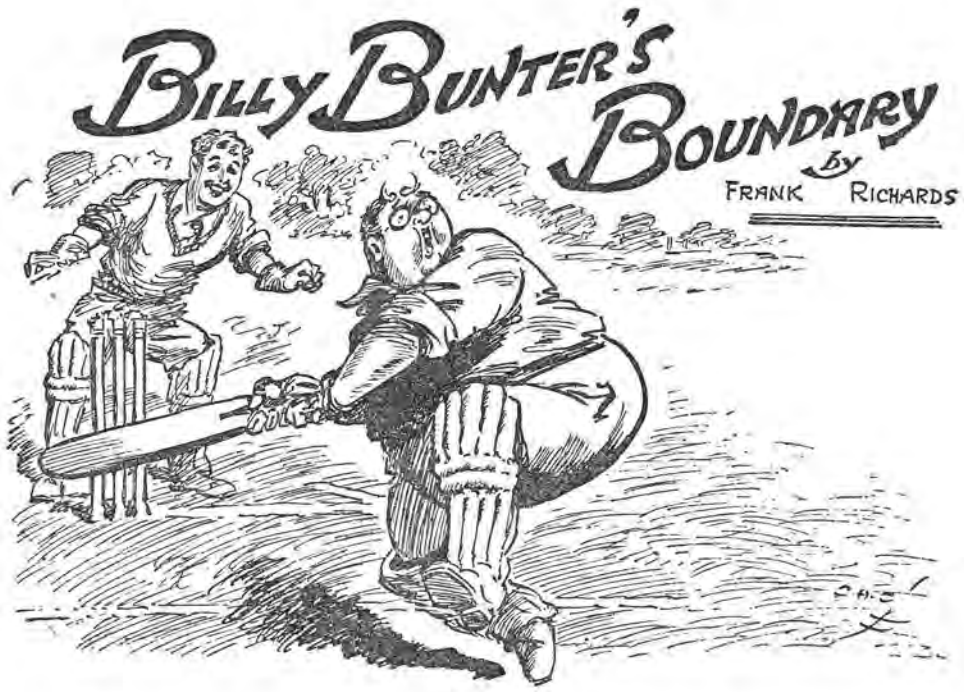

CHAPTER 1

"WHY not?" asked Bob Cherry.

Harry Wharton shook his head.

"Rot!" he said, tersely.

"Bunter's keen—"

"Is he? First time he's ever been keen on anything but tuck."

"Well, yes," admitted Bob. "But he really is keen now, and when a chap's keen, why not give him a chance? After all, it's only the Fourth we're playing—and we can beat the Fourth hands down, with a passenger on board. Bunter won't do any harm if he doesn't do any good."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"That's one way of looking at it!" he said. "But cricket's cricket, and we can't take chances."

"Safe as houses!" said Bob. "And dash it all, old man, we've ragged the fat ass often enough, for slacking: and now he's keen for once, why not give him a look in, when there's no real risk?"

"What's made him so jolly keen, all of a sudden?" asked the captain of the Remove. "He's usually keen on dodging games."

"Blessed if I know but—he is! Keen as mustard!" said Bob. "Look here, what do you fellows think?" He glanced round at Johnny Bull, Frank Nugent, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Oh, give him a chance," said Nugent. "We can beat the Fourth playing man short—and that's what it comes to."

"The beatfulness is a deadly cert," agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Grunt, from Johnny Bull.

"Cricket's an uncertain game," he said. "Temple's crowd aren't much good, but you never know."

There was a pause.

That afternoon, the Greyfriars Remove were playing the Fourth, in a Form match. They had no doubt of the result, which every Remove man regarded as a foregone conclusion. Temple, Dabney and Co. of the Fourth, were simply not in the same street, when it came to games, with the Remove. Not a member of the Famous Five doubted that they would beat the Fourth by a bagful of runs.

In such circumstances, it was possible to stretch a point.

Billy Bunter, the fattest and most fatuous member of the Remove, was keen to play. It was, as the captain of the Remove remarked, the first time he had displayed keenness. But for once, wonderful to relate, Bunter was keen as mustard: and he had pestered the captain of the Remove for days on end to give him a chance. Now Bob Cherry, always good-natured, and more than willing to welcome a stray sheep into the fold, as it were, had taken up the cudgels for the fat Owl. Certainly, in a match with Rookwood, or St. Jim's, or Felgate, Bob would not have dreamed of it. But it was only the Fourth, whom the Remove were accustomed to walk over. Even if Bunter scored ducks at the wicket, and fielded like a sack of coke, it wouldn't affect the result, unless by reducing the margin by which Temple, Dabney and Co. were licked. There would be a good margin anyway.

Harry Wharton nodded, at last.

There was only one dissentient voice among the five: Johnny's. Cricket, as Johnny remarked, was an uncertain game. But even Johnny was not emphatic about it.

"Oh, all right!" said Harry. "I'll tell the fat ass he's to play. And if the Fourth beat us, Bob—"

"They couldn't."

"Well, if they do—"

"They won't."

"If they do, we'll boot you all round the field after the game," declared Harry Wharton.

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"Do!" he said.

And the point having been settled, the captain of the Remove went to look for Billy Bunter, with good news for that fat and fatuous youth. He found the Owl of the Remove leaning on a buttress, breathing rather hard. Billy Bunter had done well at dinner, and he was slowly recovering from his exertions. Certainly he did not look a promising recruit for a cricket team.

He blinked at Harry Wharton, through his big spectacles, with a reproachful blink, as the captain of the Remove came up. How often his form-captain had answered "No!" to his requests to play for the form. Bunter could hardly have computed: but the negatives had been frequent enough to convince him that there was nothing doing.

"Oh, here you are," said Harry. "You're playing this afternoon, Bunter."

"Eh?"

"I'm shoving you into the team."

"Oh!"

"Get changed in time, if your flannels will go round that dinner you parked in hall."

Billy Bunter's fat lip curled.

"So you want me, after all?" he said. "I've a jolly good mind not to play, now."

"What?"

"You've found out that you were throwing away a good man," jeered Bunter. "Well, now you've changed your mind, and come and ask me to play, I'm not at all sure that I will, so yah! Still, if you want me—"

"You fat, foozling, frabjous, footling fathead!" said Harry Wharton, in measured tones. "You're not wanted, and you can go and eat coke." And he turned away.

A fat clutch on his arm stopped him.

"Hold on, old chap—!" bleated Bunter.

"Rats!"

"I was only jig—jog—joking, old chap! I'll play all right," gasped Bunter. "I'm awfully keen. Rely on me, old fellow! I'm your man!"

"Oh, all right, then. Stumps pitched at two!" said Harry. "And for goodness sake, Bunter, don't let us down if you can help it."

"Trust me!" said Bunter, cheerfully, "I suppose you'd like me to open the innings—"

"Oh, my hat! Hardly."

"Well, it would encourage the other fellows, you know, to see some really good batting at the start—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! What are you cackling at, I'd like to know?" hooted Bunter.

Harry Wharton did not stay to explain what he was cackling at. He walked away, still laughing. Billy Bunter frowned after him as he went. Bunter, at any rate, fancied that he could play cricket, and did not see where any element of the comic came in.

Bob Cherry met the fat Owl when he rolled in to change, and clapped him on a plump shoulder.

"Gratters, old fat man," he said. "Glad you're playing. Look here, Bunter, do your best—I talked Wharton into playing you, and he's promised to boot me round the field if we lose the game. So pull up your socks."

"Oh!" said Bunter. "Thanks, old chap! Jolly decent of you to put in a word for me."

"Well, as you're so jolly keen for once—!" said Bob.

"Yes, rather! Keen as billy-o!" said Bunter. "And look here, old fellow, you come to the feed in my study to-morrow."

"Eh? Is there going to be a feed in your study to-morrow?"

"What-ho! I'm going to blow the whole quid on one!" said Bunter, impressively.

He found the Owl leaning on a buttress

"What quid?"

Billy Bunter grinned.

"It's coming from the pater," he explained. "He's heard from Quelch that I'm slack at games. You know Quelch—he never does a fellow justice in his reports. I've told the pater a lot of times that I'm the best cricketer in the form, and chance it—"

"Oh crumbs!"

"Well, the pater's standing me a quid, if I play for the Form!" said Bunter. "And now I'm jolly well playing—he, he, he! Jolly good of you to help a fellow out, Cherry—"

"You fat villain!" roared Bob Cherry.

"Eh?"

"So that's why you're so jolly keen all of a sudden!" howled Bob. "By gum, I've a jolly good mind to boot you all over the school—"

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter threw that monosyllable over his shoulder as he hurriedly departed. Bob glared after him. Bunter's unusual and unexpected keenness on cricket was explained now. It was not a sudden and very commendable yearning for the summer game that moved him. It was the prospect of a tip from his pater if he played for his Form! Certainly Bob would never have put in that word for him, had he known that little circumstance earlier. But it was done now: for one occasion, if one only, the fat Owl was booked to display to all Greyfriars what a cricketer he was!

CHAPTER II

"LOOK out, Bunter!"

"Oh, fathead!"

"Butterfingers!"

Bunter was fielding.

To do the fat Owl justice, he was, if not exactly a keen games-man, at least keen to show the Remove, and all the rest of Greyfriars that he could play cricket. Billy Bunter often fancied that he could do things, until he came actually to do them. Then he generally woke up.

On the present occasion, it was an undoubted fact that Bunter was thinking most of all of the promised tip from his pater. That was the most important consideration in the game: indeed, in the whole universe. That "quid" was to be expended on a royal feast in Bunter's study: and compared to a study spread, a cricket match was merely an also ran. Nevertheless, Billy Bunter fancied

himself as a cricketer, and was willing, in fact eager, to let the Remove see what a mistake it had been to leave him out of matches.

Temple of the Fourth had won the toss, and elected to take first knock. The Fourth-form batsmen grinned at the fat figure that looked twice as wide as any other in the field, and gave him many chances. They seemed rather to rely on Bunter missing the ball, even if it dropped fairly on his fat little nose. If that was the idea, it paid dividends: for never by any chance did Billy Bunter's fat fingers contact the leather.

Now Hurree Jamset Ram Singh was bowling to Cecil Reginald Temple at the wicket. The Fourth had made forty, so far, and last man was in. So a catch in the field would have dismissed the Fourth: and as it happened, Temple landed a perfect "sitter" right into Bunter's hands—if those hands had not been so extensively what the juniors called "cack-handed".

Billy Bunter blinked at the ball. Perhaps he saw it. If he did that was all he did. It dropped lightly at his feet, and Temple and his partner were running.

"Butterfingers!"

"Fathead!"

"Send in that ball."

Bunter sent it in, in the wrong direction. By the time it came home, four

"Butterfingers!"

had been scored, and Temple was back at his wicket, grinning. And six more were taken before a catch in the field by Vernon-Smith put paid to the Fourth. Temple and Co. retired for fifty. It was more than they were accustomed to take, against doughty men like the Remove. Bunter in the field had been a present help in time of need!

"We shall have to pull up our socks, after all," Bob Cherry remarked at the pavilion.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Oh, dry up, Bunter!"

"But I say, what about me to open our innings?" asked Bunter. "It's a good rule in cricket to put the best men in first."

"Just what we're going to do," said Harry Wharton. "You come in last, you fat Owl—"

"Me last man!" exclaimed Bunter, indignantly.

"Yes: and if you don't like it—"

"I jolly well don't!" said Bunter, emphatically.

"Then you needn't come in at all. You can sit it out in the pav.—it won't make any difference."

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter watched the Remove innings with a frowning brow. He admitted that he hadn't had luck in the field: but he had a happy delusion that he was good for a century at the wicket, given a chance: indeed, in his mind's eye, he could see himself first in and not out! What he actually did see, when at long last he rolled out to bat, was a wrecked wicket, wrecked by the first ball he received. He blinked at that spread-eagled wicket, in surprise. He was the only person who was surprised.

"Oh, crikey!" said Bunter.

And he rolled on his homeward way.

"All down for forty-six!" Bob Cherry whistled.

"Did I say that cricket was an uncertain game?" queried Johnny Bull. "Temple's crowd are in better form than usual—and Bunter's helping them all he can—"

"Oh, really, Bull—!" squeaked an indignant fat Owl.

"You're an ass, Bob!" said Harry Wharton.

"And a chump!" said Nugent.

"The chumpfulness is terrific!" concurred Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Bob Cherry made a grimace.

"We'll lick them yet," he said.

"Better hope so!" said the captain of the Remove. "There's somebody who's going to be booted all round the field, if we don't."

"I suppose it was a bit risky, playing Bunter—", admitted Bob.

"More than a bit."

"I told you so!" remarked Johnny Bull.

"I say, you fellows, chuck it!" hooted Billy Bunter. "Any fellow might have a spot of bad luck. If you'll let me open our next innings, Wharton—"

"Kill him, somebody!"

"Beast!" hooted Bunter. "Well, I'll jolly well show you something in the field, anyhow."

And he did, when the Fourth batted again. As Bunter, in the field, was precisely as useful as a sack of coke, or a stone image, the Fourth-form batsmen seemed to delight in giving him chances. But Billy Bunter was on his mettle now—he was going to show them! And for once, marvellous to relate, his fat fingers did contact the ball. Temple, in fact, delivered it into his hands like a postman delivering a parcel.

Smack!

"Wow!"

Actually the ball smacked the fat palm. Then it dropped, and Bunter sucked that fat palm, which apparently had a pain in it.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Bob Cherry.

"Oh, the fat chump!"

"Butterfingers!"

"Ow! ow!" gasped Bunter. "Wow!"

That was Billy Bunter's last chance to distinguish himself in the field. The innings ended with the Fourth Form another fifty up: and the Remove were left with fifty-five to get if they were going to pull off that match. So far from beating the Fourth by a wide margin, there seemed to be an element of doubt whether they would beat them at all: undoubtedly, cricket was an uncertain game, as Johnny Bull had sapiently remarked.

CHAPTER III

"BOB you ass—!"

"Bob, you fathead—!"

"Bob, you ditherer!"

"Bob you terrific ass!"

Bob had nothing to say. He could have kicked himself. Still more willingly, he could have kicked Bunter. Good-naturedly, he had urged Bunter's claims: only to discover that the fat Owl's main object was to bag a tip from his pater.

But at least he had banked on Bunter doing no harm if he did no good. Even if the fat Owl scored a pair of spectacles, he did not think the result less assured. Ten Removites were as good as any eleven of the Fourth: he was sure of that. But the proverbial uncertainty of the summer was his undoing. Temple and Co. were playing a better game than usual, and there was no doubt that a man in the field like Bunter was a considerable help to batsmen. The expected margin of victory was not only narrowed down. It looked like disappearing.

Bob, generally a mighty man with the willow, couldn't foresee that he was going to have awful luck, and be dismissed for two! Neither could he have guessed, or dreamed, that Smithy would be out for three. Such sad and unlooked-for things do happen on the cricket field.

Now the Remove were taking their second knock. The best men had not been quite up to their best: and the "tail" went down rapidly. When last man in was called, the Remove score stood at fifty-one for the innings. They wanted three to tie, four to win. And the over was unfinished: last man was to take the bowling! And last man was William George Bunter!

So the other men told Bob what they thought of him, and Bob felt like kicking himself. Any man in the Remove—excepting Billy Bunter—might yet have pulled that game out of the fire. Wide margins were forgotten: but a win by a single run was a win. Instead of which, they were going to be beaten by three: for who could doubt that Bunter was going to repeat his earlier performance and remain at the wicket just long enough to turn his duck into a pair of spectacles!

"It's rotten!" mumbled Bob.

"Fathead!"

"You priceless ass!" said Harry Wharton. "You know what's coming to you if you've got us licked! Get ready to boot him all round the field, you men, after Bunter's scored his duck."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Get a move on, fathead! Get it over!"

"Yah!" retorted Bunter. "You just watch out, and you'll see what you will see! I fancy I can handle that bowling, if you fellows can't."

"Kick him!"

"Beast!"

Bunter rolled out to the vacant wicket. The Fourth-form field grinned, as he took his stand there, with the ease and grace of a coal-sack. Fry of the Fourth, who had the ball, winked at Temple, who chuckled. They all knew what was going to happen. For once in a way, they were going to beat the Remove at cricket: and undoubtedly the Remove had asked for it. One ball would be enough for that fat batsman: and all would be over. They could see

it just as clearly as if it had already happened: and so could the Remove men at the pavilion: only one fellow couldn't, and that one was William George Bunter.

Bunter blinked along the pitch through his big spectacles. He took a business-like grip on the handle of his bat. Bunter was going to swipe—he was going to put his beef into it: and whatever else Bunter lacked, it was certain that he did not lack beef. If the bat met the ball, quite probably that ball might go on distant travels. It was more likely to miss it by a foot, if not by a yard.

"All up!" sighed Bob, as Fry sent down the ball.

Johnny Bull barely refrained from saying "I told you so!"

And then—!

Clack!

All ears heard the clack of bat and ball. Bunter had swiped—and by one of those miracles which happen in cricket, Bunter had got that ball fair and square! It was a tremendous swipe! The impetus of it tipped Bunter over when it was delivered, and he landed on fat knees.

But where was the ball?

It soared far away, far over heads and uplifted hands. Amazed eyes fol-

"I can handle the bowling if you fellows can't"

lowed it in its flight. Bob Cherry gave Harry Wharton a thump on the back that made him stagger.

"It's a boundary!" he yelled.

"Ow! Don't break my backbone! wow! By gum, so it is!"

If runs had been needed, certainly they could not have been provided from Bunter's end of the pitch. That tremendous swipe seemed to have expended all his limited supply of wind. He sagged on fat knees and gasped for breath.

But no runs were needed!

That swipe had done it!

Bunter had hit a boundary!

It was incredible, unthinkable, a chance in a thousand, if not in a million: but Bunter had done it! There was a roar from the Remove.

"Four!"

"Good old Bunter!"

"Good old porpoise!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who'd have thought it?" gasped Harry Wharton. "Bunter—a boundary! A boundary—Bunter! I suppose we've not gone to sleep and dreamed it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Anybody going to boot a chap round the field for pushing Bunter into the team?" grinned Bob Cherry. "By gum—cricket is an uncertain game, and never so jolly uncertain as when Bunter's playing it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was over. After so many doubts and uncertainties, the Remove had won by a run with a wicket in hand. Later, Billy Bunter pointed out to Harry Wharton that he simply couldn't afford to leave out such a batsman when Rookwood came over. To which the captain of the Remove replied only with the classic monosyllable "Rats!" Nevertheless, Remove fellows did not forget—Billy Bunter took care that they shouldn't—that Form match had been won by Bunter's boundary!

THE END