might be ‘after’ him, was quite a mystery to the Co., but evidently Bunter did. As Coker, like themselves, was doing the Thames in the hols, it was quite possible that they might fall in with him: but they saw no reason for alarm in such an encounter. Coker undoubtedly was an aggressive sort of fellow: but even Coker had to have a reason for ‘cutting up rusty’: and if by chance he did, the Famous Five were more than able to deal with him. So they could see absolutely no cause for Bunter’s alarm. And certainly they were not going to turn a summer saunter up the river into a sort of boat-race, because the fat Owl fancied that Horace Coker might be ‘after him’.

Billy Bunter’s misgivings were quite a puzzle to the Famous Five. However, neither Bunter nor his misgivings mattered very much: and they gave up the puzzle, and proceeded to tie up under the bank, and camp out in the Nautilus. And as the moon climbed higher in cloudless heavens, and turned the gliding Thames into a sheet of gleaming silver, they slept peacefully in the roomy boat so comfortably fitted up by Coker’s Aunt Judy—lulled, perhaps, by the deep snore from Billy Bunter, that was wont to wake echoes in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars, and now reverberated along the grassy bank of Father Thames.

CHAPTER 12 GONE !

HORACE COKER breathed hard, and he breathed deep. A frown corrugated his brow. Coker was perplexed, annoyed, and his temper was rising.

Potter and Greene were tactfully silent. When Horace Coker was annoyed, it was a time for lesser mortals to be tactful.

‘I don’t understand this,’ said Coker.

That, in itself, was not surprising. There were few things that Coker did understand. But Potter and Greene were as perplexed as Coker. Fellows who called at a boatyard for a boat, as per arrangements made, cut, and dried, weeks earlier, naturally expected to find that boat there. They did not expect to be told that it had already been called for and was gone. Much less did Coker expect to hear that a young gentleman named Coker had called for that boat, and gone off in it, the previous day. Coker himself was the young gentleman named Coker for whom that boat was reserved: certainly no other young gentleman named Coker or anything else had any right to walk off with that boat. Potter and Greene were puzzled: but did not get excited about it. Coker was not only puzzled, but he was getting very excited: indeed, on his looks, he was seeking to understudy the Alpine young man, whose brow was set and whose eye beneath flashed like a falchion from its sheath.

It was the second of August: a sunny, almost blazing day on the Thames. Coker, having told Potter and Greene that they would start on the third or fourth, had decided on the second, which was like Coker. It was rather fortunate for a fat member of the Greyfriars

Remove that he hadn't decided to make it the first of August. So there they were, the three of them, on the second of August, ready to embark on the Nautilus, which should have been waiting and ready for their embarkation: only to learn that the Nautilus had disappeared the day before in possession of some mysterious young gentleman named Coker! That, at any rate, was the name the mysterious young gentleman had given when he called for the boat.

'You fellows make it out?' demanded Coker, as Potter and Greene did not speak. 'Got any idea what it means?'

'The boat's been called for—,' said Potter.

'I know that.'

'You didn't ask some relation of yours to call for it?' hazarded Greene.

'Don't be an ass, Greene.'

'Well, as it was somebody named Coker—.'

'I'll Coker him!' said Coker. 'There's some idiotic mistake here, and I'm going to know what it means.'

'Well, they've told us to see Mr. Mawson in his office about it—.'

'That's what I'm going to do,' yapped Coker, 'and if you fellows have finished hanging about and jawing, come along.'

Still tactful, Potter and Greene refrained from pointing out that it was Coker who had been hanging about and 'jawing'. They followed Coker into Mr. Mawson's office. Mr. Mawson, already aware that a young gentleman named Coker had called for a boat already called for and taken away by a Young gentleman named Coker, was as perplexed as the three Greyfriars seniors.

'This is very extraordinary,' said Mr. Mawson. 'If you are the Mr. Coker for whom the Nautilus was engaged—.'

No "if" about that!' interrupted Coker. 'I'm Coker! Horace James Coker, of the Fifth Form at Greyfriars—that's me! My Aunt Judith engaged the boat, and had it fitted up and stored all ready for me on the first. Where is it?'

'It was called for yesterday—.'

'I've been told that already.'

'The young gentleman gave the name of Coker, sir. He produced the letter we wrote to Mr. Coker at Greyfriars School on the subject of the boat.'

'Wha-a-at?'' stuttered Coker.

'If you are Mr. Coker—.'

'If!' roared Coker. 'Don't I keep on telling you that I'm Coker.'

'I was about to say—.'

'I'm Coker! You can ask these chaps if you like—they know me at school. Think I'm not Coker?' roared Coker.

'I was about to say, that if you are Mr. Coker, it is very singular that the young gentleman yesterday was in possession of the letter we wrote to Mr. Coker at Greyfriars School—and which we naturally took as a proof of identity.'

Coker gazed at Mr. Mawson.

Some imposter, evidently, had walked off with that boat. But the boat-builder was in doubt which was the impostor — the young gentleman who had called for the boat on the first, or this young gentleman who was calling for it on the second. Both of them, obviously, couldn't be the same Coker. But which was which?

‘That letter!’ gasped Coker, at last. ‘I remember it—I left it somewhere—you fellows remember where I left it?’

‘I remember you showed it to us in the cloisters,’ said Potter. ‘The day that fat young ass Bunter was doggo in the ivy—.’

‘Never thought about it since,’ said Greene.

‘You wouldn’t!’ said Coker, witheringly. ‘Fat lot of good expecting you fellows to remember anything. Somebody must have got hold of that letter—I must have left it about.’

‘Oh, my hat!’ said Potter. ‘Is this some Greyfriars chap japing us?’

‘Don’t be a goat, Potter. What has any Greyfriars chap got to do with it?’ yapped Coker.

‘Plain enough,’ yapped back Potter. ‘If you left that letter about, and somebody got hold of it, where could it have happened except at the school?’

‘Oh!’ said Coker. This was so obvious, that even Coker could see it when it was pointed out. If that letter, left about by Coker, had been picked up by anyone, the picker-up could only be an inhabitant of Greyfriars School.

‘Oh!’ repeated Coker, with thunder in his brow. ‘Some Greyfriars man—he’s got hold of that letter, and walked off our boat for a jape on us! That’s it! By gum, I’ll jape him. I’ll spiflicate him! I’ll pulverize him! I’ll strew him in little pieces all over the Thames! I’ll—.’

‘Well, if it’s some chap’s japing, we shall get the boat back all right,’ said Greene, soothingly. ‘What was he like, Mr. Mawson? Can you tell us what the chap was like who called for the boat yesterday?’

‘Certainly, sir. A stout young gentleman—unusually plump—in spectacles—’

There was a roar from Coker! He was well acquainted with a Greyfriars chap whom that description fitted.

‘Bunter!’ roared Coker.

‘Oh, Scissors!’ ejaculated Potter. ‘Bunter—that fat Remove tick—.’

‘Bunter’s walked off with our boat!’ said Greene, almost dazedly. ‘That fat frowsy kid in the Remove—.’

‘Bunter!’ repeated Coker. ‘That fat villain Bunter! He pinched that letter, and he’s walked off with my boat just as he walked off with my hamper. Why, I’ll skin him!’

‘Hem!’ said Mr. Mawson. ‘If this affair is merely a schoolboy practical joke—.’

‘I’ll practical joke him!’ roared Coker.

‘If that is all—!’

‘All?’ roared Coker. ‘I’ll spiflicate him!’

‘Looks as if it was a chap named Bunter, at our school, Mr. Mawson,’ said Potter. ‘Any idea where he went with the boat?’

‘I will call Jackson,’ said Mr. Mawson.

Jackson was called. He proved to be the man in the jersey who had taken the Nautilus across to the Surrey side for the plump young gentleman in spectacles.

‘Landed the young gentleman with the boat at the towpath above the bridge, sir,’ said Jackson, ‘where his friends was waiting for him.’

‘His friends?’ repeated Coker. ‘Was there a gang of them, then?’

‘There was a party of five waiting for the young gentleman, sir.’

‘Five?’ repeated Coker. ‘By gum! A gang of the Remove with that fat villain—he couldn’t handle the boat on his own. A gang of them! What were they like?’

‘Oh, jest schoolboys, sir,’ said Jackson. ‘One of them was a dark young gentleman.’ Coker jumped! A dark young gentleman, in a party of five Greyfriars schoolboys, furnished an unmistakable clue!

‘Wharton’s gang!’ gasped Coker.

‘That lot!’ said Potter, with a nod. ‘Oh, my hat! Bunter came here for the boat, and the rest were waiting for him on the tow-path—!’

‘The whole gang of them in it together!’ bawled Coker. ‘Look here, my man, did you see where they went in the boat?’

‘Up the river, sir.’

‘Up the river! A day out in my boat, I suppose! I’ll give them a day out! Come on, Potter! Don’t dawdle about, Greene. We’ve got to get after those young villains! Goodness knows where they left the boat after their day out! They never sent it back, or it would be here now! Why,’ added Coker, breathless with wrath, ‘they may mean to keep it for days—camping out in my boat, I shouldn’t wonder! They’ve got cheek enough! Quelch doesn’t whop them enough in the Remove. Are you fellows coming, or aren’t you?’

Coker stamped out of Mr. Mawson’s office: probably to Mr. Mawson’s relief. Potter and Greene followed him. They knew now what had become of Coker’s boat: it was in the hands of the Famous Five of the Greyfriars Remove and William George Bunter: the whole gang of them together, as Coker had not the slightest doubt. Whether they had snooped it for a day out on the river, or whether they had the amazing nerve to think of keeping possession of it for days on end, Coker didn’t know and couldn’t tell. But if there was doubt about the Removites’ intentions, there was none about Coker’s. Coker was going after that boat and after the raiders: he was going to recapture that boat, and hand out drastic punishment to those raiders. If, as he said, Quelch did not whop them enough in the Remove, Coker was going to make up for the deficiency. Harry Wharton and Co. had a day’s start, up the river: but full vengeance was on the track!

CHAPTER 13 SAUCE FOR THE GANDER

‘HALLO, hallo, hallo!’ ejaculated Bob Cherry.

He stopped, and stared.

The tow-rope slacked, and the crew of the Nautilus all looked shoreward at Bob, excepting Billy Bunter. It was a warm afternoon, and Billy Bunter had done exceedingly well at lunch, and was in need of a rest after his exertions. He was taking that rest, his eyes shut and his mouth open, with a handkerchief over a fat face to keep off the flies that were attracted by its somewhat sticky state.

Six fellows manned the Nautilus: but only five of them took turns at towing. There was really no reason why Billy Bunter should not have taken his turn, unless laziness was a reason. Johnny Bull, indeed, was disposed to assign Bunter his turn, and invigorate him, if necessary, by an application of shoe-leather. But it was, after all—or at least was supposed to be—Bunter’s boat: and making Bunter work required more exertion than the work itself. For these two reasons Bunter had, so far, taken it easy: and it was his firm intention to continue to take it easy, if he could, all the way up to Lechlade. So there was the fat Owl, sleeping and snoring in the drowsy summer’s afternoon, dreaming either of

the meal he had lately demolished, or of the next one to come: indifferent to scenery, and sunshine, and the rippling river, and gliding craft and glancing sails: though the rest of the crew were enjoying every minute of it.

‘What’s up, Bob?’ called out Harry Wharton, as the exclamation from the junior at the tow-rope reach four pairs of ears on the *Nautilus*.

‘Look!’ answered Bob, and he pointed.

The boat’s crew looked. Marlow had been left behind, and above Temple Lock the tow-path was on the Berkshire side: and it was on the edge of Berkshire that Bob Cherry had halted. At that point the bank was somewhat high and under the high bank, a boat was tied up: a very handsome boat, smaller than the *Nautilus*. The juniors, looking at it, fancied they had seen it before: but why Bob was specially drawing their attention to it, they did not for the moment know.

‘What about it?’ asked Nugent.

‘Pon’s boat!’ answered Bob.

‘Oh!’ exclaimed all four together.

‘I noticed the name on it yesterday when Pon handed out those oranges,’ explained Bob.

‘Look at it—the Gay Lark.’

‘Pon’s boat!’ agreed Harry Wharton, after another glance. ‘Those Highcliffe cads are about here somewhere.’ He rubbed his nose, where an orange had impinged the previous day.

Evidently, Pon and Co. were about. They had landed on Berkshire, and left their boat tied up under the bank. They were not to be seen on the tow-path: but there was no doubt that they were not far away. Back of the tow-path was a shady wood, and it was likely enough that the Highcliffians had landed for lunch on shore, and had not yet re-started after the interval, as it were.

Bob Cherry came down the bank, looping the tow-rope over his arm.

‘Tired?’ asked Nugent.

‘Fathead,’ replied Bob: a reply which seemed to indicate that he had not stopped on account of fatigue. ‘We’re tying up here for a bit.’

Johnny Bull’s eyes gleamed.

‘Good egg!’ he said. ‘Those Highcliffe cads gave us toco yesterday, and got away with it. Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. We’ve got all the time we want, to wait for them to come back to their craft.’

‘Nobody’s in a hurry—except Bunter!’ said Bob, with a grin. ‘Bunter seems to be in a hurry to get away from somebody at Staines, goodness knows why. He can make up for lost time by pulling the boat, if he likes, after we’re through with those Highcliffe ticks.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

It was not probable that Billy Bunter, whatever the cause of his mysterious haste to get further up the Thames, would want to make up for lost time by pulling at the oars. If personal exertion was required for haste, Bunter’s motto was ‘festina lente’: with the stress on ‘lente’. No doubt Bunter would have raised objections to a halt, had he been awake. But he snored on happily while the Famous Five tied up the *Nautilus*.

All the Co. were quite anxious to see Pon and Co. again. Pon had raked them fore and aft, so to speak, with those oranges, the day before: and shot on up the river out of the reach of reprisals. Now he was within reach. As Bob said, nobody but Bunter was in a hurry: and the Famous Five were quite content to sit it out while they waited for Ponsonby and

Gadsby and Monson to return to the Gay Lark, watching the cheery life of the river in the bright sunshine.

There was a chuckle, as Bob Cherry sorted out a sack of potatoes from the ample stores of the Nautilus. No oranges were available for Pon and Co. There had been a supply of that succulent fruit: Aunt Judy had forgotten nothing in providing for her dear Horace: but Billy Bunter had already disposed of that supply, and none was left for ammunition. But it seemed likely that Pon and Co. would enjoy a fusillade of potatoes, as much as the Greyfriars fellows had enjoyed a fusillade of oranges. The Famous Five waited patiently. 'They won't see us till they get down to the boat,' remarked Bob, cheerfully. 'We're right under the bank. We shall catch them napping.'

'The napfulness will be terrific,' agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'And the esteemed and execrable Pon will learn that whoever is saucy to the goose must be saucy to the gander, as the English proverb remarks.'

'Good old English proverb,' chuckled Bob. 'Hallo, hallo, hallo, there's somebody!'

A white Panama hat showed over the rushes, where the Highcliffe boat was tied up: a dozen yards or so ahead of the Nautilus. The Highcliffians were returning to their craft. Pon's voice floated down on the summer breeze.

'Pulling or towing?'

'Better pull, I think,' came Monson's voice. 'We've been a dashed long time over lunch—.'

'What's the hurry?'

'Well, I'd rather keep ahead of that Greyfriars gang. We don't want them to run into us.'

'Rot! That lumbering old bus isn't at Marlow yet.'

'Oh, they're a frightfully energetic crew, that Greyfriars gang,' came Gadsby's voice.

'Shouldn't wonder if they pass us on the river.'

'We'll give them something to remember us by, if we see them again.'

'Oh, don't be a goat, Pon! They hadn't a chance yesterday: but if they had, where should we be?'

'You're funky of that gang, Gaddy—!'

'I'd rather not run into them, and so would you, Pon, so don't talk rot,' said Gadsby.

'We'd better pull up to Henley, and keep clear of them.'

'Oh, all right, if you've got cold feet!' sneered Ponsonby

Every word came to the ears of the grinning Greyfriars juniors in the *Nautilus*, on the wind down the river. Gadsby and Monson, evidently, were anxious to keep at a safe distance: and no doubt Pon would have been equally anxious, had he surmised that the Greyfriars boat was anywhere in the offing. Anyhow, the three had decided on rowing instead of towing. Gadsby came down the bank, and tossed a lunch-basket into the Gay Lark, and followed it in. Ponsonby and Monson followed him, without even a glance along the high bank in the direction of the Nautilus. There was no doubt that the Highcliffe party were caught napping. It was not till he was putting his hand to the painter, that Cecil Ponsonby noticed another craft along the bank, and then his glance at it was careless—for a moment. The next moment he recognized the Nautilus and five grinning faces looking at him therefrom, and jumped.

'Oh, gad!' he ejaculated.

'What—!' began Monson. 'Oh!' He jumped too. 'That gang!'

'Greyfriars cads!' gasped Gadsby.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' roared Bob Cherry. 'Jolly glad to see you again, Pon! Glad to see you, Gaddy! Glad to see you, Monson.'

'The gladfulness is terrific!' chuckled the nabob of Bhanipur.

Bob cast the Nautilus loose, and shoved an oar at the bank. The Nautilus surged on towards the Gay Lark, the three Highcliffians staring at it blankly as it surged.

Whiz! whiz! whiz! whiz!

The potatoes flew fast. They fairly rained on the three in the Gay Lark. Pon caught the first under his chin, the second in his eye, the third in his neck. He sat down suddenly in the Gay Lark, and it rocked wildly against the rushes. As he sat, potatoes rained on him. Gadsby and Monson hopped, and jumped, and almost danced, in wild efforts to dodge the fusillade. The Gay Lark rocked and rocked, and shipped water, and Ponsonby found himself sitting in several gallons of the Thames.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Give them a few more!'

'Give them jip!'

'Give them terrific jip!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

It was quite enjoyable at the Greyfriars' end. The Famous Five yelled with laughter as they pelted. But the three Highcliffians did not seem to be enjoying the episode at all. Gadsby and Monson hopped and danced, and howled and yelled, while Ponsonby splashed and sprawled, and howled more loudly than either. And still the potatoes came raining from vigorous hands.

Gadsby scrambled out of the boat, and up the bank. He seemed to have had enough potatoes. Monson dashed after him. They disappeared in a gasping and spluttering state. Ponsonby scrambled up, but pitched over again in the rocking boat, helped by a potato that crashed under his ear. He sprawled in splashing water, with quite disastrous results to his flannels. Up he scrambled again, dripping, and plunged wildly up the bank after his friends. The Gay Lark was left to rock untenanted at its painter.

'Ha, ha, ha!' followed him in a roar from the Greyfriars boat.

Bob Cherry stood on a thwart and looked over the bank. Three dishevelled figures were disappearing into the wood across the tow-path. Bob hurled a final potato, which landed in the back of Pon's neck, and accelerated him as he vanished into the wood after Gadsby and Monson.

'Looks like a score for this party, what?' chuckled Bob.

'Sort of!' agreed Harry Wharton, laughing.

'May as well push on, now the circus is over! Hallo, hallo, hallo, Bunter's woke up!

Want to take your turn at the tow-rope, Bunter?'

Billy Bunter blinked at five laughing faces.

'I say, you fellows, you've been making a row and woke me up,' said Bunter, peevishly.

'I say, what are you laughing at? Anything funny here?'

'Yes, rather,' answered Bob.

'What is it then?'

'It's just woke up!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Yah!' retorted Bunter: and he turned over and went to sleep again: and once more a

melodious snore floated down the Thames on the wind, while the Nautilus and her cheery crew towed on up the river.

CHAPTER 14 COKER ON THE WAR-PATH

‘BUT—!’ said Potter.

‘Don’t jaw, Potter.’

‘But—!’ said Greene.

‘Don’t gabble, Greeney.’

Potter ceased to ‘jaw’, and Greene to ‘gabble’, both of them eyeing Horace Coker in a very expressive way.

They were on the tow-path above Sonning. Several other persons, as well as Potter and Greene, eyed Coker in passing. Coker’s voice was powerful, and he never saw any reason to subdue it.

But Coker of the Greyfriars Fifth was impervious to eyeing. He did not care a boiled bean if all the passers on the tow-path, all the boats’ crews on the river, indeed, all the inhabitants of Berkshire and Oxfordshire, heard him, and eyed him. He had no use for futile remarks from his comrades, and he did not hesitate to tell them so. Potter and Greene, for the umpteenth time, resisted an almost frantic urge to up-end Coker and dip his head in the Thames.

Having reduced them to silence, Coker stood staring down the river in the direction of Sonning, some distance out of sight. He scanned every craft that came up from Sonning Lock. As it was a bright day in holiday time, Coker had plenty of scanning to do. Father Thames was thickly populated with craft of all kinds. But among those innumerable craft, not one escaped Horace Coker’s eagle eye. Craft after craft rowed, or sailed, or towed, past Coker as he watched: but not the craft he was seeking.

Coker was looking for a boat with a crew of six, one of them a dark young gentleman, another an uncommonly plump young gentleman in glasses. On the crowded river, other members of the crew might possibly have escaped even that eagle eye: but Coker was assured of spotting the dark young gentleman and the plump young gentleman. And he did not want his attention taken off his watch by unnecessary remarks from Potter and Greene. Coker was one of those strong, silent characters who like to do all the talking. Potter and Greene exchanged glances. They were leaning on a tree back of the tow-path. That was not very hard work, on a golden afternoon, with the golden river rolling under their eyes. But they had been leaning there quite a long time, and were getting a rather fed-up feeling. In another sense they were far from fed up: for they wanted their tea: a trifle to which Coker appeared to give no consideration whatever.

The sunny month of August had advanced by several days, since Coker and Co. had arrived at Staines to find the Nautilus gone. Coker had started in pursuit with little doubt that he would soon run down the borrowed boat. But it had not worked out like that. News had been picked up here and there, from wayfarers or lock-keepers, of a boat which counted, among its crew, a dark young gentleman and a plump young gentleman: but it was rather vague.

Potter and Greene had no objection to a ramble up the Thames valley, lurching and dining and sleeping at inns, with Coker and his unlimited wallet to foot the rather

extensive bills. It was pleasant enough, if you came to that. Neither did they object to recapturing that boat, if it proved recapturable, and giving the cheeky Removites a thrashing all round for their unheard-of cheek in walking off with it. But they wanted to take it easy: after all, it was supposed to be a holiday. Coker, whose energy and determination had no bounds, did not allow them to take it easy. Chingachgook on the trail of a paleface could not have been more energetic and determined than Horace Coker on the trail of the Famous Five. And now Coker had a clue—or was sure he had.

‘I’m getting tired of sticking here, Greeney,’ murmured Potter: not loud enough for Coker to hear.

‘Same here!’ grunted Greene.

‘Coker thinks they’re coming up from Sonning—.’

‘Thinks?’ grunted Greene. ‘Can he think?’

‘Ten to one he’s got it wrong.’

‘A hundred to one, you mean.’

‘What about taking a stroll, and leaving him to it?’

‘Not a bad idea.’

Potter and Greene detached themselves from the tree-trunk. Another minute, and Horace Coker would have been deserted by his faithless followers. But at that moment Horace Coker turned round. His eagle eye, instead of watching the river downstream, fell on Potter and Greene.

‘What are you fellows mumbling about?’ he asked. ‘Oh! Nothing,’ stammered Potter.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Oh! Not exactly going—!’ stammered Greene.

‘Don’t wander away,’ snapped Coker. ‘It’s queer how you fellows wander if my eye’s off you. Only yesterday afternoon you lost yourselves, and never turned up till dinner-time at the inn. You’re the fellows to lose yourselves if you get half a chance.’

It was one of Coker’s attractive qualities that his leg could be pulled to any extent. It did not even occur to his powerful brain that Potter and Greene on that occasion had ‘lost’ themselves with malice aforethought, as it were.

Losing themselves was really the only way of getting a rest from the too-strenuous Horace. Luckily, Coker never suspected that his friends ever felt that they needed a rest from him.

‘Besides, they may be along any minute now,’ went on Coker. ‘You’ve got to be on the spot. I might need your help. Of course, I could handle that gang of Remove kids on my own. Still, you may as well take a hand.’

Horace Coker was never likely to admit that he couldn’t have handled Remove kids in myriads. Still, it was possible that a recollection lingered of the mix-up in No. 1 Study at Greyfriars, when unexpectedly and unaccountably it was Coker himself who had been at the receiving end of the handling.

‘What about tea, Coker?’ asked Greene, sadly.

‘Tea!’ Coker snorted out the word. He dismissed the frivolous suggestion with that snort. Tea did not come into the picture when Coker was on the war-path, and the enemy almost in his grasp.

‘I say, suppose their boat’s gone past, Coker?’ suggested Potter.

‘Don’t be an ass, Potter. If you can help it, I mean.’

‘But—!’ said Greene.

‘That man down at Sonning told us plainly that he saw them go into the lock,’ said Coker. ‘Did you hear him, or were you deaf?’

‘Oh! Yes! But—.’

‘Might have been mistaken—.’

‘No mistaking a nigger and a fat barrel like Bunter,’ said Coker, decisively. ‘It’s that crew all right! I daresay there was a jam in the lock and they’re taking their time. Did we cut up the river to get ahead and wait for them, or didn’t we?’

‘Will they walk right into our hands, towing that boat up, or won’t they?’

‘Um! Yes! But—.’

‘We’ve got them fixed, as soon as they tow along,’ said Coker. ‘Simply no chance for them. One of you will collar the fellow towing, and hold on to him and the towrope. I shall jump into the boat and knock them right and left. You will back me up, if I need it. I’ve planned the whole thing—got it all cut and dried. We pitch them out on the tow-path, and get the boat—after thrashing them for their cheek. We’ve simply got to wait.’

Sad to relate, Potter and Greene did not express admiration for Coker’s masterly strategy. No doubt that was because they were tired of standing about, and wanted their belated tea. They did not in the least share Coker’s indifference to tea. Indeed, they wanted it so much, that they were prepared to pay the bill for it themselves, if only they could lose Coker for a time.

‘But I say—!’ ventured Potter.

‘Don’t jaw so much, old man,’ said Coker. ‘You fellows are like a sheep’s head—nearly all jaw! Just wait and don’t jaw.’

With that injunction, Horace turned his back again on Potter and Greene, and resumed watching downstream.

Potter and Greene gave his broad back almost ferocious looks. Actually, they had little faith in their great leader’s strategy. They thought it quite probable that the Greyfriars craft might have passed unnoticed among the swarm of other craft coming up from Sonning Lock: and equally probable that the juniors might have stopped to camp or even pulled across the river to camp on the Oxfordshire side — even if that man at Sonning hadn’t been mistaken after all, which they considered likely enough. Anyhow, they were fed up with hanging about, fed up with Coker’s dictatorial manners and customs, and getting frightfully hungry. They exchanged a stealthy glance.

‘What about it?’ whispered Potter.

‘Cut!’ whispered back Greene.

Coker, heedless of them, eagle-eyed the Thames downstream. Silently, Potter and Greene stepped round the tree on which they had been leaning, and vanished into space.

Their great leader, happily unconscious of that base desertion, continued to watch downstream. Minutes passed—long minutes, and many of them. But at last, at long, long last, a gleam came into the eagle eye, as it picked up a towing boat—towed by a sturdy youth with a ruddy face and a mop of flaxen hair.

‘Young Cherry!’ breathed Coker.

The eagle eye danced.

There was no mistake about it. That man down at Sonning had had it right, after all. There was the Nautilus, towed by Bob Cherry. In it could be seen the dusky face of the dark young gentleman, and the ample form of the plump young gentleman in glasses, sprawling in the stern in an attitude of ease if not grace—and the eagle eye picked up

Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, and Johnny Bull, in turns— the whole gang of them, in fact!

Coker's strategy had proved equal to requirements: in spite of the doubts of his followers! There they were— walking right into his hands! Horace Coker grinned with satisfaction. 'Look out, you chaps,' he called, over his shoulder. 'They're coming!' Coker was as yet happily unaware that his faithless followers had vanished into space. He did not dream that, at that very moment, they were sitting down to tea in a riverside cafe a quarter of a mile away. 'Look out! We've jolly well got the whole gang on toast now.'

No answer came from Potter and Greene: which, in the circumstances, was not surprising. Coker stared round irritably.

'Deaf?' he hooted. 'I tell you they're coming—they'll be along here in a few minutes. We'd better get in cover behind that tree—they might pull out if they spotted us. Why—what—where——.'

Coker had uttered quite a lot before he perceived that there were no ears to hear. He stared at the tree on which Potter and Greene had been leaning, the last time his eyes had fallen on them. No one was leaning on it now. He stared up and down the tow-path. People were to be seen: but not one of them bore the remotest resemblance to a Fifth-form man of Greyfriars. He stared round, scanning as much of Berkshire as was within his range of vision. Slowly but surely it dawned on his powerful brain that Potter and Greene were gone.

Coker breathed hard.

'Gone!' he gasped. 'Gone! Wandered away, like they did yesterday—lost themselves again, I shouldn't wonder. By gum! The fatheads—the asses—the dummies—the—the blithering nitwits—just when I want them, too—Oh, this is the limit!'

He stared, or rather glared, again, at the boat coming up the Berkshire bank. It was coming at a moderate pace: but it was coming. Going in search of Potter and Greene was not a practical proposition: even if he found them, the Nautilus would have passed on up the Thames, goodness knew where, before he got back with them. Coker had to rely on himself. Luckily, he had plenty of confidence in himself and feared no foe.

Neither was his strategy yet exhausted. Giving up Potter and Greene—writing them off as a dead loss, as it were—he backed behind the tree on which they had leaned so long that afternoon. Sagely he reasoned that if the Greyfriars crew spotted him from a distance, they would push out into the river to elude an encounter with the owner of the boat they were so coolly and cheekily appropriating. And where would Coker be then? Coker supposed that he could do quite a lot of things: but he did not suppose that he could jump across the Thames from Berkshire to Oxfordshire. Strategically, Coker took cover behind that tree: and, peering round the trunk, waited for the Greyfriars boat to draw level.

Minutes passed. It came nearer and nearer, Coker's eyes glittered, and he clenched large fists. Nearer and nearer—till at last Bob Cherry, at the tow-rope, was passing the tree that hid the burly form of Coker of the Fifth.

But he did not quite pass it.

Forth from his cover, like a lion from his lair, rushed Horace Coker. Bob, too suddenly taken by surprise to know what was happening, was swept off his feet by that mighty rush, and hurled headlong into a bed of rushes on the river's margin, where he sprawled dizzily with his feet in water and his head in mud. Coker grasped the tow-rope as Bob dropped it, and dragged, and the Nautilus bumped heavily into the bank, with a bump that

caused Billy Bunter to roll off his seat and strew his fat figure in the bottom of the boat, with a series of startled and indignant squeaks. Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, stared blankly at Coker's wildly-excited face, as he dragged on the rope Seldom or never had they been so astonished.

'Got you!' roared Coker.

CHAPTER 15 A LITTLE LIVELINESS

'COKER—!'

'That ass Coker!'

'That potty fathead—!'

'That terrific chump!'

'Ow! I say, you fellows, wow—ow—wow!'

All the crew of the Nautilus exclaimed together. Never had the chums of the Remove been taken so utterly and totally by surprise. That sudden irruption of Horace Coker came like a thunderclap.

Coker had kept in cover till the last moment, in the belief that the Famous Five, if they spotted him, would pull out into the river to escape. In point of fact, nothing would have been further from their thoughts: as they had not the faintest suspicion of the real ownership of the Nautilus. They would have passed Coker by, as indifferently as any other subject of Queen Elizabeth II. So far as they knew, Coker had absolutely no reason for 'cutting up rusty' in the hols. This sudden attack, apparently for no reason at all, fairly took their breath away.

Bob Cherry sprawled dizzily in rushes and mud, hardly knowing what had happened to him. Billy Bunter rolled and squeaked in the bottom of the boat, as the nose of the Nautilus climbed the bank under Coker's tug. Four juniors tottered in the slanting boat, and almost tumbled over. All sorts of loose things rolled and tumbled about the Nautilus, accompanying Billy Bunter as he rolled and tumbled and squeaked

'Got you!' roared Coker, victoriously.

He threw down the tow-rope, and jumped into the boat. There was a yell of anguish as a large foot landed on a fat leg.

'Yaroooh!'

'Now, you cheeky young scoundrels—!' panted Coker

For the moment, at least, the hefty Horace had the upper hand. Nugent, as the boat rocked wildly, stumbled against him: and Coker's mighty grasp closed on Frank Nugent, whirled him up, and tossed him out on to the tow-path. Nugent sprawled there in a dizzy state.

The next moment Coker's mighty grasp was on Harry Wharton.

But at this point the reaction set in. The Co. were surprised—amazed—astounded—taken completely off their guard and off their balance. But they were quick to react. They had not expected Coker, if they chanced to encounter him, to be hunting for trouble. But evidently, he was: and after the first few moments of dizzy amazement, they were ready to give him all the trouble he wanted, and some over.

Coker's plan was simple. He was going to chuck the young rascals out of the boat, one after another, and take possession. Had it occurred to Coker that the Co. were, as much as himself, the victims of Billy Bunter's trickery, it might also have occurred to him that a

few words of explanation would have cleared the matter up. But no such idea occurred to Coker. The Remove 'gang' were all in it together, in Coker's belief. That cheeky gang of Greyfriars juniors had bagged his boat. Coker was now, so to speak, re-bagging it: and his methods were drastic.

But Harry Wharton did not whirl headlong out of the Nautilus after Nugent. He gave grasp for grasp, and struggled.

'Out you go!' roared Coker.

'You mad ass!' panted Wharton. 'Help here, you men.'

'Collar that potty fathead!' gasped Johnny Bull. His grasp was added to Wharton's; and the next moment, Hurree Jamset Ram Singh also had his dusky hands on Horace.

One at a time, the big, burly, beefy Fifth-form man could certainly have handled the crew of the Nautilus. But three together proved a much tougher proposition. The boat rocked against the bank as they struggled, and the whole bunch went sprawling over, to an accompaniment of fiendish howls from a fat junior over whom they sprawled.

'Yaroooh! Gerroff! I say, you fellows—yow-ow-ow! Wow!'

Nobody heeded Bunter. The three had their hands full with Horace, and Horace had his hands full with the three. They rolled and tumbled and struggled all over the rocking Nautilus.

Frank Nugent scrambled up on the tow-path. He stared for a moment at the struggling heap in the boat, then grasped the trailing tow-rope and pulled the Nautilus in, and jumped on board. He did not lose a moment in joining in the fray. Four pairs of hands were now on Horace Coker. And more were coming. Bob Cherry dragged himself out of the rushes, dripping with water and mud.

'Coker!' gasped Bob. 'That mad ass Coker! Has he gone crackers, or what? By gum!' Really, it might have been suspected that Horace Coker had gone 'crackers', judging by his utterly unexpected and amazing actions. But crackers or not, he had to be dealt with. Bob leaped into the Nautilus and added himself to the struggling heap.

Coker of the Fifth was at the bottom of the heap. He had discovered in No. 1 Study at Greyfriars, that he could not handle those cheeky juniors in a bunch. Now that lesson was borne in upon his mind a second time.

Had Potter and Greene been at hand, to lend much-needed aid, the outcome of the fray might have been doubtful. But Potter and Greene were a quarter of a mile away, enjoying tea and a rest from Coker—and the outcome was not doubtful at all. Coker was not easy even for five fellows to subdue. He resisted till not an ounce of breath was left in his burly form. Everybody was in a fearfully dishevelled state by the time Coker was flattened out in the bottom of the Nautilus and pinned there gurgling for wind, without a kick left in him. He gurgled and gurgled. Five breathless juniors panted over him, pinning him down.

'I say, you fellows.' Billy Bunter, having crawled as far as possible from the seat of war, blinked at the scene through his big spectacles, in a state of great uneasiness. The sight of the rightful owner of the Nautilus had as an alarming an effect on Billy Bunter, as the ghost of Banquo on Macbeth. He almost forgot that he had been trampled on, in his terror of Coker letting out the truth about that boat. At the moment, Coker was letting out only a series of breathless gasps. 'I say, chuck him out! I say—chuck him out and let's get away! I say—.'

‘We’re jolly well going to chuck him out!’ said Harry Wharton. ‘Can’t make out what the mad ass fancied he was up to, jumping on us like that! Pitch him over, you fellows.’



‘Urrrrrrgggh!’ gurgled Coker.

‘Over he goes!’ gasped Bob Cherry. ‘Look at me— smothered with mud! Coker’s going to have some of the mud too.’

‘Urrrrrggh! Leggo !’ gurgled Coker. ‘You young ruffians—urrrrggh——.’ He strove to renew the struggle, as five pairs of hands lifted him. But he was too helplessly winded. Between the Nautilus and the bank was shallow water—a foot of water, with a good six inches of mud under it. Bob Cherry had already sampled that mud. Now it was Coker’s turn. The Famous Five heaved together.

Splash!

‘He, he, he!’ from Bunter.

Horace Coker sprawled in the shallow margin of the Thames. Then from the flurry rose the head and shoulders of Coker, streaming with water and mud. Water soaked him from head to foot, and mud clothed him as a garment. The Famous Five were not feeling their bonniest, after that Homeric combat. But they seemed to find Coker’s aspect entertaining. There was a shout of laughter on the Nautilus.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Gurrrrrrggh!’ gurgled Coker, through a mouthful of mud. He gave the boat’s crew a muddy glare. ‘Urrrggh!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Grooooooogh!’

‘You want a wash, Coker!’ chuckled Bob Cherry.

‘The wantfulness of a wash is terrific, my esteemed idiotic Coker!’ chortled Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

‘Urrrrgh!’ Coker gurgled, and dabbed mud from his eyes. ‘Wurrgh!’ He stood with his feet deep in mud, the Thames flowing round him. But even yet Horace did not seem to have had enough. He made a clutch at the gunwale of the Nautilus and grasped it.

‘Oh, my hat!’ exclaimed Bob Cherry. ‘He wants some more.’

Coker rapidly received the more he apparently wanted. The end of an oar impinged upon his chest, and he rocked, and sat down in the Thames again. It flowed round his neck as he sat.

‘Sit it out, old bean,’ said Bob, affably.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Coker did not sit it out for more than a second. Then he scrambled up again. But this time he did not grasp at the gunwale. Even Coker seemed to realize that he had had all he could digest. He dodged another lunge from the oar, and splashed and scrambled up the bank. Bob Cherry gave another lunge, at the bank, and the Nautilus rocked out into the river.

‘May as well pull for a bit,’ he remarked. ‘I’ve had enough of Coker—if you fellows have!’

Why Coker had hunted for that spot of trouble, nobody knew—excepting William George Bunter!—but undoubtedly the crew of the Nautilus had had enough of Coker, and did not want to establish contact again—especially in his present muddy state! The tow-rope was pulled in, and the crew sat to the oars, and pulled on up the Thames. And as they pulled, they looked back at a muddy, dripping, dishevelled figure on the bank, at which everyone who came along the tow-path also stared—Coker of the Fifth, squeezing out water and scraping off mud: the most deplorable object in the valley of the Thames, anywhere from Staines to Cricklade. The last they saw of Coker was the shaking of a muddy fist: and the last he heard from them was a peal of laughter. Then Coker disappeared from view: and the crew of the Nautilus hoped that they were done with him: a hope that was to prove quite unfounded.

CHAPTER 16 IN CAMP

His friends agreed that it was jolly. Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh, indeed, declared that the jolliffulness was terrific. Even Billy Bunter condescended to give the shady little backwater, under the green foliage, an approving blink from his big spectacles. There were many ‘jolly’ spots along the Thames: their name was legion. But undoubtedly the chums of Greyfriars were now looking at one of the jolliest. And it looked very attractive for camping.

Two or three leisurely days had passed since the encounter with Coker. They had forgotten him. Even Bunter was feeling easier in his fat mind about Coker, now that they were above Reading. Harry Wharton and Co. had not the remotest idea that Coker was tracking them up the Thames: and Billy Bunter hoped, at least, that Horace was still carrying on the hunt in the lower reaches. Nobody was thinking of Coker now. The Famous Five were thinking of camping: and Bunter of supper.

‘Wonder of wonders!’ added Bob, as the purling backwater rippled round the bows of the

Nautilus.

‘What—?’ asked Harry, puzzled for a moment.

‘No board up!’ said Bob.

‘Oh, my hat!’

‘Actually, trespassers won’t be prosecuted, for once!’

The juniors chuckled. Amid the glorious scenery of the summer Thames, there had not been many spots of beauty without a notice-board warning the general public off. Some reaches, indeed, seemed to be chiefly populated by notice-boards, every one of which gave the grim warning that trespassers would be prosecuted. The Famous Five were law-abiding young citizens, with a proper respect for property: but they were growing a little tired of those notice-boards. Many and many a delightful spot was barred by them. But here, for once, was no notice-board; whoever owned that green wood and purling backwater was not, apparently, averse from letting the public have the benefit of it.

‘Wonder of wonders, and no mistake!’ said Nugent.

‘The wonderfulness is terrific,’ agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, ‘and the campfulness is the proper caper.’

‘Hear, hear!’

The Nautilus nosed into the backwater. It was quite a small stream rippling down from the Berkshire hills, flowing under the branches of great oaks and beeches that formed a green, shady arch overhead. Out on the river the August sun was blazing rather like a furnace: and the shade of the green foliage was grateful and comforting.

No doubt that desirable property belonged to somebody, and no doubt there was a house, probably a mansion, somewhere about. But the Greyfriars fellows saw no sign of it: they seemed to have that delightful spot all to themselves. They pushed on up the little stream with cheery faces.

‘Here we are!’ exclaimed Bob. ‘Just the spot!’

‘Couldn’t be better,’ said Harry.

On the bank of the stream, there was a little lawn, shut in by trees. It was precisely and exactly the spot for a camp. Willingly the juniors would have asked leave of the Owner of the property: but who and where and what he was they had no idea: and the absence of notice-boards seemed to indicate that he had no objection to visitors. And they were very careful and considerate campers: they were not going to do the slightest spot of damage. There were trippers on the Thames who left a trail of jagged tins and empty bottles and paper bags to mark their passage: but the Co. were not of that sort.

The Nautilus floated to the edge of the little green lawn, and Bob jumped ashore with the painter. He tied up to a post which had apparently been planted there for the purpose. His comrades followed him ashore, and Billy Bunter rolled after them. The next step was to land paraphernalia for the camp, and foodstuffs for supper: and Billy Bunter, having exerted himself to the extent of carrying a camp-stool ashore with him, sat on it and watched the Famous Five at work. There had been considerable shopping at Reading: and Aunt Judy’s stores, which had been somewhat depleted, had been renewed, and the locker was well stocked. Johnny Bull, with two or three tins under one arm, and three or four under the other, called to Bunter from the boat.

‘Here, Bunter, take this lot.’

Billy Bunter blinked round at him. He did not stir from the camp-stool. He gave Johnny only that one indignant blink. No doubt Bunter was tired. He had been sitting in the boat

for hours and hours, which was quite enough to tire Bunter.

‘Deaf?’ hooted Johnny. ‘Take this lot, fathead!’

‘Oh, really, Bull—.’

‘Chuck them to me, Johnny,’ said Bob Cherry, laughing. ‘Bunter’s a fixture.’

‘Is he?’ grunted Johnny Bull. ‘I’ll unfix him, then. Are you going to take these tins, Bunter?’

‘I’m sitting down!’ said Bunter, with dignity.

‘I can see that. Get up!’

‘Beast!’

Bunter did not even bestow another blink on Johnny. Getting up off that camp-stool, and helping in unloading cargo, had no attraction for Bunter. He merely grunted, and looked away.

That grunt, the next moment, was succeeded by a loud yell, as a tin of corned beef landed in the plumpest ribs in the Thames valley.

‘Yaroooh!’

Bunter got up! In fact, he bounded up. He rubbed fat ribs, and glared at Johnny Bull, with a glare that might have cracked his spectacles.

‘Taking the rest?’ asked Johnny.

‘Beast!’ roared Bunter.

Whiz! A tin of condensed dropped neatly on a fat head. There was another yell that woke the echoes of the Berkshire bank. Bunter liked condensed milk—he liked it with a tablespoon. But he did not like it in the tin in the form of a missile.

‘Ow! wow! Beast! Look here—,’ yelled Bunter.

‘Getting a move on?’ inquired Johnny.

Billy Bunter rubbed fat ribs with one hand, a fat head with the other. His glare at Johnny Bull was absolutely ferocious. But as Johnny took aim with a tin of peaches, he ceased to rub, and started towards the boat. Bunter liked peaches as much as he liked condensed milk: but had a strong objection to getting them in bulk in the tin. Johnny handed him an armful of tins. For the first time since the Nautilus had started up the river from Staines, Billy Bunter did a spot of work.

It was only a small spot—a very small spot. But it was enough for Billy Bunter. He landed the tins: but he did not sit down on the camp-stool again—it was within too easy range from the boat. He rolled away across the little lawn, and disappeared among the trees on the further side. He did not specially want a walk: but walking was preferable to working: so Bunter took a little walk, prepared to turn up again when supper was ready. Johnny Bull, coming to the gunwale with another armful, looked round for Bunter, but saw him not. Johnny gave an expressive snort, and left it at that.

But William George Bunter was the only slacker in the Greyfriars party. Five fellows set busily to work, and the camp was soon prepared: and a savoury odour rose from sausages sizzling in a frying-pan over the stove.

Supper, however, was not quite ready, when Bunter was heard from again. From under the beeches, a sudden yell reached the ears of the campers, and made them stare round in surprise.

‘Ow! Leggo’ Leggo my ear, will you. Ow! wow! Leggo!’

‘Oh, my hat!’ ejaculated Bob Cherry. ‘That’s Bunter. What trouble has that fat ass run into now?’

‘Yow-ow-ow-ow! Leggo!’ came another howl.

‘Sounds as if somebody’s got a pig by the ear!’ grunted Johnny Bull.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo, there he is!’

All the juniors stared at Bunter, as he emerged from the trees. He did not come alone. A burly man, with a red nose and a blue chin, was leading him—by the ear! That fat ear was compressed between a finger and a thumb, and Bunter uttered a series of painful squeaks as he came.

‘Oh, scissors!’ murmured Nugent. ‘Looks like trouble! Are we trespassing here after all?’ Bob Cherry whistled. The whole party felt dismayed. It was in fact dismaying, with the camp prepared and supper almost ready, if it turned out that they were after all on prohibited precincts. They stood watching the newcomer in silence, as he came across to the camp, still grasping Bunter’s ear.

‘I say, you fellows, make him leggo!’ wailed Bunter. ‘I didn’t know we were trespassing here, did I? It was you fellows—.’

The red-nosed, blue-chinned man released the fat ear at last. Bunter rubbed it tenderly, while the red-and-blue gentleman frowned at the campers.

‘What the dickens do you think you’re doing here?’ he demanded.

‘Camping!’ answered Harry Wharton, mildly.

‘And who gave you leave to camp on my land?’

‘Well, nobody, but—.’

‘You couldn’t even ask leave?’ snapped the red-and-blue gentleman ‘I find a gang of river trippers camping on my ground, and that fat feller wandering in my woods, and not so much as leave asked or a penny paid!’

Five clouded faces cleared. These last words indicated that it was a matter of paying a camping fee, which the Greyfriars party were quite prepared to do.

‘If it’s a question of paying—!’ began Harry.

‘What else would it be?’ snapped the red-and-blue gentleman, staring at him. ‘Think I bought this place for other people to use just as they like, and me paying rates and taxes on it? I don’t object to a camping party, if they don’t leave tins and bottles and torn paper about, and pay the regular fee. If you’d come up to the house and asked

‘We don’t know where the house is—it can’t be seen from here,’ said Bob.

‘Well, that’s so, mebbe,’ said the red-and-blue man, his frowning brow relaxing. ‘You look a decent lot, I’ll say that, and you can stay till morning, if you like, if you pay the fee and done with.’

‘How much?’ asked Harry.

‘Half-a-crown each is the figure, and cheap at that.’

‘I say, you fellows, that’s all right!’ squeaked Billy Bunter. ‘I don’t mind paying half-a-crown. One of you fellows lend me half-a-crown—.’

‘Shell out, you fellows,’ said Harry Wharton.

Five fellows ‘shelled’ out, producing the sum of fifteen shillings. The red-and-blue man looked quite amiable, as that sum was placed in a rather grubby palm. He rattled the coins into his pocket.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘You’re free of the place till ten in the morning. Don’t leave a lot of litter about, and burn up my turf with a camp-fire.’ His look became still more amiable, as he jingled the money in his trousers’ pocket. ‘Good-night, young gentlemen—make

yourselves at 'ome, and I 'ope you'll have a good night's rest without being disturbed. 'Good-night,' said all the juniors together: and the red-and-blue man walked away, and disappeared through the trees.

The Greyfriars campers were rather glad to see the last of him. However, it was all clear now, and they gave their attention to supper. Under the red sunset, they sat down to supper: and Billy Bunter ceased to rub a fat ear, and gave whole and undivided attention to the foodstuffs. The Nautilus rocked gently by the bank: the sunset glowed, the summer breeze whispered in the trees, and every face was cheery. Pleasantly tired with a day on the river, the juniors rather looked forward to a good night's rest, which the red-and-blue gentleman had so kindly hoped would not be disturbed. But the happenings of that balmy summer evening were not yet over.

CHAPTER 17 PAY UP !

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!' yawned Bob Cherry. His friends looked round.

'I wonder who that merchant is?' remarked Bob.

'Seems interested in us,' said Nugent, lazily. 'Well, he can stare as much as he likes—no charge for staring.'

'The starefulness is terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, his dark eyes curiously on the person who had appeared from the trees.

That person was a young man with a fishing-rod under his arm, apparently an angler, from his outfit. He stood at a little distance, after emerging from the trees, staring at the Greyfriars camp. He stared hard and he stared long: why, the juniors could not tell.

Camps on the banks of the Thames, in the sunny month of August, certainly were not rare sights. Probably there were hundreds, that summer evening on the river. But it seemed manifest that the young man with the rod was deeply interested in the Greyfriars camp. He stirred at last, and came towards the camp, with an easy saunter. The juniors watched him curiously as he came. Supper was over, and it had been a good supper. After supper, the usually strenuous juniors were enjoying a luxurious laze, chatting in the sunset before turning in. Billy Bunter was nodding drowsily, and an occasional snore escaped him.

Bunter would have been in his blankets already, but for the circumstance that he had supped not wisely but too well, and was too packed with provender and too lazy to move.

'Hallo!' said the young man with the rod, as he came up.

'Same to you, and many of them,' answered Bob, affably.

The young man stared for a moment, and then laughed.

'You seem to be making yourselves at home here,' he remarked.

'Quite, thanks,' yawned Nugent.

'Schoolboy party?' asked the young man, glancing over them.

'Guessed it in one,' agreed Bob.

'Did they teach you anything at your school about the rights of private property, and the law of trespassing?' further inquired the young man.

The Famous Five sat up and took notice, at that unexpected question. Even Billy Bunter reopened little round eyes behind big round spectacles.

'I don't quite know what you mean by that,' said Harry Wharton, quietly. 'We know that this is private property, but we're not trespassing.'

‘Not?’ said the young man. ‘You camp for the night on private property, without paying the fee charged here for camping, and you say you are not trespassing. May I inquire what else you call it?’

The Famous Five stared at him, as hard as he had stared at them on his first appearance. They had paid a fee for camping, to a gentleman with a red nose and a blue chin, so this came as a surprise, and a shock.

‘Look here, we’ve paid!’ snapped Johnny Bull.

The young man raised his eyebrows.

‘My memory must be failing me,’ he said, ironically. ‘I have no recollection whatever of having seen the colour of your money.’

‘You!’ ejaculated Bob Cherry.

‘I!’ assented the young man. ‘As the owner of this property, I naturally expect to receive the fee paid for camping on my land. Not an unreasonable expectation, I consider. I have no recollection of having received it from you. And my memory is really quite good, as a rule.’

His manner was bantering. The juniors looked at him, and looked at one another. If this sarcastic young man was the owner of that delectable spot, who was the red-and-blue man who had collected fifteen shillings from them as a camping fee?

‘Look here, I tell you we’ve paid!’ growled Johnny Bull. ‘If you’re the owner, who’s the man we’ve paid?’

The young man laughed.

‘Have you paid anybody?’ he queried.

‘Yes, we jolly well have!’ exclaimed Bob Cherry, hotly. ‘A man came along an hour ago, and said he was the owner of the place, and we paid him half-a-crown a head.’

‘If that’s true—!’

‘If!’ growled Johnny Bull, glaring at the young man rather like a bulldog about to pounce.

‘Well, if it’s true, you seem to be a very innocent set of trippers,’ said the young man.

‘Why didn’t you come up to the house? Any rogue could come along and say he was the owner of the place and touch you for a fee. I believe it’s a thing that happens quite often along the river. If you’ve been diddled by some riverside rogue, I’m sorry—but you can’t camp here for nothing. The regular charge is a pound a night for camping, and you must either pay it or clear out. That’s that!’

The young man was not laughing now. His manner was short and sharp. It looked as if he did not quite believe the statement that the campers had already paid for leave to camp in that delectable spot. And when they came to think of it, the juniors realized that the red-and-blue man had given no evidence whatever of his bonafides. They had taken him at face value, and it appeared that he was merely one of the riverside rogues who prey upon inexperienced or unreflecting trippers. No doubt the rascal had walked off laughing in his sleeve, with their fifteen shillings in his pocket: and they remembered, too, his final remark, which now had a sarcastic ring. The rascal had gone off, knowing that they were likely to be ‘disturbed’ later, when the real owner of the place turned up.

Johnny Bull clenched his hands.

‘By gum, I’d like to meet that swob again!’ he breathed. ‘I’d jolly well make his boko a bit redder.’

Harry Wharton compressed his lips. It was distinctly annoying and exasperating to learn

that they had been 'done': a set of innocents, as the young man termed them, 'diddled' by an unscrupulous rogue. But what was done could not be undone and the Greyfriars campers realized that they had to make the best of it.

'Well,' said the young man with the rod, showing signs of impatience. 'I'm sorry, as I've said, if you've been silly enough to be diddled by some stranger—but that's neither here nor there. Are you paying or going?'

'We're not going,' growled Johnny Bull.

'I say, you fellows, we jolly well can't go!' squeaked Billy Bunter. 'I'm jolly sleepy, and I'm going to turn in.'

'Shut up, Bunter.'

'Look here, pay the chap, and let's turn in!', hooted Bunter. 'What's the good of being mean, on a holiday?'

'Shut up!' roared Johnny Bull. 'Look here, you men, we're not going—and I don't see paying over again—!'

'Please yourselves!' said the young man with the rod. 'Wait here till I turn the Alsatian loose, if you like.' And he turned to walk away.

'Hold on!' exclaimed Harry Wharton, hastily.

The young man glanced back over his shoulder.

'I've wasted enough time here,' he snapped. 'Paying or going?'

'We'll pay, of course, as we're staying,' said Harry.

'The payfulness is the proper caper,' agreed Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

'Pay up and look pleasant!' sighed Bob Cherry.

Johnny Bull grunted. He said no more, and he paid up his share: but he did not look pleasant about it. In fact he looked far from pleasant. However, the sum of one pound was paid over to the young man with the rod: and with a curt good night, he walked away.

'Nice spot to camp in!' said Bob, with a grimace, when he was gone. 'But it's coming a bit expensive.'

'I wouldn't worry about that,' said Billy Bunter, with a curl of a fat lip. 'No good being stingy on a holiday. And I can jolly well say—yarrooh! Wharrer you kicking me for, Bull, you beast? You kick me again, and I'll—yooooooooooooooooop!' Bunter dodged a second one just in time.

Harry Wharton laughed, rather ruefully.

'Well, we've been diddled by that red-nosed johnny,' he said. 'But it can't be helped now. Let's turn in.'

And the ground-sheets were spread, and the campers rolled in their blankets, and as the sun disappeared from the summer sky, six juniors slept, and one snored, and not an eye reopened till the August sun was in the blue skies again.

CHAPTER 18

ORDERED OFF

'HUH!'

That remark, or rather snort, fell on surprised ears.

It was bright morning. The Greyfriars campers had turned out in gleaming sunshine.

They were as merry and bright as the morning. Bright sunshine, green shady trees, the

rippling backwater, the broad Thames rolling by, the whistling and twittering of birds in the branches, made up a scene that was quite delightful. Even Billy Bunter cast an appreciative blink around, before he concentrated his fat thoughts wholly on breakfast. Every fellow in the party agreed that it was jolly, and hardly regretted even that they had had to pay twice over for permission to camp in that happy haven. Indeed the idea was in their minds that they might do worse than make it their headquarters for a day or two, at the cost of another fee to the young man with the rod. They set about preparing breakfast in the cheeriest of spirits—Billy Bunter lending a hand to the extent of starting on the ham, while the other fellows boiled eggs and boiled the kettle for tea. But breakfast was not yet ready when that loud, emphatic snort reached their ears, and they all looked round at the snorter.

A stout gentleman was coming down the bank of the backwater. He had a plump face the hue of well-tanned leather, shaggy white eyebrows, an eyeglass glittering in one eye, and a stick under his arm. There was a hint of military stiffness in his stride. The juniors, looking at him, would have taken him for some retired military gentleman, as doubtless he was. But why he snorted as he stared at them they had no idea. They were unaware of anything in their aspect calculated to cause an old military gentleman to snort like a war-horse.

‘Huh!’

The second snort was even more emphatic than the first. Then the stout gentleman came striding at the camp with his military stride. A fiery eye gleamed through the gold-rimmed eyeglass. The juniors did not need telling that the stout man was angry. They could see that. But they knew no more the cause of his anger, than the cause of his snorts.

‘Gad! Trippers!’ he exclaimed.

‘Good-morning, sir!’ said Bob Cherry, politely. He did not like either the stout gentleman’s looks, or his remark: but Bob had a proper respect for age.

‘Top of a beautiful morning, esteemed sahib!’ said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a graceful bow of his dusky head.

‘Huh! Trippers! Get out!’

Polite greetings evidently had no ameliorating effect on the stout gentleman. He was angry, and getting angrier every moment. He raised his stick and pointed towards the rolling Thames.

‘Get out!’ he repeated, in a roar.

‘Oh, draw it mild!’ exclaimed Bob, warmly. ‘If you belong to the place, we’ve paid for leave to camp here, and it’s our show till ten o’clock.’

‘What? what? I belong to the place? What do you mean, you impertinent young rascal? I am Colonel Brumble! This is my property. Gad! if I belong to the place! If I belong to Brumble Court! Gad!’ The stout gentleman seemed in danger of choking, in his wrath.

‘Gad!’

‘Oh, my hat!’ breathed Harry Wharton.

‘Did—did you say your property?’ stuttered Bob.

‘Did I say my property?’ roared Colonel Brumble. ‘Yes, I did say my property! You are trespassing on my property! Trippers are not allowed on my property! Are you the same gang that pulled up my notice-board and threw it into the Thames? What? what?’

‘Oh, suffering cats!’ gasped Bob.

‘Oh, my esteemed hat!’ murmured the nabob of Bhanipur.

Apparently there had been a notice-board, after all! The Greyfriars party had been agreeably surprised, the previous evening, to find so delectable a spot minus a notice-board warning trespassers that they would be prosecuted. It seemed from the stout gentleman's remarks that there had been a notice-board, though there no longer was. Trippers, it appeared, had dealt with it.

Harry Wharton and Co. regarded the angry Colonel in utter dismay. Twice they had paid for leave to camp on that backwater, on each occasion to a person who represented himself as the proprietor. One of the two was a 'diddler': and now it dawned on them that both were 'diddlers'. First one and then the other had come along and 'diddled' them: and now the genuine owner had turned up! Or was this irate old gentleman the genuine owner?—or a third 'diddler'? Really, they could not feel sure: in a spot that seemed to have so unusual a number of owners.

'You, I have no doubt!' the Colonel was going on. 'My notice-board, pulled up and pitched into the river, only yesterday—and now you have come back to camp on my land—!'

'Nothing of the kind, sir!' exclaimed Harry, hastily. 'We know nothing about any notice-board—.'

'Huh!'

'We had leave to camp here, and we've paid the fee—.'

'Huh! Young rascal! Gad! If you do not clear off this instant, I will lay my stick about you!' roared Colonel Brumble. 'Gad! I'll phone to the police-station and have you arrested for trespass! I—I'll—.'

'Keep your wool on, sir!' said Bob, soothingly. 'If we've been diddled, and paid the wrong party for camping here, we're ready to pay you the camping-fee. How much?' Four heads nodded assent. Certainly, the juniors did not intend to pay over again, till they were quite, quite assured that it was the right party this time. But if it was the right party, the fact that they had been twice 'diddled' by a pair of rogues did not deprive the right party of his rights. Certainly, that camp was likely to prove the most expensive in the Thames valley, at this rate: but there was no help for that.

But the look on the stout gentleman's leathery face did not indicate that Bob had touched the right chord. He glared, and gasped with wrath.

'How much?' repeated Colonel Brumble, in a gasping voice. 'You impertinent young scamp, do you think I let my land to trippers? Gad! Camping fee! Good gad! Do you think I would touch your money? Good gad!'

That settled it, for the juniors, with regard to the proprietorship of that desirable property. The red-and-blue man, and the young man with the rod, had both wanted to be paid. Colonel Brumble not only did not want to be paid, but he received the offer as an insult! Evidently, he was the genuine goods. He brandished his stick so near that Bob backed to save his nose.

'Get out!' he roared. 'Throw your rubbish into your boat, and go! At once, before I lay my stick round you.'

'I say, you fellows, we can't go before brekker!' squeaked Billy Bunter. 'I say, I'm hungry! We're jolly well not going before brekker.'

Whop!

'Yaroooh!' roared Bunter. He jumped like a kangaroo, as the old military gentleman reached out with the stick, and it contacted the tightest trousers in the county of Berks.

One whop from that stick was enough for Billy Bunter. He made a frantic bound into the boat, forgetful even of brekker, and the Nautilus rocked as he landed in it. Colonel Brumble brandished the stick.

‘Now, then!’ he boomed. ‘Get out of it! Lawless young scoundrels, pulling up my notice-board—.’

‘Oh, don’t be a goat!’ hooted Johnny Bull. ‘We never touched your silly notice-board, if you had one. And keep that stick to yourself.’

‘What? what?’

So far from keeping his stick to himself, Colonel Brumble rewarded Johnny with an immediate whop from it. There was a roar of wrath from Johnny Bull. Had the Colonel been half his actual age, he would have received in return a punch with quite a lot of Yorkshire muscle behind it. But punching so venerable a retired military gentleman was not to be thought of. On the other hand, the Colonel was coming on with his stick, with the evident intention of handing out whop after whop to the whole party. Johnny made a jump to a large can of water, and whirled it up. The contents came out in a whizzing flood, splashing full into the leathery countenance of the retired military gentleman.

Splash!

‘Gurrrrrrggh!’

Colonel Brumble tottered, and sat down. He sat and clawed at a streaming face.

‘Oh, my hat!’ gasped Bob Cherry. ‘Perhaps we’d better be going, you men.’

‘Perhaps!’ grinned Nugent.

‘The perhapsfulness is terrific!’ chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘Urrrrrggh!’ came gurgling from Colonel Brumble. ‘Urrrggh! Young rascals—where’s my stick—I’ll—I’ll—gurrrrrrggh!’

For the moment, the old military gentleman was ‘hors de combat’. The Greyfriars campers did not lose a moment. They bundled their belongings headlong into the Nautilus. Obviously, they were not going to breakfast in that pleasant nook of Brumble Court: their cue was to get out of that pleasant nook in the shortest possible space of time. While the Colonel, gurgling and clawing, sat it out, they pitched their possessions anyhow into the boat, and followed them in. They did it at record speed, but were barely in time. Before the painter could be loosened, the Colonel was on his feet again, and glaring round for the stick he had dropped.

‘Buck up!’ panted Bob Cherry.

Harry Wharton tore the painter loose: Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh grasped oars and shoved. The Nautilus surged off, as Colonel Brumble came spluttering down the bank with brandished stick. He spluttered and brandished as the Nautilus glided down to the Thames.

Bob Cherry waved his hand in polite farewell.

‘Good-bye, Bluebell!’ he called out.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

What the old military gentleman said in reply was lost, as the Nautilus rolled out into the Thames. Probably it was not a polite farewell. Harry Wharton and Co. pulled on up the river, wisely deciding to pull at least as far as Mapledurham before bothering about breakfast, quite eager to put a good distance between themselves and the excited old military gentleman they had left brandishing his stick. They did not want to see Colonel

Brumble again: but they would have given a good deal to meet a man with a red nose and a blue chin, and a young man with a fishing-rod!

CHAPTER 19 PLAYFUL PON

‘THAT gang!’ said Ponsonby.

‘Look here, keep off them!’ said Gadsby.

‘Jolly well steer clear!’ said Monson.

Cecil Ponsonby did not answer them. Standing up in the Gay Lark, he scanned the boat tied up under the trees on the Oxfordshire bank. There was a gleam in his eyes, as he scanned it.

He knew the Nautilus at once. And had the crew been on board, Ponsonby would have been as keen as his comrades to keep off and steer clear. But he could see that the crew were not on board.

The bank was wooded: clothed with greenery. Several shady paths ran up in the woods. Great branches overlapped the water. To one of them the Nautilus was tied up, fore and aft, rocking gently to the current of the Thames. It looked as if the Greyfriars crew, tempted by the loveliness of the country round about Wallingford, had gone ashore for a ramble: leaving their boat tied up under the trees. Ponsonby scanned the boat, and scanned the wooded shore, and saw no sign of them.

During the long summer days that had passed since their last encounter, Harry Wharton and Co. had forgotten all about the Highcliffe boating party. If Ponsonby had forgotten them, he was reminded of them now. Certainly he was not looking for another encounter like the last. But he was looking for trouble with the Greyfriars crew at the receiving end: and this looked like the chance of a lifetime.

‘By gum!’ breathed Pon, as he scanned. ‘It’s their boat—and this is where we come in!’

‘Oh, chuck it,’ said Gadsby. ‘They gave better than they got, last time—leave them alone.’

‘Let’s pull on up to Wallingford, and let them rip,’ said Monson.

‘They’re not about,’ said Pon.

‘Oh!’ said Gadsby and Monson together. And they stared round at the Greyfriars boat, and observed what Pon had already observed.

‘Pull in closer, and we’ll see,’ added Pon. ‘Looks as if they’re all ashore, and left nobody to mind the boat. Get in.’

The Gay Lark swerved towards the tied-up boat. It looked untenanted, and the malicious grin on Pon’s face was reflected on those of his comrades. They were ready for mischief, if there was nobody about!

‘Gone for a walk, I expect,’ said Ponsonby. ‘Can’t see a sign of them.’

‘Mayn’t have gone very far, though,’ said Monson, doubtfully. ‘They wouldn’t get that fat frog Bunter walking very far.’

‘Um!’ said Pon, also smitten with doubt. He watched the Nautilus and the shore like a cat, as the Gay Lark glided nearer.

The Famous Five, he knew, were good for miles and miles on a ramble. But Billy Bunter was likely to prefer yards to miles. If Bunter was on that walk, there was certainly danger that the boat’s crew were still near at hand.

But a moment or two later, the Highcliffians were reassured. As they closed in towards the Nautilus, a sound from that craft reached them. It was a resonant and echoing snore! Snore!

Evidently, the Nautilus was not quite so untenanted as it looked. It had a tenant. But he was asleep and snoring.

As it was early in the afternoon, Pon and Co. had not expected to find sleepers on board the enemy craft. But that echoing snore told that there was one sleeper at least: and that he was doing the job thoroughly.

Ponsonby gave a chuckle.

‘Bet that’s Bunter,’ he said. ‘Let’s look!’

The Gay Lark ranged alongside the moored boat, and Pon caught the gunwale. Then the Highcliffians looked into the Nautilus, and grinned at what they saw.

The Greyfriars boat had one tenant. That tenant had gone to sleep in the drowsy summer’s afternoon. Billy Bunter, stretched on rugs and cushions, had his eyes shut and his mouth open: and he was fast asleep and snoring.

He did not wake as the Gay Lark bumped gently against the Nautilus. Probably a thunderclap would not have awakened Billy Bunter. The rising-bell at Greyfriars did not always awaken him. When it came to sleeping, Bunter could beat Rip Van Winkle at his own game. Epimenides of old had simply nothing on Bunter.

‘The Sleeping Beauty!’ grinned Gadsby.

‘Give him a shove with the boat-hook, and wake him up!’ chuckled Monson.

‘Quiet!’ said Pon.

‘Eh, what?’ They stared at him. ‘Why?’

‘They’ve gone off, leaving Bunter to mind the boat,’

said Ponsonby. ‘They won’t find him when they come back—or their boat either! Catch on?’

‘Oh, my hat!’ said Gadsby. ‘You can’t walk off their boat, Pon.’

‘Can’t I?’ said Ponsonby, coolly. ‘What’s to stop me?’

‘But—I say—!’ muttered Monson.

‘No need to say anything,’ cut in Ponsonby. ‘This is where we score over those Greyfriars cads. Don’t wake Bunter up! Those rotters may be near enough to hear him yell, for anything we know. Let the fat frog have his sleep out—we’ll give him a tow.’

‘Oh, scissors!’ said Gadsby. ‘Look here, even that snoring grampus will wake up, if we shift the boat.’

‘I’ll keep him quiet, if he does,’ said Pon. ‘Get those moorings loose, and tie the boat on. We’re pulling on up the river, and towing that old bus after us. They can hunt for it when they come back—and I wish them joy of it.’

Gadsby and Monson cast rather uneasy glances at the wooded shore. How near or how far the Famous Five of Greyfriars might be, they could not tell: visibility was cut off by the trees. It was likely enough that a yell of alarm from Bunter might bring them tearing down to the bank. But Bunter, at the moment, certainly did not look like giving the alarm. Happily unconscious of the Highcliffe trio, Bunter slept and snored on.

‘Get on with it,’ snapped Pon.

‘Oh, all right.’

Losing no time, Gadsby cut the mooring-rope at the bow of the Nautilus, and Monson sliced through the rope at the stern. The Nautilus rocked free: and Ponsonby tied on the

boat's painter to the stern of the Gay Lark. Still there was no sign of the Greyfriars fellows from the wood: and still William George Bunter slept and snored. Pon stepped into the Nautilus. He picked up a cushion, and sat down within easy reach of the slumbering Owl.

'Get going, you fellows,' he said. 'I don't fancy that fat animal will wake up in a hurry: but if he does, I'll keep him mum. Get going.'

Gadsby and Monson, grinning, sat to the oars again in the Gay Lark. Both boats heaved into motion.

Pulling their own boat, with a larger and heavier craft in tow, was not a light task for the Highcliffians, who were not at all keen on strenuous exertion. But they got going: and the Gay Lark glided on up the Thames, with the Nautilus surging in its wake.

Ponsonby grinned back at the bank they had left. It was immensely amusing to the playful Pon to contemplate the Greyfriars party returning, after their ramble, to find that their boat had disappeared, and that Billy Bunter had disappeared along with it. What they would do, in those unexpected circumstances, Pon neither knew nor cared: scoring over his old enemies of Greyfriars was all Pon cared about.

He sat with his eyes on Bunter, the cushion ready to jam over the fat face if he woke and wanted to yell! But Billy Bunter did not wake. Gadsby and Monson pulled, Pon sat and grinned, and Billy Bunter slept and snored, as the wooded shore dropped further and further astern: and if the fat Owl dreamed, certainly he did not dream that he was in the hands of the Philistines!

CHAPTER 20 CATCHING A TARTAR

'POTTER!'

Coker shouted.

'Greene!'

Coker bawled.

But, save for the echo of Coker's powerful voice, answer there came none.

'Potter! Greene!'

Coker fairly bellowed.

Really, almost anyone in the Thames valley might have heard Coker. Horace Coker's voice never was subdued: and when he put on steam, Stentor's of old had little or nothing on Coker's. Potter and Greene must have been at quite a distance, if they did not hear Coker calling. But it appeared that they did not: or, if they heard, they followed the example of the ancient gladiator, and heeded not.

Coker breathed hard, and he breathed deep.

'Lost again!' he said, bitterly.

He stood in a woodland path, and stared about him at trees. At some turn of that path, he had lost Potter and Greene—or they had lost him! He had gone back to look for them, without finding them. Now he shouted, he bawled, and he bellowed, without producing results.

It was really surprising, the way Potter and Greene had of getting lost, during that trip up the Thames. It had happened over and over again. Possibly it was because Coker, whose sinewy limbs were impervious to fatigue, often walked them off their legs. Coker was

unresting in his hunt for the gang of young rascals who had walked off with his boat. Potter and Green wanted a rest occasionally. It was no use telling Coker so. Getting lost was the only resource.

‘Lost!’ Coker snorted. ‘I’ll bet they’ll turn up at the inn in time for supper! They always do, after wandering about like a pair of lost geese! I can’t take my eye off those chaps without their getting lost. I’d have had that boat back the other day if they hadn’t wandered away as they did! Now they’ve got lost again! Br-r-r-r-r!’

It was exasperating to Coker. He had picked up news of the Nautilus again: or at least was sure he had. The Nautilus, he was assured, was now somewhere between Mapledurham and Wallingford. All he had to do was to spot its exact locality. With that end in view, Coker’s untiring legs had covered miles and miles that day. Coker was prepared to cover more miles and miles. Now he had to waste time looking for two fellows who, for the umpteenth time, had unaccountably got lost.

‘Potter!’ Coker put on steam again. ‘Greene! Where are you, you fatheads? Can’t you hear me, you chumps? Think I’m going to stick here all the afternoon? Potter! Greene!’ Still there was no answer.

‘Potter!’ roared Coker. ‘Greene!’

Only echo replied.

‘Oh, the fatheads!’ gasped Coker. ‘Bet I shan’t see them again till I get back to the inn! Oh, the asses!’

He gave a final roar:

‘Potter! Greene!’

Then, much to his relief, there was a sound of footsteps. Two figures appeared on the leafy woodland path, coming towards him.

‘Oh, there you are!’ exclaimed Coker. ‘You fatheads— you—!’ He broke off suddenly, as he discerned that the He stared at the two new comers. One of them was a burly man with a red nose and a prominent chin blue from lack of shaving. The other was a young man who, a few days ago, had had a fishing-rod under his arm. Harry Wharton and Co. would have known them both at once, as the two rogues who had ‘diddled’ them, one after the other, at Brumble Court. But they were strangers to Coker’s eyes. It had not occurred to the juniors that the two rogues knew one another and were in collusion. But evidently that was the case, as they were now in company. Coker stared at them, and they stared at Coker, as they came along the footpath. No doubt his stentorian shouts had reached their ears and attracted them to the spot.

Coker was angry, and his stare at the newcomers was not cordial. But even Coker realized that it was not the fault of these two strangers that they were not Potter and Greene. Also it occurred to him that they might have seen the lost wanderers, and could give him news of them. So he cleared his frowning brow, and stepped towards them as they came.

‘Have you seen—?’ he began.

He was interrupted.

What happened next astonished Coker. It was so very unexpected and unlooked-for. The two exchanged a quick glance, suddenly closed in on Coker, and grasped him by the arms.

Coker spluttered with amazement.

‘What the dickens—!’ he stuttered.

‘That’ll do from you!’ rapped the red-and-blue man. ‘Turn out your pockets, young shaver, and sharp.’

‘Sharp’s the word!’ agreed the other.

Coker goggled at them. He was not quick on the uptake. But it dawned upon his rather solid brain that he was in the hands of footpads: pleased, no doubt to have come across him, in a lonely spot in a solitary wood. In less solitary spots, ‘diddling’ was their line of country: but here, hidden from all eyes by leafy trees, they were ready with the ‘rough stuff’. They anticipated no difficulty with a fellow who was obviously a schoolboy on holiday—though Coker, certainly, was an out-size in schoolboys.

‘You—you—you!’ Coker gurgled. ‘Leggo! Hear? Leggo my arms! Think you’re going to pick my pockets, or what?’

‘Ain’t I said that’ll do?’ snapped the burly man, in a bullying tone. ‘“And it over, and ’and it sharp, if you don’t want your face knocked through the back of your ’ead!’

‘Oh, gum!’ gasped Coker. He dragged at his arms. ‘You cheeky rotters—.’

‘Pack it up, and part!’ said the young man without the fishing-rod. ‘No time to waste—shell out before you’re hurt.’

Coker had been angry already. But that was as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine, compared with the wrath that boiled up within him now. His brow corrugated, his eyes flashed, and he gave so tremendous a wrench at his arms, that he dragged them both free from the grasp on them. He jumped back about a yard.

‘Get him, Fred!’ panted the red-and-blue man.

‘Don’t let him run!’ exclaimed Fred, at the same moment.

They leaped after Coker together.

Fully expecting him to attempt at least, to take to his heels, they did not lose a second. They came right at Coker, and their fists were clenched: the ‘rough stuff’ was coming. But Horace Coker had not the faintest, remotest idea of taking to his heels. He did not turn his back on the foot-pads. He faced up to them, and clenched fists that were rather like legs of mutton. And he hit out as they came at him, and Fred uttered a yell that woke the echoes of the wood, as something that seemed like the kick of a mule jarred in the middle of his features. It was quite a surprise for the young man: and he went over backwards, yelling as he went.

The next moment, the red-and-blue man’s knuckles jammed on Coker’s nose. But Coker, having landed Fred with his right, let out his left at the burly man, with a jolt to the chin that made him stagger. He staggered over the sprawling Fred, and went down into the grass.

Coker glared at them.

‘Come on!’ he bawled. He dabbed his nose, which spurted crimson. But a spurt of claret did not daunt Coker. He was ready for more. ‘Come on! Fancy you can pick my pockets? By gum! Come on and do it!’

The red-and-blue man staggered up.

‘Come on, Fred,’ he panted, and he rushed at Coker again.

But Fred did not come on. Fred sat in the grass with one hand to a blackening eye, the other to a nose that streamed red. Fred had captured only one punch from Coker: but Coker’s punch had tremendous beef behind it, and Fred did not want another. Caressing his eye with one hand, and his nose with the other, Fred sat and moaned.

And then the red-and-blue man, to his rage and amazement, joined Fred in the grass

again. Coker gave him left and right, and both came like cannon-shots. The recipient went over in a heap. He sprawled in the grass—and stayed there, gasping, and blinking up at Coker, dizzily.



‘Come on!’ roared Coker. He fairly danced round them. ‘Want some more? Come on! Get on with picking my pockets! Get on with it! Come on and have some more! Fred moaned. The red-and-blue man gurgled. But neither of them got on with it. They were feeling rather like the lads in Macaulay, who ranging to start a hare, came on the fierce old bear! Coker looked as if his pockets were worth picking: but wads of currency notes would not have tempted them to further action.

‘Oooooooh!’ moaned Fred.

‘Urrrrrggh!’ gurgled the red-and-blue man.

And they stayed where they were. They had caught a Tartar: and were only anxious to have done with him.

‘Had enough?’ hooted Coker.

‘Oooooogh!’

‘Gurrgh!’

Coker snorted, and stalked on up the footpath, rubbing his knuckles. He disappeared from their sight: but a few moments later, they heard from him.

‘Potter! Greene!’

Coker was bawling again for his lost comrades.

Had the two rascals wished to find Coker again, they could have found him quite easily: his stentorian bawl was an easy guide. But they did not want to find him again. The very last person in Oxfordshire that they wanted to find was Horace Coker of the Greyfriars Fifth.

‘Potter! Greene!’

Coker’s bawl died away in the distance. The two dismal rascals crawled to their feet at last.

“‘Ard luck, Fred!’ mumbled the red-and-blue man.

‘You’re telling me!’ moaned Fred.

And they went on their weary way, Fred caressing the darkest eye in Oxfordshire, and the red-and-blue man rubbing a chin that felt as if it was no longer there. As for Horace Coker, he dismissed them from mind: and continued to search for the wanderers, and to bawl ‘Potter! Greene!’ till at length he tired of that game, and gave it up. Coker did not see Potter and Greene again, till he returned to the inn at Wallingford: where, having apparently found their way at last, they turned up in time for supper.

CHAPTER 21 BEASTLY FOR BUNTER

‘I SAY, you fellows!’

Billy Bunter mumbled drowsily.

Ponsonby grinned.

The sleeping beauty was awakening at last. Perhaps the inner Bunter gave warning that it was near teatime. Anyhow, the fat Owl of the Remove stirred, shifted a fat head on the cushions, opened his little round eyes behind his big round spectacles, and gave voice. He was welcome to give voice now, so far as Pon was concerned. The Nautilus had been towed a good mile up the river, and Pon was watching the shore for a suitable spot to camp. Pon had been thinking, while he sat in the Greyfriars boat, and he had made his plans.

Bunter sat up.

He could feel that the boat was in motion. But he did not immediately observe the change of ownership. His impression was that the Co. had returned and cast off, while he was asleep.

‘I say, you fellows, ain’t it teatime?’ mumbled Bunter. ‘I say, I’m hungry. I say—!’

He broke off suddenly, as he saw Ponsonby. His eyes almost popped through his spectacles at the Highcliffe junior.

‘Why—what—oh, crikey!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I—I say— what—what—what——!’

Quite wide awake now, Bunter stared round him. There was no sign of the Famous Five. Ponsonby was in the Nautilus with him: Gadsby and Monson grinning back at him from the Gay Lark as they pulled. In utter amazement, mingled with dismay, Bunter blinked at them, and blinked at Pon.

‘I—I say, what’s up?’ gasped Bunter. ‘I say, where are the fellows? Wharrer you doing in our boat, Ponsonby? Where’s Wharton—where’s Bob—what—?’

‘Haven’t the foggiest,’ drawled Ponsonby. ‘Shouldn’t wonder if they’re looking for this tub, somewhere back along the Thames.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ came from the Gay Lark.

‘But I—I—I say,’ stuttered the bewildered fat Owl. ‘You can’t walk off with our boat like this.’

‘Can’t we?’ smiled Pon. He called across to the Gay Lark. ‘Bunter says we can’t walk off with this boat, you fellows! Can we or not?’

‘Sort of!’ chuckled Gadsby.

Bunter stared blankly at Pon. He realized that the Highcliffe enemy had caught him napping—literally: in the absence of the Famous Five. But their nerve in walking off with the boat thrilled him with indignation. Walking off with a fellow’s boat—it was unheard of! Perhaps Bunter forgot, for the moment, that it was Coker’s boat, and that he, William George Bunter, had walked off with it!

‘Why, you—you cheeky beast!’ gasped Bunter. ‘Think you’re going to bag our boat?’

‘I rather had that idea,’ assented Pon, with a nod.

‘You jolly well pull in, and leave our boat alone,’ howled Bunter. ‘I’ll yell to the people on the river, if you don’t, see?’

Pon shook his head. It was too late for a yell from Bunter to reach the Famous Five, wherever they might be: but Pon did not want yells to reach passing craft on the river. And there were plenty of other craft about, most of them passing within hail.

‘I wouldn’t!’ said Pon.

‘I jolly well will, if you don’t get out of this boat!’ hooted Bunter.

‘I wouldn’t!’ repeated Pon. ‘You see, if you open that barn-door of yours to yell, I shall swipe you with this cushion—like that!’

Swipe! The cushion contacted a fat head, and Billy Bunter rolled in the bottom of the Nautilus. He rolled and spluttered, Ponsonby regarding him with a cheery grin. Bunter sat up on the floor boards.

‘Oooooogh!’ he gasped.

‘Lots more, if you want them,’ smiled Ponsonby. ‘Better behave nicely, you fat frump.’

‘Beast!’ gasped Bunter.

But he did not yell to passing craft. He sat glaring at Ponsonby, his very spectacles gleaming with indignation and wrath. But he decided that, on the whole, he wouldn’t yell to any of the boats, skiffs, launches, canoes, or punts, that populated the sunny Thames. Ponsonby stood up, his eyes on the bank, and pointed.

‘That’s the place!’ he called out.

‘Okay,’ called back Monson: and the Gay Lark swerved towards the shore, the Nautilus surging on astern.

At this point the tow-path was on the other side. Deep woods grew down to the river, and there was a narrow opening, where a tiny stream flowed into the Thames. It looked an attractive spot for tying up and camping: as attractive as that nook at Brumble Court which had tempted Harry Wharton and Co. Billy Bunter blinked at a notice-board that showed up among the foliage, proffering to the public the familiar warning that trespassers would be prosecuted. Bunter had not forgotten the misadventure at Brumble Court, and his blink was uneasy. He wanted to get away from the Highcliffians: but he did not want to land at a spot where trespassers would be prosecuted.

‘I say, you jolly well can’t land there!’ squeaked Bunter. ‘Look at that board!’

Ponsonby laughed.

‘Useful for a camp-fire, if we want one,’ he remarked.

‘Oh!’ gasped Bunter. Clearly, Pon and Co. were not particular in their methods, when

they camped along the Thames. Possibly they were the very party who had uprooted the notice-board at Brumble Court.

But if Ponsonby was not alarmed, Bunter was. He had a painful recollection of Colonel Brumble and his stick.

‘Look here, I’m not going to be jolly well prosecuted, if you are,’ he hooted. ‘I jolly well ain’t landing there, see?’

Swipe! Pon did not answer in words: he swiped with the cushion. That, no doubt, seemed to him the simplest way of meeting Bunter’s objections. Billy Bunter rolled and roared. He rolled into the bows, out of reach of the cushion, and sat up, spluttering wrath.

‘Beast!’ roared Bunter. ‘Highcliffe cad!’

Whiz! Pon did not trouble to pursue Bunter along the boat. He hurled the cushion, and it landed on a fat face, flattening Bunter out on his back.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ came again from the Gay Lark. Gadsby and Monson seemed to be enjoying the show.

Billy Bunter sat up again, gurgling. He clutched up the cushion. Even a worm will turn! Back at Ponsonby came that cushion, whizzing. Billy Bunter put plenty of force into it. But his aim was not good. Bunter was what the Greyfriars fellows would have called cack-handed.

The whizzing cushion missed Pon by a foot or more, and flew out across the shining water.

Crash! Yell! came from a passing canoe.

The Owl of the Remove had not even seen the canoe in the offing. Certainly he had not aimed that cushion at the man in the canoe. Had he done so, it might have hit Ponsonby. Aimed at Pon, it hit the man in the canoe. It landed forcefully under his ear, to his great surprise, which rapidly turned to wrath. The canoe rocked wildly and shipped water, drenching the canoer’s legs. His sudden yell sounded as if a Red Indian was loose on the Thames.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ came once more from Gadsby and Monson. Ponsonby would have joined in the laugh: but the man in the canoe, with a red infuriated face, shot alongside the Nautilus with a dip of the paddle. He grabbed the gunwale with one hand, and flourished the paddle with the other.

‘Look here, what’s this game?’ he bellowed. ‘Chucking cushions at a man’s head—what?’

‘It wasn’t!,’ gasped Ponsonby. ‘That fat ass—.’

‘Oh, crikey!’ stuttered Bunter. ‘I say, it wasn’t me— I never chucked that cushion, and I only chucked it at that beast—. Yarooooh!’

‘You, was it?’ hooted the man in the canoe. ‘Might have capsized me! Take that—and that—and that!’

Billy Bunter yelled, as he took them, from the paddle. Then the canoer, with an indignant snort, paddled off, leaving him yelling.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ roared Gadsby and Monson, and this time Pon joined in. The incident was amusing to them, if not to Bunter.

‘Pull in, you chaps!’ chuckled Ponsonby.

The Gay Lark nosed into the tiny stream under the trees. The Nautilus followed it in. The little stream, little more than a ditch, just about accommodated the boats. It was navigable only for a dozen yards or so. But once within that little inlet, the boats were completely

screened from the river by foliage: and Billy Bunter realized that, if the Famous Five were looking for the Nautilus, as doubtless they were by that time, they were extremely unlikely to find it. And when Ponsonby rapped 'Get out', Bunter, in spite of his terrors of notice-boards and prosecuting landowners, got out—a lunge from Pon's foot accelerating him as he did so.

CHAPTER 22 MISSING

'GONE!'

'Oh, my hat!'

'What the dickens—!'

'The gonefulness is terrific!'

'Where on earth's the boat?'

Five fellows exclaimed all at once. They were surprised, startled, and dismayed. It was utterly unexpected. They came out of the wood on to the bank of the Thames, naturally expecting to find the Nautilus tied up where they had left it, with the fat Owl of the Remove on board. But it was a case of the unexpected happening! There was no boat, and there was no Bunter—only the Thames rippling by under the bank where the boat had been left.

The Famous Five had had rather a long ramble, enjoying the attractive scenery of Oxfordshire. It had been a leisurely ramble: they had taken their time about it, never dreaming that anything could happen to the boat during their absence, safely tied up fore and aft, with one member of the party left on board. But something, it was clear, had happened. They had returned rather late for tea, and were more than ready for that meal. But there was no tea for them, any more than a boat or a Bunter.

'Gone!' repeated Harry Wharton, blankly.

'We've not missed the spot—!' said Frank Nugent.

'There's where we moored it—there's a rope still hanging from that branch,' Bob Cherry pointed out.

It was the spot. There was no doubt about that. The remnants of the mooring-ropes could be seen, hanging from branches over the water.

'Can't have drifted loose,' said Johnny Bull. 'Those ropes have been cut. You can see they're cut short.'

'That ass Bunter—!' said Bob. 'Has that fat ass gone off somewhere in the boat?'

Harry Wharton shook his head.

'Too jolly lazy!' he answered. 'He couldn't pull the boat on his own, either. It's not that.'

'Pinched!' growled Johnny Bull.

'Looks like it,' said Harry.

'Blessed if I make it out,' said Bob. 'I suppose there are rogues along the river who would pinch a boat—but nobody would pinch Bunter. Nobody would take him as a gift. Where's Bunter?'

'Goodness knows.'

It was quite a mystery. An unguarded boat might be 'pinched' by some lawless person, the juniors realized that. But the boat had not been unguarded. It had had Bunter on board. Bunter was to be seen nowhere on the shore: it looked as if he had gone along with

the boat. Had he landed, he would have been there, awaiting their return. Bunter, apparently, was still in the Nautilus, and the Nautilus was gone—where, was anybody's guess.

The juniors stood staring at the spot where the boat had been, and at one another, in dismay. They looked up the river, and down the river, and across the river: but though there were plenty of craft to be seen, on the sunny waters, nothing was to be seen of the Nautilus.

'If some rotter has pinched the boat, he was in a hurry to get off with it, and took it with that fat chump on board,' said Harry, at last. 'Bunter might be too scared to yell for help—.'

'No "might" about that,' grunted Johnny Bull. 'He would be!'

'We've got to find it,' said Bob.

'Yes, rather.'

'The ratherfulness is terrific,' remarked Hurree Janset Ram Singh. 'But the howfulness is a boot on the other leg.'

'Somebody may have seen it go,' said Nugent, hopefully. 'Let's ask that chap—he's pulling in.'

A man in a rather shabby old dinghy was pulling in to the spot where the schoolboys stood in a group. He had glanced at them several times from the river, and seemed interested in them. He tooted the dinghy under the branches in the late mooring-place of the Nautilus, looked at them, and touched a battered hat.

'Wanting a boat, young gentlemen?' he asked. Evidently he was one of the innumerable Thames boatmen, with a boat for hire, and he had spotted the party as likely customers.

'We're looking for our boat,' answered Harry. 'It's been taken away while we were on a walk. A rather roomy boat called the Nautilus. If you've seen anything of it—.'

'Nautilus,' repeated the boatman. 'Name painted in white letters—?'

'That's it!' said Bob, eagerly. And there was a general clearing of worried brows in the group on the bank. Evidently the boatman had seen something of the missing Nautilus.

'You've seen it?' exclaimed Harry.

'Passed me an hour ago, going up the river,' answered the boatman. 'Towed up by two fellers in a smaller boat.'

'Anybody in it?' asked Harry.

'Two fellers in it—one of them a fat covey in specs.'

The Famous Five exchanged glances of satisfaction. Evidently they were on the track. There might be more than one boat on the Thames named the Nautilus: but the 'fat covey in specs' clinched it. That fat covey in specs was undoubtedly William George Bunter.

'I noticed them special, because they looked like they was having a row,' the boatman explained. 'One of them knocked the other one over with a cushion—it was the fat covey in specs that was knocked over.'

'Bunter!' said Bob Cherry.

'Not much doubt about that,' said Harry. 'They must have towed the boat off with Bunter in it. May have landed him somewhere after getting clear. You say they were going up the river, boatman?'

'Mor'n 'arf-a-mile up from 'ere when I passed them, sir.'

'Good!' said Johnny Bull. 'We know the way they went, at least, and we can jolly well get after them.'

‘What-ho!’ said Bob Cherry. ‘We can hire this boat, and follow them up the river. Might run them down this side of Wallingford.’

Harry Wharton nodded.

‘They’ve got a good start,’ he said. ‘But they won’t travel fast with a towed boat. Bunter might give them some trouble, too.’

‘Might!’ grunted Johnny Bull.

‘The mightfulness is terrific,’ murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘Well, even that fat ass wouldn’t let them walk the boat off, if he could help it,’ said Harry. ‘Anyhow, we’re getting after them. If they’ve landed Bunter, we can pick him up later—we’ve got to get after the Nautilus now.’

‘Yes, rather.’

There was no delay in arranging matters with the boatman. He was plying for hire in the dinghy, and glad to pick up five customers in a bunch. The juniors packed into the dinghy, and the boatman pushed off and pulled away up the Thames. His name, it transpired, was Jenkins: and Jenkins was a good man with the oars. A promise of a ten-shilling note over and above his fee if the Nautilus was sighted, had quite an invigorating effect, and he put plenty of beef into the rowing.

The dinghy shot swiftly up the Thames, five pairs of eager eyes scanning every craft that showed up, in search of the Nautilus. Had the Highcliffe party remained on the river, there was little doubt that the Famous Five would have run them down, in spite of their good start. Unluckily the Gay Lark and the Nautilus were already in cover: and when the dinghy passed a tiny stream that purred into the Thames, under heavy foliage, the keenest eye could have detected no sign of the craft tied up in the little creek. Still eager, still watchful, and still hopeful, the Famous Five glided on up towards Wallingford, leaving what they sought behind them.

CHAPTER 23

BUNTER COMES IN USEFUL

‘Wow!’ howled Billy Bunter.

It was the contact of a shoe—quite an elegant shoe—on his tight trousers, that evoked the howl. Bunter was not enjoying life with the Highcliffe party.

‘Have another?’ asked Ponsonby.

‘Wow! Beast!’

Bunter backed away. He did not want another. Often and often had Billy Bunter been booted for his sins. But he had never grown to like it.

‘You try to sneak off again, and we’ll duck you!’ said Ponsonby.

‘Beast!’ groaned Bunter.

He did not try to ‘sneak’ off again. He leaned on a tree by the creek, and regarded the Highcliffe trio with a hostile glare: concentrating into that glare all the wrath and scorn that could be expressed by a pair of little round eyes and a pair of big round spectacles.

‘What’s the big idea, Pon?’ asked Monson. ‘We don’t want that fat frog about, if we’re camping here.’

‘Do we want him to tell his gang where to look for us?’ asked Pon.

‘No fear!’ agreed Monson, promptly.

‘But look here, Pon,’ said Gadsby. ‘I don’t see camping here for the night, when we’ve

hardly a thing in the boat. Where's supper coming from?' 'Lots of things you don't see, Gaddy,' answered Pon. 'Those Greyfriars cads are standing us supper. I've looked through their locker. It's stacked.'

'Oh!' said Gadsby, rather dubiously. 'Um! Look here, Pon, it's a lark bagging their boat. But scoffing their grub—.'

'No need for you to scoff any, if you don't feel that way,' drawled Ponsonby. 'I'm getting hungry, myself. You as particular as Gaddy, Monson?' Monson laughed.

'Supper for me!' he said. 'But—it's a bit risky camping here at all, Pon, with that notice-board up—.'

'Not when I happen to know that River Lodge is shut up, and the people away,' drawled Pon. 'Nobody's going to bother us here.'

'Oh!' said Gadsby and Monson together. They understood now why that notice-board had no terrors for Pon. If nobody was at home at River Lodge, it was all clear for the trespassers on that riverside residence.

'Bunter!' rapped out Ponsonby.

'Beast!' was Bunter's reply.

'Get the grub out of the locker on your boat, and the cooking things,' directed Pon.

'Why, you cheeky beast!' gasped Bunter. 'Think you're going to scoff our grub?'

'Sort of!' assented Pon.

'Think I'm going to wait on you?' yelled Bunter.

'Aren't you?' asked Pon.

'No!' yelled Bunter. 'I jolly well ain't, so yah!'

'You're going to make yourself useful,' explained Pon. 'Your best pal wouldn't call you ornamental, I suppose. Jump to it, you fat frog!'

'Shan't!' roared Bunter. 'I'll jolly well—yaroo! I'll —wow! Leave off kicking me, you Highcliffe swob! Wow! wow!'

Bunter jumped into the Nautilus.

The three Highcliffians chuckled. Camping out in the Thames valley in the summer was a quite delightful way of spending a holiday: but there was a certain amount of work involved. Pon's bright idea of passing on that spot of work to the captured Owl of Greyfriars was enthusiastically endorsed by his comrades. It saved them trouble, and it was quite amusing to see Bunter jump to it.

The hapless Owl realized that he had to jump to it. There was no escape for him until the Highcliffians chose to let him go: and they were not going to take the risk of Bunter carrying news to the Famous Five: not till they were ready to push off in the morning. Bunter was booked for Highcliffe company so long as they camped on the creek at River Lodge. Never had the fat Owl enjoyed anybody's company less.

With an expression on his fat face that exceeded, in expressiveness, the frightful, fearful, frantic frown of the Lord High Executioner, Billy Bunter proceeded to unload foodstuffs and cooking utensils. Under Pon's directions, he prepared the stove, and lighted it, filled the kettle, sorted out the frying-pan, and cooked. Gladly he would have hurled the kettle and the cooking-stove at Gadsby and Monson, and banged the frying-pan on Pon's cheeky head. But he did not venture on any of those proceedings. His only comfort was a series of substantial snacks while he cooked supper for Pon and Co.

The Highcliffians watched him at work, with grinning faces.

‘I rather fancy we score over those Greyfriars cads this time,’ Ponsonby remarked, complacently.

‘We do—we does,’ agreed Monson. ‘We’ve got their boat, and their grub, and their performing walrus—.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘But we’d better be jolly careful to steer clear of them after this,’ added Monson. ‘They must be hunting for their boat already.’

‘They won’t find it in a hurry!’ smiled Pon. ‘We’ll leave it here in the morning, when we push off in the Gay Lark. Bunter can tell them all about it, when they find it—and him. They haven’t a clue.’

‘Safe as houses!’ agreed Monson.

‘Supper ready, Bunter?’ called out Pon.

‘Beast!’

‘What did you say, my fat friend?’ Ponsonby came across to the fat junior at the cooking-stove and lifted his foot.

‘I—I—I mean, yes, Ponsonby,’ gasped Bunter, in a great hurry.

‘That’s better,’ said Pon. ‘Mind you keep a civil tongue in your head, Bunter, or I might kick you—like that!’

‘Yaroooh!’

‘Or like that!’

‘Yow-ow-ow! Stoppit!’ yelled Bunter.

‘Or like that!’ added Pon.

‘Whoo-hoop!’

Powerfully was Bunter tempted to grab up the frying-pan and bang it on Pon’s head. But he resisted that temptation. He had had enough shoe-leather on his plump trousers.

‘Ready, you fellows,’ called out the cheery Pon.

It was an attractive supper. Supplies from the Nautilus were ample and good, and the three young rascals made them fly. Gadsby forgot his objection to scoffing those supplies, and piled in as voraciously as his comrades. Sosses and chips, eggs and ham, were followed by plum pie, cake, and biscuits. Then the lordly Pon directed Bunter to make coffee. The fat Owl breathed wrath, and made coffee. Pon and Co. smoked cigarettes over their coffee, which was one of the ways they had when at a safe distance from masters and prefects. Altogether, the Highcliffians found life very enjoyable in their camp at River Lodge, as the sun sank lower and lower over the Thames valley.



Ponsonby rose, at last, with a yawn, and threw away the stump of a cigarette. 'Time to turn in!' he said. 'Lots of room on the Nautilus —those Greyfriars cads pack in six. Get on the boat, Bunter, and sort out the bed things.'

'Look here, you cheeky beast—wow! Ow! wow!' Billy Bunter got on the boat in haste. The Highcliffians followed him on, grinning. Bed things were sorted out—by Bunter—nobody else lending a hand. Bunter, if as Pon said he could not be ornamental, undoubtedly proved useful. Work of any kind never appealed to Bunter, and fagging for Highcliffe swobs was insult added to injury: but the fat Owl did not argue the point—Pon was altogether too ready with his foot for that. Bunter fagged, and breathed fury, and made everything ready for his temporary lords and masters.

The sun dipped and disappeared. Over a cloudless sky spread the silvery glimmer of the rising moon. Pon and Co. turned into their blankets, in the roomy Nautilus: and Bunter, at last, was given a respite—the wicked ceased from troubling, and the weary Owl was at rest.

As the moon climbed the sky, a resonant snore echoing in the shadows told that the Owl of the Remove had forgotten his tribulations in slumber. Pon and Co. did not hear it—they were sleeping soundly: and had they been awake, it would not have occurred to them that there might be other ears to hear. They were secure from the Famous Five, in that sequestered nook, and they did not dream of peril from another quarter. But it was from another quarter that peril was scheduled to materialise—Pon and Co. were not destined to slumber peacefully till dawn.

CHAPTER 24 GOT 'EM!

'PULL!' said Coker.

'We're pulling,' said Potter, mildly.

'Don't jaw, old chap. Just pull.'

Coker had no use for back-chat.

The full round moon rode high over the Thames. The old river rolled like a stream of silver: barred here and there by the shadows of branches on the banks. The August moon was a thing of beauty, in a sky like deep dark-blue velvet. It was a lovely summer night, if Coker and Co., had thought of it. But Potter and Greene were busy with the oars, and Coker with giving directions—unnecessarily, but almost continuously.

Coker was not pulling: which was just as well, from the point of view of making progress. The boat from the Ship Inn at Wallingford might have been delayed by Coker at the oars, catching his favourite crabs. With Potter and Greene rowing, it came down the river at a good rate from Wallingford. Coker sat in the stern and steered: but Potter and Greene were quite good oarsmen, and managed very well in spite of Coker's steering.

Coker also watched the Oxford-shire bank, with the eye of a hawk.

It was a late hour. Even the loveliness of the summer night did not seem to have tempted many craft out at that hour. No amount of Nature's beauty would have tempted Potter and Greene out, if they could have helped it. But they couldn't.

That afternoon they had 'lost' Coker, and had a long rest from him. But after supper at the inn, it was quite impracticable to lose him again. True, when Coker calmly told them that he had engaged a boat for the night, and that they were booked for an expedition down the Thames, instead of going to bed, they came very near rebellion. Coker had picked up news: and this time he was certain that the news was the genuine goods. He was not the fellow to let the grass grow under his feet, when he was on the track of his missing boat. Arguments from Potter and Greene he brushed aside as idle trifles. And though Potter and Greene were almost on the point of rebellion, they did not quite reach that point. Coker had his way: so here they were, pulling down the silvery Thames under the bright soaring moon.

'Don't make too much row,' said Coker. 'We're getting near the place.'

Potter and Greene were not making a 'row', though the creak of the rowlocks was rather distinct, in the silence of the night. But Coker just had to give orders.

'Who's making a row?' inquired Greene, breathing rather hard.

'Don't jaw,' said Coker. 'No need to shout and wake the young scoundrels up, Greene.'

Greene suppressed a desire to pull in his oar, and upend Coker in the stern with a vigorous shove from the same. Coker's friends often had to suppress such yearnings.

'We're getting near,' continued Coker, happily unaware of his narrow escape from the blade of Greene's oar. 'May spot the place any minute. They'll be fast asleep. We'll wake 'em up—when we get there! By gum, I'll make Wharton and his gang sorry they walked off with the Nautilus. We've got the young sweeps on toast this time.'

'Sure it's Wharton's gang you're after?' murmured Potter. 'We don't want to make mistakes in the dark, Coker, and wake up the wrong passenger.'

'Don't be an ass, Potter. Did I get the news from that man in a canoe at the Ship, or didn't I?' snapped Coker.

'Yes! But—'

'Nothing to but about! Have I asked about twenty or thirty people for news of that cheeky

gang, while you fellows loafed about with your hands in your pockets, or haven't I?' snorted Coker. 'And did I get hold of a chap who'd seen them, that chap in the canoe, or didn't I? Did he tell me that he saw that fat smudge Bunter in the boat, or didn't he?' 'Might be more than one fat smudge on the Thames in the summer,' suggested Greene. 'Don't be a goat, Greene. I got the description, and it was exact,' yapped Coker. 'Think he didn't look at the fat tick, when he told me that the fat ditherer buzzed a cushion at his head, and nearly capsized his canoe, and he whopped him with his paddle? It was Bunter all right.'

'It sounded like Bunter, from what he said,' admitted Greene. 'But—.'

'Oh, keep on butting!' said Coker, sardonically.

'Well, the rest of the party didn't fit in,' said Greene. 'We know that there are six of them, and that man in the canoe saw only three fellows along with the fat tick—.'

'And he never noticed a darkey among them,' said Potter.

'Looks as if they split up,' said Coker. 'May have had a row or something—fellows do have rows on holidays. I'm quite certain that the fat chap who buzzed the cushion was Bunter, from the man's description—absolutely certain of that: and the boat Bunter was on was the Nautilus—my boat. I don't know where the rest of the gang were, and I don't know why they had another boat towing the Nautilus, and I don't care—I know jolly well that it was the Nautilus that that chap in the canoe saw them towing into the backwater at River Lodge, and that's enough for me'

'But—,' said Potter.

'Don't jaw, old chap!'

'But—,' said Greene.

'Don't gabble, old fellow!'

Potter and Greene pulled on in silence. They were not feeling so easy in their minds as their great leader was. Certainly it looked as if that chap in the canoe, whom they had met at the inn at Wallingford, had seen Bunter—Billy Bunter was, in fact, a sight that once seen, was not likely to be forgotten. But the other details did not fit in. Potter and Greene were quite ready to help in handling the Remove party who had raided the boat at Staines: but they did not want to join in a night attack on some other party of trippers on the Thames.

'Here's the place,' said Coker, breaking the silence. 'Don't make a thundering row and wake them up—yet.'

Potter and Greene looked round. The bright moon overhead made the Thames almost as light as by day. Coker pointed to an opening in the deep dark woods that lined the Oxfordshire bank at that point. A tiny silvery stream came purling out into the river under the heavy foliage.

'That's River Lodge,' said Coker. 'I got it all from that man in the canoe. He saw them towing my boat into that backwater, and what do you think they were doing that for, except to camp?'

Potter and Greene had to admit that much. The party had no doubt camped on that tiny backwater. They were only doubtful whether it was the right party.

'We shall handle them easily enough,' went on Coker. 'We could handle the whole gang, if it came to that: but from what that chap in the canoe told us, there were only three of them with Bunter. Bunter doesn't count. We'll take one each, smack their cheeky heads like billy-O, and duck them. I can tell you they're going to have a lesson about walking

off with a fellow's boat! I daresay they thought it jolly clever to bag my boat for the hols. I'll show 'em how jolly clever it was! Don't kick up a row and wake them up till we've got them—I'm not letting them cut off before I've walloped them.'

Coker's eyes gleamed with anticipation.

He had had no luck in his previous attempt to recapture the raided Nautilus. But this time everything was going Coker's way. The recapture of that boat was a certainty now: all he was anxious about was that the raiders should not escape unpunished.

'Pull in!' said Coker. 'What are you pushing out into the Thames for?'

'Only because you've pulled the wrong line,' answered Potter.

'Don't jaw so much, Potter.'

The boat edged into the bank, notwithstanding Coker's steering. It floated under dark branches that grew out over the water, and Potter and Greene laid in their oars. Coker held up a hand.

'Listen!' he breathed.

From the darkness of the creek under the trees, came a sound: not a wholly unexpected sound at that time of night.

Snore!

'They're asleep!' grinned Coker.

'Sounds like it,' said Greene.

Snore!

Somebody, certainly, was asleep, and snoring. Obviously, there was a camping party in the creek, whether it was the Greyfriars party or not.

'I expect that's Bunter,' said Coker. 'I've heard that he can be heard in the next dormitory, at Greyfriars. They're fast asleep, anyhow. Don't make a row pushing in—we're catching them napping.'

'Look here, Coker, you jolly well make sure it's the right party before you start anything,' muttered Greene.

'Don't be a fathead, Greene.'

'If you start punching somebody we don't know—,' hissed Potter.

'Don't talk rot, Potter.'

Coker, grasping at branches, guided the boat into the creek. The bows bumped lightly on a boat tied up there. Out on the river it was bright: but under the over-arching branches over the creek it was deeply dark. But the three Fifth-form men made out the shape of a good-sized boat, tied up, with a glimpse of a smaller boat further on. Coker grasped the gunwale of the larger boat.

'Got 'em!' he breathed.

If it was the right party, Coker undoubtedly had 'got' them. If Potter and Greene had lingering doubts, Coker had none. It was too late now for the cheeky young rascals to escape, and there was no further need for caution. Coker had them just where he wanted them.

'Come on!' roared Coker.

And he jumped into the Nautilus.

Something that he landed on there suddenly ceased to snore, wriggled, and yelled frantically.

'Yaroooh! Wow! I say, you fellows—oh, crikey! Wow!'

'Bunter!' roared Coker.

‘Ow! wow! Gerroff! Yarooooop!’

Potter and Greene had not followed their great leader aboard, still doubting whether Coker had it right. But that frantic yell from Billy Bunter told its own tale. Coker had it right—amazing as it was for Coker to have anything right.

‘It’s that gang!’ gasped Greene.

‘Come on!’ said Potter.

And they jumped into the Nautilus after Coker.

CHAPTER 25 PAINFUL FOR PON

‘OH!’ gasped Ponsonby.

‘Ooogh!’ gurgled Monson.

‘Oh, crumbs—what—?’ stuttered Gadsby.

Never had three fellows been so utterly taken by surprise.

Pon and Co. had been sleeping soundly: lulled, perhaps by the musical effects from Billy Bunter. That Harry Wharton and Co. could track them out they did not suppose for one moment. That anyone else was on the track of the Nautilus they did not dream. That sudden invasion in the middle of the night came rather like an earthquake.

They started up from their blankets, one of them already in the mighty grasp of Horace Coker. That one was Cecil Ponsonby. Under the dark branches, they were only dim shadows: and Coker grasped Pon because he was the nearest. All that Coker could see of Pon was that he was about the size of one of the Famous Five: and he did not think of doubting that he was one of them. How was Coker to guess that the Nautilus, raided by the Remove party, had been raided a second time by the Highcliffe party? Of course Coker couldn’t. Coker knew that he was on the Nautilus, and he knew that he had a raider in his grasp. That was enough for Coker.

Smack! smack! smack!

‘Stoppit! Leggo! Oh, crikey! Leggo! What—who—Oh! wow! Oh!’ yelled Ponsonby, as Coker smacked, and smacked, and smacked again.

‘Got you!’ roared Coker. ‘Take that! And that! and that!’

Smack! smack! smack!

Pon, yelling wildly, took them. His unfortunate head rang and sang with them. Coker had a heavy hand.

‘Wallop them!’ roared Coker.

Gadsby and Monson, wriggling amazedly out of blankets, fell into the grasp of Potter and Greene. What was happening they hardly knew. But they knew that their heads were being smacked. Potter and Greene, not always keen on following the lead of their great chief, were quite willing to follow it in making an example of cheeky Remove fags who had raided their boat! They, no more than Coker, suspected that this was not the Remove party—they were not cats to see in the dark.

Coker smacked, Potter smacked, and Greene smacked. The tiny backwater of River Lodge echoed and re-echoed with the sound of emphatic smacking, accompanied by frantic yells of anguish.

Pon and Co. struggled. Utterly amazed by that sudden attack, awakening to find themselves in hostile hands, they had a first impression that the Remove party had, after

all, tracked them out. But they realized at once that these three big fellows were not Remove juniors of Greyfriars. They would have had a chance, at least, in the hands of the Removites. They had none at all in the grasp of hefty Fifth-form seniors. Ponsonby crumpled up helplessly in Coker's mighty grasp, sagging like a sack as Coker smacked and smacked. Gadsby and Monson had no better luck with Potter and Greene. They wriggled and howled and yelled and kicked, while the Nautilus rocked under them at the mooring-rope, and loose articles rolled about the boat. Among the loose articles that rolled was a fat Owl who wondered dizzily whether he was on his head or his heels. Nobody heeded Billy Bunter, in the wild excitement of the moment.

Coker and Co. had each collared his man, and were fully occupied in smacking heads. Billy Bunter rolled along the boat, sat up, groped for his spectacles, jammed them on a fat little nose, and blinked at the dim scene in the shadows like a startled owl.

Bunter's first impression, like Pon and Co.'s, was that the Famous Five had come on the scene. But he was quickly disabused of that idea, as he heard the stentorian voice of Horace Coker.

'Walk off with my boat, will you?' Coker was bellowing. 'By gum! Quelch doesn't whop you enough! Wallop the young ruffians, you fellows.'

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He realized that it was Coker—Horace Coker, of the Greyfriars Fifth: Coker, for whom an affectionate Aunt Judy had engaged and stored that boat—no other than Horace James Coker, who was bellowing in the gloom. The fat Owl fairly shivered with terror. He had not enjoyed life with Pon and Co., but even Pon and Co. were to be preferred to falling into the hands of Horace Coker, whose boat he had bagged. Of all the inhabitants of the terrestrial globe, Horace Coker was the very last that Bunter desired to meet.

'Kik-kik-kik-Coker!' moaned Bunter.

Smack! smack! smack! smack! Ponsonby, Gadsby, and Monson yelled, and struggled, and wriggled, and kicked:

Coker and Potter and Greene smacked away as if for a wager. Billy Bunter was seldom quick on the uptake: but the awful peril of Coker spurred on his fat wits to unaccustomed activity. He had to get out of this, before his turn came. He crawled to the gunwale, and, as the rocking Nautilus rocked against the bank, rolled headlong over the gunwale, and plunged ashore. He bumped into grass, with his feet in water: but he did not heed either the bump or the wet. He scrambled up and scrambled on. Where he was, and where he was going, Billy Bunter did not know: all Bunter knew was that he had to get out of Horace Coker's reach before it was too late. Stumbling over roots, bumping into trunks, gasping and spluttering, Billy Bunter ran for his fat life.

His departure passed unnoticed for the moment.

Satisfied with head-smacking—Pon and Co. were more than satisfied—Coker issued orders.

'Duck the young scoundrels!'

'Leggo!' shrieked Ponsonby, as powerful hands heaved him to the gunwale. 'Will you leggo? Who are you—what are you up to—what—who—Leggo!'

Splash!

The hapless Pon was no more than an infant in Coker's grasp. He struggled and kicked, but it availed him not. Coker, grasping him by an arm and a leg, splashed him headlong into the water: and then tossed him, drenched and dripping, into the grass on the bank.

The wretched Pon sprawled there, gurgling for breath.

‘I say——!’ began Greene.

‘They’ve had enough,’ said Potter.

‘I said duck them!’ Coker pointed out.

‘Yes, but—.’

‘Did I say duck them, or didn’t I say duck them?’ demanded Coker, categorically.

‘Oh, all right!’ said Potter.

He dipped Monson over the gunwale, and Monson wallowed ashore. Greene followed suit with Gadsby, who wallowed after Monsoon. Three drenched Highcliffians sprawled in the grass and gurgled in chorus.

‘Now where’s that fat scoundrel Bunter?’ demanded Coker.

He peered round in the gloom.

The Highcliffe juniors were not to be recognized in the dark: but Billy Bunter would have been recognized, by his circumference, if Coker’s eyes had fallen on him. But Coker’s eyes did not fall on him. Bunter was already out of the reach of vengeance.

‘Where is he?’ snapped Coker, irritably. ‘He was here a minute ago—where’s that fat frog hopped to?’

Potter and Greene stared and peered up and down and round about the Nautilus.

‘Not here now,’ said Potter.

‘Looks as if he’s cut,’ said Greene.

Snort, from Coker.

‘You fellows would let him get away!’ he said. ‘Here he was, right under your noses, and you let him cut! You would!’

‘Wasn’t he right under your nose too?’ asked Greene.

‘Don’t jaw, Greene.’

‘Didn’t you let him get away as much as we did?’ hooted Potter.

‘Don’t yell at me, Potter. You’ve let him cut!’ snapped Coker. ‘Leave it at that, and don’t jaw. I fancy we’ve made the other young rascals pretty sorry for themselves, at any rate.’

He stared at three dimly-seen wriggling and spluttering figures on the bank. ‘By gum! I’ve a jolly good mind to step out and give them a few more!’

Those words, evidently, reached the three wrigglers: for they wriggled into rapid motion and disappeared under the trees.

Coker laughed.

‘Well, I dare say they’ve had enough,’ he said. ‘We’ve given them a lesson, I fancy, about bagging a fellow’s boat! I couldn’t see which was which but whichever they were, they’ve had a tip to leave my boat alone. Get her out of here, and we’ll pull up to Wallingford.’

Coker was in great spirits. He had recaptured the Nautilus: he had bestowed drastic punishment on its raiders—and he was still in happy ignorance of the fact that the heads that had been so soundly smacked were not Greyfriars heads at all. Potter and Greene, even if they would have preferred to be in bed, had to admit that old Horace had scored all along the line. That boat had been for a week in lawless hands: and now here it was, in the hands of its rightful proprietors: tracked to its lair, as it were, and recaptured by that masterly night-attack. There were some details that were rather puzzling—why there had been only three instead of five of the young rascals, and why they had a second boat: but after all, the recapture of the Nautilus was all that mattered.

They pushed the Nautilus out into the Thames, taking the Ship Inn boat in tow. Potter and Greene sat to the oars in the Nautilus, while Coker sat in the stern and performed zigzags with the rudder lines, grinning with happy satisfaction as he zigzagged. Coker was rejoicing in victory:

Potter and Greene were thinking chiefly of bed at the Ship Inn: and they made the best speed they could under the handicap of Coker's steering.

The dusky anchorage in the little creek at River Lodge was left untenanted. It remained untenanted for long, long minutes, until Pon and Gaddy and Monson, lurking under the trees, were quite sure that their sudden and unexpected assailants were gone.

Who those assailants were, Pon and Co. did not know— they could no more see in the dark than Coker and Co. could. All they knew for certain was that their heads had been smacked, hard: and that they had been ducked: and that the Nautilus had been walked off by some persons unknown—certainly not the Famous Five, but who else, they couldn't guess. But whosoever those sudden assailants were, Pon and Co. were very anxious to see no more of them: and not till the last plash of an oar had died away up the Thames, did the drenched, dishevelled, dismal trio venture to crawl back to the creek. It was a relief, at least, to find that their own boat, the Gay Lark, was still tied up where they had left it.

The Nautilus was gone: the mysterious assailants were gone: Billy Bunter was gone: but the Gay Lark was still there: and the wretched Highcliffians were glad to crawl into it, and sort out towels and rub themselves dry: puzzled and bewildered by the night's strange happenings, and in the worst tempers ever.

CHAPTER 26 **BUNTER ON HIS OWN**

BILLY BUNTER groaned.

It was a deep hair-raising groan.

Only a deep, deep groan could have expressed Bunter's feelings.

Never had the fat Owl of the Remove felt so utterly and thoroughly up against hard fate. He blinked at the Thames, glistening in the bright moonlight, with the most pessimistic of blinks. The wide river, rolling under the full round moon, really was a beautiful sight. But the beauties of Nature were wholly lost on a tired, dismal, disconsolate, and bedraggled Owl.

'Oh, lor'!' groaned Bunter.

Where he was, Bunter did not know: except that he was somewhere in the county of Oxfordshire. Though really he could not feel quite sure of that: for his little fat legs felt as if he might have reached Gloucestershire, if not Hereford.

Actually he was not, as the crow flies, more than a quarter of a mile from that creek at River Lodge. But Bunter's flight had not been like that of the crow. He had wandered far, and he had wandered wide. He hadn't covered hundreds and hundreds of miles: but he felt just as if he had.

He had got away from Coker: that was so much to the good. He had got away from Pon and Co. They, certainly, had not given him a thought, while occupied with Coker and Potter and Greene. That also was so much to the good. But everything else was simply awful. Bunter had wandered in the dark, among trees and bushes, hoping to emerge

somewhere. He had emerged at last, on the bank of the river. The Thames, rolling in the moonlight, barred further progress. But at that point, there was no tow-path on the Oxfordshire side—no path at all. There were trees and fences down to the river margin. Neither up nor down the river could Bunter roll: and his only choice was to stay where he was, or to plunge back into the dark shadowy wood he had left.

He selected the former of those alternatives, because it did not include exertion. He sat on a knoll by the shining water, and groaned. He was tired: he was scratched by briar and bramble: he was feeling down and out. If it had been daytime, some passing craft might have picked him up and given him a lift. But it was night-time: what time Bunter did not know, as his watch was not a going concern: but he knew that it must be somewhere about midnight. At that hour there was not likely to be a passing craft available to pick up a weary Owl.

So Bunter sat and groaned.

Groaning, certainly, was not likely to get him anywhere. But he seemed to find some solace in it.

‘Beast!’ he murmured, thinking of Harry Wharton and Co.

It was all their fault, of course. If they hadn’t gone off on that ramble, leaving Bunter in the Nautilus, all this wouldn’t have happened to him. True, they had only left him in the Nautilus because he was too lazy to join them in the ramble. But it was all their fault, all the same: and they were beasts. A fat lot they cared, Bunter reflected bitterly.

Billy Bunter rather wished now that he hadn’t so cleverly ‘dished’ Coker in the hols, and walked off with his boat. But he hadn’t expected it to turn out like this!

Coker had his boat now. Bunter had left him ‘walloping’ the Highcliffians who had been in possession of it, never dreaming that it was Coker’s. But he could have no doubt that, the walloping concluded, Coker had gone off with his boat.

The Nautilus was a ‘goner’. Harry Wharton and Co. seemed to be ‘goners’ also. And here was Bunter, on his lonely own, sitting by the Thames and groaning: without even a hope of a passing craft to pick him up and give him a lift to somewhere where a fellow could get a bed for the night! It was quite a deplorable outcome of Billy Bunter’s astute scheming.

‘Oh, lor’!’ groaned Bunter.

He blinked dismally up and down the shining river.

If anything in the shape of a craft turned up, he was ready to yell for help. But what craft was likely to turn up at that time of night?

The wind down the river fanned Bunter’s fat face. The musical ripple of the Thames came to his fat ears. But that was all! He really might as well have been on Robinson Crusoe’s island, watching for a sail!

‘Oh!’ ejaculated Bunter, suddenly.

A sound that was not the ripple of the river, or the night wind in the branches, came to those fat ears. It sounded to Bunter like the splash of an oar.

The fat junior gave an eager start, and concentrated his little round eyes and his big round spectacles in the direction of the sound. And he discerned a moving shape in the distance on the shining surface of the Thames.

‘It’s a boat!’ breathed Bunter.

Late as the hour was, it was a boat. The fat Owl rose from the knoll, and fixed his eyes and spectacles on it eagerly. Undoubtedly it was a boat, coming down from the direction

of distant Wallingford.

‘Oh, good!’ gasped Bunter.

His dismal fat face brightened. Whoever it was that was out on the river at that hour, surely, he would give a lift to a dismal fat Owl stranded on an inhospitable shore?

The moonlight was bright and clear. But Billy Bunter’s vision was limited, even with the aid of his big spectacles. He could make out the boat: and as it came nearer, he made out that it seemed fairly full. A boatman was pulling at the oars: and there were four or five others in the boat, so far as Bunter could make out.

Whatsoever that craft was, and whosoever its numerous crew, Bunter was going to get a lift on it, if he could. Under the trees on the bank, he would probably have been passed unseen: but he was not going to be passed unheard. He stood on the knoll where he had been sitting, waved a fat hand in the air, and yelled: ‘Hi!’

The boat—a rather roomy old dinghy—was well out on the river, and still at some distance up, and the wind down the Thames was against Bunter. His yell failed to reach its objective: there was no sign of the craft swerving from its course. It pulled on regardless.

Billy Bunter almost danced on the grassy knoll, in his anxiety and excitement. He waved both fat hands in the air, yelling at the top of his voice.

‘Hi! I say! Hi! Help! Hi! Hi! Hi!’

In dread of the dinghy passing him, and leaving him stranded there, Billy Bunter put all his beef into that frantic yell. The dinghy, drawing nearer with every stroke of the oars, was within range of that vocal effort. The fat Owl’s yell reached ears on board: and Bunter, to his immense relief, saw that faces were turned in his direction, though not near enough for recognition. They had heard him!

He waved and yelled.

‘Hi! Help! I’m stranded here! Hi! Hi!’

There was a shout from the dinghy. It was a startled shout, in a voice that was familiar to Billy Bunter’s fat ears.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’

‘Oh, crikey!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I say, you fellows—oh, crumbs!’

‘Bunter!’

‘Pull in, Jenkins.’

‘That fat ass—!’

‘The esteemed and ridiculous Bunter!’

‘That blitherer Bunter—!’

‘That benighted chump Bunter!’

Familiar voices, uttering familiar remarks, reached Billy Bunter’s fat ears, as the dinghy pulled for the shore.

CHAPTER 27 **BUNTER—BUT NO BOAT !**

‘BUNTER!’

The little crowd of juniors in the dinghy stared at the fat Owl. They had wondered what had become of Billy Bunter. Now they knew! Here he was! They had been searching for the missing Nautilus. They had not found the Nautilus; but they had found Bunter.

It had been a long and fruitless search. They had gone up past Wallingford in their quest. They had landed at a riverside cafe for a much-needed meal: and then resumed the search. The bright moonlight night had tempted them to keep up the hunt till a late hour. Now they were coming back to give the reaches below Wallingford the twice-over, as it were: little dreaming that while they were further up the Thames, Coker and Co., in possession of the missing boat, had taken it up to the Ship Inn, tied it up there, and gone to bed. Coming back down the river, they had passed the Ship, shut for the night, but how were they to guess that the Nautilus was tied up there? Of course, they couldn't. Puzzled and exasperated, tired and sleepy, they were undecided whether to keep up the hunt, so long as the bright moonlight lasted, or whether to give it up for the night and resume at dawn. That moot point was still undecided when the yells from the Oxfordshire bank reached them in the dinghy.

What had become of Bunter, whether he was still with the Nautilus or had parted company with it, they just couldn't guess. Now, however, they knew: for here was Bunter, and there was no sign of the Nautilus. Possibly they would have preferred to see the Nautilus: still, it was a relief to have found Bunter.

'I say, you fellows!' Bunter rolled down to the dinghy, as it edged into the rushes. 'I say, I didn't know it was you fellows in that boat—I say, I've had an awful time—I say, got anything to eat?'

'Where's the Nautilus?' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

'I expect Coker's got it—.'

'Coker!'

All the Famous Five uttered that name together. They had forgotten the existence of Horace Coker, since that spot of trouble with him down at Sonning. They were astonished to be reminded of him like this.

'I—I suppose so!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I think he got it away from those Highcliffe swobs—they had it—.'

'Those Highcliffe ticks!' exclaimed Bob Cherry, blankly. The Famous Five had not even thought of Pon and Co. in connection with the missing boat.

'They collared it,' explained Bunter. 'I—I woke up and found that they'd got it, you know—.'

'Pon and Co!' said Harry, knitting his brows. 'That Highcliffe gang! They walked off with our boat!'

'And you let them, you fat frog!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'Oh, really, Bull—.'

'You looked after the boat by going to sleep in it, is that it?' asked Frank Nugent. 'And those cads came along and walked it off, and you let them.'

'Oh, really, Nugent! I—I did my best,' said Bunter. 'I—I fought like a—a—a—a—.'

'Rabbit?' asked Johnny Bull.

'Beast! Like a—a lion!' declared Bunter. 'But the three of them were too much for me. I—I couldn't handle more than two!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

The Famous Five were not in their merriest mood. But there was a burst of merriment as Billy Bunter made that statement. They could guess just about how lion-like Bunter had been in dealing with Pon and Co.

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!' yapped Bunter. 'I'd have knocked Pon overboard

as soon as looked at him. But the three of them—.'

'Was it Pon who floored you with the cushion?' asked Bob.

'Eh! How did you know?' ejaculated Bunter.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I expect a cosh with a cosh was enough for Bunter,' said Bob. 'But where did they take the boat, fatty?'

'They camped in a sort of backwater—.'

'Oh!' said Harry. 'That's how we missed them, then. We've been hunting them up at Wallingford, while they've been camped somewhere along here. Is it far from here?'

'Miles and miles and miles—.'

'Oh, rot!' grunted Johnny Bull. 'It can't be miles.'

'Perhaps you know better than I do, Bull!' yapped Bunter. 'I know I've walked miles and miles and miles and miles since I got away from them. My legs are nearly dropping off.'

'But where does Coker come in?' exclaimed Harry Wharton. 'We might have guessed that it was Pon and his gang larking with our boat, if we'd known they were about. But Coker—.'

'Well, Coker would know that it was our boat, as he saw us in it down at Sonning,' said Bob, thoughtfully.

'Would he?' gasped Bunter.

'Well, wouldn't he, fathead?'

'Oh! Yes! Of—of course!' stuttered the fat Owl. 'Oh, crikey! I—I mean, of—of course Coker would know it was our boat!'

'That's it, I suppose,' said Harry. 'Coker's an obstreperous ass, but if he saw that gang with our boat, he might get it back for us. He wouldn't stand for Highcliffe cads walking off a Greyfriars boat.'

'Oh, crumbs!' murmured Billy Bunter.

'You think Coker got it away from them?' asked Harry.

'Oh! Yes.'

'If that's so, it's safe,' said Bob. 'But what are you doing here on your own, Bunter? If Coker's got the Nautilus, why didn't you stick in it?'

'Catch me sticking in it, with Coker!' gasped Bunter. 'I jolly well bolted while he was whopping those Highcliffe cads. He would jolly well have pitched into me next.'

'You howling ass, do you think Coker's still after you, in the hols, because you bagged his hamper last term?' hooted Bob.

'Eh? Oh! No! Yes! I mean—.'

'Well, what do you mean, ass?'

'I—I—I mean, I—I wasn't risking it,' said Bunter. 'I—I jolly well cleared off! I say, you fellows, if you've got anything to eat—.' Bunter rather wanted to change the subject!

'You silly ass, we want to know about the boat!' exclaimed Harry Wharton, impatiently.

'Could you find that backwater again?'

'Of course I couldn't! It's miles and miles and miles—'

'Rubbish!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'Beast! I—I say, you fellows, it's no good looking for that boat now Coker's got it—.'

'You burbling bloater,' said Bob. 'If Coker's got it he's only minding it for us. We've only got to find Coker, to find our boat.'

'Oh, crikey!'

‘Puzzle—find Coker!’ said Nugent.

‘I say, you fellows, I’m tired out, after walking miles and miles and miles and miles—.’

‘Yards and yards and yards and yards, more likely,’ grunted Johnny Bull.

‘Yah! I say, there must be an inn somewhere, where we can get some supper, and go to bed,’ wailed Bunter. ‘After a fellow’s walked miles and miles and miles and miles and miles—..’

‘Not a bad idea,’ said Bob, with a nod. ‘We’re all jolly fagged out, you fellows, and now we know the boat’s safe, we can hunt up Coker in the morning, and get the boat. Know a place where they’ll take in weary travellers at this time of night, Jenkins?’

‘There’s the Ship, sir,’ said the boatman. “‘Arf a mile up. They’re shut now, of course: but they’d take you in.’

‘I say, you fellows, let’s go—.’ Billy Bunter clambered into the dinghy. ‘I say, I’m sleepy.’

‘I think we’re all sleepy,’ said Harry. ‘Push off, Jenkins, and we’ll make for the Ship. We can’t do anything more to-night, you chaps, but we’ll turn out early in the morning Howl from Bunter.

‘I say, I jolly well ain’t turning out early in the morning, after staying up half the night and walking miles and miles and miles and miles—.’

‘You’ll be wanted, fathead—we’ve got to find that backwater—.’

‘Well, you can call me at ten—.’

‘Not earlier?’ asked Bob.

‘Not a minute earlier!’ said Bunter, firmly.

‘You won’t turn out if we do?’

‘No jolly fear!’

‘All right,’ said Bob. ‘I’ll call you at six: and if you don’t turn out, I’ll up-end a jug of cold water over you. Think you’ll turn out then?’

‘Beast!’

Jenkins pulled up to the Ship. That hospitable hostelry gave the weary party refuge: and Harry Wharton and Co. were almost as glad as Billy Bunter to turn in. And Billy Bunter, much against the grain, did turn out at six in the sunny August morning.

CHAPTER 28 RECAPTURED !

‘POTTER!’

Five fellows stared round. One blinked round, in alarm, through a pair of big spectacles.

‘Greene!’

It was bright and early on the Thames: a glorious August morning. It was sunny and pleasant in the inn garden. The Ship had a long garden extending down to the tow-path, which at that point was on the Oxfordshire side. Quite a number of boats were tied up there. There were little tables under shady trees: and at one of them the Famous Five sat and breakfasted—an excellent breakfast which comforted Billy Bunter a little for having had to turn out early.

Harry Wharton and Co. had finished breakfast, though Billy Bunter was still going on. It was against Bunter’s principles to leave off, while anything of an edible nature remained. The Famous Five were discussing their plans, to an accompaniment of steady chomping

from Bunter. They had to find the Nautilus. From Billy Bunter's somewhat disjointed account of his adventures since Pon and Co. had walked off with the boat, it seemed probable that Coker had taken possession, in which case it was only necessary to find Coker. But where was Coker?

As if in answer to that question, a powerful voice impinged upon their ears. Somebody had come out of the inn into the sunlight, but they did not heed, till they heard that familiar bawl. Then, looking round, they realized that Coker of the Fifth did not need searching for. There he was!

'Jolly old Coker, or his ghost!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'Coker here!' said Harry. 'Well that's rather luck.'

'The luckfulness is terrific,' agreed Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

Billy Bunter ceased to demolish the last remnant of marmalade. His eyes popped at Horace Coker. He did not share the satisfaction of the Famous Five at the sight of that burly figure and rugged countenance.

It was a surprise, but after all, not much of a surprise, to find Coker at the Ship. Coker and Co. had put up there for the night, just as the juniors had. It had not occurred to them, and they might have gone off hunting for him, had he not come out into the inn-garden and bawled. So for once Horace Coker's stentorian bawl was a not unwelcome sound. Coker did not glance at the table under the tree, round which the juniors were sitting. He stood with his back to them, staring up at a window: evidently a bedroom window: and bawling. From which the juniors deduced that Potter and Greene were in that particular room, and had not yet turned out of bed.

Other persons, as well as the Greyfriars juniors, looked round, as Coker bawled. Coker did not mind. He bawled again.

'Potter! Greene! Slackers!'

The juniors exchanged glances. From Bunter's tale, they knew that Coker and Co. must have been up late the previous night. Potter and Greene, it seemed, were not prepared for early rising after a late night. They seemed to want their sleep out. Coker, disdainful of such weaknesses, was full of beans as usual.

'Potter!' Coker was getting impatient. 'Greene! Are you going to sleep all day long, or what? Potter! Greene!'

The window above opened, at last. Potter's face became visible, looking out. The expression on Potter's face was very expressive.

'For goodness sake, shut up, Coker!' he called down.

'What?' Horace Coker was not accustomed to being told, by his comrades, to shut up. 'What?'

'Do you want to wake up all Oxfordshire?' hooted Potter.

'It's time all Oxfordshire woke up!' retorted Coker. 'Slacking in bed on a glorious morning like this—.'

'Haven't we been up half the night?' hooted Potter. 'Think fellows can do without any sleep at all?'

'Look here, if you and Greene are going to slack in bed—.'

'We're not coming down till nine at least.'

'I've been up more than an hour!' snorted Coker.

'Go and get your brekker, if you want something to do.'

'I've had my brekker.'

‘Well, go and eat coke, then!’

‘I’m not going to wait for you two lazy slackers to crawl out like a pair of snails!’ bawled Coker. ‘I’m ready to take the boat out.’

‘Take it out and be blowed.’

‘Look here, Potter—.’

Slam! The window closed.

‘By gum!’ breathed Coker. ‘Slackers! Snails! Slugs!’ He bawled up to the window again.

‘Look here, George Potter! Do you hear me, Potter?’

If Potter heard, he heeded not. The window remained closed. Potter, it seemed, had gone back to bed.

Coker gave a scornful snort.

‘Slackers! Snails! Slugs!’ he repeated, unaware for the moment of ears that heard, and of five grinning faces watching him from a table under a tree. ‘Sticking in bed— yah! Well, I’ll go and get the boat ready, and if they ain’t down by then, I’ll jolly well go up and lug ’em out!’

And Coker turned, to stalk down the garden to the river.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’ called out Bob Cherry, cheerily.

Coker gave quite a jump. He stared round, and for the first time, his eyes fell on the Famous Five. They did not fall on Billy Bunter. Billy Bunter had backed out of view behind the trunk of the tree under which the party had breakfasted.

‘You!’ ejaculated Coker, staring.

‘Little us!’ assented Bob, with a cheery nod. ‘Nice morning, Coker!’

‘You cheeky young sweep—.’

‘Top of a beautiful morning, my esteemed and absurd Coker!’ said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘So you’re here, are you?’ said Coker. ‘You’re asking for it, coming here to my inn.’

‘Yours?’ asked Bob. ‘How much did you give for it, Coker?’

‘I don’t want any cheek from you!’ said Coker. ‘I’ll smack your heads all round, just as I did last night, as soon as look at you.’

‘Eh?’

‘What?’

The juniors gazed at him. They knew, from Bunter, that Coker and Co. had been smacking heads the previous night. But it certainly was not Greyfriars heads that had been smacked.

‘Keep your distance, if you know when you’re well off,’ added Coker, darkly: and with that he turned to stalk down the garden again.

‘Hold on, Coker!’ exclaimed Harry Wharton. ‘We want to know about our boat, the Nautilus. We—.’

Coker turned his head.

‘Your boat—the Nautilus!’ he ejaculated.

‘Yes! We—.’

‘Yours, is it?’ gasped Coker. ‘By gum! Let me catch you anywhere near the Nautilus again! Let me just catch you, that’s all! By gum!’

‘What on earth do you mean?’ exclaimed Harry. ‘Look here, have you got the Nautilus or not?’

‘Have I?’ hooted Coker. ‘Yes, I have, as you know jolly well: and I’m keeping it—!’

‘Keeping it!’ stuttered Wharton. ‘Look here, Coker —!’

But Coker did not ‘look there’. With an angry and disdainful snort, he stalked away down the garden, to the tow-path: leaving Harry Wharton and Co. staring at one another blankly.

‘Is he off his onion?’ asked Bob Cherry, in wonder. ‘He says he’s got our boat, and he’s keeping it—.’

‘Does he think we’ll let him?’ asked Johnny Bull, in a growl like that of the Great Huge Bear.

‘Blessed if I make him out,’ said Harry. ‘Sounds like crackers! He fancies he smacked our heads last night—.’

‘Oh, my hat!’ exclaimed Bob. ‘Did he take that Highcliffe gang for us in the dark? He smacked their heads, according to Bunter.’

‘Oh!’ ejaculated Wharton. ‘I suppose Coker’s ass enough for that, or for anything else. But even Coker can’t be ass enough to fancy that he can keep our boat.’

‘We’ll give him something to cure all that, if he does,’ grunted Johnny Bull.

‘I say, you fellows.’ Billy Bunter emerged from behind the tree. ‘I say, I—I say, we—we—we’d better keep clear of Coker—.’

‘Fathead !’

‘Oh, really, Cherry!’

‘I’ll cut in, and settle the bill here,’ said Harry. ‘Then we’ll see Coker about the Nautilus. If he fancies he can keep our boat, the sooner he wakes up the better.’

‘But I—I say, you fellows—!’ stuttered Bunter.

Billy Bunter had his own reasons—excellent reasons—for wishing to keep clear of Coker, now that Horace was in possession of his own property. He did not want—very much indeed he did not want—explanations of how the matter really stood. But nobody heeded Bunter. Harry Wharton cut into the inn to settle the bill: and then the Famous Five, in a determined body, followed on Coker’s trail down to the tow-path—Billy Bunter, in a state of considerable trepidation, bringing up the rear.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo, there’s Coker!’ said Bob.

Coker was standing in a boat, tied on to a post. No doubt that boat had been tied up there, when the juniors arrived at the inn the previous night, though they had not noticed it then. But they noticed it now—and recognized it at once. It was the Nautilus.

‘Coker!’ called out Harry Wharton.

Coker stared round.

‘You again!’ he ejaculated. ‘You’re asking for it, young Wharton! Do you want me to step out of this boat and wallop you?’

‘We want you to step out of that boat,’ said Harry. ‘Look here, Coker, don’t play the giddy ox if you can help it. We want that boat.’

Coker gasped.

‘You want this boat?’ he articulated. ‘You cheeky young rascal—.’

‘Pack all that up!’ interrupted Johnny Bull. ‘Look here, are you handing that boat over, or do you want us to sling you out of it?’

Coker almost choked.

‘Sling me out of it! By gum! I’d like to see you sling me out of it!’ he gurgled. ‘Why, I’ll smash you—I’ll pulverize you—I’ll spiflicate you—I—I—I’ll—.’ Words and breath failed Coker.

Neither did the Famous Five waste more time in words. Amazing as it was—to them—Coker fancied that he could keep that boat! They were prepared to undeceive him on that point promptly.

‘Hop in!’ said Bob.

The five jumped into the Nautilus together. It rocked at the painter, and Coker, jumping at them, stumbled over a thwart, and measured his length. They did not give him time to resume the perpendicular. Five pairs of hands grasped Coker, and beefy as he was, five pairs of hands were enough. Coker was heaved bodily out of the boat, to measure his length a second time, on the tow-path. Bob cast the painter loose.

‘Oh, crikey!’ gasped Billy Bunter.

‘Roll in, you fat ass!’ called out Bob.

Billy Bunter rolled in. Coker, gurgling for breath, sat up dizzily. Bob grasped an oar and pushed off. Six or seven yards of water separated Coker from the Nautilus when he staggered to his feet. He brandished frantic fists at faces that grinned back at him.

‘Bring back that boat!’ bawled Coker.

‘Likely!’ chuckled Bob.

‘Pull!’ said Harry Wharton, laughing.

Four oars pulled. The Nautilus shot away up the river. Horace Coker was left almost dancing on the tow-path. Five juniors looked back, grinning: one, the fattest of the party, with an anxious blink. Much to Billy Bunter’s relief, there had been no chance of explanations: but the fat Owl did not feel secure with Coker anywhere in the offing.

‘I say, you fellows, put it on!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I say, Coker might get another boat and come after us—.’

‘Let him!’ growled Johnny Bull.

‘We—we don’t want to keep on rowing with Coker,’ urged Bunter. ‘I—I say, let’s keep clear of him—what’s the good of rows in the hols? Just put your beef into it, and let’s get past Oxford, and—.’

‘Here’s an oar, if you’d like to put some of your beef into it, Bunter,’ said Nugent.

‘Oh, really, Nugent—.’

Billy Bunter was in haste, but not in sufficient haste to put his own personal beef into it! But he cast anxious blinks back along the Thames.

But the Famous Five, though not in the least sharing Bunter’s dread of Coker at close quarters, were quite willing to avoid further trouble with the headstrong Horace if they could: and they did put their beef into it, and the Nautilus travelled fast. And Billy Bunter, relieved at last, was at leisure to sort another breakfast out of the locker, and enjoy life in his own way while the other fellows pulled.

CHAPTER 29 **BIRD’S EYE VIEW**

‘COMING up, Bunter?’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Billy Bunter did not join in the laugh. He only gave Bob Cherry a devastating blink. Billy Bunter was not likely to ‘come up’: ‘up’ being up a massive oak that overtopped the Thames forty or fifty feet. That tall tree by the river tempted Bob. It did not tempt Billy Bunter—not in the very least.

‘Splendid view from the top, old fat man,’ said Bob. ‘Most of what some jolly old poet has called the “stripling Thames”—.’

‘Yah!’ was Bunter’s reply.

Bunter was not interested in the ‘stripling Thames’, except that, above Oxford, it was at a safe distance from Coker. Bunter would not have climbed to the summit of that tall tree, to get a view of the Thames from source to estuary. He did not even want to climb out of the Nautilus. Sitting down was Bunter’s long suit.

The Nautilus was tied up on the Berkshire side. The city of ancient spires and antique towers had been left behind: the ‘stripling Thames’ lay ahead. But the boating party were in no hurry to arrive at Lechlade. Leisurely day succeeded leisurely day: which suited Bunter, except for a lingering dread that Coker of the Fifth might be still on the trail. Five fellows had landed to lunch under the shade of the big oak. Bunter had lunched on board, which saved the unnecessary exertion of stepping out. While the Famous Five disposed of one lunch apiece, Billy Bunter disposed of half-a-dozen, one after another: after which, the idea of tree-climbing had less appeal for him than ever.

Lunch made no difference to Bob, always strenuous. He was as full of beans after taking as before taking. And there was no doubt that there would be a splendid view of the Thames valley from the topmost branches of that oak— Oxfordshire, Berkshire, and some Wiltshire and Gloucestershire—green meadows, dusky woods, rolling hills, nestling villages, the spires of Oxford, and great stretches of Father Thames winding on his way to the sea. Four fellows were ready to follow the energetic Bob up: but Billy Bunter’s scorn of the idea could not be expressed in words, and hardly by that devastating blink from his little round eyes and his big round spectacles.

Leaving the Famous Five to their own energetic devices, the Owl of the Remove deposited his plump form on rugs in the boat, to take the repose he really needed after his exertions at lunch. Having loaded to the Plimsoll line, or a little over, there was no more room in Bunter for provender: so naturally he was going to sleep: that being second on Bunter’s list of the joys of existence.

‘Come on!’ said Harry Wharton, laughing.

‘Race you to the top!’ said Bob.

They clambered up the big oak. A rumbling sound from the boat followed them into the branches. Billy Bunter’s eyes were closed, and his mouth was open: and that rumble announced that slumber’s chain had already bound him.

Up went the energetic five, Bob Cherry in the lead, pushing through branches to the summit. Their heads came out at last through foliage high up, and they had the splendid view that Bob had predicted.

‘Ye distant spires, ye antique towers—!’ quoted Frank Nugent, glimpsing Oxford in the far distance.

‘Jolly old river!’ said Bob. ‘Does it look ripping from here!’

‘The ripfulness is terrific,’ agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘Topping!’ said Johnny Bull. ‘Jolly scenery around here. Not quite up to Yorkshire, perhaps: but jolly.’

At which his comrades grinned. Johnny’s travels, however far and wide they might extend, were never likely to land him anywhere that he considered quite up to Yorkshire!

‘Something there you don’t see in Yorkshire, Johnny,’ said Bob.

‘Eh! What’s that?’

‘Bird’s-eye view of Bunter,’ answered Bob.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Looking down, the junior could see the Nautilus by the bank, rocking gently to the current. In the Nautilus they had a bird’s-eye view, as Bob expressed it, of William George Bunter, lying on the rugs on his plump back, his spectacles gleaming back the sunshine. In the clear air, the rumble of his resonant snore floated up to them.

Snore!

‘Music hath charms!’ chuckled Frank Nugent.

Snore!

‘The snorefulness is terrific,’ remarked Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’ exclaimed Bob Cherry, suddenly. He stared down the river. ‘See that boat?’

‘I can see a dozen,’ answered Harry.

‘Look at that one—with three fellows in it, pulling up! We know that bunch,’ said Bob.

‘Not Coker again, for goodness sake!’ exclaimed Nugent. ‘We’ve had more than we want of Coker.’

‘Pon and his gang!’ exclaimed Harry Wharton. He fixed his eyes on the boat, as it drew nearer, and recognized the crew of three. It was the Gay Lark, with Pon and Co. on board.

‘That gang!’ said Johnny Bull, knitting his brows. ‘Chance to let them know what we think of them for walking off our boat down by Wallingford.’

Harry Wharton shook his head.

‘Let them rip,’ he said. ‘We’re not looking for rows.’

Grunt from Johnny! But he let it go at that: though the glare he fixed on the approaching Highcliffe boat was grim.

The juniors watched the Gay Lark as it came slowly up. Monson and Gadsby were pulling, not very strenuously, and Ponsonby lounged in the stern, smoking a cigarette. Suddenly, they saw him take the cigarette from his mouth, half-rise in his seat, and stare. Bob Cherry chuckled.

‘He’s seen our boat,’ he said. ‘I fancy those slackers will put on steam a bit, now they know we’re about.’

‘Good riddance to bad rubbish, if they do!’ grunted Johnny Bull.

But Bob, as it proved, was in error on that point. They saw Ponsonby speaking to Gadsby and Monson, and both the oarsmen looked round, evidently at the Nautilus. Pon had spotted the Greyfriars boat tied near the big oak, and drawn his companions’ attention to it. The three of them stared at the Nautilus, and then stared at the bank, scanning it up and down with searching eyes.

Bob gave another chuckle.

‘Looking to see if we’re about!’ he said. ‘They wouldn’t guess that we’re tree-topping this afternoon. By gum, I wonder if Pon’s thinking up another lark with our boat. I shouldn’t wonder!’

The juniors grinned at the idea. It was quite probable. Down below Wallingford, Pon and Co. had come on the Nautilus, with Bunter asleep in it, and nobody else about. To the Highcliffians, it looked as if history was repeating itself: they did not cast a single upward glance, and evidently did not dream that five pairs of eyes were watching them from a tree-top. The Famous Five, grinning, watched very curiously for Pon and Co.’s next proceeding.

The Highcliffe boat came on: but so far from putting on steam, the Highcliffians were clearly satisfied that Bunter was alone, as on the previous occasion: and Ponsonby hooked on, catching the gunwale of the Nautilus. He grinned at the slumbering fat countenance of William George Bunter, and his grin was reflected on the faces of Gadsby and Monson.

‘Is this a spot of luck, you fellows?’ said Ponsonby. Almost under the big oak, his voice floated up to the ears above, to the accompaniment of Billy Bunter’s snore.

‘Looks like it,’ said Monson. ‘They’ve left that fat frog minding the boat, just as they did down below Wallingford—there’s nobody about.’

‘Look here, Pon, we’re not walking off that boat again,’ said Gadsby. ‘You know how it ended last time—.’

‘I know I’m not losing a chance like this!’ said Ponsonby. ‘But we’re not going to be found with that boat again, Gaddy. We’re going to chuck that fat frog out on his neck, and tow that tub across to the other side and tie it up there, out of sight. When those Greyfriars cads come back from their walk, they can hunt for it—as long as they like.’ Five fellows overhead grinned, as Pon’s voice floated up. They were quite enjoying this bird’s-eye view of Pon and Co.

‘Dear old Pon!’ murmured Bob Cherry. ‘Always up to something! I sort of think he’s going to get a surprise shortly.’

‘Sort of!’ chuckled Nugent.

‘The surprisefulness will probably be terrific,’ grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. ‘This time the esteemed and execrable Pon’s knavish tricks will be a boot on the other leg.’

Gadsby’s voice floated up.

‘Well, that’s all right, Pon! Hand me the boat-hook, and I’ll wake up that snoring grampus.’

‘I’ll wake him up!’ chuckled Pon.

Holding on to the Nautilus with his left, Ponsonby picked up a boat-hook with his right. His comrades watched him, grinning, as he leaned over towards the slumbering Owl of the Remove.

Billy Bunter was deep in happy slumber. No doubt he would have continued to slumber, had Pon and Co. ‘walked off’ with the boat, as they had done before. But he did not continue to slumber when Pon jabbed with the boat-hook. Even Billy Bunter’s powers as a Rip van Winkle were not proof against that. He came quite suddenly out of the realm of dreams.

‘Yaroooooooh!’

Bunter’s wild yell echoed into Berkshire on one side of the Thames, and into Oxfordshire on the other.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ came from Pon and Co.

‘Yoo-ow-ow! Who’s that? What’s that? Is that you, Bob Cherry, you beast? Ow! wow! yo-ow! Yaroooh!’ added Bunter, frantically, as Pon jabbed again, and he scrambled wildly up. His eyes popped at Pon and Co.

‘Oh, crikey!’ gasped Bunter. ‘Keep that boat-hook away, you rotter—wow! I say, you fellows! Help! Rescue! I say—yaroooh.’

‘Hop out of it, you fat frog!’ grinned Ponsonby, with another lunge of the boat-hook.

‘Ow! wow! yow!’

‘Hop it!’ chuckled Monson. ‘Puncture him, Pon, if he doesn’t hop it! Those Greyfriars

swobs may be near enough to hear him yell.'

The Greyfriars party were near—much nearer than Monson dreamed. They were already scrambling down the branches of the tall oak. But as yet they were not in view: and the Highcliffians had not the remotest idea of what was coming.

'Puncture him,' chuckled Gadsby.

Billy Bunter made a frantic bound to the bank, a last lunge from the boat-hook accelerating his bound. He rolled in the grass and roared.

Pon, laughing, dropped the boat-hook, and jumped into the Nautilus. The next item on the Highcliffe programme was casting the boat loose, and towing it across the river. But that part of the programme was never carried out.

Five fellows were slithering swiftly down the tall oak. The ascent of that tall tree had been somewhat laborious: but, as in fabled Avernus of old, the descent was facile—they fairly whizzed down. In a matter of seconds they were leaping from the lower branches. And five grisly ghosts could hardly have startled Pon and Co. more, than that sudden and unexpected appearance of the Famous Five in the flesh.

CHAPTER 30 NEW USE FOR A FRYING-PAN

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!' roared Bob Cherry.

'Oh!' gasped Ponsonby.

He spun round in the Nautilus, staring at Bob, with bulging eyes. Gadsby and Monson, holding on to the gunwale, stared. Billy Bunter rolled and roared, unheeded, on the bank. A couple of minutes would have been enough for Pon and Co. But they were not given a couple of seconds. Bob Cherry was the first to land on his feet. He did not pause: he leaped into the Nautilus, as his comrades dropped from the branches behind him.

The boat rocked as Bob crashed into it, and Pon, stumbling, sat down in the bows. He sat and stared, almost gibbering, in his amazement.

'Oh, scissors!' gasped Gadsby. 'They're here!'

'Up that tree!' stuttered Monson.

Never had three mischievous young rascals been taken so utterly by surprise. Pon sat in the Nautilus, gibbering—Gaddy and Monson gibbered from the Gay Lark.

But as the rest of the Co. followed Bob into the Nautilus, they let go the gunwale, and the Gay Lark rocked clear. Monson grabbed up an oar.

'Jump, Pon!' he shouted.

Pon would gladly have jumped. But he had no chance of jumping. As he scrambled up, Bob gave him a push on the chest, and he sat down in the bows again.

'Stick where you are, my pippin!' said Bob, cheerily.

'Collar them!' shouted Johnny Bull.

Monson shoved at the Nautilus with the oar, and the Gay Lark rocked out of jumping distance in time. Johnny, about to leap from one boat to the other, paused, as the water widened between. Pon was in the hands of the enemy: his pals were chiefly concerned with keeping out of those hands—and they just did it.

Ponsonby scrambled up again. This time Bob kindly allowed him to remain on his feet. But he gave only one look at the Gay Lark. It was well out on the river, and Pon did not want to jump into the Thames. Gadsby and Monson, with oars ready to dip, looked on

from a distance.

Pon scowled at them: and then scowled at the Greyfriars party. The Famous Five did not scowl back. They smiled. They found the situation entertaining, if Pon did not.

‘Nice seeing you again, Pon,’ said Bob Cherry, affably.

‘The nicefulness is terrific,’ grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘We were not quite so far away, this time, as you fancied!’ said Harry Wharton, laughing.

‘Taking our boat away to tie up on the other bank?’ inquired Nugent. ‘Get on with it, Pon.’

‘Do!’ said Johnny Bull.

Pon did not look like getting on with it. Gladly he would have departed, without towing the Nautilus across to Oxfordshire. But there was no departure yet for Pon.

Billy Bunter heaved himself up in the grass on the bank. He set his spectacles straight on his fat little nose, and blinked into the Nautilus. His blink at Cecil Ponsonby was positively ferocious.

‘I say, you fellows,’ spluttered Bunter. ‘Don’t let him get away! Wait till I get at him with the boat-hook!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

The fat Owl scrambled back into the boat. His eyes gleamed behind his spectacles as he grabbed up the Nautilus’s boat-hook. Pon gave a howl of alarm as the fat junior started towards him in the bows.

‘Keep that fat lunatic off!’ he yelled.

Pon had jabbed Bunter with the Gay Lark’s boat-hook. But evidently his view was that jabs from a boat-hook were among the things which it is more blessed to give than to receive! He did not want any jabs from Bunter.

‘Hold on, Bunter,’ exclaimed Harry.

‘Lemme gerrat him—!’

Bob Cherry grasped a fat shoulder.

‘Hold on, you ferocious old porpoise—.’

‘Shan’t!’ yelled Bunter. ‘Leggo! He jolly well punctured me—I’m jolly well going to puncture him—.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Ponsonby backed into the extremity of the bows, just escaping a lunge. But Bob’s powerful grasp jerked back the vengeful Owl.

‘Chuck it, old fat man,’ he said, soothingly.

‘Leggo!’ yelled Bunter.

‘Keep him off!’ gasped Ponsonby.

‘Rot!’ growled Johnny Bull. ‘Tit for tat! Let Bunter give him a jab or two.’

But Bob jerked the boat-hook from the fat hand.

‘Look here,’ hooted Johnny. ‘We’re not letting that Highcliffe cad off, when he was going to strand us a second time—.’

‘Not at all,’ said Bob. ‘Pon came here to ask for it, and he’s going to get what he asked for. Bunter’s going to give him six! Like to give Pon six, Bunter?’

‘Oh! Yes! Rather!’ chirruped Bunter.

‘Sort out the frying-pan,’ said Bob.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

There was a howl of laughter on the Nautilus. Pon did not join in it. The prospect of ‘six’

from a frying-pan, wielded in the avenging hand of the incensed fat Owl, did not move Pon to merriment.

‘Look here, let me get back to my boat,’ he panted. ‘I—I—I’ll keep clear of you after this—.’

‘Six on the bags will help you to remember to keep clear,’ said Bob. ‘Bend over, Pon!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Bend over, you Highcliffe swob!’ yelled Bunter, flourishing the frying-pan. ‘Now, then! Sharp!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Pon cast a longing look at the Gay Lark. But there was no escape for him. Gadsby and Monson were keeping their distance—not that they could have helped Pon by coming nearer. Pon had asked for it: and that for which he had asked was coming to him. His friends in the Gay Lark could only look on, glad that they too were not on the Nautilus to take a share of the frying-pan.

‘Bending over, Pon?’ grinned Johnny Bull. ‘Ready?’

Pon was not ready. But he had no choice in the matter. The Famous Five closed in on him, and collared him: and in vigorous hands he was tipped over a thwart, in a favourable position for taking ‘six’.

‘Go it, Bunter!’ chuckled Bob.

Billy Bunter ‘went’ it, with vigour. Up went the frying-pan, and down it came, landing on Pon’s elegant flannel bags with a whop that rang over the Thames like a rifle-shot. A frantic yell followed.

Whop! whop! whop!

‘Oh, my hat!’ gasped Gadsby. ‘Look!’

‘Oh, scissors!’ said Monson.

They looked—and grinned. To an onlooker, no doubt there was something comic in a fellow taking ‘six’ from a frying-pan. The Greyfriars fellows were laughing— Gadsby and Monson were grinning. The only fellow who was not entertained was Ponsonby. Like the old Queen. Pon was not amused.

Whop! whop! whop!

‘Ow! Oh! Stoppit! Wow!’ yelled Pon.

Up went the frying-pan again. But Bob Cherry caught it before it could descend on the wriggling, yelling Highcliffian.

‘That’s six, old fat man,’ said Bob.

‘Leggo!’ howled Bunter. ‘Pon hasn’t had enough—.’

‘Let’s ask Pon,’ said Bob. ‘He would know. Have you had enough Pon?’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Pon, to judge by his frantic yells, had had enough, and a little over. Six did not seem to satisfy Billy Bunter: he seemed prepared to make it sixty, if not six hundred! But Bob jerked the frying-pan away. The wriggling Pon tottered to his feet. If looks could have slain, the look he gave the Greyfriars boating party might have caused the Nautilus to be left suddenly without a crew. Fortunately, looks couldn’t.

‘Now boot him off the boat!’ said Bob. ‘All you fellows kick together! Stand steady, Pon!’

Pon did not stand steady. He did not stand at all. He made a desperate bound to the bank, stumbled over there, and rolled in the grass.

‘Time we pushed on up the river,’ said Bob. ‘I shouldn’t wonder if Pon steers clear, after this. He doesn’t seem to like frying-pans.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

The crew of the Nautilus, laughing, cast loose and pushed off. Not till a bend of the winding river hid them, did Gadsby and Monson venture to pull in, for Pon. And when the Highcliffe party pushed off again, the nose of the Gay Lark was turned down-river, instead of up. Pon, at long last, had had enough: and his chief desire now was to keep a good length of the Thames between himself and the Greyfriars boating party.

CHAPTER 31

BOB CHERRY GETS THE NEWS

‘POTTER!’

‘Oh!’ breathed Bob Cherry.

‘Greene!’

Bob came to a sudden halt.

He knew the stentorian voice that woke the echoes of the country lane. He could not see the bawler, but he knew who bawled. Either the Bull of Bashan had got loose in Oxfordshire, or else Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form at Greyfriars School, was at hand. Obviously, it couldn’t be the Bull of Basham. So it was Horace Coker.

‘Potter! Greene! Oh, my hat! Lost again!’ There was an exasperated tone in Coker’s bawl.

Bob, standing still, looked round warily. He was alone: and on his own, he did not want to meet Coker. Why Coker hunted for trouble, every time he encountered the Remove party, they did not know: having so far no suspicion whatever of the extraordinary stratagem by which Billy Bunter had obtained possession of the Nautilus for a holiday up the river. But Coker did hunt for trouble: there was no doubt on that point. The Famous Five, in a bunch, were able to give him all the trouble he wanted, and some over: but singly, they had to consider size and weight. Even Bob, strong and sturdy, and good man with his hands as he was, had little chance in Coker’s mighty grasp, on his own. So when Coker’s stentorian bawl fell on his ears, it behoved him to be wary.

The Greyfriars boating party were camped above Bablock-hythe, in a pleasant little meadow on the river. Bob had walked to a village shop for supplies. Now he was returning, with a well-filled rucksack slung on his shoulder, by a shady little country lane that led down to the Thames. But he was still at a good distance from camp: much too far for his friends to hear a shout: even Coker’s shout. So caution was indicated.

‘That ass!’ muttered Bob.

Coker had been left below Oxford. The juniors had seen and heard nothing of him since. Indeed, they had forgotten him. But it was evident now that Coker had not remained on the lower side of that ancient seat of learning. He was at hand!

Just ahead of Bob was a turn in the leafy lane. Coker, beyond that turn, was bawling. It seemed, from his words, that he had lost Potter and Greene, or that they had lost him: which had in fact been quite a frequent happening during Coker’s trail up the Thames.

‘Potter! Greene!’

That bawl was followed by heavy footsteps. Coker was coming. He was about to come round the turn, and run into Bob Cherry. Bob side-stepped into the high hawthorn hedge

that bordered the lane, with the sage idea of standing behind that hedge till Coker had passed. He was not hunting for trouble on that sunny August afternoon.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, came the largest feet in the Fifth Form at Greyfriars. Coker's bawl accompanied them, from round the corner ahead.

'Potter! Greene!'

Bob, behind the hedge, grinned. He had pushed through the hawthorns to the inner side, no gap being available at the spot. But at a little distance up the lane, nearer the corner, was a gap: and near it—actually crouching behind the hedge, were two figures.

Bob Cherry suppressed a chuckle, as he recognized Potter and Greene of the Greyfriars Fifth.

They were not so far away as Coker supposed, when he understudied Stentor. They were in fact, only a few yards from Coker's tramping feet and bawling voice. They were not looking towards Bob. They were watching that gap in the hedge, as they crouched in cover. Coker was looking for them: but plainly they did not want to be found. Bob had a view of their backs: but Coker, if he looked through the gap in the hedge, would have a view of their faces. Probably Potter and Greene were hoping fervently that he wouldn't.

'Potter! Greene!'

Coker came to a halt, bawling.

'Where are you? Have you wandered away again, you silly asses? Can't I take my eye off without you getting lost? My hat! We're right on the track of those young Remove rotters, and now you go and get lost again! Potter! Greene!'

Perhaps it was no wonder that Coker was exasperated. He had lost Potter and Greene so often. He bawled and bawled.

The two figures behind the hedge remained still and silent as mice with the cat at hand.

They, like Bob further down, waited for Coker to pass on. So far, they had had great luck in losing Coker when, as so often, his company palled on them.

But this time their luck was out! Apparently it occurred to Coker, as he did not see them in the lane, to step through the gap in the hedge and scan the adjoining field. He stepped through—stepping almost into them. He gave a startled jump as he saw them.

'Why—what—how—.' Coker fairly stuttered, as he stared at Potter and Greene behind the hedge. 'How—what—why, you heard me all the time—why, you ticks, you jolly well heard me and didn't answer—didn't you want me to find you, what?'

'Oh!' gasped Potter. 'No—yes—you see—.'

'We—we—we——,' stammered Greene.

Really, it was difficult to explain. It was obvious, even to the unsuspecting Horace, that Potter and Greene had been deliberately hiding behind that hedge, deliberately keeping out of his sight, deliberately lending deaf ears to his bawling.

It dawned on Coker.

'You—you—you—!' gasped Coker.

Possibly some doubt had already germinated in Coker's mind, so very often had Potter and Greene been 'lost' up and down the Thames valley. Anyhow, Coker knew now how the matter stood. When a thing was absolutely obvious and unmistakable, even Coker could see it. Potter and Greene were not 'lost': they were dodging him—losing him on purpose! The wrath that gathered in Horace Coker's rugged brow, as he realized it, was tremendous. Achilles' wrath, famed in ancient song, had simply nothing on it.

'You—you—you—!' repeated Coker, in a gasping voice. 'Dodging a fellow—skulking

out of sight—pretending not to hear me—letting a man down—making a fool of a fellow—.’

‘You—you see—we—we——!’ stammered Greene.

‘I see!’ roared Coker. ‘And I jolly well see a lot of things I didn’t see before, too. You ticks—you smugs—you smudges—.’

‘Look here, we’re jolly well fagged out,’ exclaimed Potter. ‘You’ve been tramping us off our legs all day, and we’re fed up, see?’ Potter seemed goaded, at last, into rebellion. ‘We want a rest! We’ve told you so a dozen times! Think we’re going to march about hunting for those Remove fags till our legs drop off?’

‘Blow ’em, anyway,’ said Greene.

‘Haven’t we got to find them?’ bawled Coker. ‘Haven’t they bagged my boat, and left me to whistle for it? Didn’t they walk off with my boat at Staines, and haven’t they had it ever since? Haven’t they chucked me out of my own boat?’

Bob Cherry, a dozen yards along the hedge, jumped almost clear of the ground, as he heard that! He was getting news!

‘Have they got the Nautilus, or haven’t they?’ roared on Coker.

‘Oh, bother the Nautilus!’ yapped Potter. ‘Precious sort of holiday we’re getting, rooting up and down the Thames after your dashed boat.’

‘Blow ’em, and blow the boat!’ said Greene. Clearly, both Coker’s followers were in a fed-up state. Now that they had been caught in the act, as it were, pulling Coker’s leg was no longer a practical proposition. So Potter and Greene were letting themselves go a little. Coker fairly gurgled with wrath.

‘They’ve got my boat!’ he gasped. ‘They’ve scoffed my boat, and scoffed everything that my Aunt Judy had packed in it for me. Have they, or haven’t they? Did that fat villain Bunter give my name at Mawson’s boat-yard, and get away with my boat, or didn’t he? What? Didn’t they pitch me neck and crop out of my own boat down at Wallingford? Did they or did they not? And instead of backing me up to get it back, you dodge a fellow behind a hedge—and pretend not to hear him when he calls—.’ Coker snorted, with wrath and scorn. ‘Tired, are you? Like to sit down and rest for a couple of hours after walking a couple of miles—. Made of putty, I suppose—.’

‘We’ve walked a dozen miles to-day,’ hooted Potter, ‘and we’re jolly well not walking another yard, see?’

‘Not another inch!’ said Greene.

‘So you can shut up,’ added Potter.

‘And give us a rest!’ said Greene.

It was rank rebellion at last! Coker gazed at them. He seemed at a loss for words. But if he was at a loss for words, he was not at a loss for action. He made a stride at Potter and Greene, grasped them, and brought their heads together with a sounding concussion.

Crack!

‘Oh, my hat!’ breathed Bob Cherry, gazing on the scene.

Two simultaneous yells, from Potter and Greene, blended into one. Coker stepped back, still glaring wrath. He had knocked their heads together, which in Coker’s opinion at all events, was the very least they deserved. Coker, who could be magnanimous, was probably prepared to leave it at that. Potter and Greene, on the other hand, were not. To Potter and Greene it was the last straw.

They hurled themselves at Coker.

Coker was up-ended before he knew what was happening. He went with a crash into a bed of stinging-nettles under the hedge. He rolled in the nettles and roared. Leaving him to roll and roar, Potter and Greene disappeared through the gap in the hedge. It was only judicious to travel before Coker got out of those stinging nettles. They travelled rapidly.

‘Oh, my hat!’ gasped Bob Cherry, the unnoticed spectator of the entertainment. ‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Coker, gasping, struggled out of the nettles. He glared round for Potter and Greene. He did not see them—what he saw was a Remove junior, some distance along the hedge, doubled up with merriment.

‘By gum!’ gasped Coker.

Dismissing his faithless followers, momentarily, from mind, Coker tore along the hedge towards Bob Cherry. Bob, still laughing, plunged back through the hawthorns into the lane. After him plunged Horace Coker, with vengeful hand outstretched to grasp. A well-packed rucksack, swinging through the air, smote in the middle of Coker’s rugged features, just in time. Coker, with a wild howl, collapsed in the hedge. Bob Cherry did that leafy lane as if he were on the cinder-path: and he had vanished into space long before Horace Coker struggled out of the hawthorns, and took up pursuit.

CHAPTER 32 WHOSE BOAT ?

‘You fat villain!’

‘Eh?’

‘You piratical porpoise!’

‘Wha-at?’

‘You fat, fozzling, footling, frumptious frump!’

‘Oh, really, Cherry—!’

Billy Bunter’s little round eyes opened wide behind his big round spectacles in his astonishment. Four other fellows in the Nautilus, regarded Bob Cherry with equal surprise. What was the matter with Bob, was quite a mystery to the crew of the Nautilus. The boat, tied up to a willow, rocked gently on the silvery Thames. It was a peaceful scene—till Bob arrived. Meadows stretched from the banks, backed by woods and hills. The summer sun shone down from a blue sky. It was quite idyllic: and on the boat, all was calm contentment. Harry Wharton and Hurree Janset Ram Singh played chess, Frank Nugent sketched a picturesque spot in his sketch-book, Johnny Bull industriously mended a rent in his sleeve, and Billy Bunter sprawled and lazed on cushions, while they waited for Bob to return with the supplies for tea. It was a scene of peace, perfect peace—till Bob came. He came rather like a thunderbolt.

He reappeared through the trees at a run. He pitched the rucksack into the boat, and followed it, with a jump that made the Nautilus rock, and drew a startled squeak from Billy Bunter. Then, to the general astonishment, he addressed Bunter, in an infuriated roar.

Chess, sketching, and sleeve-mending, were forgotten, as four juniors stared at the excited Bob. Billy Bunter sat up on the cushions, blinking at him. Bob, to the further amazement of the Nautilus’s crew, shook his fist under the fat Owl’s fat little nose,

causing Bunter to start back with a howl of alarm.

‘What on earth—!’ exclaimed Harry Wharton.

‘Bob, old chap—!’ exclaimed Nugent.

‘Gone crackers?’ inquired Johnny Bull.

‘My esteemed and ridiculous Bob—!’ ejaculated Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘Here, you keep off!’ yelled Billy Bunter. ‘Gone mad? I say, you fellows, keep him off! What have I done, I’d like to know.’

‘I’ll burst him!’ roared Bob.

‘But what—for goodness sake—what—!’ exclaimed Harry.

‘The fat villain!’

‘Yaroooh!’ yelled Billy Bunter, as Bob grabbed him by a fat neck. ‘Ow! Leggo ! Help! I say, you fellows—.’

Four fellows seized hold of Bob Cherry, and dragged him off Bunter. Really, he looked as if he might have done the fat Owl some damage. Seldom or never had Bob been seen in so towering a state of wrath.

‘Let go, you silly ass!’ hooted Bob. ‘I’m going to burst him all over the boat, and then chuck him overboard.’

‘Yarooooh!’

‘Easy does it,’ said Harry, soothingly. ‘If anything’s the matter—.’

‘If!’ roared Bob. ‘Whose boat do you think this is?’

‘Eh! Bunter’s—.’ said Harry, blankly, ‘You know Bunter stood the boat for this trip-what do you mean?’

‘It’s Coker’s!’ shrieked Bob.

‘What?’

‘Oh, crikey!’ gasped Billy Bunter. Bunter, at least, had the clue to Bob’s excitement now. Evidently, Bob had found out!

But the other fellows were still in the dark. They stared at Bob in wonder.

‘Wandering in your mind, old man?’ asked Nugent. ‘How could it be Coker’s, when we know it was lent to Bunter for the hols, and—.’

‘That ass Coker seemed to fancy that he could collar it,’ said Johnny Bull. ‘That doesn’t make it his, I suppose.’

‘I tell you it’s Coker’s!’ roared Bob. ‘That fat villain has been diddling us all along the line. It’s Coker’s boat! That’s why he’s after it!’

‘But—but Bunter told us—.’

‘Wouldn’t Bunter tell anybody anything,’ howled Bob.

‘Oh! Yes! But—.’

‘Look here, suppose you explain,’ suggested Johnny Bull. ‘You can burst Bunter afterwards.’

‘Oh, really, Bull—.’

‘Bunter will keep!’ said Harry. ‘Look here, this sounds sheer rot to me, Bob. How do you know—.’

Bob Cherry calmed down a little.

‘I came across Coker, back in that lane,’ he said. ‘He was blowing off steam to Potter and Greene, and it all came out—.’

‘Oh, my hat!’ said Nugent. ‘Is Coker around again?’

‘Yes, he is: and he’s after this boat: and he’s got to have it, as it’s his,’ howled Bob. ‘It

was all fixed up for him by his Aunt Judy—all that grub that we scoffed the first few days was stacked up for Coker—.’

‘Oh, crumbs!’

‘Know now why Bunter made us wait on the tow-path above Staines Bridge, while he fetched the boat across?’ bawled Bob. ‘He was handing out Coker’s name at the boat-yard, and getting hold of Coker’s boat.’

‘Oh, scissors!’

‘That’s why he was in such a hurry to get up the river! He knew Coker would be after his boat—.’

‘Oh, suffering cats!’

‘Now you know!’ gasped Bob. ‘He’s diddled us into bagging Coker’s boat—we’ve been tripping in it a couple of weeks, never knowing—why, we’ve even pitched Coker out of his own boat—.’

‘Oh, holy smoke!’

‘That fat villain—that footling frump—that diddling octopus—that dithering grampus—that—that—!’ Bob gasped for breath.

The Co. realized it at last. Now they knew, it explained many little puzzling circumstances. It was no wonder—now—that Billy Bunter had feared that Coker might be ‘after him in the hols’. No wonder—now—that Coker had been after that boat! No wonder that Coker had fancied that he could ‘bag’ it—as it happened to be his!

It was a startling—indeed overwhelming—discovery to the Famous Five. It was really awful, to realize that, for a couple of weeks on the sunny Thames, they had been in possession of Coker’s boat: and that they had handled the rightful owner so very unceremoniously.

‘Coker’s boat!’ said Harry Wharton, almost dazedly. ‘I—I can’t quite get it down, yet. That fat villain—!’

‘If it’s his boat, he’s got to have it,’ said Nugent.

‘It’s his boat!’ growled Johnny Bull. ‘And we might jolly well have known that there was a catch somewhere. I told you so—.’

‘The catchfulness was terrific,’ said Hurree Janset Ram Singh, ‘and the slayfulness of the esteemed and execrable Bunter is the next item on the absurd programme.’

‘Diddled, dished, and done, by that fat frog!’ breathed Johnny Bull. ‘Bunter stood the boat—and we stood the rest—and it was Coker’s boat he stood—.’

‘If that fathead Coker had had the sense to explain, instead of going off at the deep end—.’

‘He fancied we were all in it, with Bunter!’ hissed Bob. ‘He hadn’t sense enough to know that Bunter took us in. That fat villain diddled him out of the boat, just as he diddled him out of that hamper—Coker doesn’t know that he diddled us too—.’

‘Well, we can tell him, and give him back his dashed boat,’ said Harry. ‘It will muck up the trip, but that can’t be helped. Now, Bunter—!’

Five deadly glares were fixed on the hapless fat Owl. Billy Bunter had listened, with intensifying alarm in his fat face. The secret, so long kept, was out now: and the lagging foot of justice had overtaken the fat offender. Billy Bunter was feeling very uneasy. He had reason so to feel.

‘I—I say, you fellows—!’ stammered Bunter.

‘Anything to say before we scrag you bald-headed, and boot you off the boat?’ asked

Johnny Bull.

'Oh, really, Bull—.'

'Collar him—!'

'Yaroo! I say, you fellows, let a fellow speak!' howled Bunter. 'I say, tain't Coker's boat at all. I never heard him talking about it, at Greyfriars, and I never picked up that letter he left in the cloisters—.'

'That letter he showed us in the study!' roared Bob. 'Coker's, of course.'

'Scrag him!'

'I say, you fellows, I didn't—I mean I wasn't—I never!' howled Bunter. 'It—it's all a mistake. Tain't Coker's boat at all, and I never gave his name at the boat-yard—never thought of such a thing! Besides, they wouldn't have let me have the boat if I hadn't.'

'Oh, crumbs!'

'Serve him jolly well right, too,' added Bunter, warmly. 'Didn't he jolly well give me six, just as if he was a prefect? Didn't I jolly well say I'd dish him in the hols? You know I did.'

'And you diddled us too!' roared Bob.

'Well, I like that!' exclaimed Bunter, indignantly. 'Here I've stood you a splendid boat for the hols, not costing you a penny, and that's how you thank a chap! Turning on a fellow after all he's done for you! Talk about an ungrateful tooth being sharper than a serpent's child!'

'I'm going to burst him!' gasped Bob Cherry.

'I say, you fellows, if Coker's about, we'd better push off,' said Bunter. 'We don't want Coker coming here and making a fuss about his boat. Tain't his boat, either—nothing of the kind! I—I hope you fellows can take my word about that!'

The fellows did not look like taking Bunter's word about that! They all grabbed at Bunter together: and the fat Owl made a wild backward bound into the bows to escape clutching hands.

His escape would not have lasted many seconds: but at that moment, came a crash of heavy footsteps, and a roar, from the bank.

'Got you, have I?'

The juniors stared round, Billy Bunter's eyes almost popping through his spectacles, as the burly figure and rugged face of Coker of the Fifth came into view. Coker, red with running and wrath, charged down the bank, with the evident intention of leaping headlong into the Nautilus.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

The Famous Five, at close quarters, looked rather dangerous. But they did not look so dangerous as Horace Coker. Bunter tore frantically at the painter and dragged it loose, grabbed the boat-hook, and shoved wildly at the bank. The Nautilus rocked out into the Thames, as Coker came racing down to the margin. There was quite a wide space between boat and bank, when Horace Coker's large feet splashed in the river's brim.

Bunter shoved again, frantically.

That did not stop Coker.

He jumped.

CHAPTER 33 COKER'S CATCH

SPLASH!

It was quite a water-spout.

‘Oh, my hat!’ gasped Bob Cherry.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Coker landed in the Thames a yard short of the Nautilus. He hit the Thames with a mighty splash, and disappeared.

Water spouted up, and every fellow on the Nautilus was sprinkled. The boat rocked, and Billy Bunter sat down unintentionally. He bumped and roared. The Famous Five kept their footing, staring at the widening circles where Coker had gone in. For the moment they forgot Bunter. Horace Coker’s performance as a diver interested them more. Coker, of course, had not intended to dive. He had intended to leap into the boat. It was like Coker to dive into the river instead, and it struck the boating party as comic. They grinned as they watched for Coker to come up.

But Coker did not come up.

Five faces grew suddenly serious.

They expected Coker, as a matter of course, to reappear in a moment or two, and clutch at the gunwale. But several moments passed, and he did not reappear. The juniors exchanged startled looks. The water, at that point, was deep. Coker had gone deep down. It looked as if he was staying down. The circles on the water widened and widened and faded out. There was no sign of Coker.

‘Oh!’ gasped Harry Wharton. ‘Coker—.’

‘Can’t he swim?’ exclaimed Bob.

‘Coker—!’

‘We’ve got to help him—.’

‘I say, you fellows.’ It was a squeak from Bunter. ‘I say, I’m all wet. I say, I’ve knocked my funny-bone! I say—.’

‘Shut up!’ shrieked Bob.

‘Oh, really, Cherry—!’

‘He hasn’t come up,’ breathed Bob. ‘I’ll go in for him. You fellows have the boat-hook ready—.’

Splash!

‘Urrrrrgggh!’

All eyes were on the spot where Coker had gone in. But sudden sounds from the other side of the Nautilus caused the Famous Five to spin round like five humming-tops. They stared out on the river: and there was a general gasp of relief.

Splash! splash! Gurgle!

‘There he is!’ panted Nugent.

There was Coker—floundering wildly in the Thames. He had gone in on one side of the Nautilus, and come up on the other, several yards from the boat. It was an immense relief to see him.

Nevertheless, it was obvious that Coker, though he had come up, was in sore need of aid. He splashed wildly, rather like a thrashing whale. He gurgled and spluttered. It did not even occur to Coker’s powerful brain to keep his mouth shut, and quite a lot of the Thames flowed into it. He floundered and wallowed and drifted with the current, sinking under again: and what might have happened ultimately to Horace Coker, had not the Famous Five been at hand, was a quite alarming question.

Luckily, they were at hand, and ready to help. Bob Cherry put his hands together and shot into the river, cleaving it like an arrow for Coker. Harry Wharton was hardly a second after him. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh grasped the boat-hook and stood ready: Johnny Bull and Nugent seized the oars and tolled the boat after the swimmers.

‘Gurrrrrrrgggh!’

Coker’s head surged up from the Thames, his mouth, still open, emitting a suffocated gurgle. It would have gone under again, but two active swimmers had reached him, and helping hands grasped him. Wharton and Bob got his head above the water, and kept it there, and Coker, gasping for breath, was able to take in something less solid than Thames water. He gasped, and gasped, and clutched at the two juniors.

‘Let go!’ panted Bob. ‘We’ve got you.’

‘Don’t drag us down!’ gasped Harry.

No doubt Coker was in a dazed and dizzy state. Probably he was quite unaware that he was dragging his rescuers down. But with one arm round Bob’s neck, and the other hand gripping Harry Wharton’s hair, Coker was really rather a dangerous acquaintance in deep water.

But the boat was on the spot now.

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh reached out and hooked. Coker’s grasping splutter changed into a sudden howl, as the boat-hook hooked on. It hooked in his jacket, but possibly a little skin went with the jacket.

Anyhow, Coker was safely hooked, and the nabob of Bhanipur dragged. Coker was hauled towards the Nautilus, and Bob and Harry Wharton were able to free themselves from his frantic grasp.

‘Urrrrrggh!’ gurgled Coker.

Johnny Bull and Frank Nugent leaned over and grasped him. Coker was past helping himself. They dragged him up, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh dropped the boat-hook, and lent aid with two dusky hands. Coker, drenched and dripping, and hardly knowing where he was or what was happening to him, was pulled in over the rocking gunwale, and landed safely in the boat. There he sprawled at full length, in a pool of water, feebly gurgling.



Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry clambered in after him. They were as drenched and dripping as Coker, and they stood panting, with the water running down them: but little the worse for their dip. Coker looked a good deal the worse for his.

‘Urrrrrgh!’ gurgled Coker. ‘Wurrgh! Oooooogh!’ He sat up at last, dizzily.

Billy Bunter gave him an uneasy blink.

‘I say, you fellows—I’ squeaked Bunter.

‘Shut up, Bunter!’

‘Shan’t!’ hooted Bunter. ‘I say, chuck him out on the bank. We don’t want him here, kicking up a row and making out that this boat is his—.’

‘It is his, you fat villain, and we’re going to hand it over to him!’ roared Bob Cherry.

‘Tain’t!’ yelled Bunter, ‘and I can jolly well say— yaroooh! Leave off kicking me, Bull, you beast! Wow!’

‘Feeling better, Coker?’ asked Harry Wharton politely.

‘Gurrgh! Oooogh! Aytishoo!’

‘Oh, my hat!’

‘Choooh—chooh—aytishoooh!’ It came from Coker almost like a foghorn. ‘Oooooogh! Aytishoooh! Aytishoooh!’ Coker sneezed, and sneezed, and sneezed, and coughed and coughed, and gurgled and gurgled. He was quite busy. It looked as if Coker had caught a bad cold in the Thames.

‘Poor old Coker!’ sighed Bob.

‘Aytishoooh!’

‘Get him a towel—.’

‘Oogh! Aytishoooh! Woooh I You young ticks!’ gasped Coker. ‘Oooch! I was going to—aytishoooh—I mean I was going to—whooh-ooo—oooh—I was going to thrash you all round for bagging my boat—aytishoooh! But I’ll let you off now—aytishoooh!’

'Thanks!' grinned Bob.

'The thankfulness is terrific, my esteemed absurd Coker.'

'I mean it,' gasped Coker. 'Jolly decent of you to come in for me like that. I wasn't in any danger, of course—I'm a pretty good swimmer.'

'Oh! Ah! Yes.'

'I was a bit dazed, perhaps,' Coker admitted that. 'But I should have been all right, of course.'

'Of course!' said Bob Cherry, solemnly.

'Still, it was decent, and I jolly well won't thrash the lot of you, now,' said Coker, generously.

How Coker would have thrashed the lot of them, had he started on that combined operation, was a problem that, fortunately, did not have to be elucidated.

'I'll let you off!' said Coker. 'I'll—aytishoooh! Whoooooh! Somebody lend me a hanky! Mine's all wet.'

Frank Nugent lent him a handkerchief.

'We didn't bag your boat, Coker,' Harry Wharton proceeded to explain. 'That fat villain Bunter bagged it, making out that it was lent to him, and we never knew a thing—hadn't an idea—.'

'Not the foggiest!' said Bob.

'And we've only just found out that it was your boat, and you can have it back as soon as you like!' grunted Johnny Bull. 'And we're going to slaughter Bunter for taking us in.'

'The slaughterfulness will be terrific.'

'Oh!' said Coker. 'I thought—aytishoooh! I thought you were all in it together, and I was going to—aytishoooh—oooh—oooop! Oh, gum! I believe I'm going to have a cold! Ooogh.'

'Here's a towel,' said Bob. 'Sorry, Coker—if we'd known it was your boat, we'd have handed it over the minute we saw you, down at Sonning—but how the dickens were we to know, when that fat villain took us in—.'

'That fat tick—!'

'That fat grampus—!'

'That fat diddler—!'

'We'll push on to Newbridge, and hand you the boat there,' said Harry Wharton. 'I daresay we can get another, to carry on our cruise. Anyhow, you're going to have your boat, Coker.'

'Aytishooooooh!'

Gargantuan sneezes accompanied the boating-party as they pulled up to Newbridge.

CHAPTER 34 UNEXPECTED !

'I SAY, you fellows—.'

'Shut up, Bunter.'

'But I say—.'

'Boot him!'

'Beast! Will you listen to a chap?' hissed Bunter. 'Look here, just shove off while we've got the chance, see?'

Coker had landed. For the moment, he was busily occupied—doubled up with an enormous sneeze. Certainly it was an opportunity, if they had so desired, for the Famous Five to push off, and leave him to it. Billy Bunter, apparently, saw no reason why they shouldn't. But Harry Wharton and Co. were not disposed to play the part of pirates bold, if Bunter was. Now that they knew that the Nautilus was Coker's boat, that matter was settled.

'You fat, footling, fibbing fozler!' said Bob Cherry. 'If you say another word, I'll jab you with this boat-hook.'

'But I say—yarooh!' roared Bunter. 'Keep that boat-hook away, will you, you beast? I was only going to say—whoooo-ooooo!'

Billy Bunter scrambled out of reach.

'Here you are, Coker,' said Harry Wharton. 'We'll get our things out, and you can have the boat as soon as you like.'

'Aytishoooooh'

'You've picked up a pretty bad cold,' said Bob. 'You can get a change at the inn, Coker—.'

'Atchooooooh!'

'We'll leave the boat here for you,' said Johnny Bull.

'I say, you fellows—.'

'Shut up, Bunter.'

'Aytishooh!' Coker gave a final roar, and found his voice. 'You needn't trouble. Think I want to go boating in this state? Aytishooooh!'

Certainly Coker did not look in a boating state. He looked as if a bed would suit him better than a boat.

'But—!' said Harry.

'Don't jaw!' said Coker.

'But—!' said Bob.

'I said don't jaw.'

The Famous Five refrained from bumping Coker on the bank. He was no more in a state for bumping than for boating.

'I was going to say—aytishooh! Atchoooh! I was going to say—oooooooch! I mean, I was going to say, it was pretty decent of you kids to pull me out as you did. I wasn't in any danger—a swimmer like me—but I daresay you fancied I was, and it was pretty decent. So I was going to say—aytishoooooooh !'

Coker foghorned again.

'You'd better get that cold seen to, Coker,' said Frank Nugent.

'I know that without a silly fag telling me, Nugent! Don't jaw! I was going to say—oooooch !—it was pretty decent of you, considering that I was going to thrash you all round, and you can have the boat. Think I want it now? I'm going to telephone from that inn to my Aunt Judy, and get a car home. If you come across Potter and Greene, tell 'em I'll knock their heads together again, next term. Oooogh! Aytishooh!'

'But—!' said Harry.

'That's all! I'll lend you the boat for the hols. Keep it as long as you like. Urrrrggh!

Oooooogh! Aytishooh!'

Horace Coker tramped away to the inn, without waiting for a reply. The Famous Five gazed after him, and then gazed at one another: and smiled, as Coker's squelching

footsteps and echoing sneezes died away.

It was an unexpected but very happy, ending. The crew of the Nautilus pushed off from Newbridge in cheery mood: and in the general satisfaction, Billy Bunter escaped the booting he richly deserved. The summer sun, shining down on the Thames, shone on no brighter faces than those of Billy Bunter's Boating Party.

THE END