



## CHAPTER I

### A SPOT OF VENTRILOQUISM!

"HARRY, old chap!"  
"Oh, bother!" said Harry Wharton.

Four fellows in No. 1 Study, in the Greyfriars Remove, grinned. Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, seemed rather amused.

Harry Wharton did not seem amused.

"Harry old chap" from Billy Bunter meant that Billy Bunter wanted something. And the captain of the Remove had no doubt what Billy Bunter wanted.

Christmas was in the offing. Greyfriars School was soon due to break up for the "hols". Christmas holidays were in every mind—and especially in Billy Bunter's. Bunter, as was not uncommon at such times, was rather at a loose end. Home, sweet home, seemed to have no great attraction for him. But among all the crowd of Greyfriars fellows who were asking one another for Christmas, nobody had thought of asking Billy Bunter.

Not that Bunter was punctilious upon such points. He was prepared to ask himself. And Harry Wharton could see it coming, as it were.

The Famous Five of the Remove were discussing that very subject, over

baked chestnuts in No. 1 Study, when the fattest member of the form rolled in, blinked at them through his big spectacles, and addressed Harry Wharton affectionately as "Harry old chap".

"I say, old fellow—!" pursued Bunter.

"Blow!" said Harry Wharton.

"Eh? Anything the matter, old boy?" asked Bunter, blinking at him in surprise, "Why, you were looking as jolly as anything when I came in—and now you're looking as if Quelch had given you six! Anything the matter?"

"Yes."

"What is it, old chap?"

"You!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Shut the door after you, Bunter," said Frank Nugent, laughing.

"Eh? All right," said Bunter. He shut the door: remaining, however, himself on the inner side of it, which was not precisely what Nugent meant.

"Like me to boot him out, Wharton?" asked Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"Have some of these baked chestnuts, Bunter," said Bob Cherry, "Shove in enough to stop you talking."

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

Billy Bunter helped himself to the chestnuts. Never was William George Bunter known to refuse an offer of that kind. The most extensive mouth in the Greyfriars Remove was filled to capacity. But if Bob hoped that that would stop Bunter talking, it was a delusive hope. Bunter's fat squeak continued, through a barrage of chestnuts.

"I say, you fellows, I came here to speak about the Christmas hols—"

"I guessed that one!" sighed Harry Wharton.

"The fact is—grooogh! Oooooogh!" Billy Bunter spluttered. Conversation did not seem to synchronize comfortably with chewing chestnuts, and something appeared to have gone down the wrong way. "Oooooogh! Wooogh! Urrrrrgggh! Oooooch! The fact is, you fellows—urrrrrggh! I was going to say—wurrrrrggh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ooogh! Blessed if I see anything to—ooogh!—cackle at, when a fellow's chook-chook-choking—woooooch! Urrrrrggh!"

Billy Bunter cleared a fat neck at last, and resumed.

"The fact is, you fellows, I've been rather dished, over Christmas. I'm not going home to Bunter Court."

"If any!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry—Urrgh! Wurrgh!" Bunter cleared a fat neck again. "The fact is, my people will be away over Christmas, so there won't be the usual magnificent festivities at home. Sammy and Bessie are going to uncles and aunts: but they don't seem keen on me—I—I mean, I'm not keen on

Christmas with fusty and musty old uncles and aunts. So I've told the pater I'm going with some of my pals in my form here, see?"

"The seefulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a dusky grin. "The esteemed pals will be terrifically pleased—perhapsfully!"

"Oh, really, Inky! I say, Harry, old chap—"

"Run away and play, Bunter," suggested Harry Wharton.

"Eh? I haven't finished yet," said Bunter. "Of course, lots of fellows would like me for Christmas, I mean to say, I'm the sort of chap to be the life of a party, as you fellows know. With my wonderful ventriloquism, for instance—you fellows know what a wonderful ventriloquist I am—"

"We know you fancy you are!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull! I could ventriloquise your head off, and chance it," said Bunter, warmly. "Why, only yesterday Smithy kicked me because I made him think Quelch was calling him—I had the old boy's bark to a T. Can't I jolly well throw my voice wherever I jolly well like?"

"No: you jolly well can't!"

"Throw it out of this study, old fat man, and throw yourself after it!" said Bob Cherry.

"Beast! I say, you fellows, whose dog is that under the table? Dogs ain't allowed in the studies," said Bunter.

Five fellows stared at Bunter.

"There's no dog in the study, you fat ass," said Harry Wharton. "You—" The captain of the Remove broke off suddenly, with a jump.

Gr-r-r-r-r-r!

It was a sudden, hideous, ferocious growl from under the study table. It startled all the fellows in No. 1 Study: excepting one!

Johnny Bull, whose legs were under the table, jerked them out so suddenly, that his chair rocked, and went over backwards. Johnny sat on the floor.

"He, he, he!" chuckled Bunter.

All the Co. jumped to their feet. Not one of them had had the faintest suspicion that there was a dog in the study. And that horrible growl under the table indicated that it was a very vicious one! Five fellows backed away from the table. Bunter remained where he was: apparently indifferent, and with a fat grin wreathing his fat face.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Where did that dashed dog come from?"

"The wherefulness is terrific."

"Sounds jolly savage—!" said Nugent.

Gr-r-r-r-r-r!

There was no doubt that that dog sounded savage!

Johnny Bull made a stride to the fireplace, and grasped the poker. Poker in hand, he turned back to the table.

"Must be Gosling's dog," he said. "Goodness knows how he wandered in here. I'll jolly well drive him out. I—Oh, my hat! Where's that dog?"

Johnny stared under the table.

No dog was visible there.

In utter amazement he stared. There was no sign whatever of a dog. The growl had been distinctly audible: twice. There was no mistake about that. All the Famous Five had heard it, quite distinctly. But that dog, if it was audible, was not visible.

"He, he, he!" came from Bunter again. "I say, you fellows! He, he, he! Think I can ventriloquise now, Bull? He, he, he!"

"Oh!" gasped Johnny Bull.

"You!" roared Bob Cherry.

"You fat ass—!"

"You terrific tick—!"

"He, he, he!" Billy Bunter chuckled, and chuckled again. He at least was amused, if the Famous Five were not. Certainly he had given indubitable proof that he could ventriloquise: nothing could have been more life-like than that ferocious growl, and undoubtedly it had appeared to come from under the table.

"So it was you ventriloquising, was it?" breathed Johnny Bull. Johnny had withdrawn his legs from an imaginary dog so rapidly that he had overturned his chair and bumped on the floor. He did not seem pleased. He gripped the poker and glared at the fat ventriloquist.

"He, he, he! Now, about the hols, Harry, old chap—!" went on Bunter. "I was going to say—yaroooooh! Keep that poker away, Bull! If you shove that poker at me again, I'll—whooooooooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Johnny Bull did not keep the poker away. He jabbed it quite ferociously in Billy Bunter's fat ribs. The fat Owl of the Remove bounded.

"Beast! Will you stop jabbing that poker at me?" he roared. "Woooooh! Ow! You're pip-pip-puncturing me—wow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, Harry, old chap, make him stoppit!" shrieked Bunter, dodging frantically, "I—I want to speak to you about the Christmas hols, old fellow—wow!—Keep off! Stoppit! About the hols, old fellow—"

"Keep it up, Johnny!" said Harry Wharton, laughing. He did not seem keen to hear anything from Bunter about the hols!

"Yaroooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a roar of laughter in No. 1 Study as Billy Bunter frantically dodged the lunges of the poker. But those lunges were not to be dodged: and the fat Owl, at length, dragged open the door and bounded into the passage. A final lunge from the poker just missed him as he disappeared.

"Beast!" floated back from the passage.



Johnny Bull banged the door after him. And the discussion of plans for the Christmas holidays was resumed in No. 1 Study: without the assistance of William George Bunter.

## CHAPTER II

## UNEXPECTED!

"FIXED up for the hols, Bunter?"  
"Beast!"

It was Herbert Vernon-Smith, the Bounder of Greyfriars, who asked the question. It was Billy Bunter who answered it.

It was not a gracious answer to the Bounder's question. But Billy Bunter was not in a gracious mood.

He was peeved.

Sitting, or to be more exact sprawling, in the roomiest armchair in the Rag, Billy Bunter had a frown of thoughtfulness on his fat brow. He was thinking over a problem that seemed to have no solution, so far.

It was the problem of the Christmas holidays.

Whether Bunter Court was, or was not, the magnificent abode of wealth and luxury such as the fat Owl often described to unbelieving Remove fellows, it seemed that it was not available for Bunter. Mr. and Mrs. Bunter were going away for Christmas. Brother Sammy of the Second Form at Greyfriars, and Sister Bessie of Cliff House School, were booked for a sojourn with an uncle and aunt over the holidays. For some reason quite unknown to Billy Bunter, no uncle or aunt seemed to yearn for his company. It was rather a puzzle, for Bunter knew, if nobody else did, what a very fascinating fellow he was: a youth of many gifts, calculated to be the life and soul of any party.

But there it was!

Not that Bunter was keen on Bunter Court: an establishment that, seen close at hand, diminished to a semi-detached villa in Surrey. Neither was he keen on what he had described as "musty and fusty" old uncles and aunts. Christmas at Mauleverer Towers, or at Wharton Lodge, or in company with the Bounder on one of his expensive trips abroad, would have suited Bunter.

Mr. Bunter had suggested that his hopeful son should pass the Christmas holidays with some of his many friends at Greyfriars: who, according to that hopeful son, were all eager for such a treat. As an alternative he had offered to arrange for William to remain at the school over the holidays—a prospect that did not appeal to Bunter in the very least.

So it was no wonder that Billy Bunter was peeved: and that his fat brow was sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, as Shakespeare has expressed it.

Really it was a problem!

Lord Mauleverer had been tried, but tried in vain. His lordship had often been long-suffering with Bunter. But there was a limit. This time, all that Bunter had been able to extract from Mauly, was a promise to kick him if he spotted him anywhere within a mile of Mauleverer Towers.

In No. 1 Study he had had no better luck. Harry Wharton, it was true, had shown some signs of relenting, but the ventriloquial incident had put the lid on: and Bunter's fat ribs were still feeling the effects of lunges from the poker in Johnny Bull's vigorous hand.

Thinking it over, in the Rag, Bunter frowned, as Vernon-Smith came into the room with his pal Tom Redwing. A holiday with Smithy would have suited him—Smithy always did something fearfully expensive, as a millionaire's son could afford to do. But he had not even tried Smithy—there was no hope in that quarter. Smithy was as hard as nails: the very last fellow at Greyfriars to have a fat and fatuous Owl landed on him for the "hols".

So when Smithy came across, and asked him genially whether he was "fixed up for the hols", Billy Bunter could only suppose that the question was asked in a spirit of derision: and he answered accordingly.

Tom Redwing, apparently, had the same impression, for he gave his chum a rather expressive glance, and said:

"Chuck it, Smithy!"

"Only asking a question," said the Bounder, blandly, "I'm interested to know whether you're fixed up for the hols, Bunter."

"Yah!" retorted Bunter.

Several fellows in the Rag grinned. Billy Bunter and his problem, in fact, were rather a joke in the Remove. As a fisher for invitations, Bunter had no equal—and on this occasion, in the desperate circumstances, his fishing had been unusually extensive though unavailing. Every man in the Remove knew that Bunter was still "unfixed" for the hols: Skinner, indeed, had remarked that fellows had to guard with their left if Bunter came near them!

"Look out, Smithy!" said Skinner, "You'll find yourself landed with Bunter before you know where you are!"

"Oh, really, Skinner—"

"But that's just what I want," said Vernon-Smith, "If you're not fixed up for the hols, Bunter, like to come with me?"

Billy Bunter jumped almost out of his armchair.

His eyes fairly popped through his spectacles at the Bounder.

That was the last, the very last thing he had dreamed of hearing from Herbert Vernon-Smith.

Had the fat Owl dreamed that there was the remotest chance of a Christmas holiday with the millionaire's son, he certainly would not have wasted his time in No. 1 Study. Now he could scarcely believe his fat ears.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Mean it, Smithy?"

"Of course."

"Oh, crikey!" said Bunter. "I—I—I say, old fellow, I'll come with pleasure. I—I'd like it no end, Smithy!"

"Done, then!" said the Bounder.

Every fellow in the Rag stared at Smithy. All were as surprised as Bunter. Tom Redwing stared at his chum, more blankly than the rest.

"Look here, Smithy—" he exclaimed.

"Don't jaw, old chap! I'm asking Bunter for the hols. Why not?"

"But——!" exclaimed Redwing.

"Is Redwing coming?" asked Bunter, with a rather inimical blink at the sailorman's son. It looked to him, from Redwing's words, that Tom had some objection to this addition to the Christmas party.

"Oh, yes, Reddy and I are going on a trip together," said Vernon-Smith.

"If you like to make a third, Bunter——"

"Yes, rather, old chap! Look here, Redwing, you shut up," said Bunter. "Smithy can ask whom he likes, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course," said Redwing. "But——"

"You needn't butt in," said Bunter, warmly. "You shut up, see——?"

"But——!" persisted Redwing.

"Take Bunter's advice, and shut up!" said Smithy. "Now, is it fixed, Bunter? If you're on——"

"What-ho!" gasped Bunter. "Rely on me, old chap!"

"Then you'll pack in the car with us on the day we break up here, and get along to Folkestone, where we go aboard," said Smithy.

Billy Bunter's eyes danced behind his spectacles. This sounded like one of the Bounder's expensive trips abroad! It was exactly what Bunter wanted—if he could get it! Now he had got it!

"That's that," said the Bounder. "Come on, Reddy——"

"Look here, Smithy, Bunter won't like it," exclaimed Redwing. "I can't make you out. If this is a joke——"

"Sober as a judge!" said Smithy. "Shut up, old fellow, and come along. It's a go, Bunter——and we'll have a tremendous time! Come on, Reddy."

"But——!"

"Oh, rot! You talk too much, old chap!" And with that, Vernon-Smith linked his arm in Tom Redwing's, and fairly dragged him out of the Rag.

Billy Bunter was left grinning with satisfaction.

Some fellows eyed him rather enviously. Everyone knew how the wealthy Bounder was accustomed to spending money right and left. Expense was no object, with Smithy, when he was after a good time. Skinner and Co. would have been very glad to join up—Fisher T. Fish would have jumped at it with both his transatlantic feet: quite a number of fellows, in fact, would have welcomed that breezy invitation from the Bounder. But he had not asked

them—he had asked Bunter—which really was inexplicable. How the Bounder, or anyone else, could possibly want Billy Bunter for the “hols”, was a mystery.

But it was no mystery to Bunter! To his fat mind it was clear enough. Smithy had realized what a splendid chap he was, what a credit he would be to his party, and that was all. Smithy, certainly, was rather a sardonic fellow, with a satirical turn of humour: but an invitation was an invitation: Smithy couldn't possibly go back on it. Billy Bunter, at last, was safely booked for the hols. and with the very fellow he would have chosen! No wonder he grinned an expansive grin that extended almost from one of his fat ears to the other.

“Pulling your leg, I expect,” said Skinner.

“Yah!” retorted Bunter. “Don't you wish he would pull your leg the same way? He, he, he!”

It was quite a happy Bunter.

### CHAPTER III

### BUNTER ALL OVER!

HARRY WHARTON glanced round at his chums in No. 1 Study, opened his lips, and closed them again. The chestnuts were finished, and the Famous Five about to go down. But it seemed that the captain of the Remove had something to say—yet hesitated to put it into words.

“Coming?” asked Bob Cherry, glancing at him.

“Oh! Yes! But—hold on a minute—”

“Two if you like,” said Bob, cheerily.

Harry Wharton paused. His friends were looking at him inquiringly, wondering what was on his mind. All was settled, so far as the Christmas holidays were concerned. The Co. were going with Wharton to Wharton Lodge for Christmas. All that Harry had to do was to write to his uncle, Colonel Wharton or to his aunt, Miss Amy Wharton, and apprise them that four guests would be coming home with him.

“Well, look here——” said Harry, at last.

“Looking!” said Johnny Bull.

“The lookfulness is terrific,” smiled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “Give it an esteemed name, my absurd chum. What is the idiotic trouble?”

“Not exactly a trouble,” answered Harry. “But——” He paused again, colouring a little.

“Cough it up!” said Bob, encouragingly.

“Well, look here—!” Another pause.

“We're all looking!” said Frank Nugent, laughing.

“Well, about Bunter,” said Harry, getting it out at last.

“What about Bunter?”



"Well, he's rather a bothering ass, and a fat fraud, and when he plays ventriloquist tricks he wants kicking, and—and——well, after all, we've stood him before," said Harry. "He seems to have some spot of bother at home, and you know he's rather hung up for the hols—and I was thinking——well, if we've stood him before, we can stand him again, what?"

Four fellows grinned.

Evidently the genial influence of Christmastide had done its work, and Harry Wharton, instead of hardening his heart like Pharaoh of old, had softened it towards the fat Owl of the Remove. Nobody wanted Bunter——certainly Harry Wharton didn't—but for that very reason, he was thinking of including the fat Owl in the party for Wharton Lodge.

"So that's it?" said Bob.

"That's it! You see——"

"It's your party, old man."

"But if you fellows don't like the idea——!"

"Who would?" asked Johnny Bull. "All the same, it's a good idea, old bean. Have the fat chump by all means."

"Right as rain," said Nugent. "If that's all——"

"Well, that's all," said Harry. "If you fellows think you can stand him, I'll ask him when we go down."

"The standfulness will be terrific, my esteemed chum," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, reassuringly.

"Hear, hear!" grinned Bob.

Harry Wharton looked relieved.

"Well, if that's settled, let's go down, and I'll tell Bunter," he said; and with that, the Famous Five left the study, to go down to the Rag.

On the Remove landing they passed Vernon-Smith and Redwing, apparently engaged in a warm argument. Tom Redwing was looking disturbed, while the Bounder was grinning his most sardonic grin.

"Look here, Smithy——!" Redwing was saying, as Harry Wharton and Co. came along. "Look here, it's too thick——"

"Bow-wow!" said Smithy.

"It's a rotten joke——"

"Quite a good one, I think."

"Well, I don't! You know jolly well——exclaimed Redwing.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob Cherry. "You fellows rowing? Forgotten that Christmas is coming? Peace, my infants, peace!"

"Fathead!" was the Bounder's reply to that.

The Co. went down the stairs, leaving Smithy and his chum still arguing, though they did not hear any more of the argument. But they could guess that Smithy was in one of his sardonic moods, and had been "up" to something, and that his more considerate pal was trying to reason with him.

The Famous Five came into the Rag in a cheery bunch. They were not, it

had to be admitted, feeling particularly exhilarated by the proposed addition of William George Bunter to the Christmas party at Wharton Lodge. On the other hand, it was Christmastime: and Christmas was the time for goodwill and good turns. On the whole, they were rather glad that they were going to relieve the fat Owl of his pressing problem.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here he is," said Bob Cherry. And the Famous Five came over to the fat figure sprawling in the armchair.

Billy Bunter blinked at them through his big spectacles.

It was not a welcoming blink.

Half-an-hour ago, Bunter would have been extremely glad to see them looking so friendly and genial. He would have broached the subject of the Christmas holidays on the spot, hoping for the best.

But there had been a change since then.

Bunter was booked for the "hols" now, and he had no use for Harry Wharton and Co. They were, so far, quite unaware of that change in the fat Owl's fortunes. They were about to learn!

"Looking for you, Bunter," said Harry.

"Look for somebody else!" suggested Bunter.

"What?"

"Deaf?" asked Bunter.

"Look here, you fat ass—"

"Yah!"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"It's all right, fathead," he said. "If you'd like to come along to Wharton Lodge for Christmas, we'll make you welcome. Like to come?"

Only one answer was expected to that question. For a week at least, Billy Bunter had been going up and down the Remove, like a lion seeking what he might devour, in quest of an invitation for the "hols". Now that he had, at long last, received one, naturally he might have been expected to reply with a prompt affirmative, before the inviter had time to change his mind. But it was the unexpected that was destined to happen.

Bunter's fat lip curled. He turned up his fat little nose, even further than Nature had already done. All the contemptuous derision of which he was capable was concentrated in his fat face.

"No!" he answered.

"Eh?"

"I said no!" sneered Bunter. "Sorry, and all that, but I really couldn't come. You can't expect it."

The Famous Five gazed at him, blankly.

They had expected an affirmative reply, and were genially prepared to make the best of it. A negative reply was too much to be hoped for. Certainly, a negative was more gratifying than an affirmative, if it came to that. But the manner in which it was handed out was not gratifying.

"Sorry, of course," pursued Bunter, blinking at the amazed five, "I'd give you a week or two, at your humble home, if I could, Wharton. But I simply couldn't spare the time, these hols."

"Oh, my hat!" said Bob Cherry.

"You fat ass—!" said Harry.

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"I'm not pulling your leg, Bunter," said Harry, quite puzzled. "You can come home with me for Christmas——"

"I'll watch it!" said Bunter, derisively. "Sorry, and all that, but it's not good enough, if you don't mind my saying so. I have enough of those fellows at school, without having them in the hols. as well. And of you too, Harry Wharton, if you want it plain. And I couldn't stand your fussy old uncle, or your fussy old aunt—I just couldn't! And I may as well say, too, that Wharton Lodge isn't exactly the sort of place I'd care to spend the hols. in. Hardly my class, if you know what I mean."

Bunter was "rubbing it in".

He was enjoying this!

Safely landed for the hols, Bunter could venture to make himself as objectionable as he liked. Which he accordingly did! It was Bunter all over!

"Well suffering cats and crocodiles!" said Bob. "Is Bunter wandering in his mind, or has he landed himself on Mauly for the hols, or what?"

"Oh, really, Cherry—!"

"Kick him!" suggested Johnny Bull.

"Beast!"

Harry Wharton laughed. He was surprised: and he could not really be expected to be pleased by the way Bunter put it. Nevertheless, the prospect of not seeing Bunter again till after the holidays was grateful and comforting!

"So you won't come, Bunter?" he asked.

"No!" answered Billy Bunter, emphatically, "I jolly well won't!"

"Thanks!" said Harry.

"Eh?"

"Many thanks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from the Co.

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"The thankfulness is terrific, my esteemed and idiotic Bunter," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Co. walked away, leaving the fat Owl frowning.

But the frown soon disappeared from the fat brow: and Billy Bunter grinned again, a happy and anticipative grin. He had jolly well told Wharton off—which was a considerable satisfaction. And he was going abroad with Smithy on one of his expensive holiday trips—a still greater satisfaction. Billy Bunter

was, for the present, in a happy dream—from which, alas! he was destined to wake later!

"Blessed if I make the fat ass out," remarked Bob Cherry, as the Famous Five walked out of the Rag. "But that's that, at any rate! What an escape!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Famous Five went out into the quad to punt a footer till tea-time: undoubtedly feeling that they had had a lucky escape!

#### CHAPTER IV

### BEASTLY FOR BUNTER!

"'EAVY!" remarked Gosling.

"I believe you!" said Cripps, the carrier.

Billy Bunter blinked round, through his big spectacles.

The arrival of the carrier from Friardale interested Bunter. Old Cripps sometimes brought a hamper along for some Greyfriars fellow. Perhaps the fat Owl nourished a faint hope that the old folks at home might have sent him a hamper—hope springs eternal in the human breast. But the object that Cripps had landed at the porter's lodge was nothing like a hamper.

It was a long box of considerable dimensions. It was nearly six feet long, nearly two feet wide, and well over a foot deep. The long lid was of wooden slats, through the interstices of which, brown sacking could be seen, and wisps of straw. Whatever that lengthy box contained was, apparently, packed in straw and sacking. Obviously it was not food: so there was no reason why Billy Bunter should be interested in it. But Bunter was always interested in what did not concern him.

"Wot the dickens can be in it, Cripps?" went on the ancient Greyfriars porter.

"You can ask me another!" answered the Friardale carrier.

"It's for Mr. Quelch," said Gosling, peering at the label. "Bit 'eavy to carry up to the 'Ouse, Cripps."

"More than a bit," agreed Cripps.

"More like Mr. Quelch will want it unpacked in the wood-shed," said Gosling. "He wouldn't want all that rubbidge littering his study." Gosling glanced round at the fat junior who was looking on. "'Ere, Master Bunter! You go in and tell your form-master that this 'ere box has come, and ask him where he wants it put, please."

Billy Bunter blinked at Gosling through his big spectacles.

Possibly Gosling fancied that a fellow who was hanging about idly with nothing to do, would be quite willing to oblige in so small a matter. If so, he



had forgotten all he knew about Bunter. True, a walk from the porter's lodge to the House was not a great exertion. But William George Bunter did not like even a small exertion.

"Oh, really, Gosling—!" he said, warmly.

"Well, cut off, will you?" said Gosling.

"I'll watch it," answered Bunter.

Gosling gave him an expressive look. Probably he would have preferred to give him something more expressive, with his horny hand.

"Well, I got to be going, Gosling," said Cripps.

"Old on," said Gosling. "You'll 'ave to give me a 'and with it, wherever the dratted thing 'ave got to go. I'll speak to Mr. Quelch from the lodge."

Gosling went back into his lodge, to speak to Mr. Quelch, in his study, on the telephone there. Cripps waited. Billy Bunter stood blinking at the long box, wondering what it might possibly contain that had arrived for the Remove master just before Christmas. Whatever it might contain, did not concern Billy Bunter in the very least: so naturally he was curious. Curiosity was Billy Bunter's besetting sin.

Gosling emerged from the lodge again.

"He's coming," he said.

A rather tall and angular gentleman came down from the House. It was Mr. Quelch, master of the Remove, to whom that mysterious box was addressed on the label. There was quite a keen expression on Quelch's face. Evidently he was interested in that box. He came on the scene with rapid strides.

"Ah! It has come!" said Mr. Quelch, glancing at the box with much satisfaction. "I think it had better be unpacked in your shed, Gosling—there seems to be a great deal of packing inside. Please carry it to the shed, and be extremely careful with it. One cannot be too careful with busts."

"There ain't any bu'st, sir," said Cripps. "It says 'With Care,' on that box, sir, and I've 'andled it with care. Don't you be afraid of a bu'st, sir."

"Eh! What? There are two busts in that box, Cripps—"

"I'm sure there ain't sir," answered the Friardale carrier, warmly. "When it says 'with care', sir, we 'andles things with care. You can take my word for it, sir, that there ain't a single bu'st in it, let alone two."

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Quelch. "You misunderstand me, Cripps—"

"There certainly ain't any bu'sts in that box, sir," declared Cripps. "You see any bu'sts in it, Gosling?"

"Can't say I do!" said Gosling. "It's all right, Mr. Quelch, sir—Cripps ain't busted that box, sir—there ain't a sign of a bu'st—"

"You misunderstand my meaning entirely," rapped Mr. Quelch. "That box contains the busts of two famous Roman poets—Horace and Virgil. Marble busts! Do you understand?"

Billy Bunter grinned. Evidently there were two "busts" in that box, though

not the kind of "bu'sts" to which Cripps had supposed the Remove master to be alluding.

"Marble busts!" repeated Mr. Quelch, to make it quite clear. "Do you understand now, Cripps?"

"Well, of course I understand that marble bu'sts if you drop it, sir—" said the carrier. "If there's marble in that box, sir, it ain't busted, you can take my word for that."

Mr. Quelch breathed rather hard.

"A bust, Cripps, is a sculptured figure, consisting of the head and shoulders," he rapped. "Kindly take the box to the wood-shed. Carry it between you, and take the greatest care."

"Oh! Yessir!" said Cripps, "lend a 'and, Gosling."

"'Ere you are," said Gosling.

The long box was heaved up. No doubt the marble busts it contained were of a good size, for that box undoubtedly was weighty. Quelch watched the heaving-up process quite anxiously. Those Roman busts, in fact, were a Christmas present for Quelch, from his old college friend Professor Pawson. Horace and Virgil, in marble, were to adorn Quelch's study: happily reminding him at odd moments of the Aeneid and the Odes! That was the sort of thing, as Billy Bunter sarcastically reflected, in which Quelch was interested! Bunter, personally, would gladly have swapped both Horace and Virgil, with all their deathless works thrown in, for a single dough-nut!

"Bunter!" rapped Mr. Quelch, as Cripps and Gosling started.

"Eh! Oh! Yes, sir," answered Bunter.

"Run to the wood-shed and open the door ready."

Billy Bunter gave him one blink! But he could not venture to answer Mr. Quelch as he had answered Gosling. Deep as were Billy Bunter's objections to making himself useful, he had no choice in the matter. Suppressing his feelings, the fat Owl rolled away to the wood-shed to open the door.

After him marched Gosling and Cripps with the long box. After them marched Mr. Quelch, with an eye on the box, evidently anxious to see Horace and Virgil safely landed.

Bunter had the door open by the time they arrived. The long box was carried into Gosling's wood-shed, and dumped down there—with care!

"Bunter!"

The fat Owl, in dread that further usefulness might be required of him, was rolling away. But his form-master's sharp voice called him back.

"Yes, sir!" breathed Bunter: suppressing his feelings once more.

"Go to my study, Bunter—"

"Oh, really, sir—"

"What? What did you say, Bunter?"

"Oh! Nothing, sir!" gasped Bunter, "I—I—I'll go to your study with—with—with pleasure, sir."

"Go to my study immediately, Bunter and fetch a key that you will find in the top drawer on the left-hand side of my writing-table."

Billy Bunter breathed hard. As there was a lock on the box, and as Quelch was sending him for a key, he could guess that the key in the top drawer on the left-hand side of Quelch's writing-table was the key of that box. Really, Quelch could have brought it along with him! Apparently he hadn't thought of it: and Billy Bunter had to fetch it! Billy Bunter wished, from the bottom of his fat heart, that a fellow could talk to his "beak" as a fellow would have liked to talk to his beak! However, a fellow couldn't: so the fat Owl, with deeper feelings than ever, rolled off to the House to fetch that key. He did not hurry!

By the time he returned with it, Cripps, the carrier, was gone. Gosling and Mr. Quelch stood looking at the long box: Quelch with keen interest and anticipation: Gosling with neither. Quelch was eager to get that box unpacked: Gosling was far from eager to bend his ancient limbs to the task of unpacking it. Quelch gave Bunter a frown, as he rolled in with a key in a fat hand.

"You have kept me waiting, Bunter!" he rapped, severely.

"I—I—I hurried like anything, sir—"

"You did nothing of the kind, Bunter."

"I—I—I—"

"You are a lazy and idle boy, Bunter."

"Oh, really, sir—!"

"This is the key of the box, Gosling," said Mr. Quelch. "My friend, Professor Pawson sent it by post a day or two ago, in readiness for the arrival of the box. Please take it and open the box, Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir—!"

"You need not go, Bunter."

"I—I think I heard Toddy calling me, sir—"

"Never mind that—"

"I—I mean, I—I've got some lines to do, sir—"

"You may help Gosling unpack that box, Bunter."

"Oh, crikey!"

Billy Bunter's feelings could hardly have been deeper than they were already. They were very, very deep, as he lent a reluctant fat hand in unpacking that box, when Gosling had unlocked it. Quelch, ruthlessly regardless of the indignation of the fattest and laziest member of his form, watched the unpacking with eager eyes, and fairly beamed when Horace and Virgil came to light from the midst of a vast accumulation of sacking and straw.

## CHAPTER V

## MYSTERIOUS!

"HA, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter blinked round him in astonishment.

Why that roar of laughter greeted him, as he rolled into the Rag after tea, he did not know.

There were quite a crowd of Remove fellows in the Rag after tea. They were all talking and grinning, when Bunter arrived. And his arrival was the signal for a roar of laughter from one end of the room to the other.

Evidently, some joke was on. Equally evidently, it was somehow in connection with William George Bunter. But what it was all about, was quite a mystery to the Owl of the Remove.

"I say, you fellows!" he squeaked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, what's the joke!" demanded Bunter.

"You are!" answered Skinner.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter, both surprised and peeved, blinked from one face to another. The Famous Five, in a group by the window, were smiling—broadly. Skinner and Snoop and Stott chuckled. Squiff, and Tom Brown, and Peter Todd, and Ogilvy, and Russell, and Bolsover major, and a dozen other fellows, all seemed in a high state of amusement. Even Lord Mauleverer, placid in his armchair, was smiling. Clearly, every fellow in the room knew the joke—whatever it was. Only William George Bunter was in the dark.

"Going to have a jolly good time in the hols, Bunter?" called out Squiff.

"Eh! Yes, rather," answered Bunter.

Why that reply should have evoked another roar of laughter, Billy Bunter simply could not guess. But it did! There was quite a yell.

"I say, Toddy, what's all this cackling about?" asked Bunter.

"You, old fat man," answered Peter.

"Oh, really, Toddy—"

"Merry Christmas, Bunter!" roared Bob Cherry. "Have a good time!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The merriffulness of the esteemed Bunter's Christmas will be terrific," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Oh, really, you fellows—!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm going abroad with Smithy!" said Bunter, loftily. "We leave in a car on breaking-up day—"



"A life on the ocean wave, a home on the rolling deep!" sang Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" exclaimed the fat Owl, more mystified and peeved than ever. "Nothing funny in a Christmas holiday abroad, is there?"

"That depends!" said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"The dependfulness is preposterous."

"It's too bad of Smithy, really," said Frank Nugent. "Poor old Bunter."

Billy Bunter gave him a disdainful blink.

"Yah! I jolly well know you'd be jolly glad to join up, Nugent!" he exclaimed. "You don't often get a Continental holiday, and chance it."

"Going to the Continent?" chuckled Johnny Bull.

"Eh? Yes! Of course! We're going aboard at Folkestone, Smithy said," answered Bunter. "I suppose that means the Continent, doesn't it? What else could it mean?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

More mystified than ever, Billy Bunter blinked round at the laughing juniors. For some reason, utterly mysterious to Bunter, the Remove fellows seemed to regard his Christmas holiday with Smithy as a tremendous joke. Evidently they did not take the view that he was going to enjoy it as he anticipated. Why, Bunter could not begin to guess. An expensive trip with Smithy was a great catch. Quite a number of fellows would have liked it. Bunter, so unexpectedly but so happily selected by the wealthy Bounder, was the lucky man!

There was absolutely nothing of a comic nature in the affair, so far as Bunter could see: unless, indeed, Smithy was only pulling his fat leg, and was going to let him down at the last minute. But that was unthinkable. There was a spot of the "bounder" in Smithy, whence his nickname in the Remove: but no Greyfriars man could be quite such a bounder as that. Smithy, having asked him for the "hols", couldn't possibly let him down. So that was all right—so far as Bunter could see, at all events.

True, Smithy had said nothing about a Continental trip. But going aboard at Folkestone couldn't mean anything else. How could it?

"I say, you fellows." A sudden doubt smote Bunter. "I suppose the trip ain't off for any reason? Has Smithy said anything?"

"He's certainly said something," chuckled Skinner.

"Well, what?" demanded Bunter.

"Better ask him!"

"The trip isn't off, old fat man," said Bob. "That's all right! Smithy and Redwing are going—and you too, if you want to."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh!" said Bunter, relieved. "That's all right, then. Blessed if I see anything for you fellows to cackle at. I'll bet you'd like it!"

"Well, I might," chuckled Bob. "But I fancy you won't."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yah!" retorted Bunter. "I say, where's Smithy?"

"Up in his study," said Skinner. "Don't you worry, Bunter. Smithy isn't letting you down! You're going—if you don't cry off."

"Why should I?" demanded Bunter.

"Echo answers why!" grinned Skinner.

"Estimated echo answers that the whyfulness is terrific," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you can cackle," said Bunter, disdainfully. "I'm going to have a good time abroad, I can tell you. Sorry for you spending the Christmas vac. at your poky little home, Wharton. You couldn't afford a trip like this."

"Well—I think I might," said Harry Wharton. "But I rather think I'd prefer Christmas at my poky little home."

"I don't think!" jeered Bunter. "Well, you can make the best of it, but you won't see me there, I can tell you. Like your cheek to ask me, I think, when I've got the choice between Bunter Court and going abroad with Smithy."

"Right—I won't ask you again," said Harry, laughing.

"No good if you did!" said Bunter, with overpowering disdain. "You can keep your poky little place, and your fusty old uncle and aunt—I've no use for them. I can do better than that, I can jolly well tell you."

"Best of luck," said Harry, amiably.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cackle!" snorted Bunter. "You can cackle, and pack into the school bus when we break up, while I'm rolling off in Smithy's car——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yah!"

Billy Bunter revolved on his axis, and rolled out of the Rag. A roar of laughter followed him as he went.

He headed for the stairs, and the Remove studies. He wanted to see Smithy.

There was something—Bunter could not imagine what—in that trip with Smithy which the Remove fellows seemed to regard as an excruciating joke. Smithy, it seemed, had said something: and that had started the joke. Nobody was going to tell him what it was—but Bunter, rather naturally, was anxious to know. The trip was not off—and Smithy couldn't possibly let him down—so it was all as right as rain! Still, Bunter wanted to know what it was that caused the Remove fellows to regard it as a tremendous joke. He was feeling just a little inward uneasiness.

He arrived at No. 4 Study in the Remove, pushed open the door, and blinked in. Smithy and Redwing, in that study, were finishing tea. They were talking—the Bounder grinning, and Redwing frowning a little—but they ceased to speak as the fat face blinked in.

"I say, Smithy—!" squeaked Bunter.

Vernon-Smith looked round at him.

"I say, all the fellows are cackling about something," said Bunter. "They seem to think there's something funny about me going with you for the hols."

"Do they?" asked Smithy, raising his eyebrows.

"You ain't calling it off, old chap?"

"Not at all."

"Well, what is all the cackling about, then?" asked the mystified Owl.

"Ask me another."

"Look here, Smithy—!" began Redwing.

"Cheese it, old man! Shut that door after you, Bunter."

Billy Bunter blinked from one to the other, and back from the other to the one. Then he withdrew, closing the door after him with rather a bang. Either Smithy had nothing to tell him—or was not going to tell him anything. Bunter was still in the dark as to the cause of the merriment in the Remove.

But Billy Bunter had his own ways and means of acquiring information when he wanted it. He banged the door of No. 4 Study—but he did not depart. He remained close to that door: and bent a fat ear to the keyhole! If anything was to be learned from the conversation in No. 4 Study, Billy Bunter was not going to remain in the dark.

## CHAPTER VI

### SMACK!

"SMITHY, old man—!" Tom Redwing spoke seriously.

"Can it!" said the Bounder.

"It's rather thick—"

"So you've said before. More than once."

"Well, I'll say it again," said Redwing, warmly. "It's not fair on that silly fat chump Bunter."

Outside the study door, a silly fat chump, Bunter, knitted fat brows. Bunter himself was quite unaware that he was a silly fat chump! He could not see that that description applied to him in any way at all. However, it was said of old that listeners never hear any good of themselves. Bunter would have liked to hiss "Beast!" through the keyhole. But he wanted to hear more. His fat brow wrinkled in a frown: but he remained quiescent, and listened.

"Rot!" came the Bounder's sardonic voice. "Isn't it the joke of the term?"

"Well, yes, perhaps: but—"

"Don't you want Bunter with us on the trip?" chuckled the Bounder.

"No more than you do, Smithy: but you jolly well know that he won't come when he finds out what it's going to be like."

"Oh!" breathed the fat Owl outside the keyhole. It seemed that there was something for Bunter to "find out". He listened-in with more eager intentness than ever. Whatever there was to be found out, Bunter was going to know.

The Bounder laughed. Smithy seemed amused if his pal was not.

"Think he wouldn't come if he knew, Reddy?"

"You know he wouldn't, Smithy! As soon as he finds out, he will call it off, and you jolly well know it."

"That won't be till we break up here," chuckled the Bounder.

"You've told a good many of the fellows—"

"Too good a joke to keep!" Smithy chuckled again. "But nobody's going to tip Bunter! It's too good to spoil by telling him."

"If he doesn't find out till we leave the school—"

"He won't."

"Well, that will leave him stranded," said Redwing.

"Exactly!" said the Bounder, coolly, "and a jolly good thing too. For more than a week he's been fairly dunning fellows for the Christmas hols—I've seen old Mauly hop round corners to keep clear of him—and this will keep him quiet! He won't know a thing till we break up here, and that will give the Remove a rest on the subject, see?"

"Well, yes: but—it's really taking him in—"

"That's rot!" said Vernon-Smith. "I've asked him for the hols—he can come if he likes! How's that taking him in?"

"Of course he thinks it's one of your expensive trips abroad—winter sports in Switzerland, or a run down to Nice or Cannes—"

"I've not said so."

"You've let him think so," said Redwing, sharply. "Think he would have jumped at your invitation if you'd told him we're going to spend the holidays on a coasting trip in my father's ketch, facing foul weather, living on hard tack, and working like forecastle hands? I wonder you're willing to face it yourself, Smithy—but you jolly well know that Bunter wouldn't."

The Bounder laughed: loud and long. Certainly the fat Owl of the Remove could hardly be imagined welcoming such a "holiday" as Redwing described. Had Smithy put it to him in those words, undoubtedly the indignant fat Owl would have hurled his invitation back in his teeth, as it were!

"Well, it's funny, in a way, perhaps," said Redwing. "But I think it's tough on Bunter. It will be a blow to him when he wakes up and finds out what sort of a trip it's going to be. Look here, Smithy, let him know—"

"I'll watch it!" said Smithy, chuckling. "Joke of the term, I tell you. Bunter can come—if he likes! It would do him good! Fancy him rolling about a sloping deck in a North Sea gale, soaked to the skin, and pulling and hauling like a jolly old sailorman! What? Ha, ha, ha!"

Outside the study, a fat junior with a fat ear glued to a keyhole seemed quite paralysed.



Bunter knew now!

Smithy was, after all, pulling his fat leg!

The invitation was genuine enough. Smithy was not going to let him down! He could join that Christmas holiday trip if he liked! But—!

Never for a moment had the fat Owl dreamed of anything like this. He had pictured one of Smithy's magnificent trips on the Continent—winter sports or palm trees in the sunny South: or something in that expensive line. And it was going to be a coasting trip in a sailing ketch—the North Sea in December—hard work and hard tack!

It was strange perhaps that the Bounder, whose millionaire father never counted expense when his son wanted anything, was content with such a trip. But there was a hardy strain in the Bounder: he loved ease and luxury with one side of his nature, as it were: but there was another side, to which hardship, and peril, and tough exertion, had a strong appeal. Smithy was going to enjoy that rough and stormy trip in old John Redwing's ketch, as much as he had ever enjoyed Monte Carlo or Biarritz or Zermatt.

But William George Bunter was built on very different lines. William George Bunter really wouldn't have been found dead on such a trip!

He knew, now!

Billy Bunter had gone up and down the Remove, as it were, seeking some fellow on whom to land himself for Christmas. He had landed himself at last! And this was the happy landing!

That beast Smithy knew that he wouldn't come on such a trip! That unspeakable beast Smithy was going to leave him in his dream till break-up day: when it would be too late for him to seek a happier landing! No doubt that would, as Smithy said, give the Remove fellows a rest from Bunter! No doubt it would be the joke of the term—from Smithy's point of view! But—

"Oh!" breathed Bunter.

For some moments, the fat Owl really seemed paralysed by that stunning revelation. Certainly, he was not going with Smithy on the "hols" now! Wild, wild horses would not have dragged him on such a trip! After that delusive happy landing, he was at a loose end once more—unfixed after all for the hols! Wrath and indignation boiled up in the fat Owl.

Smithy was still laughing, in sardonic enjoyment of his jest on Bunter, when the study door was hurled suddenly open.

The Bounder and Redwing jumped, and stared round.

"What the—!" ejaculated Smithy.

In the doorway stood a figure of wrath. Billy Bunter's fat face was crimson, his eyes gleaming through his spectacles. Never had so extensive an amount of wrath and indignation been packed into that fat face.

"Beast!" he roared.

"What's biting you, Bunter?" asked Smithy.

"Rotter!" roared Bunter.

"What the dickens——?"

"He's heard!" said Redwing, quietly. He guessed that a fat ear had been at the keyhole, now. "All the better, Smithy—it was too thick, as I told you——"

"Cad!" roared Bunter. "Beast! Rotter! Outsider! Think I'm coming with you on a rotten cheap trip on a dirty coaster in December? I'll watchit! Taking a fellow in! Beast!" Billy Bunter advanced into the study, and shook a fat fist almost under the Bounder's nose. "Rotter! Yah!"

The Bounder scowled. His tremendous joke on Bunter—such as it was—had come to a sudden end! It was annoying to Smithy.

"Oh, get out!" he snapped.

"Beast! I've a jolly good mind to punch your head!" roared Bunter. "I've a jolly good mind to smack your face! I've a jolly good mind to——"

"Are you waiting to be kicked out?" snapped the Bounder.

**SMACK!**

Bunter had stated that he had a "jolly good mind" to smack the Bounder's face. Certainly it had never occurred to Vernon-Smith that the fat Owl would venture to do so. Now he did! Carried away by indignant wrath, Billy Bunter forgot, for the moment, that discretion was the better part of valour. A fat hand swiped across Vernon-Smith's astonished face, with a smack that could almost have been heard at the end of the passage.

"Oh!" gasped Smithy.

He bounded from his chair.

The look on his face was enough for Billy Bunter. Towering wrath changed in an instant to terrified alarm. Bunter, quite scared at what he had done, and still more scared of the coming consequences, made a frantic bound for the doorway.

He would not have reached it, had not Tom Redwing jumped up, and grasped the Bounder's arm, stopping him as he leaped after Bunter.

"Hold on, Smithy," gasped Tom.

"Let go!" yelled Smithy.

"Keep cool, old chap! Look here——"

Smithy did not look like keeping cool! His face had been smacked—by the egregious Owl of the Remove. So far from thinking of keeping cool, Smithy was boiling over. He wrenched his arm free from Redwing's grasp, and rushed out of the study in pursuit of Bunter. Fortunately for the fat Owl, owing to Redwing's intervention, he had a start. And an arrow in its flight had nothing on William George Bunter, as he flew down the stairs, and bolted out of the House—hunting cover.

## CHAPTER VII

## HIS MASTER'S VOICE!

"GOSLING!"  
"Yes. Master Vernon-Smith."  
"Seen Bunter?"

Billy Bunter trembled.

The December evening had long closed in. It was clear and starry, and a crescent of moon sailed over the old quad of Greyfriars, a silver crescent in a steely sky. It was past lock-ups: and no Greyfriars junior was supposed to be out of the House. Bunter, heedless of lock-ups, heedful only of the angry Bounder on his track, had dodged out of the House by way of the junior lobby: hoping to keep at a safe distance till Smithy had had time to cool down.

But a glimpse of Smithy in the starry quad warned him that the Bounder was equally heedless of lock-ups. Had it been darker, the fat Owl would have been safe—but the visibility was good. He dodged away in great haste, and rolled into Gosling's wood-shed. There, he hoped, he was going to find safe cover.

Alas for Bunter! Hardly a minute later, he heard footsteps outside the shed: and the Bounder's strident voice. Evidently Smithy had spotted him cutting off in that direction.

"I seen him," came Gosling's crusty voice. "Jest going down to my wood-shed to tidy up, I was, and I seed him. Out of the 'Ouse in lock-ups, and you too, Master Vernon-Smith! Such goings-on——"

"Where is he now?" snapped the Bounder.

"Ow'd I know, unless he's dodged into my wood-shed," grunted Gosling. "You go back to the 'Ouse, sir, or I'll 'ave to report you out in lock-ups."

"Go and eat coke."

With that polite reply, Smithy tramped towards the wood-shed. Gosling, with another grunt, followed. Gosling had to tidy up in that wood-shed, where a huge quantity of straw and sacking lay about, after the unpacking of Horace and Virgil from the long box. Horace and Virgil were now adorning Mr. Quelch's study: the box remained where it had been unpacked.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Billy Bunter.

From the bottom of his fat heart, Billy Bunter repented him that he had allowed himself to be carried away by indignation to the extent of smacking Smithy's face. Never, assuredly, had a fellow deserved more to have his face smacked! Bunter would have liked to administer a round dozen of smacks, if it came to that. But the consequences were going to be dire, when the Bounder ran him down. Already he seemed to feel a boot crashing on his tight trousers.

He blinked wildly round the wood-shed for a hiding-place. If Smithy did not see him there, he would depart and look elsewhere. But there was no cover in that shed, once Smithy stepped in.

But was there not?

Moonlight glimmering in at the window glimmered on a long box, with a slatted lid wide open, surrounded by straw and sacking. That box had lately contained two marble busts, packed end to end. Now it was empty!

Billy Bunter's fat brain did not often work quickly. But the imminence of peril spurred it into unusual activity. He cut across the shed to the box.

There was ample room inside it for Bunter. It was five or six feet long. It was wide and deep. Space had been required for layer after layer of packing to preserve those marble busts from damage. Almost in a twinkling, Bunter rolled into that box, and drew the slatted lid shut.

He had no time for more. He would have been glad to drag some of the sacking over him before he closed the lid: but there was no time. He lay on his fat back in the long box, the lid closed down. As the lid was of slats, with interstices between the slats, his fat face was quite visible from outside—had there been a light in the shed. But the moonlight from the little window did not reveal it. He lay and palpitated, and hoped for the best.

Hardly a few seconds later, there were footsteps in the doorway. Then came the Bounder's voice:

"Bunter, you fat scoundrel! I know you're here! I'm going to kick you all round Greyfriars and back! Show up, you fat frog."

Never was Billy Bunter less disposed to show up! His cue was to under-study that sagacious animal, Brer Fox, and to "lay low and say nuffin". He tried to still his breathing.

There was the scratch of a match: and the Bounder glanced round the shed in the flicker. Billy Bunter trembled in the box.

"Ere, none of that!" came Gosling's voice. "Don't you light matches in this 'ere shed, with all that stror about, Master Vernon-Smith. You want to set the blinking place afire?"

"If Bunter's here—"

"I'll soon see if he's 'ere, when I get my lantern alight."

"Oh, lor'!" breathed Bunter, in dismay.

Gosling, evidently, had something to do in that shed, and was going to light his lantern, that hung from a nail. Once the shed was illuminated by the lantern-light, a fat face would be visible between the slats of the box-lid.

Gosling, in his turn, scratched a match, and the lantern was lighted. Vernon-Smith stood staring round him in the light.

"Nobody 'ere," grunted Gosling, "and wot I says is this 'ere, you better 'ook it back to the 'Ouse, arter lock-ups—"

"I'm going to find Bunter," snapped Vernon-Smith. "If he's here, I'll root him out all right—"



Billy Bunter heard the Bounder's footsteps moving about the wood-shed. So far, he had not thought of the box. But it was quite certain that he would notice it, in a matter of moments, or minutes at the most, and then—!

Once more Billy Bunter's fat brain worked quickly.

"Gosling!" came a sudden, sharp, rapping voice, apparently from the open doorway. If it was not Mr. Quelch's voice, it was a twin to it.

Bunter could do these things! If William George Bunter could do nothing else, he could ventriloquise. His imitation of Quelch's bark was perfect. Had Mr. Quelch heard it, he might have fancied that he himself had spoken. Gosling and Smithy had no doubt about it.

"Yessir!" answered Gosling, staring round.

"Gosling! What is that Remove boy doing in your wood-shed after lock-ups?" came the sharp bark. "Take him back to the House at once!"

"Oh! Yessir!" gasped Gosling. "I didn't know you was 'ere, sir. I'll take him at once, sir."

Vernon-Smith breathed hard. He had not heard Mr. Quelch's footsteps: neither did the Remove master look in at the doorway. But there was no doubt about the voice!

"Vernon-Smith!" came the sharp bark.

"Yes, sir!" muttered the Bounder, sullenly.

"Take fifty lines for leaving the House after lock-ups without leave."

"Yes, sir!" breathed Smithy.

"Now you jest come alonger me, Master Vernon-Smith," said Gosling. "I got to take you back to the 'Ouse—"

"I can go without your help!" snapped Smithy.

"Mr. Quelch says take you back, sir, and I got to take you back!" grunted Gosling. "Now you come alonger me, and don't waste a man's time. You coming, Master Vernon-Smith, or you want to be took with a 'and on your shoulder?"

"Oh, go to Jericho!" snarled Smithy, and he walked out of the wood-shed, Gosling following him. Gosling had to take him back to the House, according to instructions: little dreaming that those instructions emanated from a fat ventriloquist hidden in the long box. Both of them, to Billy Bunter's immense relief, left the wood-shed: somewhat surprised to see nothing of Mr. Quelch when they came out, but certainly not guessing that the master's voice had been there without the master!

"He, he, he!" chuckled Billy Bunter.

He pushed up the slatted lid on its hinges, and sat up, grinning in the lantern light. The fat Owl crawled out of the box. He blinked cautiously out of the wood-shed through his big spectacles. Smithy and Gosling were gone: and the coast was clear. Billy Bunter rolled out of the wood-shed, grinning all over his fat face. That long box, once the repository of Horace and Virgil, had served his turn: and Billy Bunter, at the moment, was far from dreaming how it was to serve his turn again, and in what remarkable circumstances.

## CHAPTER VIII

## NOTHING DOING!

"I SAY, YOU fellows!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at—"

"Look in the glass, old fat man! Then you will!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"About Christmas, you fellows—"

"Shut the door after you!"

"Beast! I mean, look here, old chap—"

"Buzz off!" exclaimed five voices in chorus.

The sight of Billy Bunter's fat face, in the doorway of No. 1 study, seemed to have moved Harry Wharton and Co. to merriment. But the fat Owl of the Remove was far from sharing that merriment. Never had his plump visage been so serious and solemn.

Billy Bunter was at a loose end again. His arrangements for the Christmas vacation, which had seemed so happily fixed, had come sadly unstuck. Not for worlds would Bunter have taken on that trip with Smithy and Redwing, now that he knew what that trip was going to be like.

The Remove fellows seemed much amused by Smithy's jest on the fat Owl. Bunter was not in the least amused.

The sardonic Bounder had intended to keep up the joke right up to the day Greyfriars broke up for the holidays. But the fat Owl had put paid to that, at least. He was now aware of the true inwardness, as it were, of Smithy's unexpected invitation. He certainly was not going with Smithy! He still had time to make other arrangements, before the Greyfriars fellows scattered to the north, south, east, and west. But other arrangements did not seem easy to make.

Deeply did the fat Owl repent him that he had turned down Harry Wharton with such ineffable scorn. His only hope now was, so to speak, to turn him up again!

He could have been safely booked for Wharton Lodge! In the belief that he was going to a gorgeous trip with Smithy, he had turned that down: scornfully, contemptuously, derisively. He had quite enjoyed telling Harry Wharton "off". Now he wished that he hadn't!

The Famous Five were at tea in No. 1 Study the next day, when Billy Bunter materialized in the doorway. They did not need telling why he had called. Now that the delusive Continental holiday was washed out, Bunter had a use for them again. But it did not appear that they were prepared to be made use of. Billy Bunter had turned them down not wisely but too well.

"I say, you fellows—!"

"Hook it!"

"But I say—"

"The hookfulness is the proper caper, my esteemed idiotic Bunter."

"I say, I ain't going with Smithy after all—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He took me in, you know," said Bunter, sorrowfully. "Of course I thought it was going to be topping—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I jolly well smacked his face for it!" said Bunter. "The beast kicked me in the dorm last night—still, I jolly well smacked his face! I say, you fellows, I'll tell you what. I've turned Smithy down, and—and—and I'll jolly well come with you fellows, if you like, after all."

"If!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"Jolly big 'if'!" remarked Johnny Bull.

"The if-fulness is terrific."

"I say, Harry, old chap—!"

"Cut it out!" said Harry Wharton, "Wharton Lodge wouldn't suit you, Bunter. You just don't want the hols in my poky little place."

"That—that was only a jog-jig-joke, old chap—"

"Hardly your class, you know!"

"I—I—I—"

"And you have enough of these fellows at school, and of me too!"

"You—you—you see—!" stammered Bunter.

"Yes, I see!" agreed Harry Wharton, laughing. "Quite! And all I have to say about the hols is this—"

"Yes, old chap?" said Bunter, eagerly.

"Just this: that if you show up anywhere near Wharton Lodge, I'll kick you all over Surrey."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"And we'll all do the same," said Bob Cherry.

"The samefulness will be preposterous!" grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"And now cut!" said Frank Nugent.

Billy Bunter stood in the doorway, blinking at them. It was borne in upon his fat mind that the invitation that had been turned down, was not to be turned up again! He had let his chances like the sunbeams pass him by!

However, he did not "cut". Wharton Lodge was his last hope: the alternative was holidays at the school, with such cheering company as that of Mrs. Kebble, the house-dame, and Gosling the porter. Somehow or anyhow he had to escape that. It was necessary, as the old song says, for a victim to be found!

"I say, Harry, old fellow—!"

"You can Harry-old-fellow me till you're tired, but it won't make any difference," said the captain of the Remove. "For goodness sake, cut."

"But I say——"

"Travel!"

"Beast! I mean, I heard you tell Nugent yesterday that your uncle was away from home, and wouldn't be back till Christmas Eve——"

"You hear a lot of things that don't concern you, you fat eavesdropping tick! What about it, anyway?"

"I mean, where is he now?" asked Bunter.

"If you particularly want to know, he's gone to visit some old Army friends at Aldershot. Anything more you'd like to know?"

"Oh! Yes! No! I mean, don't you think your uncle would rather like to see me at Christmas?" asked Bunter. "I—I like Colonel Wharton a lot, you know! I—I don't think he's a musty and fusty old military fossil, old chap."

"You fat frump——"

"Don't you think he'd be rather disappointed not to see me?" asked Bunter.

"Not at all."

"And then there's your Aunt Amy—she rather likes me, you know——"

"I don't!"

"Beast!"

With that, the fat Owl rolled out of the doorway, and departed. Bob Cherry banged the door after him.

The Famous Five went on with their tea. The talk round the study table ran on the Christmas holidays, and plans for the same: which did not include William George Bunter. The Co. in fact, forgot the existence of the fat Owl of the Remove: little dreaming of what was working in his podgy mind when he rolled away.

They had just finished tea, when there was a tap at the door, and Vernon-Smith looked in.

"You're wanted, Wharton," he said.

"Who and what?" asked Harry.

"Quelch's study. He told me to tell you your uncle's rung up from Aldershot, and he's holding the line."

"Oh, my hat!" Harry Wharton jumped up at once. "Blessed if I was expecting a phone call from my uncle. Something about Christmas, I suppose."

He hurried out of the study.

"Seen Bunter about?" asked Vernon-Smith, glancing at the Co. as Wharton cut away down the passage.

"He was here a quarter of an hour ago," answered Bob Cherry. "Asking him for the hols again?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Quelch gave me fifty lines yesterday—or I thought he did!" answered the Bounder. "When he called me just now, I thought he was going to ask for my lines—and I haven't done them. But he didn't—he seems to have forgotten all about them."



"Not like Quelch!" said Bob, staring. "He never forgets a fellow's lines."

"Exactly!" said Smithy. "He spoke from outside a door, and I didn't see him—but I believe Bunter was hanging about somewhere, in the offing. And as Quelch hasn't asked for the lines——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob. "Some more of Bunter's ventriloquism, what?"

"It looks like it! I'm going to kick him, just in case! Anybody know where he is?"

But nobody in No. 1 Study knew where Billy Bunter was, and the Bounder went on his way, to look for him. But he did not find Billy Bunter in the Remove quarters. Billy Bunter, just then, was in a spot where certainly no Remove fellow would ever have thought of looking for him!

## CHAPTER IX

### AMAZING!

"PLEASE come in, Wharton," said Mr. Quelch.

Harry Wharton had tapped at the door of his form-master's study, and opened it. Then he paused.

Quelch was not alone in the study. Mr. Prout, the portly master of the Fifth Form, was there also: talking. Prout generally was talking. The Remove master was seated at his writing-table: Prout was standing, looking at the two Roman busts that now adorned Quelch's bookcase. Horace and Virgil, in marble, grew in beauty side by side, as it were: and no doubt Quelch was quite pleased to show his valued new possessions to other members of the Staff. At the same time, it was easy to have enough, and even too much, of the portly Prout's conversation: and perhaps Wharton's arrival came as rather a relief to Quelch.

Wharton, having been sent for to take a telephone call, had arrived with promptness and despatch. But finding two masters in conversation in the study, he paused in the doorway. Glancing across the room, he saw that the telephone receiver was off the hooks: somebody apparently was holding the line. He looked inquiringly at Mr. Quelch, who bade him enter in very cordial tones.

"You will excuse me, Prout——" added Mr. Quelch.

"Eh, what?"

"This junior——"

"Oh, quite! quite! I will wait," said Mr. Prout. Prout was not yet tired of talking: he never tired so soon as the listeners-in. He was prepared to wait till the junior was done with, and then resume.

"Wharton is here to take a telephone call, Mr. Prout. His uncle is waiting to speak to him."

"Oh! In that case—!" said Mr. Prout. "I will give you a look-in later, Quelch." And the portly Prout rolled out of the study.

"Wharton! Your uncle, Colonel Wharton, has rung up," said Mr. Quelch. "He tells me that he is speaking from Aldershot, and desires to tell you something about the Christmas holidays. You may take the call."

"Thank you, sir."

Harry Wharton crossed over to the telephone by the window. The door closed on Prout, and Mr. Quelch picked up his pen, leaving the junior to take the call.

Wharton put the receiver to his ear, and spoke into the transmitter.

"Harry speaking, uncle."

"Is that you, Harry?" came back a voice over the wires. It was a rather deep, incisive voice, with a slight huskiness in it, sounding as if the speaker had a spot of the common cold.

"Yes, uncle! That is Colonel Wharton speaking?" asked Harry. He knew the voice: but it did not seem to sound quite so familiar as usual.

"Speaking from Aldershot, Harry," came back the husky voice.

"I hope you haven't a cold, uncle."

"Eh? What? No—a trifle of huskiness that is all—these cold December winds! You are breaking up at your school the day after to-morrow, I understand?"

"Yes, uncle."

"I think you told me you were bringing some friends home with you."

"Yes: four fellows. You know them all, uncle—Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, Bob Cherry, and Inky—I mean Hurree Jamset Ram Singh."

"I shall be glad to see them, my boy! But what about your other friend—who was with us last Christmas—a very nice boy named Bunter."

Harry Wharton quite jumped.

It was true that Billy Bunter had spent the last Christmas at Wharton Lodge. Colonel Wharton was quite well acquainted with the Owl of the Remove. But that he regarded William George Bunter as a "very nice boy" was news to his nephew—and quite surprising news. Harry Wharton's own impression had been that the old gentleman had tolerated Bunter, making the best of him: assuredly without forming any high opinion of the fat Owl.

"Bunter?" repeated Harry.

"Yes—a very nice lad, of whom I have a high opinion. Is he not coming home with you this time?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"What? What did you say—what?"

"I—I mean—!" stammered Harry. "I—didn't know you thought much of Bunter, uncle——"

"I certainly think a great deal of him, Harry. He compares very favourably, I think, with your other friends."

"Oh!" gasped Harry.

"I should certainly like to see him again, Harry. Probably he may have other engagements—I imagine him to be a very popular lad, from his attractive appearance and agreeable manners——"

"Oh, crikey!"

"What? What?"

"—I—I mean——"

"If he has other engagements, naturally, he cannot come to Wharton Lodge. But have you asked him?"

"Nunno! I—I mean, I did ask him, as a matter of fact, uncle, but he had fixed up to go with another chap—Vernon-Smith, of my form——"

"I am glad you asked him, Harry. I should like to see you cultivate the friendship of that very nice-mannered and manly boy."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"If he cannot come, of course, it cannot be helped, though I should certainly like to see him again. Is it definite that he is going with another school-fellow?"

"Oh! No! As a matter of fact, it has fallen through after all——"

"Then Bunter is not otherwise engaged, and could come with you, if he cared to do so?"

"Oh! Yes."

"Well, I will not dictate to you, my boy, as to what friends you gather round you at Christmas! I will only say that if Bunter consented to come with your party from Greyfriars, I should be very pleased."

"Oh, suffering cats!" breathed Harry Wharton.

That he was astonished to hear all this from Colonel Wharton, is putting it very mildly. He was amazed! He was, in fact, astounded. Never by a word or a glance had his uncle ever displayed any liking or esteem for William George Bunter. They had met on a good many occasions: but not on a single one of those occasions had there been a sign, or the ghost of a sign, that Colonel Wharton regarded the fat Owl as anything but an object to be tolerated with as much patience as possible. Now it might really have been supposed, by the talk on the telephone, that the fat Owl was the apple of his eye!

"Well, Harry——?" came a rap over the wires.

"I—I—I——" stammered Harry, "I—I'll certainly ask him, uncle, if you'd like him to come! I never dreamed you'd like to see him——"

"Nonsense! A very fine lad—a credit to his school in every way—I shall be delighted to see him."

"Oh! All right, then——"

"You will invite him to Wharton Lodge for Christmas, Harry?"

"Certainly, if you wish it, uncle."

"I do wish it, Harry! Do you think he will come?"

"Oh! Yes! I'm sure he will, if I ask him again."

"Very good! Then I shall expect to see him at Wharton Lodge, with your party of school friends, when I return from—from Aldershot on Christmas Eve."

"He will be there all right, uncle. If—if—if you're quite sure that you want him to come—?"

"Certainly! An admirable lad——so frank, and manly, and truthful——"

"Eh?"

"An excellent friend for you, Harry, whom you might very well take as an example——"

"Oh, scissors!"

"It is settled, then Harry. Very good! Now I have only to say——  
YAROOOOOH!"

Harry Wharton fairly staggered, as that frantic yell came ringing along the telephone wires. Obviously it could not have come from Colonel James Wharton. It sounded like the yell of Billy Bunter in the throes of terror. What it meant, what it could possibly mean, was an astounding mystery. In his utter amazement, Harry Wharton dropped the receiver, and staggered. Mr. Quelch, at the same moment, dropped his pen, and stared round at him. That frantic yell, peeling from the telephone, had startled him as much as it had startled Wharton.

"Wharton—what——?" ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

"I—I—I——" Wharton was quite dazed. "I—I—I——" He picked up the receiver, and called again into the mouthpiece.

But there was no answer. The telephone had gone quite dead. Whosoever had been speaking to Harry Wharton over the wires, had evidently been cut off——quite suddenly!

## CHAPTER X

### BAD LUCK FOR BUNTER!

**M**R. PROUT stared.

Then he frowned.

He frowned portentously.

Prout had opened the door of his study to enter. To his surprise, his ears were greeted by the sound of a voice speaking. Then his eyes fell on a fat figure standing at the telephone.

That fat figure had its back to the door. But it was quite easy to recognize W. G. Bunter of the Remove by a back view.

It was no wonder that Prout frowned. A boy—not even a boy of his own Form, but a Remove boy—was using his telephone without leave. That Remove boy had had the audacity, the impertinence, to enter Prout's study in



his absence, and use the telephone—no doubt having made sure first that the Fifth-form master was safe off the scene! Prout had been off the scene: indeed, he would have remained off the scene, talking to Mr. Quelch in his study, had not Harry Wharton come there to take a call. Owing to that interruption, Prout had left Quelch: and after a few words of chat with Mr. Hacker, from which Mr. Hacker escaped as promptly as he could!—he came into his study sooner than he had intended to do—and doubtless sooner than that impertinent junior had expected him to do.

Prout was surprised and annoyed. But his surprise increased, and his annoyance ripened into wrath, as he heard what Billy Bunter was saying at the telephone.

He knew Bunter's voice—normally! But he did not know it now! The fat Owl was speaking in a voice quite other than his own. He had assumed an elderly and deeper voice, with a slight huskiness in it—a trick that came easy to the Remove ventriloquist.

Perhaps Prout had heard of Bunter's ventriloquism, and his curious trick of imitating voices. Anyhow he knew what the fat junior was up to now. Not only had he entered Prout's study without leave. Not only had he borrowed a senior master's telephone unpermitted. He was playing some deceptive trick—assuming the voice of an elderly man, obviously for some purpose of deception, as he could have no other reason for so doing.

Prout gazed at the fat back of the fat Owl, thunder in his brow.

Bunter, deep in his telephone talk, had not heard the door open. He did not look round. He carried on regardless.

Billy Bunter, in fact, was feeling quite safe. He had been very cautious about borrowing a telephone. He had made quite sure that Prout was not in his study. Often and often did Prout, after tea with the other masters in Common-Room, linger there for a chat, and his chat seldom ended so long as there was a single person left to listen-in. Bunter, nothing doubting that Prout's plump chin was going strong in Common-Room, felt quite secure.

Little did he dream, as he stood at the telephone, that the door had opened, and that a basilisk-glare was fastened on his podgy back.

Prout breathed hard, and he breathed deep! Amazingly Bunter's voice came, not in the least like Bunter's voice, but like some elderly voice Prout had heard before, though he did not remember, for the moment, when or where. And the fat junior was saying, in that assumed voice—"an excellent friend for you, Harry, whom you might very well take as an example". Really, it was amazing. Breathing very hard, Mr. Prout stepped into the study.

Still unaware, Bunter was running happily on, in that assumed elderly voice: "It is settled, then, Harry! Now I have only to say—" At that point a plump hand grasped the back of Bunter's fat neck. Startled almost out of his fat wits, the Owl of the Remove uttered a wild yell, "YAROOOOOOH!"

He dropped the receiver, and wriggled round, in the grasp of that plump

hand. His little round eyes almost popped through his big round spectacles at Mr. Prout.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter.

"Boy!" boomed Prout.

"Ow! Leggo! I—I wasn't using the telephone—I!" gasped Bunter.

"What? What? I heard you telephoning, Bunter—"

"I—I—I mean—I—I was—was speaking to my pater at home, sir—he's—he's ill, and I—I was—was anxious about him, sir—"

"Upon my word! Is your father's name Harry, and are you accustomed to address him as Harry?" thundered Prout.

"Oh, lor'! I—I mean, I—I was speaking to my—my cousin Harry—"

"And why were you speaking in a disguised voice to your cousin Harry, Bunter?" boomed Prout.

"Oh! I—I—I—I was—I mean I—I wasn't—"

"Come!" said Prout: and still with that plump grasp on Bunter's collar, he led him across the study to the door. "I shall take you to your form master, Bunter, and report to him this act of outrageous impertinence. It is for your form master to inquire what foolish prank you were playing by speaking into the telephone in an assumed voice—"

"Oh, crikey! I—I say, sir—" stuttered Bunter.

"Come!" boomed Prout.

"But I—I—I say, sir, I—I'd rather not go to Quelch, sir—oh, crikey—I—I—I say—I!" stuttered the dismayed fat Owl.

"Come!" And with the plump hand on Bunter's collar, Mr. Prout hooked him out of the room, and marched him down the passage to Mr. Quelch's study.

Still grasping Bunter with his right, he tapped on the door with his left, and opened it. Billy Bunter, almost collapsing with terror, was marched into his form master's study. Mr. Quelch was speaking as they marched in.

"Most extraordinary, Wharton! Most!"

"I can't understand it, sir!" said Harry, in whose face was depicted blank astonishment. "It can't have been my uncle who yelled out like that—but—but—I can't make it out, and I'm cut off now—"

"Mr. Quelch!" boomed Prout.

Quelch and Wharton looked round together. Both were astonished to see the Fifth-form master roll in, with a terrified fat Owl in his grip.

"What—?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"I have brought this boy Bunter to you, sir—I!" boomed Prout.

"I can see that, Mr. Prout! But what—"

"I have to report him, sir, for playing a most extraordinary prank in my study! A most extraordinary—I may say unparalleled—prank, sir! He was speaking at my telephone when I found him, sir—"

"Bunter! How dare you use a master's telephone without permission?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"I—I—I——"

"That is not all, sir!" went on Mr. Prout. "Bunter was speaking in a disguised voice—a voice assumed, sir, for some purpose of deception. Had I not actually seen him with my own eyes, sir, I should never have dreamed that it was a boy speaking at all—he made his voice sound like that of an elderly man with a slight cold, sir—a most extraordinary trick——"

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Quelch.

"Upon whom he was playing this unparalleled prank, I cannot say, sir! That is for you to inquire into. All I can say is that he was addressing some person as Harry——!"

"Harry!" ejaculated Harry Wharton, involuntarily.

"Harry!" repeated Mr. Prout. "Speaking in an assumed elderly voice, with a husky tone, he was telling this person he called Harry, Mr. Quelch, to take example by some other boy, or words to that effect——"

"Oh!" gasped Harry Wharton.

He knew now!

That telephone-call had not come from such a distance as Aldershot. It had come from no greater distance than Prout's study. It was the Remove ventriloquist who had spoken in an elderly voice remarkably like Colonel Wharton's, with a spot of huskiness artfully added to make assurance doubly sure, as it were. That was why "Colonel Wharton" had so unexpectedly requested his nephew to add Billy Bunter to the Christmas party for Wharton Lodge! That was why the talk had ended in that astonishing yell—when Prout caught the fat spoofer at the telephone!

"Oh!" repeated Harry. "Bunter, you fat villain——!" He remembered that he was in his form-master's study, and broke off.

"Bunter!" Mr. Quelch's voice was both loud and deep. "What does this mean, Bunter? What insensate trick were you playing?"

"I—I—I wasn't——" stuttered Bunter. "I—I mean, I—I didn't—I—I—oh, lor'!"

"Thank you for bringing this matter to my notice, Mr. Prout. You may be sure that I shall deal with this boy as he deserves."

"Quite so, sir," boomed Prout. "Such a trick—such an extraordinary and indeed unparalleled trick, sir——" Prout faded out of the study.

"Now, Bunter——!"

"It—it wasn't me, sir!" groaned Bunter. "I—I mean, I never didn't—that is, I wasn't wouldn't—oh, crikey!"

"Tell me at once, Bunter, to whom you were telephoning!" thundered Mr. Quelch.

"Oh! Nobody, sir!"

"What?"

"I—I mean, it was my father Harry—I mean my cousin Wharton—I—I—I mean—oh, crikey! I—I mean, I—I—I wasn't telephoning to Wharton, sir! Nothing of the kind."

"To Wharton?" repeated Mr. Quelch, quite blankly.

"Yes, sir! I mean, no, sir! I—I—I never asked him where his uncle was, so that I could make out I was speaking from there, sir—never thought of anything of the kind. I—I couldn't imitate Colonel Wharton's voice if—if I tried, sir! I—I was just—just phoning to my father Harry—I mean to my cousin Colonel—I mean—"

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Quelch. He, too, grasped now what Wharton had already grasped. "Bunter! Is it possible—is it imaginable—that you have ventured to play such a trick as this—!"

"Oh, no, sir! No! I—I—"

"Wharton! I certainly supposed that it was your uncle speaking on the telephone when I sent for you to take the call. It now appears that it was this utterly obtuse boy, Bunter, playing an insensate trick. Colonel Wharton has not telephoned at all—it was Bunter—"

"I see that now, sir," said Harry.

"I—I—I say, I—I—I never——" moaned Bunter.

"You may leave my study, Wharton! Bunter, you will remain. I shall deal with you most severely for this insensate trickery."

Harry Wharton, at the moment, was feeling disposed to bestow upon William George Bunter the kicking of his fat life. Not for a moment had he suspected that he was being "spoofed" on the telephone. He had been taken in all along the line, and but for Prout's discovery in his study, the artful fat Owl would undoubtedly have "got away" with that amazing trick: and would have been once more "fixed up" for the holidays! Only the fact that he was in Quelch's study saved Billy Bunter, at that moment, from an avenging boot. But as he left the study, Mr. Quelch picked up the cane from his table: and the expression on his face quite eliminated Wharton's desire to kick the fat Owl. Obviously, Bunter was going to get enough, and would not need any more, when Henry Samuel Quelch had done with him!

The swishing of a cane, and loud sounds of woe, followed Harry Wharton, as he went down the passage. Quelch, evidently, was running no risk of spoiling Bunter by sparing the rod!

Even the Bounder did not feel like kicking Bunter, when the hapless fat Owl was seen again. It was a dismal, doleful, dolorous, disconsolate Bunter: who wriggled and mumbled, and mumbled and wriggled, and like Rachel of old, mourned and could not be comforted.



## CHAPTER XI

## BUNTER ON HIS OWN!

"I SAY, Gosling—"

"Huh!" grunted, Gosling.

"I say—"

"Wot I says is this 'ere, Master Bunter—you cut orf!" said Gosling.

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter rolled away.

It was a fine, clear, frosty December day. There was a glimmer of wintry sunshine. A light powdering of snow, on the old red roofs, gleamed in that glimmer. It was really quite a cheerful scene. But the fat face of the Owl of the Remove did not match it. That fat face was deeply pessimistic.

Greyfriars School had broken up for Christmas.

Passages no longer echoed to the tramp of feet. No voice was heard in the deserted studies. The form rooms were closed—not that Billy Bunter had any predilection for form rooms! Lessons were at an end—which was so much to the good! But——!

The rest, as Shakespeare has remarked, was silence! Everybody, or nearly everybody, was gone. Billy Bunter remained. Quelch was not yet gone—though he was going. Other masters had departed. Even the Head was going. Billy Bunter was going to have Greyfriars almost to himself! Even Fisher T. Fish, who was sometimes left over, as it were, in holiday time, was gone. Not a single Greyfriars man, excepting William George Bunter, remained on the solitary spot that had lately been so thickly populated.

The day after breaking up, Bunter had turned out in an empty school. He had breakfasted with Mrs. Kebble, the house-dame. Fortunately, it was a good breakfast, which was a comfort so far as it went. But the solitary spaces of Greyfriars, afterwards, weighed on the hapless Owl. Utterly and totally did he fail to see the charms which sages have seen in the face of Solitude. Bunter was rather a gregarious animal. His own company, fascinating as it doubtless was, palled on him. He had even rolled down to the porter's lodge to speak to Gosling: a last resource for the sake of speaking to somebody. But he did not find Gosling appreciative. Gosling had simply no use for him.

"Oh, crikey!" said Bunter, as he rolled away into a deserted quad.

He would have been glad of the company of even Sammy Bunter of the Second Form. But Sammy Bunter was gone with the rest. Little as he liked walking, he would have walked over to Cliff House School for a word or two with Sister Bessie. But Cliff House School was closed for the holidays: Sister

Bessie also was gone. Sammy and Bessie were the guests of uncles and aunts who, for some mysterious reason quite unknown to Bunter, did not yearn for the society of Brother Billy. Even Bunter Court—otherwise Bunter Villa—was unavailable. The old folks at home were no longer at home.

Mr. Bunter had kindly made the arrangements for William to remain at the school over the holidays—if he did not depart with some of his many friends! Bunter was wont to expand, at home, on the subject of his many friends: and no doubt Mr. Bunter failed to see why some of them should not accommodate him at Christmas for the vacation. And indeed it was the first time that Billy Bunter had been stranded like this. The skill with which he landed himself on other fellows for the “hols” was really phenomenal. But this time—!

This time his luck had let him down!

It was that beast Smithy's fault, of course. If he had not pulled the fat Owl's leg about that holiday trip, Bunter would have been safely booked for Wharton Lodge. But even Bunter did not quite expect Harry Wharton to renew that invitation, after the way in which he had turned it down!

Certainly, such a trifling formality as an invitation did not weigh very much with Bunter. He could have managed without that! He was quite prepared to walk into Wharton Lodge as a happy surprise for the inhabitants of that abode—had it been practicable. But all the Famous Five had warned him that they would kick him all over Surrey if they saw him during the hols. Bunter had often been kicked: but he had never grown to like it. He did not want to be kicked all over Surrey!

“Beasts!” murmured Bunter, as he rolled disconsolately in the deserted quad.

He had done his best—that extraordinary scheme on the telephone had very nearly landed him at Wharton Lodge after all. Harry Wharton had taken it like milk, as it were: and if it had come off, and it had transpired afterwards that old Colonel Wharton never had telephoned from Aldershot, still Bunter would have been somewhere for the hols, even at the risk of a kicking for his trickery. But it had not come off! It very nearly had—but not quite! It had been the last hope—and it had failed!

But was it the last?

Billy Bunter was thinking, as he rolled in the quad. Thinking was not really his long suit: his fat brain usually moved in slow motion. But the dismal prospect of “hols” in a deserted school spurred on his intellect, such as it was. If there was any way out of this, Bunter was going to discover it. He concentrated on it.

A sharp voice interrupted his reflections.

“Bunter!”

He blinked round at Mr. Quelch. Quelch was standing in the doorway of the House, in hat and coat, with a bag in his hand. Apparently he was about to depart. Even in the dismal solitude of a deserted school, Billy Bunter could not

regret that Quelch was departing. It was something, at least, to lose sight of that severe face and gimlet-eye!

But Quelch's face, at the moment, was less severe than usual. No doubt Christmastide had its ameliorating effect. He gave Bunter quite a kindly nod.

"Yes, sir," mumbled Bunter. His blink at his form-master was as inimical as he could venture to make it.

"As you are staying at the school over the holidays, Bunter, you will have a good deal of time on your hands," said Mr. Quelch.

"Oh! Yes, sir!" mumbled Bunter.

"It will be an opportunity for you, Bunter, to give some little extra attention to studies which, during the term, you have often neglected."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

That undoubtedly, was a resource, for a fellow who had time to kill. But it was not a resource of which Bunter had thought. His one consolation, in the present dire circumstances, was that lessons were at an end. If Mr. Quelch fancied that he would find comfort and consolation in giving a little extra attention to neglected studies, he was quite in error. Bunter was quite prepared to leave those studies in their present neglected state!

"I have set you a holiday task, Bunter," went on Mr. Quelch, benevolently. "You will find the paper on my study table."

"Oh!" repeated Bunter. He knew what he was going to do with that paper, as soon as Quelch was gone!

"You have been extremely backward, Bunter, in Latin grammar. You are especially weak in deponent verbs," said Mr. Quelch. "I have set you an exercise in deponent verbs, Bunter, which I trust will be of some benefit to you."

Billy Bunter did not answer. Really, he could not trust himself to speak. If there was a section of the Latin grammar which Bunter loathed more than all the rest, it was those irritating verbs which are passive in form but active in meaning. Verbs in the active voice were rotten. Verbs in the passive voice were putrid. But verbs which combined the horrors of both voices were the limit! Bunter's feelings were too deep for words.

A taxi came grinding up the drive from the gates. Evidently it was the taxi that was to convey Mr. Quelch to the station. Bunter was going to see the last of him now, at any rate.

"Good-bye, Bunter!" said Mr. Quelch, quite benevolently.

"Oh! Good-bye, sir!" gasped Bunter.

"You will not forget your holiday task, Bunter."

"Oh! Yes, sir! I—I mean, no, sir!"

The taxi rolled away with Mr. Quelch. Billy Bunter stood on the House steps and watched it till it was gone.

"Beast!" he breathed.

When the taxi had turned out of the gates and disappeared, Billy Bunter

rolled away to his form-master's study. He was quite anxious to get hold of that holiday task—though not to penetrate deeply into the mysteries of deponent verbs.

He rolled into Mr. Quelch's deserted study.

The remains of a fire smouldered in the grate. Bunter clutched up a paper from the table, jammed it into the fire, and stirred it well home with the poker! That exercise in deponent verbs vanished in smoke!

That was some comfort, at least.

Quelch being gone, Billy Bunter deposited himself in Quelch's armchair. He blinked inimically at Horace and Virgil, in marble, on Quelch's bookcase. He remembered how he had had to help in unpacking them from the long box in Gosling's wood-shed. Quite willingly he would have knocked their marble heads together, knocking their Roman noses off! Still, it was really rather lucky for Bunter that Horace and Virgil had arrived at Greyfriars when they did: for that long box had certainly served him well, on the occasion when the exasperated Bounder was raging on his track.

"Beasts!" said Bunter, addressessing the marble busts on the bookcase. Horace and Virgil did not seem to mind. They stared at him with stony eyes, quite indifferent.

Billy Bunter sprawled in Quelch's armchair, thinking. How was he going to get out of this? Suddenly he gave a start. Perhaps it was because Horace and Virgil were before his eyes, reminding him of hiding in the long box, that a startling idea came into his fat mind.

"Oh, crikey!" ejaculated Bunter.

He sat up in the armchair, with quite an excited fat face. His eyes gleamed through his big spectacles.

"Oh, scissors!" he gasped. "Why not?"

He grinned.

It was a startling idea that had flashed into his mind. Probably it never would have flashed into any other. Billy Bunter's fat mind moved in mysterious ways its wonders to perform!

"By gum!" breathed Bunter. "It would work! I should be there, anyhow—I could manage the rest, somehow! By gum, I'll jolly well try it on!"

Anyone who had overheard that cryptic utterance, might have been puzzled to guess its meaning. But evidently some great idea was working in the podgy brain of the Owl of the Remove.

He grinned at Horace and Virgil on the bookcase. It was the marble busts of those long-dead Roman poets that had put that stupendous idea into his fat head! They had arrived at Greyfriars in that long box with its slatted lid—the box that still lay in Gosling's wood-shed: the box in which Bunter had hidden from the wrathful Bounder. Bunter had thought of a use for that long box, in which Horace and Virgil had travelled!

"He, he, he!" chuckled Bunter.



He heaved his weight out of the armchair. He rolled across to the telephone. That instrument was at his disposal: there were no "beaks" about to butt in and interrupt him this time. With a grinning fat face, Billy Bunter rang up Gosling's lodge: and when he spoke into the transmitter, his voice was nothing like that of Bunter of the Remove: it was an exact reproduction of the bark of his form-master, Henry Samuel Quelch!

## CHAPTER XII

## GOSLING GETS INSTRUCTIONS!

GOSLING grunted.  
"Drat it!" he remarked, to space.

Gosling had settled down in comfort, in his cosy room in his lodge. An armchair before a crackling fire on a frosty day: a pipe in his ancient mouth, a glass at his elbow with something warm, and a newspaper with a murder in it—that was Gosling's ideal of comfort. The deserted state of the school did not worry Gosling as it worried Billy Bunter. He rejoiced in it. His fixed opinion was that all boys ought to be "drowned": and the next best thing was to have them at a good distance. Gosling was going to enjoy the holidays in his own crusty way: and his enjoyment was just beginning, when the buzz of the telephone bell in his lodge jerked him out of his comfort.

Buzzzz.

"Drat it!" repeated Gosling. "DRAT it!" he added, with increasing emphasis. "Wot is it now, I wonder? DRAT it, anyway."

He laid down the newspaper and the pipe, and shuffled to the telephone. His horny hand grabbed off the receiver, and he fairly growled into the mouth-piece:

"Allo!"

"Gosling!" came a sharp bark over the wires. "Is that you, Gosling? Mr. Quelch speaking from Courtfield Station."

"Oh, my eye!" said Gosling.

He was surprised and annoyed. Quelch had gone off in his taxi, and must be at the station by this time: really and truly, Gosling felt that he was entitled to consider that he had done with Mr. Quelch till next term. Apparently, however, he hadn't!

"What? What did you say, Gosling?"

"Oh! Nothing, sir! What's wanted, Mr. Quelch, sir? 'Ave you lorst your train, sir?" Why Mr. Quelch had rung him up from the railway station was quite a mystery to Gosling. He could only surmise that the Remove master had forgotten or overlooked something before his departure, and wanted him to see to it. "Anything I got to do, sir?"

"Yes, Gosling! I quite forgot to mention it to you before I left. I desire a box to be despatched to Colonel Wharton, at Wharton Lodge, Surrey."

"Orl right, sir! I'll ring up the carrier, and get Cripps round."

"It is the box—the long box—in which the Roman busts were delivered a few days ago, Gosling. You will find it prepared for transit."

"That there box in my wood-shed, sir—"

"Precisely."

"I didn't know you'd packed it, sir—"

"That is quite immaterial, Gosling."

"I mean, I'd 'ave 'elped pack it, sir, if you'd spoke to a man—"

"That was unnecessary, Gosling. I did not need assistance. You will find the box packed and locked: all that is needed is for you to label it, carefully, for its destination."

"Werry good, sir."

"You must be very careful with the box, Gosling. Warn the carrier to be very careful. The contents are very valuable."

"Yessir."

"The box must not be jolted, or bumped, or handled roughly in any way. Impress that upon Mr. Cripps. Any damage might be irreparable. It must travel by road, Gosling, not by railway. It is essential for it to arrive at Wharton Lodge this afternoon, or the evening at the latest."

"My eye! I—I mean, sir, it'll be a bill, travelling by road—'adn't I better let it go by rail, sir?"

"Expense is no object, Gosling—no object at all. There are too many delays on the railway. The box must travel by road, and be delivered at Wharton Lodge in the shortest possible space of time. Impress this upon Mr. Cripps. No objection will be made to the cost of transit."

"It will come 'igh, sir."

"Never mind that, Gosling! I repeat that expense is no object. Whatever it may cost, such are my instructions."

"Oh! werry good, sir," grunted Gosling. He could not help being surprised. Mr. Quelch, though by no means parsimonious, was careful with money. Extravagance like this was quite out of his line. Cripps' bill for the carriage of that box by road was certain to be extensive. Quelch did not seem to care. Surprised as he was, Gosling could only carry out the instructions he was receiving.

"You will label the box carefully, addressed to Colonel Wharton, at Wharton Lodge, Surrey. You understand, Gosling?"

"Yessir."

"It must be despatched by the shortest route, in a fast vehicle," continued the voice on the telephone. "That is very important! You may tell Cripps that he must see to this, regardless of expense."

"Cert'nly, sir!" said Gosling, more and more surprised. "It'll come to a pretty penny, at that rate, sir."

"Oh, quite, quite! Never mind that! So long as the box is delivered safely, without damage, and quickly, that is all that really matters. Speed and safety are the essentials, Gosling. If the slightest damage should be done to the—the contents of the box, or if there should be delay in delivery, I shall take a very serious view of the matter. Please tell Cripps so."

"I'll tell 'im, sir."

"Immediately I ring off, Gosling, ring up Cripps to make the necessary arrangements. You will have ample time to label the box before he arrives at the school to take it away."

"Lots, sir! I'll see to it, sir. I'll get the label ready, sir, and stick it on when Cripps comes for the box." Gosling did not feel like taking an unnecessary walk round to the wood-shed.

"Very good, Gosling! That will do very well. Now, you understand clearly—the box is to travel by road, in a fast vehicle, and be delivered at Wharton Lodge at the earliest possible moment, without consideration of expense. Is that clear, Gosling?"

"Yessir! Wot about paying Cripps, sir? It will come to pounds."

"Oh! Ah! Yes! One moment! Carriage will be paid at the other end, Gosling. Cripps will present his bill and receive payment at Wharton Lodge."

"Werry good, sir! I'll tell 'im! Is that all, Mr. Quelch, sir?"

"That is all, Gosling! Remember to telephone Cripps the moment I ring off—no time whatever must be lost."

"Yessir."

"Good-bye, Gosling!"

"Good-bye, sir!"

Gosling stood with the receiver in his hand, staring at the telephone. He frowned at that useful instrument. He had to ring up Cripps, at Friardale, and make the necessary arrangements for the transit of that troublesome box, before he would get back to his armchair, his fireside, his glass of something warm, and his newspaper with a very attractive murder in it. It was very annoying. Really, Gosling considered Quelch might have seen to all this himself, before he started for the station.

Neither was it like Quelch, as a rule, to overlook things in this careless way. No doubt the hurry and bustle of getting off for Christmas had caused it to slip his mind. But it was very annoying to Gosling—interrupting the happy, peaceful calm which had followed the departure of those irritating creatures, the boys, from Greyfriars School.

Still, it could not be helped: Gosling had to carry out his instructions. He proceeded to ring up Mr. Cripps at Friardale, and explain to the carrier what was required of him. Which probably surprised Mr. Cripps a little: though the Friardale carrier certainly had no objection to undertaking transport regardless of expense.

Having arranged matters with Mr. Cripps, Gosling sat down to write out a

label for the box. Then, at long last, he was able to get back to his armchair, and his pipe, and his glass of something warm, and the interesting murder in his newspaper, while he waited for Mr. Cripps to arrive. He was still feeling rather annoyed with Mr. Quelch: and assuredly did not dream that that gentleman was speeding away in a train in blissful ignorance of the whole transaction: and that it was a fat and fatuous ventriloquist who had talked on the telephone in his master's voice!

## CHAPTER XIII

## BUNTER IN THE BOX!

"**H**E, he he!"  
Billy Bunter chuckled.

He felt that he had reason to chuckle.

It had worked like a charm! The fat Owl chuckled, and grinned from one fat ear to the other, as he hung up the receiver in Mr. Quelch's study.

Gosling had taken it like milk! Evidently, there had not been the remotest glimmering of suspicion in his mind. He knew Quelch's voice: and the fat ventriloquist had reproduced it to the last tone. Gosling, nothing doubting that he had received those instructions from the Remove master, was going to carry out Billy Bunter's remarkable plans: never even dreaming that a fat Owl had anything whatever to do with the matter.

"He, he, he!"

But Bunter did not waste time.

He rolled out of Mr. Quelch's study, and for once, like Iser in the poem, he rolled rapidly. He had his own arrangements to make: and it was essential to get through with them, before Gosling went round to his wood-shed. Very artfully—in Quelch's voice!—he had insisted that Gosling should ring up the carrier before he labelled the box. That would take a little time—possibly more than a little, for William Gosling was not the man to hurry. But the fat Owl could not afford to take risks: he had to be quite, quite sure of being ready for Gosling.

Seldom did Billy Bunter put on speed. But he put it on now. In a very few minutes after hanging up the receiver in Quelch's study, the fat junior rolled out of the House in overcoat and cap. Gladly he would have packed sandwiches in the overcoat pockets: Mrs. Kebble would have supplied them, if asked: but there was no time for that. Minutes might be precious. For once, if for once only in his fat life, Billy Bunter allowed even the consideration of food to take second place. All was lost, if he was not ready before Gosling came round to the wood-shed.

His little fat legs whisked like machinery when he hurried out of the House.



In a remarkably short space of time, considering the weight he had to carry, he arrived at the wood-shed.

He rolled into that little building, panting for breath, and shut the door.

The long box lay where he had seen it last. Gosling had tidied up, shoving the straw and sacking back into the box, and closing the lid. Quelch, probably had not given that box a further thought: Gosling, probably, had expected it to be left there as one of his perquisites. Anyhow, there it was, with the key still sticking in the lock.

Billy Bunter rolled breathlessly across to it.

He lifted the slatted lid.

Swiftly—even Bunter could be swift, in such pressing circumstances—he dragged out the sacking. Under it was a mass of crumpled straw.



*The fat Owl rolled into the box.*

He jerked out the key, and jammed it in the inside of the lock on the box. That box had been locked on the outside when it travelled to Greyfriars containing Virgil and Horace. It was going to be locked on the inside now, when it went on its travels again, with very different contents!

The fat Owl rolled into the long box.

There was ample space for even his rotund form. His fat figure sank into the thick straw. On a previous occasion, when the vengeful Bounder was hunting him, that box had accommodated Bunter for a matter of minutes. It was going to accommodate him now for a considerably longer period!

Such was the amazing scheme that had been hatched in Bunter's fat brain!

Bunter was not going to spend the holidays at the school. Bunter knew—or at least he had no doubt that he knew—a trick worth two of that! He was going to Wharton Lodge for Christmas after all!

True, he could not present himself at that abode openly, under penalty of being kicked all over Surrey! He was going to enter surreptitiously: inside that long box—rather like the Greeks in their Wooden Horse at the taking of Troy!

It was bound to work, Bunter considered.

He knew that Colonel Wharton was away from home, not to return till the eve of Christmas. The box, therefore, would not be opened on arrival: it would be placed somewhere till the Colonel's return. Long before that, the fat Owl would be outside it!—but inside Wharton Lodge!

Once within those walls, Bunter had to trust to luck for the rest. It was not the first time that the fat Owl had taken long chances.

He might be able to keep out of sight till it was judicious to show up. That would not be difficult, since no one would have the slightest suspicion that he was in the house at all. When he was discovered, the genial influence of Christmas might come to the rescue, and save him from being kicked out. But even if he were kicked out, he would be no worse off than before. In the meantime, he hoped for the best. Anyhow he was not sticking in a deserted school over the holidays if he could help it. He was going to Wharton Lodge: and taking the chance how it might turn out.

Nobody but Billy Bunter, probably, would ever have thought, or dreamed, of such a scheme. But to Bunter's fat mind it looked like a winner. Anyhow, that was what he had planned: and what he was going to do.

Squatted in the straw in the long box, he drew the sacking over him. He was in haste, lest Gosling should materialize too soon: but he had more time at his disposal than on the previous occasion. He covered himself carefully with the sacking: all but his fat face.

Having disposed himself as comfortably as possible, he drew the slatted lid shut, and turned the key in the lock on the inside. There was no shortage of air, in the box: an ample supply came through the interstices between the slats of the lid. Bunter grinned up through those slats. Very carefully, he drew the sacking over his fat face, and it disappeared from view. Looked at from out-

side, through the slats, only sacking was to be seen: and Bunter had only to keep silent.

He grinned under the sacking.

He listened intently while he grinned. Gosling might come along at any minute. There was nothing to excite his suspicions if he came now. So far as Gosling knew, Mr. Quelch had packed something in that box, for transit to Wharton Lodge. What it was, he did not know, and doubtless did not care. Certainly it was never likely to occur to him that what was contained in that box had packed itself, and that it was the fattest member of Mr. Quelch's form!

Bunter waited.

He had some time to wait. He need not, after all, have been in such a hurry: but he had to be on the safe side. Minute followed minute: and it seemed to Bunter quite a long time before he heard, at last, footsteps and voices.

"'Ere you are, Cripps." It was Gosling's crusty voice. The wood-shed door opened, and the old Greyfriars porter came in, followed by the carrier.

"Same box that I brought 'ere?" asked Cripps.

"That's it!"

"Well, I 'ope it ain't so 'eavy as last time."

"I'll lend you a 'and with it, if it is. Wait a minute while I stick on this 'ere label."

Billy Bunter, hidden from sight, could see nothing. But he could hear: and he stilled his breathing as he heard Gosling stooping over the box, to attach the label to the lid.

"Now get 'old of it," said Gosling.

Billy Bunter felt the box move. It was lifted a few inches, with Gosling at one end and Cripps at the other. Then it bumped on the floor again, and the fat Owl barely repressed a startled squeak. Apparently Gosling and Cripps found it heavy!

"My word!" gasped Mr. Cripps, "Why, that's 'eavier than it was last time, Gosling. Something 'eavier than blinking busts in it this time."

"'Eavy, and no mistake!" agreed Gosling.

"Wot's in it?" asked Cripps.

"Blessed if I know! Never even knew it was packed at all, if you come to that," answered Gosling. "Mr. Quelch rings me up from the station, to give me instructions, and that was the first I 'eard of it. Packed it 'isself, without asking a man to lend a 'and. Goes orf and forgets all about it, and rings up a man from the station! Huh!"

"Well, we got to get it to the car," said Cripps. "'Ave another go!"

The box heaved up again.

This time it remained up. It was heavy—undoubtedly it was heavy! It was very heavy indeed. It was a cold December day: but both Gosling and Cripps perspired, as they bore that box out of the wood-shed.

They bore it away quite slowly: but it was dumped down at last. Again its hidden contents barely repressed a squeak, as it was dumped.

"Eavy, and no mistake!" came a gasp from Cripps.

"I believe you!" gurgled Gosling. "'Orribly 'eavy, if you ask me!"

"Wot the dickens can be in it, to weigh all that?"

"Ask me another."

"Well, somebody will 'ave to 'elp me with it at the other end," said Cripps.

There was the sound of an engine. Billy Bunter felt himself in motion. He subdued a fat chuckle.

He had left Greyfriars. He was on his way to Wharton Lodge. How it was going to turn out, was on the knees of the gods: but the fat Owl had great faith in his own fat artfulness. Anyhow, there he was: on his way to Wharton Lodge for Christmas: the most extraordinary Christmas Box that had ever arrived anywhere at Christmastide!

#### CHAPTER XIV

### THE MAN IN THE TREE!

**B**OB CHERRY jumped.  
"Oh!" he ejaculated.

It was really no wonder that Bob jumped. A heavy object, suddenly falling on his head apparently out of the wintry sky, was enough to make any fellow jump. It was so very unexpected.

"Oh!" repeated Bob. His hand shot to his head. "Wow! What the dickens What the thump—what—wow!"

Something dropped at his feet. It was the heavy object that had fallen on his head and rolled off.

"What on earth—?" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"Great pip!" ejaculated Johnny Bull.

Five fellows were quite astonished. Bob Cherry seemed hurt, as well as astonished. He rubbed his head, where there was a pain.

Harry Wharton and Co. had been out for a ramble that fine wintry afternoon, and were returning a little late for tea to Wharton Lodge. Being a little late, and aware that Miss Amy Wharton, presiding over tea and cakes, would be awaiting them, and naturally not wishing to keep that kind old lady waiting, they were rather in a hurry. For which reason, they were taking a short cut across the park to the house. There was no track to be seen among the thick trees: but Harry Wharton knew every foot of the ground round his old home: and he led the way without a pause, Bob and Nugent and Johnny Bull and the nabob of Bhanipur following his guidance. They were passing under the massive branches of an ancient beech when it happened.



They came to an astonished halt. Bob was chiefly occupied in rubbing his head but four pairs of eyes fixed on the object that had fallen on the earth. It was a pair of field-glasses.

Harry Wharton stooped and picked them up.

He stared at them. The other fellows stared at them. How a pair of field-glasses could have fallen on a fellow's head, in the middle of a thick wood, was a mystery. Of that mystery there was only one possible explanation—somebody in the branches above their heads must have dropped them. So, after staring blankly at the field-glasses, the chums of the Greyfriars Remove stared upwards, into the branches of the tall old beech.

"Somebody's up there!" said Johnny Bull.

"And he dropped those field-glasses—!" said Frank Nugent.

"On my head!" growled Bob Cherry, "I'll jolly well punch his, whoever he is, when he comes down! Who the dickens can be sticking up in that tree?"

"Goodness knows," said Harry Wharton. "But we'll jolly soon know! Nobody has a right to trespass here."

The Famous Five forgot, for the moment, both tea, and Miss Wharton presiding over the tea-table. Somebody, evidently, was hidden in that tree, over their heads: obviously somebody who had no business there. Whoever it was, must have climbed over the park wall, and trespassed on private grounds: apparently having selected the tallest tree in the park to take a survey with his field-glasses. It was very unusual, and very surprising, and Harry Wharton had no intention of passing on without looking into it. But for the accidental dropping of the field-glasses, the schoolboys would have gone on their way, without the faintest suspicion that there was anyone in the tree.

They scanned the overhead branches. The winter winds had stripped the tall tree of most of its foliage, but the branches were thick, and the winter dusk was falling. Whoever was in the tree seemed to have packed himself close, for they could not pick him out.

"Who's up there?" called out Harry Wharton.

No answer.

"Somebody's there!" said Nugent.

"That's a cert," said Johnny Bull.

"The certfulness is terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a nod of his dusky head.

"Will you answer me?" shouted Wharton.

There was still no reply.

"Whoever he is, he's up to no good," said Johnny Bull. "We're not going on without knowing what he's up to."

"No fear," said Harry.

"If the esteemed mountain will not come to Mahomet, the worthy Mahomet must go to the mountain," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Let us go up climbfully and chuck him down."

"We jolly well will, if he won't come down," said Harry.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob Cherry. "You in the tree! Show a leg! Are you coming down, or are you waiting for us to come up and chuck you down?"

There was a stirring in the tree at last. Its mysterious inhabitant did not, apparently, desire the Greyfriars fellows to climb up and "chuck" him down. A figure emerged from a mass of thick boughs, and clambered down the tree.

It was that of a small, lithe man, who clambered as actively as a monkey. The juniors watched him as he descended, with keen eyes.

"Mind he doesn't dodge away when he drops!" said Harry. "He's got to give an account of himself."

"What-ho!" said Bob.

The little man stopped, on a branch a few feet over the juniors' heads, and looked down at them, peering in the dusk. Five pairs of eyes fastened on his face: and not one of the five juniors was favourably impressed by its aspect. It was a sharp foxy-looking face, with bright black eyes that gleamed like beads. The man seemed as watchful and alert as a badger.

But if he had hoped to jump down and run, he had to give it up. The five schoolboys stood round in a circle to receive him. He had no chance of dodging away. He paused on the branch watching them like a cat.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"You may as well drop!" he called out. "We've got you—and you're going to explain what you're up to here. Make up your mind to it."

"Coming, sir!" said the small man, quite civilly: though the glint in his beady eyes belied the civility of his tone. And he dropped lightly from the branch, and landed on the earth: the Famous Five closing round him as he landed.

"Well, what's your game here?" asked Harry. "Who are you?"

"No harm, sir! Name of Tucker, sir! Thank you for picking up my glasses. They dropped from my 'and."

"On my nut!" grunted Bob Cherry.

"Sorry, sir!" said Mr. Tucker, very civilly. "'Ope your 'ead aint 'urt, sir! They jest dropped from my 'and."

He stretched out his hand to the field-glasses, and slipped them into his pocket. His manner was quite cool and assured: though there was a restless glint in his beady eyes.

"Well, never mind my nut," said Bob. "I know you didn't drop those dashed glasses on purpose—you didn't mean to show up if you could help it. What were you hiding in that tree for?"

"And what were you watching through those glasses?" grunted Johnny Bull.

"You're not going till you explain," said Harry Wharton.

"Explain as fast as you like, young gentlemen," said the small man. "I'm

'aving a day in the country, and I jest climbed that tree, sir, to give the scenery the once-over through field-glasses, sir. No 'arm in that, is there?"

"You're trespassing here," said Harry. "Couldn't you have picked a tree without clambering over a park wall into private grounds?"

"I jest picked out the tallest tree I saw, sir, wanting to take a good look round," said Mr. Tucker, apologetically. "Sorry if I've pushed in where I ain't wanted. I'll go as soon as you like."

Harry Wharton looked at him very intently. He did not like the foxy face or the restless, cunning, watchful beady eyes. But Mr. Tucker's explanation seemed plausible: and it was difficult to guess what ill motive he could have had, for parking himself at the top of the tree.

"No 'arm done, and sorry I intruded, sir!" said the small man. "P'raps you'll point out the quickest way out of this, sir! I sort of lost my way among all these 'ere trees."

"Gammon!" said Johnny Bull.

The beady eyes shot round at Johnny. Johnny gave him a grim, uncompromising stare.

"You're up to no good here," he said. "If I were you Wharton, I wouldn't let him clear off."

"Well, he's done no harm, if you come to that," said Harry.

"Not so far!" said Johnny. "But what was he doing up on that tree with field-glasses? We can't see the house from here, on the ground: but he could see it all right from that tree-top, and count every brick, if he liked, through those field-glasses. He was watching the house."

The little man gave a start, and his beady eyes snapped. A hunted look came, for a moment, into those beady eyes.

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry. "But what—?"

"The house can be seen from here—up a tree," said Johny, "and every window examined, as if it was only a yard away, through those glasses. That was his game, and it's as clear as daylight."

"Oh!" repeated Harry.

"Oh, come orf it, sir!" protested Mr. Tucker. "Wot would I want to be watchin' the 'ouse for, and counting the winders?"

"That's an easy one," answered Johnny Bull, stolidly. "Looking for a way in, I fancy, later on."

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Is that it?"

"By gum! It looks like it, now Johnny mentions it!" said Frank Nugent. "That would explain——"

"The lookfulness is terrific."

"Oh, draw it mild," said Mr. Tucker. "I tell you——"

"Look here, Wharton," said Johnny Bull, "the best thing we can do is to walk this merchant to Wimford Police-station, and let them inquire into his business. He can tell them all about climbing trees in a private park to look at

the scenery—and perhaps they may believe him! I don't: and I jolly well think——Look out!”

“Collar him!”

Evidently Mr. Tucker did not want to be walked to Wimford Police-station, for inquiry into his business. He made a sudden bound like a wild cat, taking the juniors by surprise.

Hands reached out on all sides to grasp him, as he bounded: and he barely eluded them. But he was too swift for those grasping hands. In the twinkling of an eye, he was running. And he ran like a hare.

“After him!” roared Bob.

That sudden flight could hardly leave any doubt that the man was a suspicious character! And all the five schoolboys rushed after him, in hot pursuit. But in a matter of seconds Mr. Tucker—if Tucker was his name—vanished among the trees.

They had one more glimpse of him—on the top of the park wall. But it was only an instant's glimpse! Then he dropped on the further side, and vanished.

“Oh, crumbs!” Bob Cherry came to a breathless halt. “Gone!”

“By gum!” he could run!” panted Harry Wharton. “Not much doubt now that Johnny had it right. It looks like it, at least.”

“Not the sort of guest you want dropping in one night over the hols,” grinned Nugent.

“Hardly,” said Harry laughing. “Come on, you fellows—he's given us the slip, and we're jolly late for tea.”

The man with the beady eyes, whoever and whatever he was, had vanished. And the Famous Five remembered Miss Amy Wharton and tea: and resumed their way at a trot. They arrived rather breathlessly at Wharton Lodge: but they did not find Miss Wharton, as they expected, awaiting them at a belated tea-table. They found her in the hall, with Wells, the butler, and John and James, the footmen: all four gazing at a long box, with a slatted lid, addressed to Colonel Wharton, which had apparently just been delivered.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE BOX FROM GREYFRIARS!

“HARRY, my dear.” Miss Wharton looked round, as her nephew came in with his friends. There was quite a perplexed expression on her face. The arrival of the long box seemed to have puzzled her.

“Yes, Aunt Amy,” answered Harry.

“It is very odd!” said Miss Wharton. “Did you know anything about it, Harry?”



"About what, auntie?"

"This box!" said Miss Wharton, pointing to it.

Harry Wharton looked at the box, and looked at his aunt. His friends looked at the box curiously. None of them had ever seen it before, and certainly they knew nothing about it. Billy Bunter had seen it arrive at Greyfriars School a few days since; and Smithy might have noticed it in Gosling's woodshed when he looked there for the fleeing fat Owl: but the Co. had seen nothing of it. It did not occur to them that it had come from the school at all.

"No aunt," said Harry, puzzled. "It's addressed to Uncle James." He glanced at the label. "It will have to wait till he comes home on Christmas Eve."

"But it is very odd!" said Miss Wharton. "Your uncle never mentioned to



.... the famous Five closed round him.

me that he was expecting anything of the kind, when he left last week. He did not mention it to you in his letters?"

"No, aunt!"

"Did not Mr. Quelch?" asked Miss Wharton.

"Mr. Quelch?" repeated Harry, blankly. "No! How could Mr. Quelch know anything about a box coming here for uncle?"

"It was sent here by Mr. Quelch," explained his aunt. "No doubt you saw Mr. Quelch yesterday, when the school broke up—"

"Of course," said Harry. "But—"

"But he did not mention that he was sending this box to your uncle?"

"Not a word!" said Harry, in astonishment. "Blessed if I make it out! What the dickens can Quelch have sent to uncle, in a box that size? It's jolly odd that he never mentioned it."

"Very odd!" said Miss Wharton. "I cannot imagine what it contains! Very odd that my brother never mentioned it to me, and that Mr. Quelch never mentioned it to you, Harry."

"Very!" agreed Harry. "But are you sure it comes from Mr. Quelch, auntie?"

"So the carrier informed me. It was carried by road, by a carrier of Friar-dale named Cripps—"

"Old Cripps, the carrier? By road!" exclaimed Harry. "Why if it came by road, auntie, it would run into pounds—"

"It certainly did!" said Miss Wharton. "Mr. Cripps informed me that he had instructions at Greyfriars School to carry it by road, in the shortest possible time, and deliver it here, and I was quite dismayed by the amount I have had to pay for carriage."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry. "Has Quelchy sent Wharton's uncle a Christmas box, and forgotten to pay carriage on it?"

"It is most puzzling," continued Miss Wharton. "The box could have come by rail, and I see no reason for the haste to which the carrier referred, as your uncle is absent, and will not see it until he returns. Perhaps Mr. Quelch did not know that he was away from home at present. But it is very singular."

"Can't make it out!" confessed Wharton. "But if old Cripps says it comes from Quelch, I suppose he knows. May be something breakable in it, if it had to come specially by road."

"Well, I suppose we shall know, when my brother returns home," said Miss Wharton. "But it is very, very odd, that no mention has been made of it. It must wait for my brother's return. Wells!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Wells.

"You had better place the box in the Colonel's study, to await his return."

"Very good, ma'am."

Wells, the portly butler of Wharton Lodge, proceeded to direct John and James to bear the mysterious box to the Colonel's study. John and James

picked it up by either end: fairly bending under the weight. Gosling and Cripps had not found that box easy to negotiate. Neither did John and James.

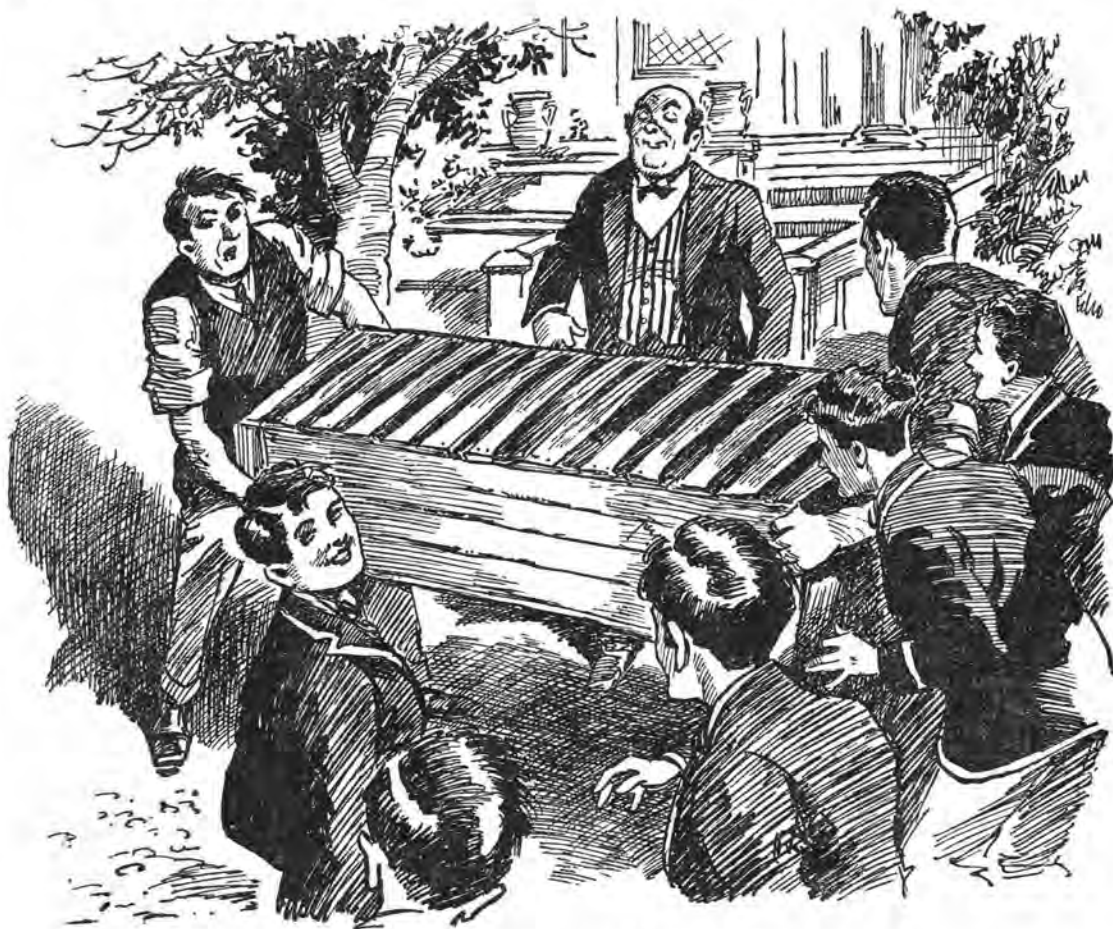
"Something jolly heavy in it!" remarked Bob. "What on earth can Quelchy have sent your uncle in that big box, Harry?"

"Goodness knows!" said Harry.

"Might be a statue, or something, from the size of the box, and the weight," remarked Nugent. "I suppose Quelchy isn't sending your uncle a life-size statue for a Christmas present?"

"Hardly!" said Harry, laughing.

"Take care, John!" said Wells, as the heavy box bumped against a chair. "Take care, James! There may be something breakable in the box! Take the greatest care not to drop it. The contents might be damaged."



*John and James staggered with the box.*

Wells was quite unaware that his voice reached a pair of fat ears, hidden beneath the sacking under the slatted lid of the box. The "contents" of that box almost squeaked aloud, as it swayed in the hands of James and John. Billy Bunter, at least, had no doubt that the contents might be damaged, if John and James dropped it!

"It's very heavy, Mr. Wells," gasped John.

"P'raps you'd lend a hand, Mr. Wells," suggested James.

"You have not far to take it." The portly butler did not heed the suggestion.

"I will open the door for you."

"Dear me! It does appear to be very heavy indeed!" said Miss Wharton.

"I really cannot imagine what Mr. Quelch can have sent to your uncle, Harry, that weighs so very much. The carrier had to have assistance in getting it into the house. It is very singular."

"Careful!" admonished Wells, again, as John and James staggered with the box. It seemed almost too much for their combined efforts.

"Let's lend a hand, you chaps," said Bob Cherry. Bob was not the fellow to stand idle while others exerted themselves. "All hands on deck, and heave ahead, my hearties!"

"Go it!" agreed Harry.

And all the Co. gathered round the long box, grasping it on all sides, to lend their aid in its transit.

Many hands make light work! Heavy as it undoubtedly was, the box was fairly easily handled, when five sturdy schoolboys lent their aid. Wells had opened the door of Colonel Wharton's study: a room which adjoined the library, and had a door on the hall. Surrounded by bearers, the long box was borne through the doorway into the study.

"Something jolly solid in it!" breathed Bob Cherry. "Feels as if it weighs about half a ton!"

"Not quite that!" said Harry, with a breathless laugh. "But—my hat! It's heavy! Weighs as much as Bunter, I should think."

"The weighfulness is terrific!" agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But many hands make the cracked pitcher go longest to the well, as the English proverb remarks: and a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together, saves a stitch in time."

And with a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together, the mysterious box was carried into the Colonel's study, and dumped down there. It dumped down rather hard, and there was a sudden squeak:

"Wow!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! On somebody's foot?" asked Bob Cherry, looking round.

"Not mine," said Harry.

"Or mine," said Nugent. "Yours, Johnny?"

"No!" answered Johnny Bull, "Yours, Inky?"



The nabob shook a dusky head.

"Hurt, either of you?" asked Harry Wharton, looking at John and James.

"Thank you sir, no," answered John.

"Not at all, sir," answered James.

"Well, it sounded as if somebody had got it on his foot!" said Bob. "I heard somebody yowl. Who was it?"

There was no answer to that question. Everyone of the bearers had heard that sudden squeak as the box dumped sharply on the floor. Who had uttered it did not transpire. And the person who actually had uttered it kept as still and quiet as a mouse with the cat at hand. Billy Bunter had squeaked quite inadvertently as the box dumped: but no one was likely to guess that that squeak had come from the interior of the box from Greyfriars.

"Well, that's that!" said Bob. "Shouldn't like to have to carry that box a mile, you chaps! Come on—we're jolly late for tea."

Harry Wharton and Co. left the Colonel's study. John and James followed: and Wells closed the door from the hall. The long box from Greyfriars was left in the dusky room, to remain there till Colonel Wharton returned home. And when Harry Wharton and Co. went to bed that night, if they dreamed, not one of them dreamed that Wharton Lodge now had an additional inhabitant.

## CHAPTER XVI

### IN THE DARK!

**B**ILLY BUNTER sat up.  
Like the heathen of old, he sat in darkness.

Midnight had sounded from the grandfather clock in the hall. The strokes reached two fat and eager listening ears in the room adjoining the library of Wharton Lodge. Others might be sleeping, at midnight's witching hour: but the inhabitant of the long box from Greyfriars did not sleep. Which was very unusual: for Billy Bunter, when it came to sleeping, could as a rule beat Rip van Winkle at his own game.

But circumstances alter cases. Bunter was hungry! He was awfully hungry! He was fearfully hungry! Hunger, like Macbeth, murdered sleep!

It was hours and hours and hours since Bunter had had a meal. It seemed to him like days and days and days, if not weeks and weeks and weeks. Seldom, if ever, had the fat Owl been so hungry. As he lay in the straw, under the sacking in the long box, he realized what a ship-wrecked crew must feel like after weeks in an open boat! That was how Bunter felt—only worse! He was just ravenous.

Nevertheless, he had to be cautious.

He was safely landed inside Wharton Lodge! His amazing scheme had

worked like a charm! The artful Greeks who penetrated Troy, hidden in the interior of a wooden horse, had not been more successful than the artful fat Owl, hidden in the slatted box. So far, so good!

But it would be bootless to overcome the difficulty of entering, only to be kicked out again. Bunter had to lie low, for the present at least. Later, he might be able to show up, and somehow make his peace. He hoped so: hope springs eternal in the human breast. But evidently he had to wait for a favourable opportunity. On Christmas Day, when all was peace and goodwill, he might make the venture. Even those beasts, Bunter considered, wouldn't feel like kicking a fellow on Christmas Day. In the meantime, Bunter had to keep doggo—very strictly doggo!

But he had to eat!

That was necessary for any fellow: and especially necessary for Billy Bunter. He knew his way about Wharton Lodge—he had stayed there several times, and it was quite familiar ground. It would be easy to find his way to the larder: when everybody was asleep in bed. But he had to wait.

True, there was likely to be some spot of surprise in the morning, when it was discovered that the larder had been raided. Everyone would wonder who had been at work there.

But that mattered little—to Bunter. Miss Wharton and Wells, might think that Harry Wharton's schoolboy guests were the culprits. The Co. might suspect one another. Or John or James, or the house-maids, might come under suspicion. All that mattered nothing at all, so long as nobody suspected that a fat Owl had raided the foodstuffs. And nobody was likely to suspect that!

But Bunter had to wait! In his peculiar position, he simply had to consider "safety first". Unless, and until, some happy opportunity came for showing up and staying on as a guest, his presence in Wharton Lodge had to be kept a deep, dark secret!

Hungry as he was, yearning for foodstuffs as he had seldom yearned before in his fat life, Bunter waited for midnight. By that time he had no doubt that everyone would be in bed. If not, he had to chance it. He simply could not wait longer than that.

Never had a sound been so welcome to his fat ears as the chimes of midnight.

He unlocked the box-lid, pushed it up, and sat up, blinking round him through his big spectacles, in dense darkness.

The Colonel's study was as black as a hat. Outside, Bunter could hear the December wind whistling. There was a light fall of snow: but the blinds were drawn, and no gleam of it penetrated the room. In densest darkness, the fat Owl clambered out of the box, slipping the key into his pocket.

He had had plenty of room, and had been quite comfortable there: still, he was feeling a little cramped, and he stretched his fat limbs with satisfaction. But he did not delay. The call of food was irresistible.

He groped to the door.

Bump!

"Wow!"

Bunter was no cat to see in the dark. He bumped into a chair, and it went over. In the deep silence of midnight it sounded very loud: and almost as loud was Bunter's yelp, at a pang in a fat shin.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter. He stooped and rubbed the fat shin, listening intently, with beating heart. If that noise had been heard—

But who was likely to hear it, at midnight? The Colonel's study was on the ground floor: and everybody was upstairs in bed. Still, Bunter listened with painful intentness for a long minute.

There was no sound: and he resumed his groping. He reached the door without further mishap, opened it, and peered out into the hall.

It was not so dark there. Winter starlight glimmered in through high windows, and there was a glimmer of snow outside. In a dim twilight, the fat junior groped out into the hall, and made his way to the service door. That was the door that led to the region of the foodstuffs! It also led, as Bunter was aware, to Wells's room which was next to the pantry. But he had no doubt that Wells was fast asleep, like the rest of the household. He had only to tiptoe past Wells's door in the dark.

There were electric switches at hand, but he could not venture to turn on a light, much as he would have liked to do so. But for his haste when leaving the school, he might have provided himself with a flash-lamp—he could have found one in somebody's study. Now he had to creep in darkness. He crept on, groping at walls and doors: wishing from the bottom of his fat heart that he had thought of providing himself with at least a box of matches. But he hadn't!

Where was he?

He had made a surreptitious visit to that larder, on the occasion of a previous visit to Wharton Lodge. He had banked on finding his way without much trouble. But the darkness was baffling. He groped over a door, and felt a door handle. Was it the right one?

He just didn't know.

For a long, long moment he hesitated. He was almost sure that he was on the right track: but not quite. If he opened the wrong door, in the dark, he simply did not know what might be on the other side. He decided to open it very, very quietly, peer in, and listen. That, really, was all that he could do, in the baffling circumstances.

Very cautiously he turned the door handle. He pushed the door open, and blinked into the darkness beyond.

That door might lead into the kitchen: it might lead into a passage: it might lead even into Wells's room: in fact, it might have led almost anywhere, for all Bunter knew. The quest of food at midnight was not the simple proposition that the fat Owl had anticipated.

But it was neck or nothing now: and he groped through the doorway. There was a jarring sound as he bumped into some article of furniture.

He stopped, his fat heart thumping.

Another sound came to his fat ears! It was the sound of someone stirring in bed! It was a bedroom into which he was groping.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

The creak of the bed was followed by a startled voice:

"What's that? Who's there?"

It was the voice of Wells, the butler of Wharton Lodge! In utter dismay the fat Owl realized that he was groping into Wells's room, and that he had awakened Wells!

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

He backed out hurriedly through the doorway. Even as he closed the door after him, there was a flash of light in the dark. Wells, startled, had switched on a bedside lamp. Staring from the bed, the startled butler saw the door closing! A moment earlier he would have seen Bunter.

"Oh, jiminy!" gasped Bunter, outside.

He could hear the butler scrambling out of bed. Wells was alarmed: and he was coming after the unseen, unknown person who had opened his door at midnight. Probably he was thinking of burglars. In a matter of moments that door would be open again——!

Bunter was hungry! He was famished! He was ravenous! But in his alarm he forgot foodstuffs: forgot that he was hungry, famished, and ravenous. He remembered only that he had to escape discovery. He fled as if for his fat life! By the time Wells had that door open, Bunter had groped and stumbled and scrambled back to the service door, and rolled breathless and panting into the dim hall.

## CHAPTER XVII

### NOT A BURGLAR!

"OH, lor'!" breathed Billy Bunter.

His fat heart was beating fast.

Wells had turned out of bed. No doubt he had delayed a few moments, to don a garment or two. But he was after the midnight intruder. Lights had flashed on behind Bunter. In wild alarm, the fat Owl stumbled and groped in the dim hall, bumping into anything that came in his way. His idea was to get back to the Colonel's study and hunt cover in the long box—there to lie low till all was quiet again. In the darkness he opened a door and pushed through, hoping that it was the right door.



Right or wrong, he had no chance of retracing his steps, for the electric light flashed on in the hall as he closed that door behind him. He did not dare to latch it, lest a sound should reach Wells, and betray the way he had gone. With the door an inch open, he stood gasping for breath and listening intently with both fat ears. The room into which he had groped had tall windows, from which came a glimmer of stars. He realized that it could not be the room he had been seeking, which was black as a hat. He realized further that he was in the dining-room of Wharton Lodge where, on happier occasions, he had had stuffed turkey and mince pies and Christmas pudding. But it was too late to retreat now: Wells was in the hall, with the light on.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

He could not get back to his former refuge. He had to remain where he was. If Wells followed him in, there was the long table under which he could dodge. That was the hapless Owl's last resource—if it came to that!

Keeping the massive oak door barely an inch ajar, he peered out into the lighted hall through his big spectacles.

Wells was standing, half-dressed, at a distance, looking round him. He had a poker in his hand. He was not looking towards the dining-room: and evidently was not aware that that was the direction the midnight intruder had taken. He was looking towards the stairs, as if doubting whether the unseen intruder might not have dodged up to the upper floors. That was a relief to Bunter. Wells was welcome to investigate in any direction except that of the dining-room, so far as Bunter was concerned.

The fat Owl blinked at him apprehensively.

The butler's door had been opened at midnight: by some person he had not seen. He could hardly suppose that that person was an inhabitant of Wharton Lodge. Obviously, he must be thinking of burglars. What was he going to do? It was practically certain that he would call John and James, for a search of the house. Billy Bunter realized it, and his fat heart sank. Had he been safely back in the long box, with the lid locked over him, all would have been secure. But as it was, could a search for the imaginary burglar fail to unearth him? His game was up.

Or was it?

Spurred by peril, Billy Bunter's fat brain functioned more efficiently than was its wont. He remembered that he was a ventriloquist.

"Wells!"

The butler started, as his name was called. It was difficult for him to "place" that unexpected voice, but it certainly seemed to him to come from the dim gallery over the hall, at the head of the big staircase. And the voice was familiar to him. Unless his ears deceived him, it was the voice of Harry Wharton.

"Master Harry—!" he ejaculated. "Are you awake, sir? Are you up? Look out, sir—there is somebody in the house—"

"Don't be an ass, Wells."

"What?"

"What are you rotting about in the middle of the night for, with a silly poker in your hand, you old ass?"

Wells could hardly believe his ears.

Wells was an old retainer of the Wharton household. He had known Harry Wharton all his young life, and was accustomed to regard him with almost a fatherly eye. Harry, on his side, liked old Wells, and had always treated him with the consideration and respect due to his age and faithful service. For Master Harry to address him in this manner was unheard-of: unthinkable. Yet Wells had to believe his ears!

The butler's face reddened. He stared up at the balustrade of the old oak gallery over the hall, from which direction he had no doubt that Master Harry was speaking. Indignation glowed in his plump face. He could not see over the balustrade, from below: but he could hardly doubt that Harry Wharton was there!

"Master Harry—!" he exclaimed. "There is a burglar in the house—"

"Rot!"

"Really, Master Harry—"

"Rubbish!"

Wells breathed very hard.

"If your uncle were present, Master Harry, he would not permit you to address me in that manner!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, rats!"

Wells breathed harder still.

"I am sorry you have been awakened sir," he said, with cold dignity. "But there is someone in the house, and a search must be made. Someone opened my door at few minutes ago and awakened me—"

"It wasn't a burglar, you old donkey! It was me."

"Wha-a-t?"

"Only a lark, Wells. Just to make you jump! No need to fancy there's burglars in the house, you old ass."

"Upon my word!" gasped Wells.

He stared blankly. Not for a moment had it occurred to him that that startling episode might mean only that a schoolboy was "larking". Least of all would he have suspected that the Colonel's nephew was the fellow for such a "lark". He could hardly believe his ears. Still, he had to believe them.

"You, Master Harry!" Wells fairly stuttered.

"Yes, you silly cuckoo: and there's nothing to do a song and dance about. I'm going back to bed, and you'd better do the same."

"Master Harry——!" gasped Wells.

There was no reply. "Master Harry", apparently, was gone. Wells stood staring up, breathing hard and deep. His plump face was red, and his eyes glinted. Not a burglar, after all—only a schoolboy larking—and that school-

boy, instead of expressing regret, had addressed him in the most disrespectful manner! Wells's feelings were deep.

However, he gave up the idea of burglars. The poker was not needed after all. There was no need to call John and James, and search the house. With deep, deep feelings, Wells switched off lights, and went back by the service door to his own quarters.

A fat junior, behind the dining-room door, was glad to see him go. The darkness, as the lights went out, was more than welcome to Billy Bunter.

The artful fat Owl grinned in the dark.

Once more his weird gift of ventriloquism had served his turn. Wells was gone: and everybody else was still asleep: Harry Wharton, among the sleepers, little dreaming how he had deteriorated in Wells's esteem! Once more the unsuspected inhabitant of Wharton Lodge was safe: and at liberty to carry on in his search for provender.

But the grin faded off Billy Bunter's fat face. After what had happened, he dared not risk going by way of the service door again. The foodstuffs in that direction were barred to him. But he remembered—from a previous visit to Wharton Lodge—that there were biscuits in the side-board in the dining-room: and he was in the dining-room now.

He closed the latch of the door, softly: and in the glimmer from the tall windows, groped to the sideboard. A minute later a biscuit box was in his hands: and the grin returned to his fat face, as he found that it was crammed with biscuits. Having popped two or three into a capacious mouth—for in the circumstances there was not a second to be lost!—the fat Owl rolled to an armchair, chewing as he rolled: and sat down there, with the biscuit box on his fat knees.

Outside Wharton Lodge, the wind whistled round the chimney-pots, the trees in the park creaked and rustled: within, there was another sound: a sound of steady, industrious munching!

Munch! munch! munch! munch!

Luckily for Bunter, there were no ears to hear. For quite a long time the munching continued. There was an ample supply of biscuits in the box: few fellows could have disposed of all of them at a single sitting. But Billy Bunter was equal to it. Munch-munch-munch went steadily on, till the last biscuit had disappeared on the downward path.

Then Billy Bunter leaned luxuriously back on the soft leather of the chair, and rested after his exertions. Really, he needed rather a rest. He was no longer hungry. But he was sleepy—awfully sleepy! Billy Bunter was quite unaccustomed to hearing the chimes at midnight: and it was now long past midnight. Almost unconsciously, his little round eyes closed behind his big round spectacles. He was not thinking of going to sleep in that deep comfortable armchair. He just went to sleep without thinking of it!

Snore!

A new sound was added to those of the windy December night. It was a sound that was wont to wake the echoes in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars in term time. When Billy Bunter went to sleep, he stayed asleep. And when he slept, he snored. And he was still sleeping, and still snoring, when the dim light of the December dawn glimmered in at the windows.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A SURPRISE FOR HARRY WHARTON

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"  
Billy Bunter woke suddenly.

His eyes opened behind his spectacles, and he blinked drowsily. That cheery roar, impinging on his fat ears, was familiar to him: and for the moment, as he emerged from the mists and shadows of sleep, he fancied that he was waking up in the old dormitory at school, and that the rising-bell had gone.

"Beast!" breathed Bunter. "Waking a fellow up! Urrrggh."

He sat up.

Then he jumped. He was not in bed in the Remove dormitory: he was in a big deep armchair in the dining-room at Wharton Lodge. He remembered where he was: and the need for caution. And deep dismay was depicted in his fat face.

He was aware that he must have nodded off. But it was hard to realize that he had slept for solid hours. Evidently he had: for light was glimmering in at the windows, and there were sounds of a stirring household.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

He blinked round him in alarm.

He was still alone. That familiar roar in Bob Cherry's powerful voice had come from the other side of a closed door. Bob was in the hall: and there was—so far—solid oak between him and the surreptitious dweller in Wharton Lodge.

That was a relief. He was not discovered yet. But he had cause for dismay and alarm. It was early morning—very early—but it was morning. Some of the household, evidently, were up. Somebody would be coming into the dining-room before long if only to sweep or dust. And there was Bunter!

The fat Owl heaved his weight hurriedly out of the armchair.

On awakening in the morning, Billy Bunter's first thought, as a rule, was of breakfast. But he was not thinking of breakfast now. He was thinking of the imminent danger of discovery.

The fat Owl did not want to depart from the Lodge with a boot thudding on



his tight trousers. Very much indeed he did not. It wouldn't be safe to make his presence known till Christmas Day—if then!

On that day, could they kick a fellow out? Bunter hoped not, at any rate. But earlier than that, there was no doubt that they could: and little doubt that they would!

He crept to the door, and listened. Bob Cherry, evidently, was in the hall: his stentorian roar had sounded quite near. And Bunter heard a fruity voice from beyond the door: that of Wells.

"Good-morning, Master Cherry!"

Apparently it was the butler whom Bob had greeted with that roar.

"Top of the morning, Wells," came Bob's cheery voice. "I'm down first, but the other chaps will be down in two ticks—we're going down to the lake to look at the ice, before brekker. Topping morning, isn't it?"

"It is very cold, sir."

"All the better for the ice."

"Oh! Quite, sir."

Billy Bunter listened, intently. It seemed that the Famous Five were going out before breakfast to look at the ice on the lake in the park, with a view to skating: which was all to the good from Bunter's point of view. There were plenty of others for him to dodge, without those beasts around.

Then the door handle turned.

Billy Bunter caught his breath.

One of them—no doubt Wells—was coming into the dining-room. For a moment it seemed to the hapless fat Owl that all was lost.

But once more his fat brain, spurred by peril, worked! He backed swiftly behind the door.

It opened. But for the moment, at least, the fattest member of the Greyfriars Remove was invisible.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" Bob Cherry was understudying Stentor again. "Here you are, you slackers! Ready?"

"The slackfulness is not terrific, my esteemed and idiotic Bob!" came Hurree Jamset Ram Singh's voice. "The readifulness is preposterous."

Billy Bunter heard footsteps on the stairs, as four schoolboys came down. They joined Bob near the dining-room door: and Harry Wharton called to the butler, who had stepped into the room. The door was between Wells and the fat junior crammed against the wall within. Bunter barely breathed.

"Wells!" called Harry.

"Yes, sir!" said Wells, in a voice as cold and icy as the frozen surface of the lake in the park. Wells had not forgotten the episode of the night. Such expressions as "old ass" and "old donkey" were not easily forgotten! Wells was in a state of reserved and icy dignity.

"Good-morning, Wells!"

Wells did not return that cheery greeting.

"Did you want anything, sir?" he asked, icily.

Harry looked at him. All the Co. looked at him. They had known Wells, so far, as a quite benignant, indeed almost fatherly, butler. The change in him was quite startling. True, his manner to Bob had been as respectfully benignant as ever. But to Harry Wharton it was very much altered. The ice on the lake could not have been icier.

"Is anything the matter, Wells?" asked Harry, puzzled.

"You called to me, sir! Will you kindly give me your instructions, sir?" asked Wells, in a voice that appeared to proceed from a refrigerator.

"I want you to tell Miss Wharton that we've gone down to the lake, if we're not back when she comes down—"

"Very good, sir! Is that all?"

"No, that isn't all!" said Harry, rather sharply. "What's the matter? I can see that something's up. What is it?"

"You should know, sir," said Wells, stiffly.

Behind the door, Billy Bunter listened, suppressing his breathing. So long as this went on, he was safe. It was a respite, at least.

"I should know?" repeated Harry, blankly.

"I imagine so, sir."

"Well, I haven't the faintest idea what you're driving at, Wells," said Harry, impatiently. "Suppose you explain?"

"I should prefer not to refer to the matter, sir, at least until Colonel Wharton returns," answered Wells. "I quite understand, sir, that boys will be boys, and that schoolboys are given to what they are pleased to call larking; but there is a limit, sir, a very definite limit, to what I consider is due to myself, and my position in this household, to tolerate."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry: while Nugent, Johnny Bull, and the nabob, looked blankly surprised. Something, evidently, was very wrong with Wells. He was in an unmistakable state of dignified offence. Most surprised of all the quintette was Harry Wharton.

"You're talking in riddles, Wells," he said.

"Indeed, sir."

"Will you tell me what you are talking about?" asked Harry.

"It would be superfluous, sir, for me to tell you what you are perfectly well acquainted with already."

"Tell me all the same," said Harry. "I simply can't imagine what you're driving at, Wells."

"You have a very short memory, sir! Possibly—." Wells was sarcastic. "Possibly you have forgotten opening my door and waking me up in the middle of the night."

Harry Wharton almost bounded, in his amazement.

"I did!" he gasped.

"You did, sir: and it was not what I should have expected of you—"

"But I did nothing of the kind!" howled Wharton.

"Really, sir—"

"I slept like a top all night," exclaimed Harry. "If anybody woke you up, Wells, it was certainly not I. Sure you didn't dream it?"

"I could hardly have dreamed, in addition, that you called me an old ass, sir, and told me to get back to bed." Wells was still sarcastic. "Kindly say no more about the matter, sir. I shall consider whether to lay it before Colonel Wharton on his return home—"

"I—I—I called you an old ass, and—and—and told you to get back to bed!" Wharton fairly stuttered. "You've been dreaming, Wells. I tell you I never woke up once in the night, and was never out of bed till Bob called me this morning. You must have dreamed it all."

"Must have, Wells," said Bob Cherry, soothingly.

"The dreamfulness must have been terrific, my esteemed Wells."

"Harry wouldn't—!" said Nugent.

"Of course he wouldn't," said Johnny Bull. "You'd better get it into your head that you dreamed it all, Wells."

Wells's face did not relax. He was perfectly well aware that he had not dreamed it. And his dignity was deeply offended.

"Please say no more about the matter, sir," he said: and with that Wells walked into the dining-room: leaving Harry Wharton and Co. in the hall, staring blankly at one another.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE ARTFUL DODGER

"O H, jiminy!" breathed Billy Bunter.

He peered round the edge of the door.

Harry Wharton and Co. were gone: all of them in a state of considerable surprise. The only conclusion to which they could possibly come was that Wells had had an extraordinary dream: but they were puzzled, and not a little concerned, as they walked down to the lake in the cold and frosty morning. Billy Bunter dismissed them from mind. Wells was quite sufficient to occupy that fat mind: Wells was in the dining-room; and any minute might discover a fat Owl crammed behind the open door. It had not, naturally, occurred to Wells to look behind the door: but if he did so—!

He seemed very silent: and Bunter wondered what he was up to, and whether there might be a chance of stealing softly away when his back was turned. And at length the fat Owl ventured to peer round the door—and had a view of Wells's back, across the room.

Wells was standing by the armchair, which Bunter had occupied. On the rug before that chair lay a silver biscuit-box—empty! On the chair, and on the rug, and round about, were scattered crumbs. Wells, his back to Bunter, was gazing at the armchair, the biscuit-box, and the crumbs, in a state of great astonishment. It was really a startling discovery. Evidently, someone had been there, during the night, had devoured the biscuits, and left ample traces of the feast. Wells gazed at those traces, as if transfixed. And Billy Bunter, through his big spectacles, gazed at Wells's back!

His fat heart thumped.

If Wells did not look round for a few moments, there was a chance for a fat Owl to steal out of the room, on tiptoe, unseen. But if he did—!

Bunter realized that he had to risk it! To remain where he was, was certain discovery, before long. He simply had to take the chance.

Harry Wharton and Co. were no longer on the spot. Someone else might be in the hall: but Bunter had to risk that.

With thumping heart, the fat junior stepped out from behind the door. On tiptoe, with his eyes and his spectacles glued on Wells, he backed out of the doorway into the hall.

Wells, fortunately, did not stir, for the moment. Hardly able to believe in his good luck, the fat Owl backed into the hall, leaving Wells still staring at the armchair and the traces of its late occupant.

In the hall, Bunter cast a rapid blink round. If only the coast was clear, for a rapid retreat to the Colonel's study, and the box——!

But the coast was not clear. Across the hall, John, the younger footman, was bending down at the hall fireplace. He had brought in a basket of logs: and apparently one of his duties was to set the log-fire going.

Bunter blinked across the hall, at his back, as he had blinked at Wells's back in the dining-room, with palpitating fat heart.

To get to the Colonel's study, and the refuge of the "Christmas Box", he had to pass John: and though John was too busy to look round behind him, it was quite certain that the fat Owl could not pass him unseen and unnoticed. The distance to the door of the Colonel's study was only a matter of yards: but it might as well have been miles, or leagues, for all the chance Billy Bunter had of reaching it undiscovered. His retreat in that direction was cut off.

But he could not stay where he was! John might look round—Wells would be coming out of the dining-room: at any moment an early housemaid might appear from somewhere—Bunter had to hunt cover.

There was only one way open—up the staircase. And on tiptoe, lest his footsteps should reach John's ears, Bunter rolled to the stairs, and mounted them as fast as his fat little legs could mount.

Breathless, he reached the old oaken gallery that ran round three sides of the hall. He rolled into it, glad that the oaken balustrade concealed him from view from below.



He was only in time. He heard Wells's voice below: the butler had come out of the dining-room, and was speaking to the younger footman.

"John!"

John looked round from the fireplace.

"Yes, Mr. Wells, sir."

"Someone has been in the dining-room, John. The biscuit-box has been taken from the side-board, and left empty—"

"Lor', Mr. Wells, sir!"

"Every biscuit has been eaten! The rug is smothered with crumbs, John. This must be looked into."

Billy Bunter did not stay to listen. He was more than content to leave the mystery of the missing biscuits to Wells and John. He crept silently along the gallery, and rolled into the corridor on which, as he knew from of old, the rooms of Harry Wharton and his friends opened. The Co. were all out of doors, not to return till breakfast: so that was a safe quarter for a harassed Owl, at least till the maids came up to "do" the rooms.

The Colonel's nephew had two rooms there: a bedroom with a sitting-room which was called his "den" adjoining. Both had doors on the corridor: and Bunter rolled into the "den", and closed the door after him.

There, for the moment at least, he was safe.

He sat down in Harry Wharton's armchair, gasped for breath, and wiped spots of perspiration from his fat brow. Quite a lot of excitement had been compressed into the last few minutes, and his fat heart was still thumping.

But he had escaped discovery! He sat in the armchair, and blinked round the room through his big spectacles. Now that immediate peril was past, Bunter's thoughts turned automatically, as it were, upon food. He had to seek a hide-out: but to pass a whole day in any hide-out without sustenance, was not only impossible—it was unthinkable, at least to Billy Bunter.

But he was aware that when Harry Wharton had his friends home for the holidays, they were often wont to gather in the "den", as they had been wont to gather in the old study at Greyfriars: and it was probable that there would be something about in the way of light refreshments. And his little round eyes brightened behind his big round spectacles, at the sight of several articles on the table—a large box of candied fruits, two or three packets of toffee, a box of chocolates, and a dish of apples.

"Oh, good!" breathed Bunter.

He rolled to the table. Certainly, he would have preferred eggs and bacon: but all was grist that came to a hungry Owl's mill.

It was Billy Bunter's happy custom, in the presence of food, to begin on it at once, and keep on till the last morsel had vanished. But his present position was too perilous for him to adhere to his usual manners and customs. He had to be in hiding before anyone came up. There were no minutes to waste. He opened the large box of candied fruits, and began on them: and while they went

down like oysters, his fat hands were busy: packing chocolates and toffee and apples into his pockets, cramming them to capacity. He was still wearing the overcoat in which he had left Greyfriars: the December cold had been too keen for him to discard it when he started on his over-night foraging expedition. Every pocket in that overcoat bulged, by the time he had finished the box of candied fruits.

What Wharton would think, when he came in, and found the table cleared, Bunter did not know, and neither did he care. Possibly he would think that the other fellows had helped themselves rather liberally: possibly that some servant had done so. At all events he was not likely to think of a fat Owl whom he did not suppose to be within miles and miles of Wharton Lodge.

Billy Bunter had packed in the last apple, and was finishing the last of the candied fruits, when he jumped at the sound of a footstep.

He suppressed a gasp.

Someone had come up! The juniors could hardly have come in yet. But it was someone—and the door handle was turning!

Billy Bunter's fat heart almost jumped into his mouth.

He had just time to duck down behind the table, when the door opened. The table hid him, for the moment, from sight. But he had a view of a pair of legs at the doorway, and the lower end of a basket of logs. It was John, with logs for a fire in the "den".

For a second, Billy Bunter's fat brain swam. He was fairly cornered. But that fat brain was becoming accustomed, by this time, to working at accelerated speed.

A few steps, and John would pass the table, and a crouching fat Owl would be full in his view. But even as John was taking the first of those few steps, a voice was heard: and had Wells heard it, he would hardly have doubted that it was his own fruity voice.

"John! Where are you, John?"

John looked round, over his shoulder, into the corridor.

"Here, Mr. Wells, sir."

"Come down at once, John: I want you."

"I was going to do Master Harry's fire, sir—"

"I said come down at once."

"Oh, very well, Mr. Wells."

John set down the basket of logs, and, leaving the door open, went back down the corridor to the gallery over the hall. No doubt he would discover, to his astonishment, when he contacted Wells, that the butler had not called him. But the fat ventriloquist had a minute or two!

Bunter rose to his feet, and tiptoed to the door. He peered out. John had turned the corner into the gallery, and was out of sight. The fat Owl fairly bolted from the room, and scudded up the corridor. There were quite a number of rooms on that corridor: and all of them, he knew, could not be

occupied by the guests at Wharton Lodge. An unoccupied room was what Bunter wanted. In dread every moment of hearing John's returning footsteps, the fat Owl bolted up the corridor to the end, and opened the last door.

One blink within reassured him.

That room, obviously had no occupant, for the bedstead was bare of all but the mattress: and there was nothing about to indicate that the room was in use. Billy Bunter rolled in, and closed the door. He sat down on the bedstead, and gasped for breath. He was safe at last: and he was feeling rather like the Ancient Mariner when, after his hair-raising voyage, he found himself at long last safe in port.

## CHAPTER XX

### BURGLARS!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"

"Something's up!"

"The upfulness seems to be terrific."

"What the jolly old dickens—"

"What's happened, Wells?"

Harry Wharton and Co, had come in, merry and bright, and more than ready for breakfast, after a walk in the keen frosty air. They had found the ice on the lake in good condition, and were looking forward to skating later in the morning. At the moment, however, they were looking forward chiefly to breakfast.

But they forgot all about breakfast, at the sight of what was going on in the hall. It was a spot of very unexpected excitement.

The door of the Colonel's study was wide open. In the room were visible Miss Amy Wharton and Wells, the butler. In the doorway were John and James. Outside it, several maids were gathered, staring in, all in a state of breathless excitement. Evidently, something had happened: though what it could possibly have been, the Famous Five had, for the moment, no idea.

Harry Wharton ran across the hall. The startled maids made room for him to pass, and John and James stepped aside. He hurried into his uncle's study. Whatever it was that had happened had happened there.

"Auntie!" he exclaimed. Miss Wharton was looking very startled: Wells almost thunderstruck. "What is it, Aunt Amy? What has happened, Wells?"

But he did not need answers to those questions: for the next moment he saw what had happened. All eyes were fixed on the long box which had been delivered by Cripps, the Friardale carrier, the previous day, and which had been deposited in Colonel Wharton's study. And Wharton's own eyes fixed on it, in amazement: and the Co. following him in, stared at it too, dumbfounded.

That box had been left closed and locked, as it had been delivered. But it was neither locked nor closed now.

The slatted lid stood wide open. No key was to be seen: but it looked as if a key had been used, for the lock showed no sign of damage. Sacking and straw almost filled the box, and some of the sacking sprawled over the side. Apart from straw and sacking, there was nothing in the box.

"Burglars, sir!" said Wells. "There was burglars last night, after all, sir."

"Burglars!" repeated Miss Wharton, in quite a faint voice. "Oh, goodness gracious! And my brother away—oh, dear!"

"Burglars!" repeated Harry.

"But what's been taken?" asked Bob Cherry.

"That we cannot tell, sir!" answered Wells. "Eliza found the box open, sir, when she came in to dust: and called me at once. I found the box exactly as you see it now, sir. Whatever may have been in it, was gone. Whatever it was that Mr. Quelch sent to the master, sir, has been taken away."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" said Miss Wharton. "It must have been something very valuable—very valuable indeed! What will my brother say! Oh, dear."

"Nothing else missing, Wells?" asked Harry.

"Nothing, sir! I have no doubt now, sir, that it was the burglar who opened my door last night, and awakened me—no doubt that he was after the plate, sir. But the silver is quite safe. Nothing has been taken excepting from this box."

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry. "You told me that somebody woke you up in the middle of the night, Wells, and you fancied—"

Wells coloured deeply.

"I am sorry, Master Harry, sir. I came out, bringing with me a poker, thinking that it must be a burglar, but when I heard your voice—"

"You did not hear my voice."

"I—I understand that now, Master Harry, now that I know that there must have been a burglar in the house," said Wells, humbly. "But I certainly thought I knew your voice, sir, calling down to me from the gallery—it is quite amazing, sir, and I cannot comprehend it now, but certainly it sounded exactly like your voice, sir—and I was quite deceived. But now that it is clear that there was a burglar in the house, I know that it must have been he that spoke—though how his voice came to be exactly like yours, sir, I cannot understand."

"I expect you were half-asleep," said Harry. "If anybody spoke to you at that time, it must have been the burglar, I suppose—"

"Someone certainly did, sir, and I—I thought—"

"Is that jolly old burglar a jolly old ventriloquist like Bunter?" said Bob Cherry. "I've heard Bunter play such tricks. But a burglar—"

"You fancied that it was Wharton speaking!" said Johnny Bull, staring at the butler, "and you went back to bed, and left the burglar to carry on, what?"

Wells's face, already red, grew redder.



"I—I had absolutely no doubt that it was Master Harry speaking to me," he said. "Certainly, I did not see him: but his voice was quite familiar—I am quite amazed, sir, now that I know that it was not Master Harry speaking. I cannot understand it now, for he addressed me by name—he called me Wells—and how could a burglar know my name? But it must have been the burglar—if it was not Master Harry who awoke me by opening my door—"

"Of course it was not," said Harry, curtly, "and I can't understand a burglar's voice being so like mine that you were taken in by such a trick to make you go back to bed."

"I—I can't understand it myself, sir—but—" stammered Wells.

"Half asleep, I suppose," said Harry. "Anyhow, it seems that you fancied that it was I, and went back to bed, and then the burglar carried on. You seem to have let him walk off with whatever was in that box."

"At least the silver is safe, sir, and it is extremely valuable: owing to my having been awakened, the miscreant did not make any further attempt on it."

"Something in that!" said Bob Cherry. "Nothing gone except what was in that box. What the dickens could it have been?"

"And how did a burglar get it away?" exclaimed Johnny Bull. "You fellows remember how jolly heavy that box was—a jolly good weight for two men to carry! You remember we all lent a hand with it. Whatever was in that box was too heavy for one man to carry off."

"That's so," said Nugent, with a nod.

"But it is gone, sir!" said Wells.

"Blessed if I make it out!" said Johnny. "There's something jolly queer about this."

"The queerfulness is terrific."

"Dear me! dear me!" Miss Wharton almost wailed. "It must have been something very valuable! What will my brother say? Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Whatever can have been in the box, Harry?"

Harry Wharton shook his head.

It was a complete mystery to him. The arrival of the box, from Mr. Quelch to Colonel Wharton, had been a surprise. Nobody could begin to guess what the Remove master at Greyfriars could possibly have sent to the old Colonel at Wharton Lodge, of such weight and bulk. But for the Colonel's absence, the box would have been opened. Naturally it did not occur to Harry, or to anyone else, that but for the Colonel's absence that box would not have arrived at Wharton Lodge at all! It was the Colonel's absence which had enabled the fat Owl of the Remove to carry out his extraordinary scheme.

Everyone was looking into the box. But no one was able to discover a clue to its missing contents. That those contents had walked away on their own fat legs nobody was likely to guess. Obviously—so far as anyone could see—it was a case of burglary: what else could it be?

"What shall we do, Harry?" Miss Wharton turned to her nephew. "While your uncle is away—"

"I'll get on the telephone to the police-station at Wimford, at once," said Harry; and he went back to the hall. Johnny Bull followed him, and tapped him on the shoulder as he was going into the telephone cabinet.

"Better tell them about that merchant in the park yesterday," said Johnny. "If there's been a burglary, he's the man, I fancy. I jolly well know that he was spying on the house with his glasses from that tree-top."

"Looks like it—now!" said Harry. "If he's the man, we've got his description all right."

And he rang up the Wimford police-station.

His friends were at breakfast when he rejoined them: Miss Wharton, in a state of considerable agitation, presiding at the breakfast-table. The whole house was in a state of half-suppressed excitement, awaiting the arrival of the police to investigate the burglary.

"Inspector Jenks is coming over from Wimford at once, auntie," said Harry. "He won't be very long. He will get in touch with Mr. Quelch, and then we shall know what was in the box, at any rate."

"I wonder what the dickens it was!" said Bob.

Everyone in Wharton Lodge was wondering just that! Something—something very heavy!—had been in that mysterious box: and it was gone. What it was, and where it was now, nobody could even surmise. And certainly no one was likely to surmise that it was sitting on a bed in an unoccupied room upstairs, devouring apples!

## CHAPTER XXI

### VERY MYSTERIOUS!

**I**NPECTOR JENKS was puzzled.

Every inhabitant of Wharton Lodge was puzzled: and the portly police-inspector from Wimford was as puzzled as anyone else.

It was, in fact, a "case" that might have puzzled the keenest wits at Scotland Yard. Sherlock Holmes or Ferrers Locke could hardly have known what to make of it, had those celebrated detectives been on the case.

One surprise followed another. Every spot of new information seemed only to deepen the mystery.

First of all, Inspector Jenks examined the mysterious box: but all he could ascertain therefrom was the fact that it was now empty save for straw and sacking. There was no clue to what it had contained.

Then he made a meticulous examination of windows and doors: without discovering by which—if any—the burglar could have entered.

He listened, with a thoughtful but undoubtedly perplexed face, to all that anyone had to tell him. But he failed to make head or tail of it.

Wells's story no doubt surprised him. It seemed fairly clear that the burglar must have been after the silver, when he butted into Wells's room and inadvertently awakened the butler: after which he had decided to give the silver a miss. It seemed clear, too, that it must have been the burglar who had spoken to Wells from the gallery over the hall, tricking him into going back to bed: though how Wells could have mistaken the voice for Master Harry's was inexplicable.

It seemed probable, if not clear, that the beady-eyed man whom the juniors had found in the tree, the previous day, watching the house, was the man who was wanted. Really, it did look like it!

But the rest was wrapped in mystery: one mystery piled on another, like Pelion piled on Ossa, and on Pelion Olympus!

The greatest surprise was when the inspector succeeded in getting into touch with Mr. Quelch. A telephone call to Gosling, at Greyfriars School, elicited the information that the Remove master was at Bournemouth, and Gosling was able to furnish his telephone number there. A call to Mr. Quelch at Bournemouth followed: from which Inspector Jenks hoped, at least, to learn what had been contained in the box.

To his amazement, Mr. Quelch stated categorically that he had despatched no such box to Wharton Lodge, and knew nothing whatever about it.

Another call to Gosling followed: but the Greyfriars porter could only state that he had received telephonic instructions from Mr. Quelch to despatch the box, that he had found it ready for despatch, and had despatched it by Cripps the carrier as instructed.

By this time, Inspector Jenks was feeling almost as if his head was turning round! He was not accustomed, in a quiet country town like Wimford, to such inextricably mysterious cases as this!

The box had come from Greyfriars School. That was certain. But it was almost the only thing that was certain, in this strange case.

Mr. Quelch, who was supposed to have sent it, had not sent it. Gosling, who supposed that he had received telephonic instructions from Quelch, must have been deceived by some person unknown. The box had contained something—quite heavy: many witnesses testified how heavy it had been. Whatever it had contained, was gone! How could a burglar have walked off with the contents of a box which had taxed the strength of John and James combined? And without leaving a trace, on door or window, of entrance or exit?

It was no wonder that Inspector Jenks was puzzled!

In the hope that Colonel Wharton might be able to let in some light on this baffling mystery, Mr. Jenks rang up the old Colonel at Aldershot. All he learned from him was, that Colonel Wharton had not been expecting such a box, or any box at all, from anyone: that he was astonished to hear that such a

box had arrived at his home: and that he could not even surmise what it all meant. The Colonel added that, if there had been a burglary at the Lodge, he would cut short his visit to his Army friends at Aldershot, and return home immediately. But that was no present help in time of need.

Inspector Jenks spent most of that day at Wharton Lodge a puzzled man. Finally he departed: leaving everyone as puzzled as himself. He assured Miss Wharton that the matter would be carefully investigated: though he was quite unable, at the moment, to indicate to what those investigations would lead.

"Well!" said Bob Cherry. The Co. gathered in Wharton's "den", after the inspector was gone, to discuss the strange affair. "Well! If you ask me, my beloved 'earers, this beats Banagher!"

"The beatfulness is terrific!" agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Anybody make head or tail of it?" asked Nugent.

There was a general shaking of heads. No member of the Co. could make "head or tail" of it!

"The jolly old box came," said Bob. "But from whom? Who sent it?"

"Not Quelch," said Harry.

"No, that's clear now. But it came from the school. Somebody at Greyfriars must have sent it."

"Looks like it!"

"Everybody's away from the school now, except a few of the staff—"

"And Bunter!" said Nugent.

"Oh! Yes, I'd forgotten Bunter! I wonder how jolly old Bunter is getting on! Tired of his own company by this time, I expect."

"Not so tired as everybody else!" remarked Johnny Bull.

"Somebody got Gosling on the phone, and made him believe it was Quelch giving him instructions. That sounds like one of Bunter's tricks—you know his dashed ventriloquism. But Bunter wouldn't be sending your uncle a Christmas box, Harry—"

"Hardly," said Harry, laughing.

"Something must have been in it," said Bob. "Can't think of anything but a Christmas present for your uncle, as it was sent to him. But who?"

"Ask me another!"

"And why should he send it in Quelch's name?"

"The whyfulness is terrific."

"And what the thump was it?" said Bob. "Simply no clue to that! Only something jolly heavy—that's all we know."

"And valuable!" said Nugent. "A burglar wouldn't walk off with it if it wasn't worth walking off with."

"Yes, that's so! But how the thump would a burglar know anything about it? If it was that merchant we came on in the park yesterday, he may have seen the box arrive—he was spying on the house. But he wouldn't know it was worth burgling—and he seems to have taken nothing else."



"Must have been after the silver too," said Nugent. "That's how he came to wake up Wells."

"Yes, I suppose so. It's all dashed queer," said Bob. "Wells waking up seems to have scared him off from that quarter. But he went into the dining-room and scoffed the biscuits, from what Wells says."

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Harry Wharton, suddenly. He was staring at the table in his "den".

"What—?" began Nugent.

"Looks as if the jolly old burglar scoffed something else, as well as the bikkies in the dining-room!" said Harry. "None of us has been up to this room to-day, till now—"

"No, what about it?" asked Bob.

Harry pointed to the table.

"Somebody's cleared off the tuck," he said. "There were toffee, and chocs, and apples, and—look at that box: it was full of candied fruits, and it hadn't been opened! Look at it!"

"Oh, my hat!"

The Co. gathered round the table, staring. It was quite a large box that had contained candied fruits. It was empty! And there was no other article to be seen on the table. Some unknown hand had made a clean sweep of apples, chocolates, and toffee!

"Well, this is the bee's knee, as Fishy would say!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "He must have been up here!"

"Must have been!" said Harry. "Blessed if I ever heard of a burglar before, scoffing biscuits and apples and toffee and chocs! More like Bunter than a burglar!"

"The morefulness is terrific."

"Well, this beats it!" said Bob. "I wonder what Ferrers Locke would make of a case like this! A mysterious box arrives from nobody knows whom, containing nobody knows what, and the same night a burglar burgles the box, and stuffs himself with bikkies, and candied fruits, and toffee and chocs, and apples! And not a sign how he came in or went out! It gets curiouiser and curiouiser, as Alice said in Wonderland. I give it up!"

And the rest of the Co. had to give it up also. And when Colonel Wharton returned that evening, and heard the whole strange story, he had to give it up too. The whole thing was utterly inexplicable: an impenetrable mystery, and it remained one.

## CHAPTER XXII

## TWO IN THE DARK!

**B**ILLY BUNTER grinned.  
It was a grin of happy anticipation.

The hour was late.

It was, in fact, past midnight. In normal circumstances, Billy Bunter would have been fast asleep at that hour, and a melodious snore would have been rousing out the adjacent echoes.

But the circumstances were not normal. Billy Bunter was passing his Christmas holidays under very unusual conditions. A Christmas guest who arrived not only unexpected but unknown and unsuspected, packed in a box, could not carry on in quite a normal manner.

At the moment, Billy Bunter was standing at the door of the room in which he had camped, the door ajar, listening.

He was listening for the chime of the clock in the hall. As soon as the stroke of one came, Bunter was going to get busy. He was in fact like one of those deponent verbs which bothered him so much at school—passive in form but active in meaning! He was keen to get going. But “safety-first” was his motto. He had to wait till all was quite, quite safe for an unsuspected inhabitant of the house to go in quest of provender. After his wild adventures the previous night, Bunter felt that a fellow couldn’t be too careful. It was a wary Owl.

He seemed quite secure in his present quarters. Only once during the day had there been an alarm: when the fat Owl had dodged promptly under the bed at the sound of footsteps coming up the corridor. Someone had come into the room, and fumbled at the window: why, Bunter didn’t know, and couldn’t guess. He was unaware that Inspector Jenks was making a round of the house examining windows for traces of an imaginary burglar.

Whoever it was, of whose feet and trouser-ends he had a glimpse from under the bed, he had departed, certainly never dreaming that a fat Owl was in the offing. Bunter was glad to see the feet and trouser-ends disappear.

Since then, nothing had disappeared. Of the spot of excitement going on in the Lodge, Bunter knew nothing—voices did not reach his secluded retreat. What the household had thought of the open box in the Colonel’s study he did not know, neither did he care—they were welcome to think of anything they liked, so long as they did not think of William George Bunter, which was unlikely.

No one had come near the unoccupied room: no one, certainly, dreaming that it now had an occupant.

All was going well for the surreptitious Owl: except in one particular. Bunter was hungry.

Candied fruits, toffee, chocolates, and apples, were all very well in their way. They had taken the edge off Bunter's appetite. He had enjoyed them, so long as they had lasted. But the inner Bunter longed for something of a more solid nature. That was to come.

Peering into the dusky corridor, listening with both fat ears for the chime from below, Billy Bunter grinned in anticipation.

His capacious mouth watered at the thought of mince pies, cake, ham, jam, and Christmas pudding. This time he was going to make a clean sweep. His fat thoughts dwelt on the larder, and the good things to be found there. He was going to return to his hide-out heavy-laden. He was not going to wake up that beast Wells this time! He had found a box of matches in the room, and he would be able to light his way. This time all was going to be well. No doubt there would be surprise in the morning, when it was discovered that the larder had been cleared out over-night. That did not worry Bunter. Nobody had guessed so far that the grub-raider of Greyfriars was in the house: and nobody was likely to guess that one!

A sound came through the silence of the December night at last. It came from the clock in the hall.

It was one o'clock.

All the household were asleep at that hour. They had long been asleep. Bunter had left it late enough for absolute safety.

But he was very cautious.

He stepped softly out of the room, eyes and spectacles and fat ears on the alert.

He had to pass the rooms occupied by Harry Wharton and Co.: door after door: and he passed them on tiptoe. Once he paused, with beating heart, at a faint sound from one of the rooms. But it was only one of the juniors turning in bed: and there was silence again.

"Beast!" breathed Bunter.

He tiptoed on his way.

All was dim and silent when he reached the oaken gallery over the hall. He peered over the balustrade into a well of darkness.

Leaning on the oaken balustrade, he peered and listened. Then his fat heart gave another jump.

A faint, indefinable sound came from below.

It seemed to Billy Bunter's listening ears that it was the sound of a faint, stealthy footfall!

"Oh, crikey!" breathed the startled Owl.

He strained his eyes into the darkness.

Nobody could be up, at that hour, and without a light. It was really impossible. Yet he had heard something.

But if there had been a sound, it was not repeated. A faint wail of the

December wind came from without. There was no other sound. Possibly what he had heard had been a rustle of old ivy in the wind!

Reassured at last, he moved on.

On tiptoe he descended the staircase, with a fat hand on the banisters. He reached the hall, and groped his way to the service door, Groping for the door, his fat hand traversed an open doorway.

The door had been left wide open.

That, no doubt, was very careless of Wells: but it did not bother Bunter. He groped through the doorway into the passage beyond.

Then he felt for the box of matches in his pocket.

He needed a glimmer of light now, to make sure that he did not arrive at the wrong door, as on the previous unfortunate occasion.

He struck a match.

Scratch!

The light glimmered.

He held up the match: and the next second, jumped almost clear of the floor, startled almost out of his fat wits.

He had expected that match to reveal his surroundings. But he had not expected those surroundings to include a human figure.

But they did!

Ahead of him, in the passage, was a man. And that man, at the scratch of the match and the sudden light, stared round—at Bunter.

It was not Wells. It was not anyone whom Bunter knew as belonging to the household. It was a small man, with a foxy face, and little glancing beady black eyes. Those beady eyes popped at Bunter.

Bunter's eyes popped back, almost popping through his spectacles.

Never had two persons been more utterly taken by surprise at the same moment!

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

"Cor'!" gasped the beady-eyed man.

Billy Bunter stood transfixed, the match in his fat fingers, staring. It rushed into his fat mind what this man was—what he must be! And in his terror, as he realized that he was standing only two or three yards from a burglar, the fat Owl stood paralysed.

Both were too astonished and startled to stir, for the moment. Billy Bunter stared at the burglar. The burglar stared at Billy Bunter.

But the beady-eyed man was the first to recover. A fierce gleam shot into the beady eyes, and he made a spring.

Probably his idea was that this fat fellow in spectacles, who had come upon him so unexpectedly, had to be kept quiet, while he got on with his business of removing the silver plate.

But that spring woke Bunter from his trance, as it were. He dropped the match and bounded.



With one bound, he reached the open doorway into the hall. But as he reached it, a hand in the dark grasped him, from behind.

The yell of terror that pealed from Billy Bunter, as that hand grasped him, woke every echo within the walls of Wharton Lodge.

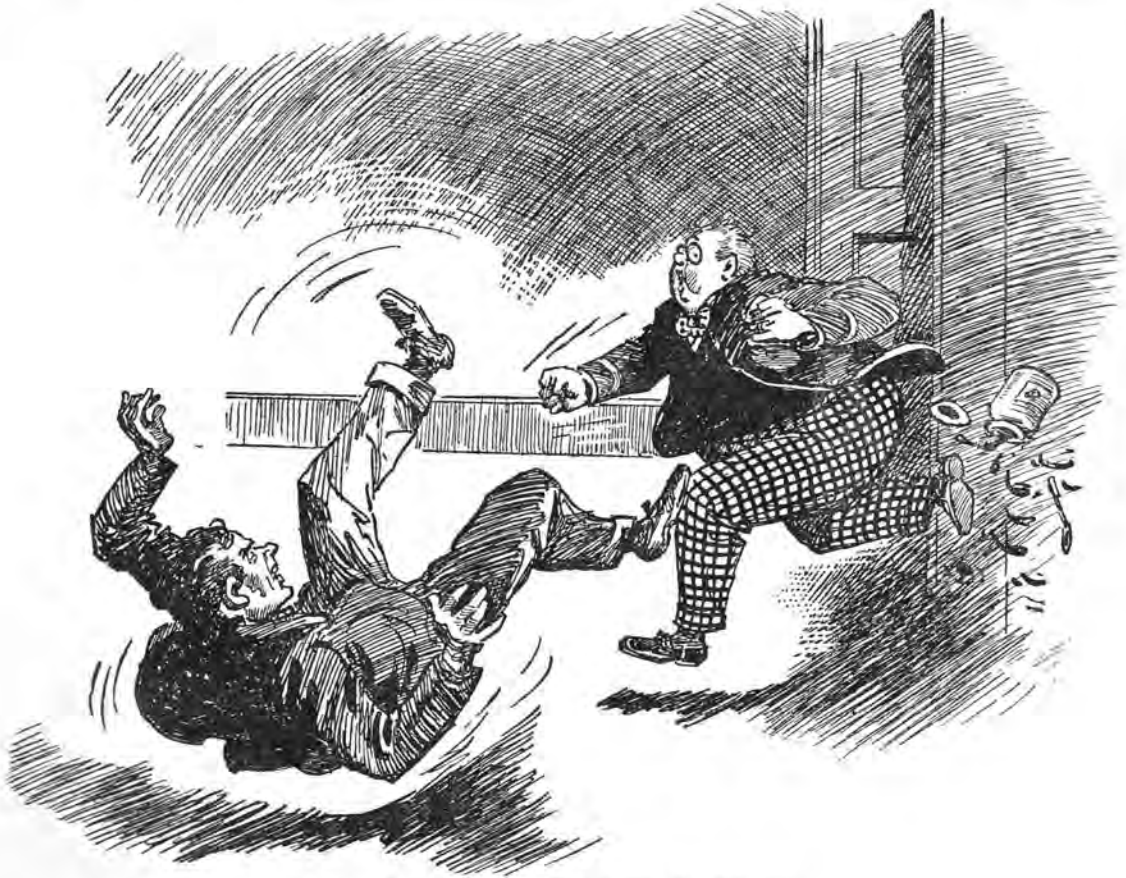
Hardly knowing what he did, he hit out in the dark.

Crash!

The fat fist landed upon something that seemed soft. Bunter did not know what it was: but he knew that it was some section of the burglar. And he knew that that terrifying grasp relaxed, and slipped from him. He heard a gurgle. he heard strange suffocated sounds.

"Urrrrrrrrgh! Wooooooh! Gurrrrrrggh."

It sounded like a man in the throes of asphyxiation. Bunter's fat fist, in fact, had caught the beady-eyed man below the belt. A frantic jolt in the wind,



*Hardly knowing what he did, he hit out*

with Bunter's uncommon weight behind it, was no light matter. The burglar had had all he wanted, and more. Unseen by Bunter in the dark, he was staggering against a wall, emitting sounds of suffocating anguish.

Billy Bunter did not stay to listen to those musical effects.

He bolted.

There were sounds of alarm in the house. The household were awakening. Bunter's yell, when the burglar had grasped him, would have awakened Rip van Winkle.

The fat Owl bolted for the stairs.

Somehow, he hardly knew how, he had escaped the burglar. He had to bolt back to his lair like a rabbit to its burrow, to escape discovery, now.

But as he reached the staircase, a light flashed on in the gallery above. Voices were calling.

Escape that way was cut off.

But there was still a refuge. The fat Owl bolted across the hall to the Colonel's study. He darted into that apartment. He closed the door behind him, as there was a tramp of footsteps on the stairs: the next moment lights flashed on, and there was a crowd in the hall.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### RUN TO EARTH!

“WHO—?”  
“What—?”  
“Which—?”  
“How—!”

There were startled ejaculations on all sides. Every eye was fixed on a beady-eyed man who staggered and tottered, with hands pressed to his waistcoat, emitting sounds of woe and anguish.

Colonel Wharton, in flowing dressing-gown, had been first down, at the alarm in the night, with his old Army revolver in his hand. Wells had been on the scene a second later, issuing through the service door with a poker in his hand—the poker that he had wielded the night before. But Harry Wharton and Co. were not long in coming—half-dressed, they came speeding from their rooms, at the sound of the uproar, John and James materialized from the shadows: somewhere in the distance maids were shrieking: and Miss Amy Wharton was calling. Every inhabitant of Wharton Lodge was wide awake—and most of them gathered in the hall, round the strange figure that staggered, and tottered, and pressed his waistcoat, and moaned.

“A burglar!” gasped Wells. He gripped the poker, hard. “The same man, sir, as last night, I should think—”

"Probably! A burglar undoubtedly!" said Colonel Wharton. His old Army revolver was half-raised. True, it was not loaded: but it looked very businesslike: and doubtless would have scared the burglar, if that burglar had been in a state to be scared by anything.

But he was not. He was gurgling and moaning in anguish for his lost wind. He was winded to the wide: and could not have lifted a finger to resist, nor did pokers and old Army revolvers affect him in the least. Staggering, bent almost double, he caressed his waistcoat and moaned.

"That's the man!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. Bob was the first to recognize the foxy face the juniors had seen once before: the face of the man in the tree, whom they had suspected of watching the house with burglarious intent.

Evidently, that suspicion had been well-founded: for this was the man!—foxy face, beady eyes, and all.

"The man we saw—!" exclaimed Frank Nugent.

"The same man!" said Johnny Bull. "I jolly well told you so!"

"The samefulness is terrific."

The old Colonel looked at them.

"You have seen this man before?" he exclaimed.

"It's the man we saw in the park, the day before yesterday, that we told Inspector Jenks about, uncle," answered Harry Wharton. "I'd know that foxy face again anywhere."

"Ooooooogh!" came moaning from the man with the foxy face. "Wooooogh Oooooh!"

"He's been knocked out!" said Bob, in wonder. "Somebody seems to have knocked the wind out of him. Was it you, Wells?"

"No, sir!" answered Wells. "The master, perhaps—"

"Not at all!" said Colonel Wharton. "He was like this when I came down and found him. He seems quite incapacitated. Possibly some dispute with his accomplice—there were two of them—"

"Two, sir!" exclaimed Wells. He took a harder grip on the poker. "Did you see—?"

"Someone was running across the hall!" said the Colonel. "I heard him, though I did not see him, as I came down—I found only this man here, and he certainly was not running—he does not look as if he had a run in him—he is quite incapacitated—"

"Moooooogh!" came from the hapless burglar. "Ooooooh!" Certainly there was no run in him. There was not a walk in him! Undoubtedly he was quite, quite incapacitated!

"Then there's another burglar in the house!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Which way was he running, sir. Do you know—?"

"Across the hall from the stairs, I am certain!" said Colonel Wharton. "He may have run into the library, or my study—"

"Come on!" exclaimed Bob.

"Stop!" rapped the Colonel. "You may follow me! Wells, take care of this man! He does not look like giving you much trouble."

"Wurrrrggh!" moaned the burglar.

"Leave him to me, sir!" said Wells. "I will take care of him, sir! He will not get away from me, sir."

Wells dropped a plump hand on the foxy man's shoulder. In the other he grasped his poker, ready for business. But the hapless man was in no state to give trouble. Heedless of the hand on his shoulder, heedless of the poker, heedless of everything, he continued to caress his waistcoat and moan.

Colonel Wharton strode across the hall, with the Famous Five at his heels, John and James bringing up the rear.

That there had been another on the spot, the old Colonel knew: quite distinctly he had heard him running across the hall. He could only conclude that there had been two of the midnight marauders: and judging by the speechless state of the one who had been captured, it looked as if the other had knocked him out and then run—though why, was quite inexplicable. Anyhow there certainly had been another on the spot, and he was going to be rooted out and seized, unless he had already contrived to make his escape.

In considerable excitement, the juniors followed the old Colonel: ready to lend a helping hand in the capture of the other marauder. The foxy man was left mumbling and moaning in Wells's portly grasp.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "That's somebody in your study, sir—I heard—!"

"So did I!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "Somebody—"

"Keep back!" said Colonel Wharton. "You may follow me in."

He threw open the door of the study.

The juniors stared into the dark room. All of them had heard a sound within—the sound of a movement! Somebody was there—and there could be no doubt who it was!

Colonel Wharton reached in with his left hand, and switched on the electric light in the room. Then, with the old Army revolver well to the fore, he marched in, followed by the Co.

They stared round the room. The electric light illuminated every corner of it: gleaming on curtains and carpet, chairs and table and desk, and on the long box that had arrived from Greyfriars. But it did not gleam on some beetle-browed ruffian, as they expected. There was no one to be seen in the room.

"Nobody here!" said Nugent.

"I jolly well heard—!" said Bob.

"Gone by the window, perhaps!" said Johnny Bull. He ran to the window. "No—it's shut—fastened inside—"

"He must be still here!" said Colonel Wharton. Under his knitted brows, he stared about the room. Harry Wharton and Co., stared about it, into every corner and recess. No one was to be seen.



Bob gave a sudden yell:

"The box!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry. "That's it!"

It dawned on them, all at once. The slatted lid of the box was closed. The box was amply large enough to conceal a burglar. That, undoubtedly, was where he had taken refuge: a last desperate attempt to find a hiding-place when he heard them coming across the hall.

"Good gad!" exclaimed Colonel Wharton. "That must be it! Good gad! He has hidden himself in that box!"

"We'll jolly soon have him out—!"

"What-ho!"

"He's there all right!"

"Stand back while I lift the lid!" said Colonel Wharton. "We have him now, if he is there: and there seems no doubt that he must be there."

Colonel Wharton stooped, and grasped the slatted lid with his left hand, the old Army revolver in his right. Harry Wharton and Co. gathered round, ready for action if needed. If the burglar was there, undoubtedly they had him now: and there was no doubt that he was there!

The Colonel threw back the slatted lid.

The interior of the long box was revealed: stuffed with straw and sacking, and in the midst of the straw and sacking, a huddled figure. A fat face stared up at staring faces, and a big pair of spectacles gleamed in the electric light. A fat gasping squeak was heard:

"I say, you fellows! Oh, crikey! I say—"

Colonel Wharton stared blankly. Five fellows, who had been expecting to see a burglar, doubted their vision when they beheld a fat Owl sprawling in the straw and sacking. From all of them came a yell of astonishment.

"Bunter!"

#### CHAPTER XXIV

#### ONLY BUNTER!

"**B**ILLY BUNTER!"

"Bunter!"

"The esteemed and ridiculous Bunter!"

"That fat ass Bunter—"

"That—that—that prize porker, Bunter."

Billy Bunter sat up in the box. He set his big spectacles straight on his little fat nose, and blinked at Colonel Wharton, who gazed at him in speechless amazement, and at the Famous Five, hardly less amazed than the old Colonel.

"I say, you fellows—!" gasped Bunter.

"Bunter!" said Harry Wharton, almost dazedly. "Bunter! Is that Bunter, or are we dreaming this?"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"It's Bunter!" said Bob Cherry, blankly. "It's not a burglar—it's Bunter! How did Bunter get here? You fat, frabjous ass—"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Good gad!" Colonel Wharton found his voice. "I think I have seen this—this boy before, Harry—a schoolfellow of yours, I think—"

"Yes, uncle—Billy Bunter—"

"But what does this mean, then?" exclaimed the Colonel. "I did not know that Bunter was in the house at all—"

"Neither did anyone else!" said Harry. "I just can't imagine how he got here. Bunter, you mad porpoise, how did you get here? And what are you here for?"

"Oh, really, Harry, old chap—"

"You fat villain—"

"Beast! I mean, look here, old fellows—"

"Bunter!" said Colonel Wharton. "What are you doing here?"

"I—I—I—I'm sitting in this box, sir."

"What? what? You utterly stupid boy, what does this mean? Did my nephew ask you here for the holidays?"

"He—he—he forgot, sir—"

"What?"

"So I—I—I came—!" stuttered Bunter. "I—I—I knew it would be a—a—a pleasant surprise for him, sir—"

"Upon my word!"

Billy Bunter blinked uneasily at the staring Co.

What was going to happen now, Billy Bunter did not know: but at any rate his game was up. He was run to earth: and there was no more hiding in secluded corners for the fat Owl. Quite unintentionally he had revealed his presence in Wharton Lodge: there he was, under all eyes, sitting in the box in which he had arrived from Greyfriars! He had hoped to keep "doggo" till Christmas Day; trusting to the genial influence of that day to see him through. And here he was, with the amazed Co. all staring at him.

"How long have you been in the house, Bunter?"

"Only—only since the day before yesterday, sir—"

"The day before yesterday!" repeated Colonel Wharton. "Good gad! And you knew nothing of it, Harry?"

"Nothing at all, uncle."

"You have been keeping out of sight all that time, Bunter?" exclaimed the Colonel.

"Oh! Yes! You—you—you see. I—I—I was going to give the fellows a—a—a surprise—a—a—a happy surprise, on Christmas Day—"

"The happifulness would have been terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Oh, really, Inky—"

"But how did you get here?" exclaimed the Colonel. "How could you possibly have come into the house without being seen?"

"I—I—I—"

"Well?"

"I—I came—"

"I can see that you came, as you are here! But how—?"

"I—I—I came in—in—in—"

"In what?"

"In this box!" gasped Bunter.

Colonel Wharton gazed at him. Harry Wharton and Co. gazed at him. For a long moment, there was silence. The discovery of the fat Owl in the house at all was amazing. But the discovery that he had arrived in the box from Greyfriars put the lid on, so to speak.

They gazed at him, dumbfounded.

"Good gad!" said the Colonel, at last. "You—you—you came—packed in this box—good gad! You—you—you came in—in—in this b-b-box!"

"Oh, crumbs!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"Oh, suffering cats!" said Johnny Bull.

"No wonder it was heavy!" murmured Frank Nugent.

"No wonderfulness that the heaviness was terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Good gad!" repeated the Colonel. He was gazing at Bunter as if the fat Owl mesmerized him. "Good gad!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "Then—then there was no burglary last night after all! If it was Bunter in the box, and he got out—"

"I—I—I was hungry—"

"What?"

"I—I never meant to wake up Wells, you know—I—I was looking for the larder—" stammered Bunter.

"Oh!" gasped Harry.

"I—I never had anything but some biscuits!" said Bunter, pathetically. "Nothing else till the morning, old chap, when I found some tuck in your room—"

"So that was you—"

"I—I—I knew you wouldn't mind, old fellow—"

"And you've been keeping doggo ever since?" exclaimed Harry Wharton, blankly.

"Yes, old chap! I—I—I wasn't quite sure you'd be glad to see me, as—as—as you forgot to ask me to come—"

"You fat frabjous, footling fathead—"

"Oh, really, Harry, old chap—"

"Then you have been in hiding!" exclaimed Colonel Wharton. "And why, Bunter, did you come out of your hiding-place, wherever it was, in the middle of the night?"

"I—I was going down to the larder—a—a—a chap has to eat, you know," gasped Bunter. "I—I—I—"

"Oh! I see!" A faint smile came over the old Colonel's grim face. "That was how you ran into the burglar, I suppose?"

"Oh! Yes!"

"Great pip!" yelled Bob Cherry. "Was it Bunter knocked the burglar out? Somebody did—"

"He—he—he grabbed me, in the dark," gasped Bunter. "I—I—I hit out— Was—was he knocked out—?"

"Sort of!" chuckled Bob. "You seem to have landed him in the bread-basket, and he's still trying to get his second wind."

"Oh! I—I mean, I—I knocked him out, of course," said Bunter. "I—I wasn't frightened, or—or anything like that! I—I—I knew he was a burglar, you know, and—and I just knocked him out—I was as cool as a cow-cumber—I mean as cool as a coolcumber—I—I mean—"

"Yes, we can guess just how cool you were!" agreed Bob. "But you jolly well did knock him out—"

"And the knockfulness was terrific."

"You had better get out of that box, Bunter," said Colonel Wharton. "For whatever reason you are here, and by whatever extraordinary means you came, there is no doubt that you have, by sheer accident, prevented a burglary, and saved me from what might have been a very heavy loss. Perhaps you will bear that in mind, Harry, in dealing with this very extraordinary boy."

"Oh!" said Harry. "Yes, uncle."

Billy Bunter scrambled out of the box.

"I—I say, sir—!" he gasped.

"Well?"

"Mum-mum-mum-may I—I—"

"May you what?"

"Mum-mum-may I have some supper?"

Colonel Wharton stared at him, for a moment, and then smiled.

"You may!" he said.

And Bunter did.

He had doubts about the morrow. But at the moment, the most important consideration within the wide limits of the universe was something to eat. Billy Bunter ate: and was happy.



## CHAPTER XXV

## A MERRY CHRISTMAS!

**B**UT BUNTER need have had no doubts about the morrow. On the morrow, it was all right for Bunter.

His extraordinary adventures, inside the "Christmas box" and out of it, seemed to add considerably to the gaiety of the Christmas party at Wharton Lodge. And it was clear that the fat Owl had been the inadvertent means of preventing the foxy-faced man from walking off with the Colonel's silver plate. Inspector Jenks, when he came from Wimford with a constable to take the burglar in charge, gave the fat Owl somewhat grim looks; his valuable time had been wasted looking for an imaginary burglar. Still, he was compensated by the capture of a real one: so upon the whole he was satisfied.

"Like to stay on for the hols, Bunter?" asked Harry Wharton, in the morning.

Bunter gave him a thoughtful blink.

"Well, if you really want me to, old chap—!" he said.

"Not at all!"

"He, he, he!"

"What are you he-he-heing about?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Harry's little joke! I can take a joke!" said Bunter. "He, he, he! I'll stay on, old chap, as you're so pressing. And look here, I'll help to make things go, you know, with my wonderful ventriloquism—"

"If you do, we'll pack you up in that box again, and send you back to Greyfriars."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"We'll keep the box handy in case," said Bob.

"Beast! I—I mean, ain't it jolly, all of us old pals being together again for Christmas? I say you fellows, I've seen the turkey! It looks prime! We're going to have a merry Christmas!"

And a merry Christmas it was, for everyone at Wharton Lodge: and especially for the unexpected guest who had arrived in Billy Bunter's Christmas Box!

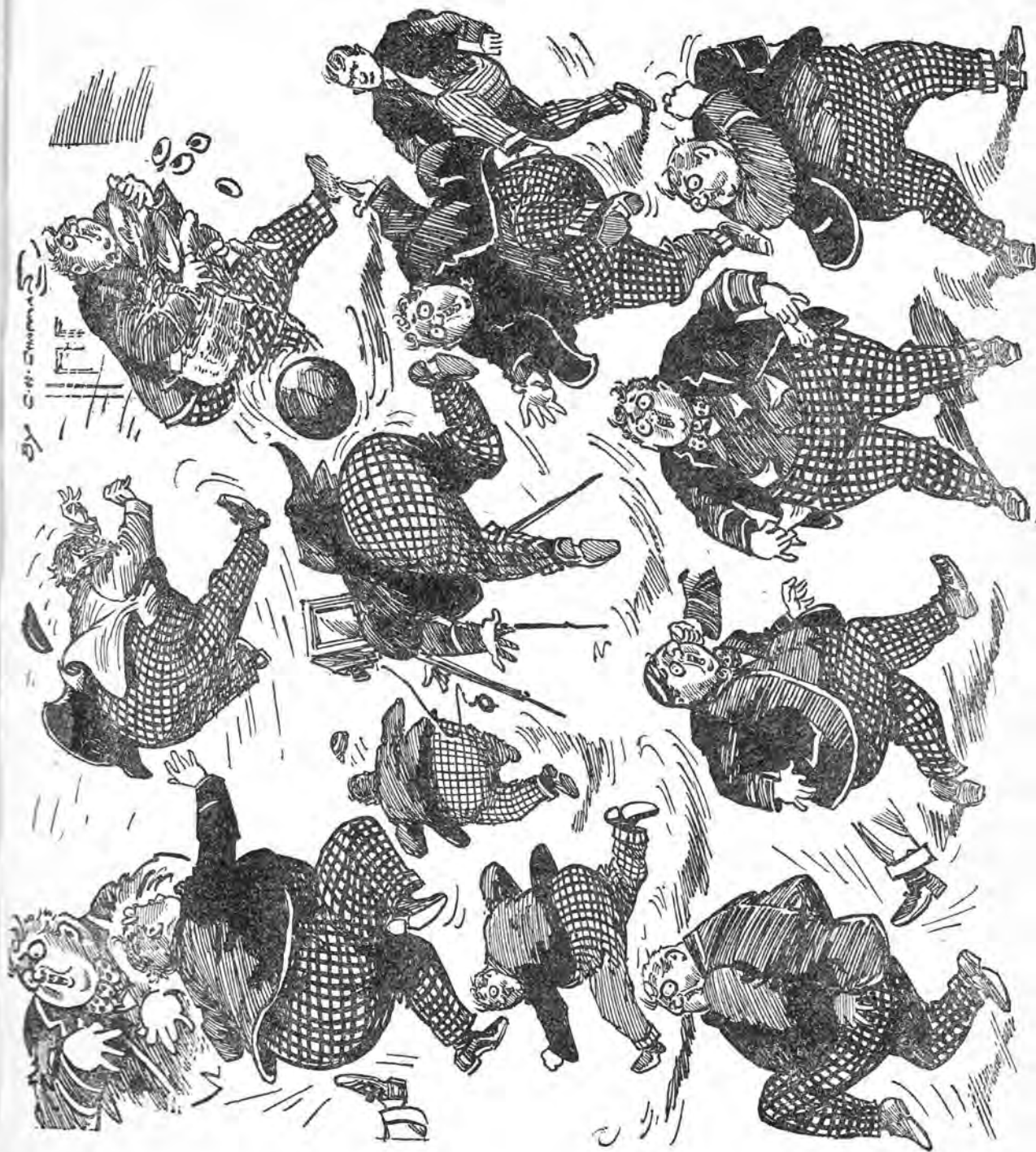
THE END

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



*Some typical incidents in the life of . . .*



... William George Bunter.