

BAD LUCK for BUNDLE!

A SCHOOL STORY of 1970

By FRANK RICHARDS.



I

BUNDLE, of the Dolcot Fourth, was a clever fellow, in his way, and often thought of things that other fellows seldom or never thought of. But he never seemed to have luck. It would turn out that he had overlooked some minor detail. For example, it was Bundle who thought of catching a wasp in a butterfly-net, and parking it in Mr. Mandy's desk, to surprise him when he opened the lid, in the form-room. But he had not noticed that there was a hole in the net, through which that wasp emerged: and Bundle had to go to the Dame about the sting. Something of that kind always seemed to happen to James Cuthbert Bundle. But he had never been so unlucky, as he was on the occasion when he told Mr. Mundy what he thought of him: though on that occasion he laid his plans with such care, that there seemed absolutely no room for mischance.

It was Saturday, and that morning, Mundy had whopped Bundle for his own good. Mr. Mundy was going away for the week-end, taking the ether-plane to the moon for a couple of days' change of air: and almost his last act before he left Dolcot was to hand Bundle that whopping. Mundy, probably, forgot all about it, long before he had taken his place in the ether-plane: but Bundle, naturally, had a longer memory, and he was feeling sore, in a double sense.

Often and often had Bundle wanted to tell Mundy what he thought of him. But a fellow couldn't, of course, at Dolcot. You had to toe the line at school, and never breathe a word of what you thought of your beak. But Bundle knew

how. Mundy was away from Dolcot for the week-end: and during that absence, he was going to hear from Bundle.

It was easy enough, really. All Bundle really had to do, was to ring him up on the TV telephone in his study. With Mundy thousands of miles away, far up in the boundless ether, obviously there was no danger of his catching Bundle in his study, chatting on the telephone. Certainly, when he took the call, he would see as well as hear his interlocutor. But Bundle had thought that out. He was going to fasten his handkerchief over his face when he handled the TV telephone. Mundy, sitting in the ether-plane, would certainly see him, but he would see only a face covered with a handkerchief, and there would be no clue. Any face at Dolcot might be hidden behind that handkerchief. Mundy, no doubt, would guess that it was some fellow in his form talking to him. But he could never guess which fellow. All the fellows in the Fourth would be grinning, when he came back to Dolcot on Monday morning, to take his form. But what could he do?

Bundle thought it out, over and over, and could not detect a leak anywhere. It was safe as houses. He could cover his face, disguise his voice, and talk to Mundy as no form-master at Dolcot had ever been talked to before. It was as easy as falling off a form.

Full of that idea, Bundle waited impatiently, till he was quite, quite sure that Mr. Mundy was safe off the earth. He was not going to take unnecessary risks: for Mundy had a heavy hand with a cane. But he fancied that it would be quite safe when Mundy had covered twenty thousand miles or so. He had to wait, but it was worth it, for safety's sake. Of course he would have had to wait longer, in the old days when ether-planes had crawled about at six or seven thousand miles an hour. But things had been speeded up since then: in 1970, things really moved.

Bundle consulted a time-table, and worked it out: and as soon as he was sure that twenty-thousand miles stretched between Dolcot and Mr. Mundy, he proceeded very cautiously to his form-master's study. He made quite, quite sure that the coast was clear, and was assured that no eye fell on him. In the study, he shut the door, and locked it for further security. Then he extracted a somewhat grubby handkerchief from his pocket, cut two eye-holes in it with his penknife, and fastened it carefully over his face, tying the corners behind his head. Under that effective cover, Mundy was welcome to recognize him if he could.

Then he stepped to the TV telephone and rang up. He grinned at his reflection in the little circular mirror. Mundy, far away in the ether-plane would of course see him, just as he saw himself now. Certainly he could never have guessed his own identity, from that reflection of a handkerchief-covered face. Neither, obviously, could Mundy. Cheerfully and confidently, Bundle rang up, calling Mr. Mundy's pocket-receiver far up in the ether.

II

BUZZZZ!

Mr. Mundy uttered an impatient exclamation.

Several other passengers in the ether-plane glanced round at him.

Mundy was not in the best of tempers, at the moment, and the sudden buzz from his pocket-telephone annoyed him.

He was not used to space-travel. He had had a spot of bother with his oxygen-tube, and the conductor had had to fix it for him. He was feeling slightly ether-sick. He did not enjoy the motion of his swinging chair. He was not anticipating with any pleasure the point where the gravitation of the earth was exchanged for that of the moon, and there had to be a general shift. Other passengers yawned over newspapers, quite at their ease. The passenger on one side of him was reading the "Lunar Times": the passenger on the other side looking over the "Mars Messenger": as indifferent to space-travel, as if they were merely on an air-coach trip to Peru or Patagonia. But Mundy was not at his ease.

Still, he fancied that he was, at least, done with Dolcot School, and the whole terrestrial globe, and was going to enjoy a week-end of peace and quiet in one of those attractive chalets in the Mountains of the Moon, where they took in paying guests: the earth and its worries far behind. So the buzz of his pocket-telephone annoyed him.

He frowned as he jerked it out to take the call. If the head-master had rung him up, on his journey, about some petty detail—

"Hallo!" grunted Mr. Mundy, into his receiver. Then he stared blankly into the mirror attached to it.

Certainly it was not the head-master of Dolcot who had rung him up. In the TV mirror he saw the person who was standing at the telephone in a study at Dolcot—his own study! But he could not recognise who it was. He stared at a face covered by a handkerchief, with two eye-holes cut in it, revealing only the eyes. Mundy stared at it in amazement. His own amazed face was, of course, visible at the other end: the person in the handkerchief-mask could see him clearly. But all Mundy could see of that fellow was his eyes. It was rather startling.

"Hallo!" came back through thousands of miles of ether. "Is that old Mundy?"

"What?"

"Yes, I can make out your chivvy, old thing. Do you call it a face?"

"Eh?"

"Or did you put on a Guy Fawkes mask for the trip? It looks like it."

"Bless my soul!"

"Glad to see the last of you for a day or two, Mundy!" went on the cheerful

voice from Dolcot School. "You're much nicer a few thousand miles away.

"Who is speaking?" gasped Mr. Mundy.

A chuckle floated through space.

"Wouldn't you like to know, you old image?"

Mr. Mundy glared into the TV mirror. Evidently, this was some Dolcot fellow, slanging him now that he was at a safe distance. But his glare could not penetrate that grubby handkerchief. He strove to identify the voice: but it was unfamiliar to his ears—pitched high to disguise it, he could guess. Some junior in his own form, he had no doubt—but which? Mr. Mundy would have given much to know. Indeed, had it been practicable, he would gladly have turned the ether-plane back, and given up his week-end on the moon, solely to catch that impertinent young rascal in his study and deal with him. But that, of course, was impracticable. Inter-Stellar Communications Ltd., had to work to schedule. Once on the ether-plane, there was no stop till they touched down on the moon.

While Mr. Mundy glared into the TV mirror, and fumed, and breathed wrath, and the other passengers glanced at him, and smiled to one another, that disguised voice from the far-off earth ran cheerily on.

"You won't guess in a month of Sundays, old thing! I've rung you up to tell you what I think of you, Mundy. You're a pain in the neck."

"Upon my word!" breathed Mr. Mundy.

"Your face would stop a clock, Mundy."

"You impertinent young rascal!" gasped Mr. Mundy.

"I can tell you we're fed up with you, Mundy. Fed right up to the back teeth. But it's good of you to clear off for the week-end. Dolcot's a much jollier place without your mug disfiguring the landscape."

"I—I—I—!" gurgled Mr. Mundy.

Bundle, in his form-master's study down on the earth, was enjoying this. Mundy up in the ether-plane was not! Bundle ran on:

"Did I mention that you're an old ass, Mundy?"

"Boy!"

"Dithering old ass! Why, all the other beaks in Common-Room know what an old ass you are, Mundy. It beats me why the Head doesn't sack you."

Mr. Mundy gurgled.

"Getting shirty, old tulip? You look as if you'd like to bite somebody. Ha, ha, ha! You're a funny old fish, Mundy."

"Who—who—who is speaking?"

"That's telling, fathead!"

"What—what—what did you say—!"

"Fathead!"

Other passengers in the plane grinned at the expression on Mr. Mundy's speaking countenance. Mundy did not heed them. He was concentrated on his earthly interlocutor. He glared and glared into that mirror, as if by the sheer

force of glaring, he would penetrate the identity hidden behind that grubby handkerchief. And suddenly his eyes gleamed.

There was no penetrating that handkerchief. He simply had no hope of seeing the hidden face. Bundle had been too careful for that. That handkerchief was tied well over the face—two of its corners tied behind the head, one corner sticking upward, the other falling over the chin. Never could a face have been hidden more completely. But—

“J.C.B.!” breathed Mr. Mundy, his glare fixing on the corner of the handkerchief that covered Bundle’s chin. “J.C.B.”

That hanky was undoubtedly grubby. The initials in the corner did not leap to the eye. But Mr. Mundy’s concentrated glare sorted them out. It was only a small detail that Bundle had overlooked. But he had overlooked it. Happily unaware of it, the junior in the study at Dolcot rattled on:

“I said fathead, and I mean fathead! Silly ass! I’m just telling you what all the Fourth think of you, Mundy! You’re no good! I don’t know what you’re doing at Dolcot at all, unless you’re something that the cat brought in—.”

Mr. Mundy cut off.

He had had enough of that light and genial conversation from Dolcot. Bundle could have gone on joyfully: but Mr. Mundy did not want any more. What he wanted was a little quiet reflection, running over in his mind the names and initials of Dolcot fellows, until he came to one whose initials were J.C.B.



III

BUNDLE was in high feather. He had told the whole form, and on Monday morning they were in a state of great expectation. All the form agreed that James Cuthbert Bundle was a great lad. He had done what no other Dolcot fellow would have ventured to do, or dreamed of doing: and he had got away with it. When Mr. Mundy, back from his week-end on the moon, came into the form-room to take his form, all eyes fixed on him, and all eyes glimmered. Mundy had had to hear what Bundle thought of him, and he had to take it: he hadn't a clue. Bundle was feeling quite secure. So it was a surprise to him when Mr. Mundy's eyes fixed on his face with a quite deadly glint in them, and Mundy rapped out:

"Bundle!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Bundle.

"Stand out before the form!"

Bundle, in dismay, stepped out. Could Mundy have guessed? How could he? It looked as if he had, as he picked up the cane from his desk.

"Bundle, on Saturday you entered my study without leave, and rang me up on my own TV telephone, and used expressions in addressing me which call for the most condign punishment. Bend over that desk, Bundle."

It was a sad and painful scene that followed. It made James Cuthbert Bundle sick and tired of the mere idea of telling a form-master at Dolcot what he thought of him. All such thoughts, in future, Bundle was quite certain to keep locked up in his own breast. It had seemed so safe and sound: but somehow as usual, he had slipped up on it: and as usual it was bad luck for Bundle!

THE END