



He rolled out — with a parcel under his arm

CHAPTER I

BAD FOR BUNTER!

“HALLO, hallo, hallo!”

“What’s up?”

“Is the upfulness terrific?”

“Licked?”

“What’s the trouble?”

Billy Bunter did not answer.

He sat in the armchair in No. 1 study in the Greyfriars Remove, and blinked dismally at Harry Wharton and Co. through his big spectacles.

The Famous Five had come in to tea. They came in fresh, and ruddy, and hungry, after football: more than ready for tea. They were not surprised to

see Billy Bunter in the study. It was far from uncommon for the fat Owl of the Remove to be found in another fellow's study about tea-time. But they were surprised to see him looking as if all the troubles of the universe, and a few over, had descended in a bunch on his fat shoulders.

Generally, it was a cheerful Owl. As a rule, Bunter was satisfied with life at Greyfriars School, and more than satisfied with himself. If he had spots of bother with Mr. Quelch in the form-room, he soon forgot them—almost as easily as he forgot his lessons. If—as so often happened—he was disappointed about a postal-order he was expecting, he usually contrived to exercise his skill as a borrower, or to ask himself to some other fellow's spread, or at a pinch, to raid supplies surreptitiously from some other fellow's study cupboard. On the whole, Billy Bunter had a quite cheerful outlook on life.

But now there was a change.

His fat face was gloomy and glum. He blinked at the chums of the Remove with a lack-lustre blink. It was a sad and sorrowful Owl. Something, evidently, was amiss with the plumpest member of the Greyfriars community.

"Lines from Quelch?" asked Bob Cherry.

Bunter shook his head.

"Whops?" asked Frank Nugent.

Another shake of the head.

"Smithy been booting you for snooping his dough-nuts?" asked Johnny Bull.

Again the fat head was shaken.

"Well, what's up, then?" asked Harry Wharton. "You look as if you were going to execution, old fat man."

"So I am!" moaned Bunter, finding his voice at last. "Or just as bad! Quelch says I'm to go to the Head."

"The Head won't eat you," said Bob.

"The eatfulness will not be terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Quite a nice old boy, in some ways," said Nugent.

But there seemed no comfort for Bunter in those comforting remarks. Certainly, he did not suppose that the Head would eat him! It was not so bad as that! But, kindly old gentleman as Dr. Locke certainly was, no Greyfriars fellow really enjoyed being sent up to him. To most of the juniors the Head's study rather resembled a lion's den: and Billy Bunter, clearly, did not dare to be a Daniel—if he could help it.

"But what have you done?" asked Harry.

"Nothing!" moaned Bunter. "It's just Quelch! He's been down on me all this term, as you fellows know. He makes out that I'm lazy and careless and

slovenly—he's said so lots of times—he's even said that I'm untruthful—me, you know!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"He's been jawing me," went on Bunter. "I wouldn't mind that so much, if he left it at that. Schoolmasters do jaw, you know—and fellows have to stand it. But he wound up by saying I was to go to the Head, who would decide what was to be done. I—I—I don't want to go to the Head! Quelch said he was fed up with me—."

"Quelch did!" gasped Bob.

"Well, not in those words," said Bunter. "He said that I had exhausted his patience—that's the way schoolmasters talk! He meant he was fed up. He said that he had consulted the head-master, and that Dr. Locke would decide. I—I don't quite know what he meant by that—but—but it sounds like jolly bad trouble. Don't you fellows think so?"

"Sort of!" agreed Bob.

"The sortfulness is terrific."



"Quelch said he was fed up with me . . ."

"Poor old Bunter!"

"Hard cheese, old fat man."

The Famous Five were sympathetic. They could sympathise with any fellow who had to go up to the Head. But they really could not be surprised that Mr. Quelch's patience had run out, with that particular member of his form. Quelch had the idea, so common to schoolmasters, that fellows came to school to learn things. Billy Bunter, on the other hand, seemed to have a fixed and irrevocable determination never to learn anything. His "howlers" in class often entertained other fellows, but they never amused Quelch. And Bunter was often—too often—under suspicion when comestibles were missing, whether biscuits from the box in Common-Room, or a pie from the pantry. His excuses and explanations, on such occasions, were many and various, but seldom in accordance with the facts. Indeed, at this very moment, sad and sorrowful as he was, there were crumbs adhering to his fat face, and scattered over his wide circumference, which looked as if he had recently been somewhere where there was a cake—very probably not his own cake.

Nevertheless, Harry Wharton and Co. were sympathetic. If matters had come to such a pass that the Remove master had decided to send the fattest member of his form to the Head for judgment, it did, indeed, look like "jolly bad trouble" for the Owl of the Remove.

"Poor old Bunter!" repeated Harry Wharton. "Well, if Quelch says you're to go, you'd better go. Perhaps it will only be a jaw."

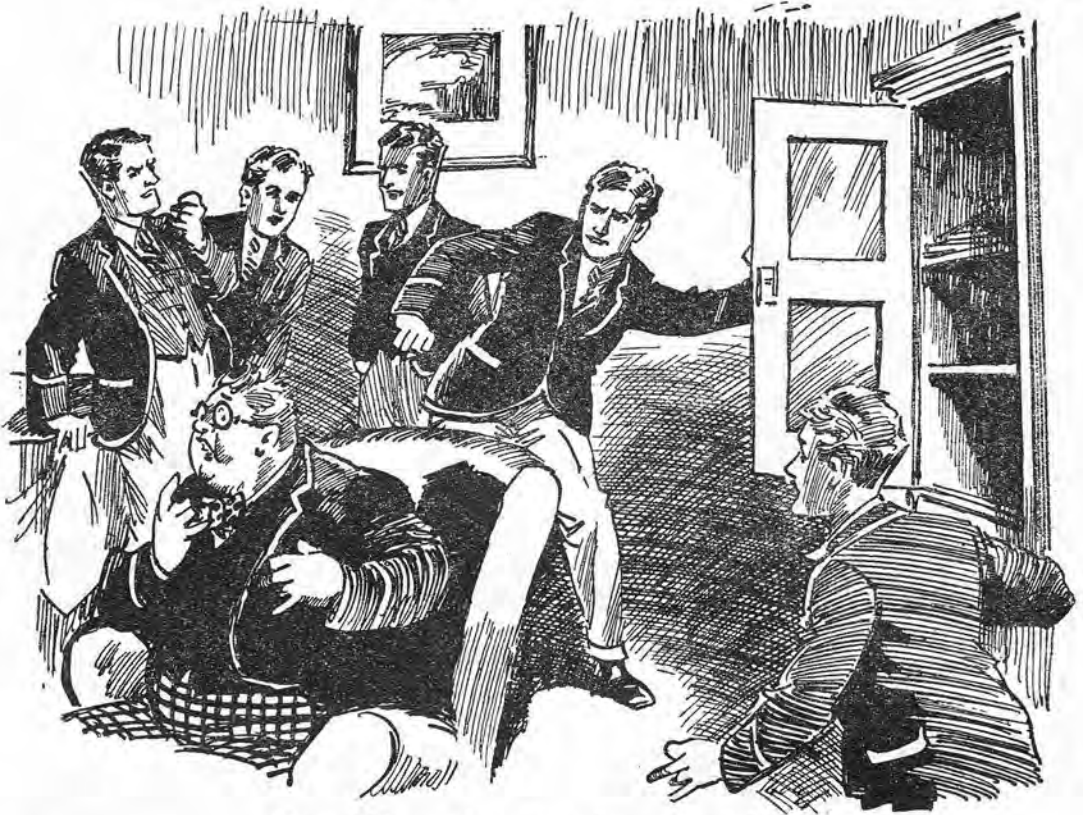
"Have tea with us before you go," said Frank Nugent. "We've got a whopping cake for tea—it came for Wharton this morning."

"Oh!" Billy Bunter sat up in the armchair. Strange to relate, that kind invitation did not seem to lighten his woes. Generally, the mere mention of food had a bracing effect on Bunter. For some reason it seemed now rather to alarm him. "Oh! I—I—I think I'd better go—." He rose from the armchair quite hastily.

"Rot!" said Harry Wharton, "You'll feel more like facing the Head with a cargo of tuck inside."

"I—I—Oh—yes—but—."

Harry Wharton crossed to the study cupboard. That day a cake, a very large and very handsome cake, had arrived from Wharton Lodge for the captain of the Remove. The Famous Five, no doubt, could have done it ample justice, after football in the keen December air. But they were willing—eager, in fact—to whack out that big cake with the forlorn Owl, in the sad circumstances. It was the only comfort they could give: and if food did not comfort Bunter, nothing would. They were not only prepared to whack out that cake with Bunter, but to seen him annex the lion's share thereof.



Harry Wharton threw open the cupboard door

But———!

Harry Wharton threw open the cupboard door. He reached into the cupboard. But he reached into empty space!

Then there was almost a roar.

"Where's that cake?"

"Eh! It's there—?" said Nugent.

"It isn't."

"But you put it there—!"

Billy Bunter was sidling swiftly towards the door. Johnny Bull, with a grim face, gave him a push, and he tottered back to the armchair, and sat therein with a bump.

"Ow!" gasped Bunter.

"Where's that cake?"

"The wherefulness is terrific."

"Bunter, you fat villain—."

"Bunter, you podgy pirate—."

"Bunter, you bloated brigand—."

"Bunter, you terrific cormorant—."

"I—I—I say, you fellows," gasped Bunter, in alarm. "I—I never had the cake! I—I—I haven't had any cake for days—I—I mean weeks—."

"Where did all those crumbs come from, then?"

"Eh!" Billy Bunter hastily drew a fat hand across a large mouth. "I—I mean—I—I wasn't—I mean—I never—I—I didn't know there was a cake in the cupboard—it wasn't there when I looked in. Besides, I never looked in. I'm not the fellow to nose into another fellow's cupboard, I hope! I—I say, you fellows, if you think I had that cake, I can jolly well say——yaroooooooooh!"

Sympathy had completely evaporated! Five hungry fellows had been prepared to whack out that cake. But that cake was a goner—gone from their gaze like a beautiful dream! Sad and sorrowful as they had found Bunter, his sadness and sorrowfulness had not, evidently, affected his appetite! Nothing remained of that cake but the crumbs scattered over Bunter.

"I say, you fellows—yaroooh—leave off kicking me, you beasts—wow! I say—I didn't—yaroooh!—I never—wow! Oh, crikey! Whooooooooop!"

Billy Bunter fled for his fat life! Five feet contacted him as he fled, and a wild roar came back from the passage as he flew through the doorway. Still roaring, Bunter did the passage at about 60 m.p.h. And the Famous Five, absolutely unsympathetic now, only hoped that if Bunter was going to the Head's study for a whopping, the old boy would lay it on hard!

CHAPTER II

PAINFUL PROSPECTS!

"**B**EAST!"

Billy Bunter breathed that expressive word inaudibly. He was standing at the door of the head-master's study, with a fat hand raised. But he had not yet tapped. A tap would be followed by the words "Come in,"—and Billy Bunter did not want to go in—very much indeed, he did not. He had to—there was no doubt about that. But he hesitated, with a sinking, plump heart: and murmured, under his breath, "Beast!"

Sad to relate, Bunter was applying that epithet to no less a person than Dr. Locke, head-master of Greyfriars School. Any person who came between William George Bunter and his fat comfort was, obviously, a beast: even a

head-master! But he was careful not to utter the word aloud. He did not want to confide to Dr. Locke his opinion of him!

He was booked for a "row". Quelch was fed up with him, as Bunter put it: his patience was exhausted, as Quelch had put it himself. Whichever way it was put, the fact was the same: and Quelch was handing him over to his head-master, and what was the result going to be? If it was a "jaw", Bunter felt that he could stand it. But he had a deep misgiving that it was going to be something much more unpalatable than a "jaw". Once, twice, thrice, he almost tapped—but still he hesitated.

But it had to be! Screwing up his courage at last, Billy Bunter tapped on the dreaded door.

There was no reply from within. Perhaps that hesitating tap had been too faint to be heard. Billy Bunter breathed hard. He tapped again, more loudly.

Still there was no response. It occurred to Bunter that perhaps the Head



Bunter tapped on the dreaded door

was not in his study at the moment. If so, he had to go in and wait for him. That, at least, would be a respite.

He opened the door, and blinked into the study through his big spectacles. The room was vacant. Dr. Locke was not there.

"Beast!" murmured Bunter once more, as he rolled in.

He was glad of the respite. Nevertheless, it was beastly to be kept waiting for a "row". It had to come, and the sooner it was over the better. But the forlorn fat Owl had to wait.

He blinked at the Head's armchair, debating in his fat mind whether he could venture to sit in it while he waited for Dr. Locke. But another blink round the study drew his attention from the armchair. On the table was a tray. On the tray was a glass of milk, and a plate of biscuits. Apparently the Head was not going to his house for tea, but had directed a little light refreshment to be placed in his study. Billy Bunter blinked at the plate of biscuits, and then blinked round stealthily at the door, which he had left half-open.

Foodstuffs always tempted Bunter. It was hardly half-an-hour since he had scoffed a cake in Harry Wharton's study. But there was always room for more within Bunter's extensive circumference.

The Head might come in any minute. But there was no sound of footsteps so far. A fat hand was stretched out to the tray, and a biscuit was transferred to a capacious mouth. One, Bunter considered, would not be missed.

He crunched that biscuit with satisfaction. Still there was no sound of footsteps. The fat hand was stretched out again. Two, after all, would not be missed! A second biscuit crunched.

Unluckily, when Billy Bunter began to eat, he found it difficult to stop, so long as anything eatable remained. Had the Head come in, certainly he would have stopped. But the Head did not come in. A third biscuit followed the second, and a fourth followed the third. Then, almost unconsciously, Billy Bunter went on crunching biscuits, hardly noticing how he was clearing that plate, till only a couple of biscuits were left.

Then there was a footstep without, and at the sound of it, Billy Bunter backed hastily away from the table. He could hardly hope that the Head would never notice the denuded state of that plate. But he hoped, from the bottom of his fat heart, that the Head wouldn't notice it till he was safe out of the study.

Dr. Locke rustled in.

To the fat junior's great relief, he did not glance towards the table. His eyes fixed on the Owl of the Remove.

"Bunter!" he said.

"Yes, sir!" mumbled Bunter. "Mr. Quelch told me to come, sir!"

"Quite!" said Dr. Locke.

He sat down, still without a glance towards the table. Light refreshment, no doubt, was to wait till he was through with Bunter. His eyes remained fixed on the fat Owl. His brow, usually quite benignant, had assumed a severe expression. Billy Bunter quaked inwardly, wondering dismally whether it was going to be "whops". The Head looked like it.

"Bunter!" Dr. Locke's voice was deep. "I have received very serious complaints about you from your form-master. It appears, Bunter, that you are idle, inattentive, dilatory, extremely backward in class, and even very slack in games. This must be amended, Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Bunter. "Certainly, sir."

"Even more serious than that," went on Dr. Locke, "Mr. Quelch reports that you are an extremely untruthful boy: not only the most untruthful boy in his form, or in the whole school, but the most untruthful boy in all his experience."



"I've always been truthful, sir"

Billy Bunter's eyes opened wide behind his spectacles. Apparently he did not recognize this description of himself.

"Me, sir!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, you, Bunter."

"Oh, really, sir! Perhaps Mr. Quelch was thinking of some other fellow, sir—Wharton, or Nugent, or Cherry, sir—not me, sir! I—I can't remember ever telling a fib, sir—."

"Bunter!"

"I—I can't, really, sir! I—I've always been truthful, sir, like—like George Washington, sir, with his little hatchet."

"That will do, Bunter. There is still another matter, a very serious matter, upon which Mr. Quelch has laid much stress."

Billy Bunter almost ejaculated "Beast!": this time in reference to his form-master! Evidently Quelch, having once decided to hand Bunter over to his Chief, had furnished a quite long list of sins. Bunter wondered indignantly, what was coming next! Idle, dilatory, inattentive, backward, slack, and untruthful: Quelch had piled it on! And still there was more to come!

"It appears," said the Head, sternly, "that you are a most unscrupulous boy in matters of—hem—comestibles. On numerous occasions—Mr. Quelch states on innumerable occasions—you have purloined comestibles belonging to other boys, and even to masters—an act, Bunter, which amounts to pilfering."

"D-d-d-does it, sir?"

"Are you not aware that it does, Bunter?"

"Oh! Yes, sir! But I never—."

"Only this morning, Bunter, a pie was missed from below stairs, and Mrs. Kebble complained to your form-master that you had taken it."

"But—but I didn't, sir—!" gasped Bunter. "I—I hadn't been down the kitchen stairs at all, sir. Mrs. Kebble thought I had, just because she saw me coming up, sir—."

"What?"

"But—but I—I hadn't, sir," gasped Bunter. "I—I was in the tuck-shop, sir, when I went down for that pie—I mean when I didn't went down—."

"Upon my word! Bunter, it is quite clear that you abstracted the pie—a large pie—."

"Oh, no, sir, it wasn't large—it hardly lasted me ten minutes—."

"Bless my soul! Then you confess that you did take it, Bunter?"

"Oh, no, sir! I—I never touched it! I—I never knew there was a pie! I never saw it when I went down to the kitchen, sir—and I never went down, sir—I was in the gym when Mrs. Kebble saw me on the stairs—I mean when she didn't saw me—."

"That will do, Bunter."

"Yes, sir! Thank you, sir! M-m-may I go now, sir?"

"Listen to me, Bunter. I shall expect to hear from your form-master that you have improved in class. I shall expect to hear that you have corrected your propensity to untruthfulness. And—" the Head's voice deepened, "I shall expect, Bunter, to learn that you have entirely ceased your depredations in the matter of comestibles. You must learn, Bunter, that the rights of property are to be respected, even in such trifles as dough-nuts or—or tarts. Otherwise, Bunter, I shall have no choice but to deal with you with the utmost severity."

Bunter almost gasped with relief.

It was, after all, only a "jaw".

Certainly, the prospect of the "utmost severity" if he did not mend his ways was not attractive. His ways required a tremendous amount of mending, which they were not likely to get. But Billy Bunter was not the fellow to meet trouble half-way. So long as he escaped from the Head's study unwhopped, that was good enough to go on with.

The Head made a gesture towards the door. Gladly the fat Owl started to roll in that direction. Unluckily, Dr. Locke turned his attention to the tray on the table, having finished with Bunter.

Then there was a sharp exclamation.

"Bunter! Stop!"

"Oh, crikey! I—I mean, yes, sir!" gasped Bunter. Unwillingly, he stopped. The Head gazed at an almost empty plate, and then at Bunter.

"Upon my word!" said Dr. Locke. "In my own study—Bunter, you have purloined the biscuits from this tray, in your head-master's study."

"Oh! No, sir!" gasped Bunter. "I—I—I haven't been near the table, sir! I—I never noticed the biscuits at all! And—and there were only two of them, sir, when I came in."

"That plate was full of biscuits, Bunter."

"W-a-was it, sir? Perhaps—perhaps it was the cat, sir—."

"The cat?"

"Yes, sir—Mrs. Kebble's cat, sir, it's always nosing into the studies, sir—I—I—I think it must have been the—the—the kik-kik-cat, sir—."

Dr. Locke rose to his feet. His expression was almost terrific. He picked up a cane.

"Bunter, bend over that chair."

"Oh, lor'!"

Whop!

"Wow!"

"Now, Bunter—."



"Bunter, bend over that chair"

"Ow! wow! wow! ow!"

"Listen to this, Bunter! Bear my warning in mind! If I receive a single report, on a single occasion, that you have appropriated comestibles belonging to any other person, I shall administer a flogging—a most severe flogging!"

"Oh, crikey!"

"Take care, Bunter, that no such report reaches my ears! If you should be guilty of such an action, on a single occasion, you will be flogged! Bear that in mind! Now you may go!"

Billy Bunter blinked at him. The Head's face was quite grim. Evidently he meant every word he said! Unless the purloiner of tuck mended his ways, he was booked for a flogging—and only too clearly, if it came to that, the Head was going to lay it on! It was an awful prospect for Bunter.

"Go!" rapped the Head.

A dismal and dolorous Owl rolled out of the study.

CHAPTER III

COKER'S CHRISTMAS PUDDING!

"CHRISTMAS pudding!"

Billy Bunter pricked up his fat ears.

Those words were—to Bunter—words of magic! Why Coker, Potter and Greene, of the Fifth Form, were discussing Christmas puddings, Bunter did not know—but those magic words caught his fat ears, which pricked up at once.

It was the day after Bunter's painful interview with his head-master. It was a half-holiday: a fine, clear, if rather cold, December day, with a glimmer of wintry sunshine in the sky. Most Greyfriars fellows were feeling quite cheery that afternoon, braced by the keen frosty air, the satisfaction of having done with lessons for the day, and the prospect of breaking up for the Christmas holidays, now near at hand. But Billy Bunter was not cheery. He was not braced. His fat face was gloomy as he rolled in the quad.

Usually an optimist, that interview with the Head had transformed Bunter into a pessimist. After dinner he was not, exactly, hungry, but he had ample space for anything of a sweet and sticky nature. Had his celebrated postal-order arrived, as Bunter had fully expected, it would have eased the situation. But, as had so often happened before, he had been disappointed about that postal-order, and like the seed in the parable, he had fallen in a stony place! And his accustomed resource, in such circumstances, was barred to him. One single depredation, if it came out, meant a flogging; and the fat Owl fairly cringed at the idea of bending over under the Head's birch. The tuck-raider of the Remove found, like Othello, his occupation gone!

With that awful prospect hanging over his fat head, he dared not venture to extract a single biscuit from the box in Common-Room. Wild horses could hardly have dragged him down the kitchen stairs in search of a pie. He had seen Temple of the Fourth take a box of chocs to his study, and come away without it—but he resisted the urge to pay a surreptitious visit to Temple's study. He knew that Smithy had a bag of dough-nuts in his study in the Remove—and Bunter loved dough-nuts. And Vernon-Smith had gone out with his pal Redwing. But—! Bunter's fat thoughts dwelt on those dough-nuts, but he shook his head sadly. Smithy might make a fuss if they were missing—some word might reach Quelch's ears—and then!

It was a pessimistic Bunter.

"Christmas pudding!"

Billy Bunter's little round eyes, and big round spectacles, turned on Horace Coker. He was coming away from Gosling's lodge, swinging a parcel in his hand. Potter and Greene, apparently, had made some inquiry as to the contents of that parcel: hence Coker's reply. Bunter was interested—he could hardly have been more so. Christmas was coming—and no doubt Christmas puddings too—but that was only in prospect: Billy Bunter would have liked a Christmas pudding on the spot! And there was one on the spot, it seemed—in that parcel swinging from Horace Coker's hand.

"You see, Aunt Judy mentioned it in her letter this morning," explained Coker. "She told me she was sending me a Christmas pudding, ahead of Christmas, you know, and here it is, see?"

"Sensible old lady!" said Potter.

"Jolly good idea," said Greene.

"I'll take it up to the study," said Coker. "I fancy we shall be ready for it when we come in from our walk, what? Warm it up on the stove in the study. I can tell you, my aunt Judy's Christmas puddings are good. It's a good size, too—might ask some of the fellows in. You don't get a Christmas pudding every day of the week. After we've had our trot over to Pegg—"

"Um!" said Potter. "That's rather a long trot, Coker." Coker's pals were not quite so energetic as Coker. Coker had the longest and most active legs in the Fifth Form, and not infrequently he walked Potter and Greene off theirs.

"Rot!" said Coker. "We can come back by the short cut through Friardale Wood if you get fagged."

"Um!" said Potter again. "I'd rather steer clear of Friardale Wood. You know what Price said about that tramp hanging about—"

"Who's afraid of tramps?" inquired Coker.

"Well, Price said he stopped him on the footpath, and Price cut—"

"Price would!" said Coker, disdainfully. "I'd like to see a tramp make me cut! Rot! Now, I'll take this up to the study—. You fellows wait for me, and then we'll get off to Pegg."

"But I say—"

"Don't jaw, old chap."

Coker marched into the House with his parcel. Potter and Greene were left to wait for him in the quad. Billy Bunter did not heed Potter and Greene. His eyes, and his spectacles, followed Coker of the Fifth, until he disappeared into the House with Aunt Judy's parcel. Then Bunter rolled sadly away.

It was really quite painful for Bunter. He could resist biscuits—he could resist chocs—he could resist dough-nuts! But Christmas pudding! That was almost irresistible!

And Coker and Co. were going out on a long walk, that Christmas pudding was going to be left in their study, at the mercy of a tuck-raiding Owl! In happier circumstances, Billy Bunter would have had only to wait till they were gone, and then pop into Coker's study! But the Head's dread warning was still fresh in his fat mind. If it came out, there was a flogging ahead for Bunter. A Christmas pudding was almost worth a flogging—but not quite! Billy Bunter pondered over it as he rolled, but again he shook a fat head.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

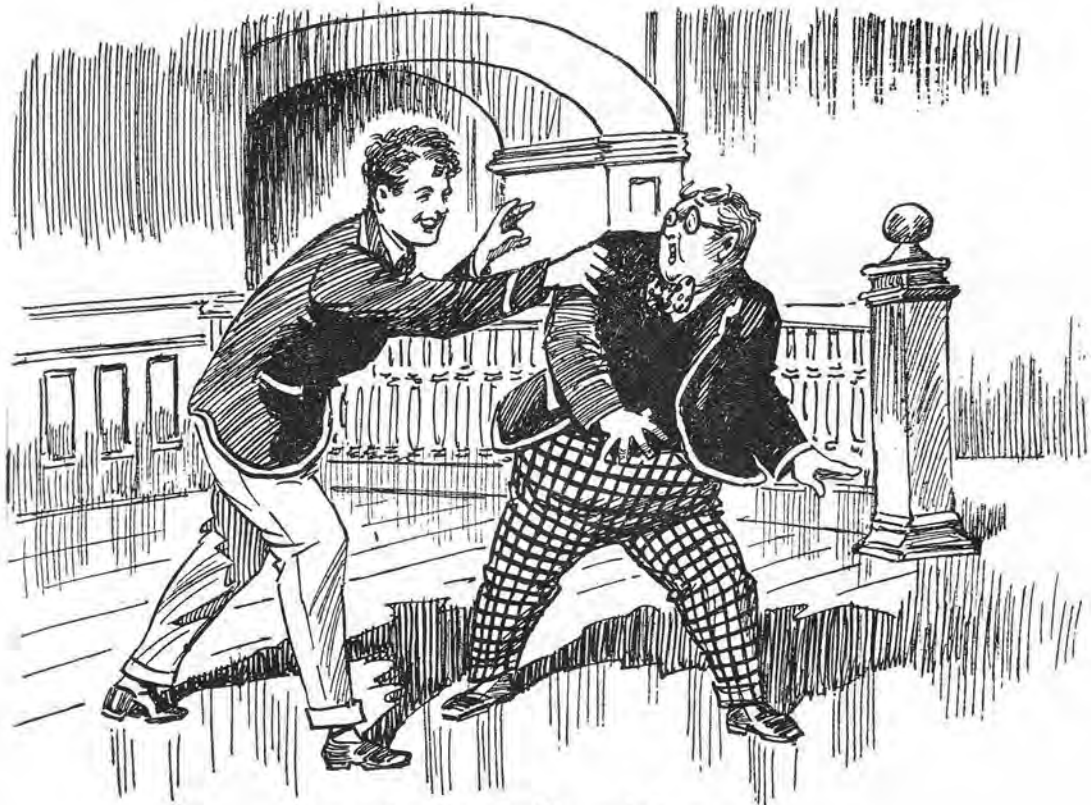
A cheery smack on a fat shoulder made Bunter jump.

"Ow!" gasped Bunter. "Beast!" He blinked round at Bob Cherry.

"Enjoying life, old fat man?" asked Bob, genially. The pessimistic Owl did not look like enjoying life!

He frowned at the cheery Bob. But the frown melted away as a bright idea came into his fat mind.

"I say, Cherry, old chap—"



A smack on his shoulder made Bunter jump

"Stony!" said Bob, shaking his head.

"Eh! Think I want to borrow something?" yapped Bunter.

"Don't you?"

"No!" yapped Bunter.

"Then what did you call me old chap for?"

"Oh, really, Cherry! I say, what price a lark on Coker?" With the corner of his eye, Bunter noted that Coker had come out of the House, rejoined Potter and Greene, and that the three were going down to the gates. The coast was clear now! He blinked eagerly at Bob Cherry.

"A lark on Coker?" repeated Bob. "What sort of a lark, old porpoise?"

"He's just taken a parcel up to his study, and he's gone out with his pals," said Bunter. "I say, old chap, it would be jolly easy to nip into his study and bag that parcel—. There's a Christmas pudding in it—."

"You fat, foozling, frumptious, frabjous fathead!" said Bob Cherry, in measured tones. "Is that what you call a lark—bagging Coker's Christmas pudding? Keep clear of Coker's study, you fat foozler."

"I'm jolly well going to," said Bunter. "You know what the Head said to me yesterday—."

"You'd better keep it in mind," said Bob. "You touch Coker's parcel, and it's you for the whopping of your life."

"But I'm not going to touch it," explained Bunter. "I hope I'm not the fellow to scoff another fellow's Christmas pudding—."

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Bob.

"It's a lark!" further explained Bunter. "Suppose that pudding was taken out of Coker's study, and—and put up in the box-room? See? Then Coker could hunt for it! Simply a lark on Coker, just to give him a hunt for his Christmas pudding. I—I—I'm not thinking of eating it—."

"You wouldn't!" grinned Bob.

"Nothing of the kind, of course! Just hide it up in the box-room and give Coker a hunt for it—no end of a lark on Coker! You nip into his study, old fellow, and—and take that pudding up to the box-room, see? I—I—I'll keep cave for you, see? Jolly good joke on Coker, what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob.

"You'll do it?" asked Bunter, eagerly.

"Let's have it clear," chuckled Bob. "I'm to nip into Coker's study and bag that pudding, and take it up to the box-room and leave it there—."

"That's it, old fellow."

"Only to give Coker a hunt for it?"

"That's all."



"But I'm not going to touch it"

"And you wouldn't dodge into the box-room afterwards and scoff it?" asked Bob.

"Yes—I—I mean no—not at all, old chap! I—I hope you don't think I'm just pulling your leg, to get hold of Coker's pudding—."

"Sorry, old fat man, but that's just what I do think!" chuckled Bob. "You fat villain, if you're looking for a catspaw, you'll have to look further. I won't go anywhere near Coker's study: but I'll tell you what I will do—I'll jolly well boot you for trying to pull my leg—!"

"Yarooooooh!"

Bob Cherry walked away, laughing—leaving Billy Bunter wriggling and glaring after him with a glare that might almost have cracked his spectacles. And it was borne in upon the fat Owl's fat mind, that if any hands abstracted that Christmas pudding from Coker's study, they would have to be his own fat hands.

CHAPTER IV

SIMPLY AWFUL!

BILLY BUNTER hesitated.

But it was said of old that he who hesitates is lost!

And it was so very easy!

Nobody was about. Not a man was about the Fifth-form studies. Coker and Potter and Greene, as the fat Owl knew, had gone out of gates. But had Hilton, or Price, or Blundell, or any other Fifth-form man, been in the offing, Bunter would hardly have made the venture. But nobody was in the offing. All that worried Bunter was the Head's stern warning. But he reasoned it out that the Head wouldn't know! If nobody saw Bunter anywhere near Coker's study, how was a missing Christmas pudding to be traced to Bunter?

It was true, as the fat Owl sadly knew, that when tuck was missing, fellows thought of him at once. But suspicion was not evidence. The Head, even if he was a beast, was a just beast: he wouldn't whop a fellow on suspicion. Bunter, if he got away with that pudding, was not going to be seen with it. He was going to scud out of gates immediately, to some remote and secure spot where he could devour his prey at leisure and in safety. Really, there was little risk, or none, so far as Bunter could see. His fat mind was made up at last.

He rolled into Coker's study. He was not more than a few moments in that apartment. He rolled out again with a parcel under a fat arm.

The die was cast!

The coast was still clear. Not a fellow, senior or junior, was to be seen on the landing when he rolled out of the Fifth-form passage with that parcel. But on the stairs, as he descended, he passed Skinner of the Remove.

"Hallo, what have you got there, Bunter?" asked Skinner.

"Oh! Nothing," said Bunter, hastily.

"A parcel full of nothing?" asked Skinner.

"Yes—I mean, no! I mean, 'tain't a pudding, if that's what you think," snapped Bunter. "Don't you ask a fellow questions, Skinner."

He rolled on, leaving Skinner grinning.

He emerged from the House, and his fat heart had a tremor as his eyes fell on Mr. Quelch. The Remove master was taking a walk in the quad with Mr. Prout, the master of the Fifth. Prout did not heed the fat junior, but Quelch glanced at him, unfavourably. That particular member of his form was not in Quelch's good books. Only the day before, he had sent him up to the Head. Billy Bunter almost trembled as the gimlet-eye fell on him.

But, keen as that gimlet-eye was, it certainly could not penetrate the parcel under Bunter's fat arm. To Bunter's relief, Quelch gave him only that unfavouring glance, and left it at that.

Bunter rolled on. He headed for the gates. He was very anxious to get out of the precincts of Greyfriars School with his booty. His extensive mouth watered for that Christmas pudding, but he was not going to open Coker's parcel until he was quite safe from observation.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

He blinked round in alarm. It was Bob Cherry hailing him from a distance. Bob, no doubt, had noted that parcel under the fat arm, and perhaps, remembering his talk with Bunter, he suspected what was in it.

Bunter gave him only one blink, and then broke into a rapid trot. He disappeared out of gates, leaving Bob staring.

Crash!



The parcel dropped from his fat arm

It was really a little injudicious to charge out at the gates at a rapid trot, when any fellow might have been coming in. As a matter of fact, two fellows were just coming in—Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent. The charging Owl crashed into them before he saw them.

The parcel dropped from under the fat arm. It thudded on the ground, and the thud was followed by a crack. No doubt that Christmas pudding was in a basin. Something, certainly, had cracked.

"You fat ass, look where you're going!" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"Ow! Beast!" gasped Bunter. He stooped and clutched up the parcel in haste.

"What the dickens have you got there?" asked Nugent. "Sounds as if something's broken."

"Oh! Nothing! I mean, it's only my—my shoes I'm taking to be mended," stammered Bunter. "That's all."

"Sounded to me like a crock cracking."

"Nothing of the kind," gasped Bunter. "Don't you get saying that there was a pudding-basin in my parcel, Nugent—."

"What?"

"'Tain't that—nothing like it—it's only some—some old ginger-beer bottles I'm taking back to Uncle Clegg's—that's all."

"You fat chump—."

"Beast!"

Bunter rolled on with his parcel, leaving Wharton and Nugent aware that there was a pudding-basin in that parcel. It was necessary, in the circumstances, to keep that pudding a deep, dead secret, but Billy Bunter had his own inimitable way of keeping secrets.

He trotted on down Friardale Lane.

His trot soon slackened to a walk. Eager as he was to sample that luscious Christmas pudding, exertion soon told on the fat Owl. He rolled on to the stile in Friardale Lane, and sat on it to recover his breath.

Sitting on the stile, he blinked cautiously up and down the lane. It was a fairly solitary spot, and he decided to open the parcel there. But it seemed that there was no rest for the wicked! Just as his fat fingers were fumbling with the string, two figures came in sight from the direction of the village—Wingate and Gwynne of the Sixth, walking back from Friardale.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

One glimpse of the Sixth-Form prefects was enough for him! He was over that stile in a moment, and rolling up the footpath through Friardale Wood.

He did not halt till he was well out of sight from the lane. But his fat breath gave out again, and he stopped at a spot where an old log afforded him



He trotted on down Friardale Lane

a seat. He sat down on that log, satisfied that he was safe at last from any eyes belonging to Greyfriars; and then, at long last, Coker's parcel was opened.

Wrappings and string were cast aside, and Billy Bunter was able at length to feast his eyes on the contents of Coker's parcel. He grinned with glee as he feasted them. It was a large Christmas pudding—it was a lovely pudding—it was a luscious pudding. It was almost, if not quite, worth a whopping from the Head! Aunt Judy, undoubtedly, knew how to make Christmas puddings, and she had done her best for her beloved Horace, little dreaming into whose fat hands that Christmas pudding was to fall! Billy Bunter fairly gloated over it.

But it was not his eyes that he was eager to feast—it was his capacious inside! He fumbled in his pocket for his pocket-knife, to begin operations on that luscious pudding. Intent on that pudding, wholly and solely concentrated on it, he did not cast a single blink round him, and did not observe a hulking, disreputable figure that came slouching along the footpath.

But two beery eyes observed Bunter! The slouching figure stopped. Jemmy Jorrocks seemed interested in Bunter—and in the pudding! After a stare at the fat junior, he slouched towards him.

"'Ere, you with the gig-lamps!" he snapped.

Billy Bunter jumped. He blinked up in alarm at the tattered figure, through the big spectacles to which Mr. Jorrocks disrespectfully alluded as "gig-lamps".

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

His little round eyes bulged through his big round spectacles at Jemmy Jorrocks. He remembered now something that Coker and Co. had been saying—about a tramp who had stopped Price of the Fifth in the wood. He had forgotten that. His fat mind had been full, so to speak, of Coker's Christmas pudding, and had no room for tramps. But he remembered now—as the hulking figure lurched over him.

Mr. Jorrocks stretched out a hand sadly in need of soap and water.

"I'll 'ave that!" he said.

"I—I—I say—!" stammered Bunter.

"You got anything to say agin it?" inquired Mr. Jorrocks, with a threatening glare at the terrified fat Owl.

"Oh! Yes! No! I—I mean—!" stammered Bunter.

"That'll do."

The unwashed hand picked up the pudding.

"I—I—I say, you leave that alone!" gasped Bunter. "Look here, I say—yarooooooooooh!"

With his free hand, Jemmy Jorrocks delivered a smack. Apparently he was not open to argument on the subject! Jemmy's financial resources were low, and the last of them had been expended on liquid, not solid, refreshment. That luscious pudding tempted him. Smacking Bunter's fat head was quite an easy way of obtaining possession of it. Jemmy had a hard and heavy hand, and Billy Bunter roared as it smacked.

"Ow! wow! Beast! You keep off! Ow!" roared Bunter.

"Got any more to say about it?" demanded Mr. Jorrocks, ferociously.

"Ow! wow! ooooooh!"

The heavy hand rose again. Billy Bunter did not wait for it to descend. He leaped up as if the log had suddenly become red-hot, and bolted. Price of the Fifth had "cut" to dodge that tramp, and that was too good an example for Billy Bunter not to follow it. He careered away at top speed, and vanished into Friardale Wood, leaving Jemmy Jorrocks in undisputed possession of Horace Coker's Christmas pudding.

Not till he was far from the spot, and not till the last breath in his fat



Bunter vanished into the wood

circumference was expanded, did Billy Bunter stop. Then he leaned on a tree, gasping and gasping for breath.

"Oh, lor!" groaned Bunter.

It was an awful blow for Bunter! After the Head's stern warning, with the awful possibility of a flogging hanging over his fat head, he had raided Coker's Christmas pudding, and now it was gone! He had not even tasted it! He had the risk, and that unscrupulous tramp had the pudding! It was a crushing blow! It was, in fact, simply awful! A sad and sorrowful Bunter rolled dismally back to Greyfriars—what time an unwashed tramp, in Friardale Wood, finished Coker's Christmas pudding to the last plum and the last crumb!

CHAPTER V

COKER ON THE WAR-PATH!

"I SAY, you fellows."
"Hook it, Bunter."
"But I say—"
"Buzz!"

Harry Wharton and Co. did not seem pleased or gratified to find Billy Bunter in No. 1 Study, when they came up to tea. Probably they had not forgotten the incident of the cake the previous day. William George Bunter was not "persona grata" in that study.

But William George Bunter neither hooked it nor buzzed. He eyed the Famous Five uneasily through his big spectacles: but he did not budge.

"I say, I haven't come to tea," he hastily explained.

"You haven't!" agreed Harry Wharton.

"Not at all," said Frank Nugent.

"The not-at-allfulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.
"The hookfulness is the proper caper, my esteemed fat Bunter."

"But—but if you fellows don't mind, I'll stick here while you have tea," said Bunter. "I—I'd rather not go down to the Rag, or—or to my own study—if—if you fellows don't mind."

"We do!" said Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"What the dickens do you want to stick here for?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Oh! Because—because—," Bunter seemed at a loss for a reason.

"Because what?"

"Because—because I like your company, old chap. You—you—you're such nice chaps, you know—"

"We are!" agreed Bob. "Nicest lot we know! Couldn't be nicer! In fact, the nicefulness is terrific—isn't it, Inky? But what do you want to stick here for, you fat prevaricator?"

"It's nothing to do with Coker, of course—"

"Coker!" repeated the Famous Five, all together. They stared at Bunter. The fat Owl, obviously, had some reason for wanting to "stick" in that study, which had nothing to do with the fact that they were nice chaps—nice chaps as they undoubtedly were! But what it had to do with Coker of the Fifth was rather a puzzle.

"Well, you know Coker," said Bunter, blinking at them. "Suspicious beast, you know. The other day he said that apples had been snooped from his study, and he came after me, just as if he fancied I'd had them—"

"I expect you had!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"As if I'd touch his apples!" said Bunter, scornfully. "I never even knew he had any apples. There were only four, too, and not very big, either. But fellows always think of me if they miss tuck—you jolly well know they do! Why, you do yourselves, and you jolly well can't deny it."

"Guilty, my lord!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"Have you been snooping in Coker's study again?" demanded Harry Wharton.

"Nothing of the kind! Still, I'd rather keep out of Coker's way. If he missed that Christmas pudding he might think it was me—you know him!"

"Has Coker got a Christmas pudding?"



"I never had it, of course" said Bunter

"Not that I know of," said Bunter, hastily, "I never heard him saying anything about it to Potter and Greene—"

"You fat villain!" said Bob Cherry. "You told me—"

"Oh! Yes! No! I mean—I—I mean, I don't know anything about it, if Coker misses it from his study," stammered Bunter. "If—if—if he does, he might think it was me, because of those apples, you know—"

"The mightfulness is terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I—I never had it, of course," said Bunter. "I—I've been out all the afternoon, and I—I never took anything with me—"

"I saw a parcel under your arm in the quad," said Bob.

"Oh! That—that was only some shoes I was taking to be mended—"

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Nugent. "Was it Coker's Christmas pudding in that parcel you dropped when you barged into us at the gate? I remember something cracked."

"Oh! No! That was only some old ginger-beer bottles—"

"You fat Ananias!"

"I—I say, you fellows, don't you get saying that I had Coker's pudding," exclaimed Bunter, in alarm. "I tell you it wasn't in that parcel. That was only some old ginger-beer bottles I was taking to be mended—I mean some shoes I was taking back to Uncle Clegg's—I—I mean—"

"Well, my hat!" said Bob. "After what the Head said to you yesterday—!"

"That's what I'm worried about," mumbled Bunter. "If Coker kicks up a fuss about that Christmas pudding, Quelch might hear something, and then it would mean going up to the Head. I—I say, you fellows, I—I'd rather keep clear of Coker for a bit, in—in case he fancies I had it. I—I don't want a row with Coker."

"If you've scoffed his Christmas pudding——"

"I haven't!" howled Bunter, "I couldn't, when that tramp took it away from me in Friardale Wood, the beast. Never even tasted it. I say, that tramp ought to be run in—bagging a fellow's pudding, you know. Fancy anybody being dishonest enough to bag another fellow's pudding!"

"Only fancy!" gasped Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you can cackle!" snorted Bunter, indignantly. "But tain't a laughing matter, I can tell you. I don't want Coker making out that I had his pudding, and kicking up a row. He's come in now—it is just on lock-ups. Might be looking for me this very minute. I—I'll stick here for a bit, if—if you fellows don't mind—I—I don't want to see Coker, if—if he's looking for me."

"I'll bet he's looking for you, if he's missed a pudding from his study," said



Heavy footsteps thundered on his track

Johnny Bull. "You'd better tell him that you never had it, and that a tramp took it away from you—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! that sounds rather like Coker's fairy footsteps!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, as a heavy tramping of large feet was heard in the passage.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Billy Bunter. "I—I say, you fellows, if that's Coker—if—if he looks in here, you fellows chuck him out. You can handle Coker, the lot of you! I say, I'd whack out that Christmas pudding, if—if that tramp hadn't scooped it! Honest Injun! Not—not that I—I had it, you know. I—I don't mean that—I never went to Coker's study at all, and I never touched that pudding while I was there, and—and—"

The door of No. 1 Study flew wide open, under the impact of a large and heavy foot. A red and excited face looked in.

"Bunter here?" roared Coker.

"Oh! No! I—I'm not here—!" gasped Bunter.

"Where's that Christmas pudding?" bawled Coker. "Think I don't know who snooped it from my study, what? Who snooped my apples? What? Where is it? If you've scoffed it, I'll boot you all round Greyfriars and back again. You fat porker, no fellow's tuck is safe in his study with you around. Where is it?"

Coker rushed in.

"I say, you fellows, keep him off!" yelled Bunter, dodging frantically round the study table. "I say—oh, crikey!"

Billy Bunter circum-navigated the study table at unwonted speed. But Coker was after him like a shot. The fat Owl bolted for the doorway. After him rushed Coker. Billy Bunter flew down the passage. Heavy footsteps thundered on his track.

Harry Wharton and Co. watched the chase, from the doorway of No. 1 Study. Billy Bunter, who generally understudied the tortoise, was running like a hare. Close behind him thundered Coker of the Fifth. They disappeared across the study landing, both going strong.

"Poor old Bunter!" sighed Bob. "The Head's jaw doesn't seem to have done him much good, but perhaps Coker will give him a tip about snooping in the studies. Lucky for him Coker isn't the man to give him away to a beak! Well, let's have tea, and then we'll go down and see whether Coker has left any remnants of Bunter lying about."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Famous Five sat down to tea, nothing doubting that the fat Owl would suffer for his sins at the heavy hand of Horace Coker, and still less doubting that he deserved so to do.

CHAPTER VI

BUNTER BOOKED!

MR. QUELCH stared. He knitted his brows, and stared again. He was surprised, shocked, and displeased. The unexpected sight of a boy of his form wriggling and yelling in the grasp of a burly Fifth-form man naturally roused Quelch's ire. Certainly, that boy of his form was rather in his black books; his opinion of William George Bunter, never high, was at its lowest ebb. But that made no difference. Quelch, coming in from the dusky quad, was, as already stated, surprised, shocked and displeased, by what met his eyes. Billy Bunter, overtaken and captured at the foot of the staircase, was undoubtedly suffering for his sins at the hands of Horace Coker.

A dozen fellows were staring. Coker did not heed them. He concentrated on the Owl of the Remove.

"Where's that pudding?" Smack! "Where's that Christmas pudding?" Smack! "You snooping fat frog!" Smack! Smack! Smack!

"Ow! wow! Leggo! Yaroooooh!" roared Bunter.

Smack! smack! smack!

Mr. Quelch strode on the scene. He looked, at that moment, like the Alpine young man in the poem: his brow was set, his eye beneath flashed like a falchion from its sheath. And when he spoke, he almost bawled:

"Coker! Cease this at once! Release that boy of my form instantly! Do you hear me, Coker?"

Coker could not fail to hear him. In his excitement, Coker had rather forgotten that the spot was a somewhat public one. His intention had been to deal with Bunter up in the Remove. But having chased him down the staircase and caught him, he was dealing with him on the spot. However, at Quelch's sharp voice, he ceased to smack the fattest head at Greyfriars.

Billy Bunter, however, did not cease his musical effects. He roared on:

"Ow! Wow! Ooooooh! Beast! Oh, crikey! Wow! wow!"

"Silence, Bunter!" rapped Mr. Quelch.

"Yow-ow-ow-ow-ow!"

"Will you be silent, Bunter?"

"Ow! wow! Yes, sir!" gasped Bunter. "Ow! wow! Smacking a fellow's head—wow! Yow-ow-ow! Wow!" Billy Bunter rubbed that fat head, and blinked at his form-master. "Wow! It wasn't me—ow!"

"Coker!" thundered Quelch.

"Oh! Yes, sir!" stammered Coker. "I—I—"

"How dare you, Coker?"

"I—I—I—you see, sir—I—I—he—he—!" Coker stammered. As Bob Cherry had remarked in No. 1 Study, Coker was not the man to give a fellow away to a beak. He was full of wrath: he was prepared to deal with the grub-raider in the most drastic manner, with his own heavy hands, but he did not want to hand the culprit over to authority. He wanted to smack Billy Bunter's head, and smack it hard and often, but he did not want a beak on the scene, butting in.

But it was rather too late for Coker to think of that. A "beak" was on the scene now, and obviously was going to "butt in".

"I heard what you said, Coker! You referred to—to—to some comestible. A—a—a pudding—a—a Christmas pudding—that is what you said. What do you mean by that, Coker?"

"I—I—I—," stammered Coker.

"Are you afflicted with a stutter, Coker?"

"Eh? Oh! No, sir."

"Then answer me without stammering. Do you mean that this boy of my form has abstracted some comestible belonging to you?"

Quelch had guessed that! Really, it was an easy guess! But Coker did not answer him, with or without stammering. Coker wasn't going to give Bunter away to his beak!

But no answer from Coker was needed. A howl from Billy Bunter supplied its place.

"It wasn't me," howled Bunter. "I never had it! I never had those apples either! Coker thought I had them because he saw me eating them! I never knew he had a Christmas pudding—"



"Follow me to my study"

"Bunter! After my warning to you, after your head-master's warning to you, have you abstracted eatables from another boy's study?"

"No, sir!" gasped Bunter. Billy Bunter had long been a stranger to truth, and he did not feel like making its acquaintance at that moment. "I never went to Coker's study, sir—and nobody saw me there, sir—there was nobody about when I went there—I mean when I didn't went—"

"I think I understand!" said Mr. Quelch, grimly. "Coker, if this boy of my form has purloined comestibles from your study, you should not have taken the law into your own hands! Coker, you are a foolish, obstreperous, unruly boy, and I shall report your conduct to your form-master. Bunter, follow me to my study."

"Oh, crikey!"

Billy Bunter was glad that the largest hands in the Fifth Form at Greyfriars were no longer smacking his fat head. But he would almost have preferred unlimited smacks from those extensive hands, to what was before him now. But the hapless Owl had no choice in the matter. In the lowest of spirits, he rolled after his form-master, as Quelch stalked away. Coker was left with a crimson face, and fellows who had been watching the scene were grinning. But there was no trace of a grin on Billy Bunter's plump countenance. Never in his fat life had the Owl of the Remove looked more lugubrious.

Quelch was going to send him to the Head! Dr. Locke was going to administer that flogging! That beastly tramp in Friardale Wood had had the feast and Billy Bunter was going to have the reckoning.

The prospect was awful—and it was no wonder that the fat Owl lagged, as he followed his form-master. He even cast a blink round at the open doorway on the quad, with a wild idea of bolting out of the House! Quelch glanced round.

"Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Bunter.

"Follow me, at once."

"Oh, lor'! I—I mean, yes, sir," groaned Bunter.

And he followed Quelch to his study. The Remove-master switched on the light, and stood looking at him. Billy Bunter quaked under that stern glare. Quelch's face was sometimes grim—sometimes very grim! But never had Bunter seen it so grim as now. His fat knees knocked together, as he stood waiting for his form master to speak.

"Bunter!" Quelch spoke at last, after a silence that seemed to the fat Owl very, very long. "Bunter! It appears that you are incorrigible. Apparently the most severe warnings have no effect upon you. Only yesterday you were sent to your head master. And now—"

"It—it wasn't me, sir!" moaned Bunter. "I—I—I never knew Coker had a

Christmas pudding from his aunt, sir. I—I don't like Christmas pudding, sir, I—I wouldn't touch it for anything!"

"Did you go to Coker's study, Bunter?"

"Oh! No, sir!" mumbled Bunter. "I—I—I've been out of gates all the afternoon, sir."

"What did you take with you?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Bunter! You had a parcel under your arm when you went out, as I observed at the time. What was in that parcel?"

"Oh! Nothing, sir! I—I—I mean, it—it was only some shoes I—I was taking to the cobbler's in the village, sir, to be—be mended—"

"Did you take them to the cobbler?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Will he bear out your statement, Bunter, if I inquire?"

"Oh! No—yes—no—I—I—I mean—," gasped Bunter.

"What do you mean, Bunter?"



"What do you mean, Bunter?"

"I—I—I mean, n-n-now I kik-kik-come to think of it, sir, it—it wasn't shoes—it was—was—was some old ginger-beer bottles—"

"Upon my word! Bunter, how dare you prevaricate in this manner?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch, "It is clear to me, Bunter, that you abstracted a—a—a pudding, from a Fifth-form boy's study, recklessly disregarding the warnings you received from me and from your head-master. Dr. Locke will deal with you, Bunter. You know what to expect."

"Oh, crikey!"

"I shall report this to the head-master, Bunter—"

"Oh, lor'!"

"And immediately after calling-over, Bunter, you will go to Dr. Locke's study, where you will receive a severe flogging. I shall take you there."

"Ow!"

"Now go!" snapped Mr. Quelch.

"I—I say, sir—!"

"Go!"

"It—it—it wasn't me—."

"GO!" thundered Mr. Quelch. "But for the fact, Bunter, that you are to receive a severe flogging from your head-master, I would cane you now for your untruthfulness. GO!"

A dismal Owl rolled out of the study.

A little later, Greyfriars fellows gathered in hall for calling-over. It was Quelch's turn to take the roll, and his voice was very sharp as he rapped out the names. One name he rapped out twice, and then once more. But to that name no answering voice squeaked "adsum".

"BUNTER!" boomed Quelch for the fourth time.

Still there was no answer! Bunter was not present. He had not rolled in for roll. Quelch's eyes glinted as he went on with the list. Bunter, already booked for a flogging, was adding to his offences by cutting roll! After roll, it was Quelch's intention to march him off to the Head, to receive that which was his due. No doubt that was why the fat Owl was not present. That unattractive prospect, it seemed, was too much for him. Quelch, certainly, couldn't march him off if he was not there! Calling-over finished without the fattest member of the Greyfriars community putting in an appearance.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER DARK!

"OH, lor'!" moaned Billy Bunter.
It was an unhappy Owl.

The December darkness had long settled down over Greyfriars School. Lights gleamed from many windows into the dusky quad. It was beyond the radius of those lights, that a fat figure lurked dismally under the leafless branches of ancient elms.

Billy Bunter was due—in fact, long over-due—in his head-master's study, there to receive that for which he had asked. To keep the Head waiting was an act of temerity of which few Greyfriars fellows were capable. Even the reckless Bounder would hardly have ventured to do so. But Billy Bunter, though far from being as reckless as Smithy, was actually doing so. If Dr. Locke expected the fat Removite in his study, he expected in vain. If he waited for him, he was booked for a long wait. Probably he did not wait for him—a head-master was not likely to waste his time waiting for a junior. No doubt he had turned his attention to other matters. Nevertheless, Bunter was due in the Head's study, whether the Head was waiting or not—and Bunter, generally the least venturesome member of the Remove, was disregarding his form-master's order, and setting his head-master's authority at naught! He just couldn't help it!

A flogging awaited him in the Head's study. The birch was ready for Quelch to march him in. Long, long ago, he should have been marched in, and the birch should have done its fell work. But—

"Oh, lor'!" moaned Bunter again.

From the darkness under the elms, he blinked at distant lighted windows. He had to go in, sooner or later—he had to face the penalty—he had to take it! But he could not make up his fat mind to do so. His ample flesh cringed at the mere thought of the descending birch. From the bottom of his plump heart he wished that he had left Coker's Christmas pudding alone. It had seemed so safe at the time, and it had proved so awfully unsafe after all! And that horrid tramp had had the pudding—only the flogging remained for Bunter!

Quelch, probably, was looking for him. He wouldn't be able to find him in the House, at any rate—he could only wait for him to come in. Bunter was at a safe distance from the Head's birch—for the present. Even if they looked for him outside the House, they wouldn't find him in the dark. But—



He knew that tattered figure

It had to be! He knew that it had to be! He was only postponing the inevitable—putting off the evil hour! Several times he decided that it would be better to go in, and get it over. But he did not go in. It seemed as if his fat little legs refused to drag him in the direction of the Head's birch.

Time was passing. He saw lights in the windows of the Remove studies: Harry Wharton and Co. and the rest of the form, would be at prep now. Having cut roll, Bunter was now cutting prep. Later on the bell would ring for dorm, and he could not cut dorm! But—he just couldn't go in and face that flogging!

He leaned on an ancient trunk, and mumbled dismally.

Suddenly he gave a start. There was a footstep on the path under the branches of the old elms.

"Oh!" breathed Bunter.

He blinked round in alarm. If they were looking for him—! His fat heart

almost died within his plump circumference, as he recognized, in a glimmer of wintry stars, a majestic figure! His little round eyes almost bulged through his big round spectacles at Dr. Locke.

It was the Head! Terror chained him, motionless.

But the next moment he was relieved. Dr. Locke was not looking in his direction. He was pacing, with his hands behind his back, his eyes on the ground: oblivious of Bunter. Dark as it was, it was quite a fine evening, and apparently the Head was taking a walk under the stars in the quad; no doubt, thinking of matters much more important than a fat junior of the Lower Fourth. Silent, still, Billy Bunter watched him, as he passed, till he disappeared in the shadows.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

Evidently, the Head was not waiting for him in his study! Quite probably, he had for the time forgotten Bunter's unimportant existence. Bunter was very anxious not to remind him of it.

He leaned on the trunk again, blinking at the distant lighted windows. He had to go in—he knew that he had to. But that glimpse of the Head made him more reluctant than ever to do so. It occurred to his fat brain that the Head might pace back along that path under the elms, and he watched and listened anxiously, blinking in the direction Dr. Locke had taken. But it was from the other direction, behind him, that he suddenly heard a sound.

"Beast!" breathed Bunter, inaudibly. It was not the Head this time—it was somebody else: very likely Quelch looking for him! He clamped himself close to the trunk, in deepest shadow, and hardly breathed, blinking anxiously up the path where a glimmer of starlight fell.

Then, in his surprise and alarm, he almost squeaked aloud! Luckily he succeeded in suppressing that squeak! His eyes bulged at a tattered figure that crept into dim view among the elms.

He knew that tattered figure! He was not likely to forget the frowsy, disreputable tramp who had deprived him of Coker's Christmas pudding in Friardale Wood that afternoon. He had never expected to see Jemmy Jorrocks again. Now he saw him!

Mr. Jorrocks was moving cautiously, peering about him as he moved, warily. Why he was there, within the precincts of Greyfriars School, was a mystery to Bunter, as he blinked at him. But even Bunter's fat brain was equal to elucidating that mystery. Jemmy Jorrocks, evidently, must have climbed a wall to get in; not a new experience in his career as a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles! He was there for what he could get: any unguarded article of any value that might fall into his thievish hands. Mr. Jorrocks was probably similarly engaged after dark on most evenings. He was prowling about the school in the dark on

what he would have called the "pinching lay"—"pinching" being Mr. Jorrocks' chief source of income.

Billy Bunter, certainly, was not worth his while, if he had seen him. But he did not see Bunter. Close to the old elm, half-hidden by the trunk, Bunter was wrapped in darkness. And he was very careful to make no sound. He would have preferred even the Head to discover him there, rather than that awful tramp!

In the deepest trepidation, he waited for the tramp to pass on and disappear. But Jemmy Jorrocks suddenly stopped.

He stopped so near Bunter's elm, that the fat junior fancied, for a moment, that he was spotted. But Jemmy Jorrocks was not looking towards him. He was staring along the path ahead, and listening.

Footsteps came up the path.

Then Bunter understood.



Bunter, dumbfounded, could only blink

The Head, pacing thoughtfully under the stars, was coming back along that shadowy path, as Bunter had thought that he might. The tramp had heard him coming—that was why he had stopped.

For a moment, Mr. Jorrocks stood with bent head listening. Then he backed into deep shadow under a tree. The starlit path was left tenantless. The Head, who had passed that spot once without seeing Bunter, was going to re-pass it without seeing either Bunter or the tramp.

But was he?

Billy Bunter blinked at Dr. Locke, as he came into view in the glimmer of starlight. Still with his hands clasped behind him, still with his gaze thoughtfully on the ground, the Head paced by. And then—

“Oh!” gasped Bunter.

It happened so suddenly that it almost made his head swim. From black shadow a tattered figure suddenly leaped: two unwashed sinewy hands grasped Dr. Locke, and jammed him against a trunk, then one sinewy hand held him pinned there, while the other, clenched and knuckly, was brandished within an inch of his majestic nose. And a whispering voice, full of menace, reached Bunter's ears:

“Quiet! You give one yelp, old 'un, you jest give one yelp, and I'll bust your face through the back of your 'ead! You get me?”

Bunter, dumbfounded, could only blink.

CHAPTER VIII

BUNTER BUTTS IN!

BILLY BUNTER just blinked.

He could do nothing else. The sight of his head-master pinned against a tree trunk in the grasp of ruffianly hands, fairly paralysed the fat Owl. He could hardly believe either his eyes or his spectacles, as he stared dumbfounded at the scene.

Dr. Locke, taken utterly by surprise by that sudden and unexpected attack, gasped for breath, his dilated eyes on the rough, shaggy visage of the tramp, and the threatening knuckly fist.

“You get me?” repeated Jemmy Jorrocks, in the same menacing whisper. “Not a sound, old 'un, or you get it—'ard! Ketch on?”

Dr. Locke certainly “caught on”. As he realized what was happening, he opened his lips to call for help. But he did not utter that call. The knuckly

clenched fist was too close, and the tramp, only too clearly, was ready to carry out his threat. That heavy knuckly fist was ready to crash like a hammer in his face, crashing his head back against the tree-trunk. He gasped for breath, but he made no other sound.

"You keep quiet, old 'un!" went on the menacing whisper. "You 'owl out and bring anybody 'ere, and they'll find you with your 'ead caved in, and you can lay to that."

Then the Head found his voice. He spoke in a low tone.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Never mind oo I am," grinned Jemmy Jorrocks. "But I'll tell you what I want, old 'un! I want all the spondulics you got about you, and sharp."

"The—the what?" Dr. Locke knew many languages, but apparently "spondulics" was a new one on him! "What do you mean?"

"Quiet! Don't let nobody 'ear you, old 'un! I'd knock your blinking features through your silly old 'ead as soon as look at you. Speak low, if you don't want your nut cracked."

Dr. Locke was more accustomed to giving commands than to obeying them. But he obeyed that one. He was utterly helpless in the tramp's sinewy grasp, and the knuckles were terribly close.

"You rascal!" he breathed.

"That'll do, old 'un! 'And it over, sharp—all you got about you. I ain't got no time to waste of you. Get me?"

Jemmy Jorrocks certainly had no time to waste. He was taking risks. He was utterly unaware of a fat schoolboy blinking at him in terrified horror from the blackness under an elm. But it was dangerous ground for a footpad. He had been prowling about the school in the dark in the hope of plunder, when, at a distance from the buildings, this old gentleman had fairly walked into his hands. It was, for Mr. Jorrocks, an unexpected and very happy stroke of luck. Who the old gentleman was he did not know and did not care; all he cared about was making the most of such an opportunity. He was going to annex all that the old gentleman had about him in the way of cash, and then he was going to depart from the vicinity of Greyfriars as fast as he could. And moments were precious.

"'And it over!" His voice came in a hiss. "You got a wallet, I reckon—you 'and it over, sharp, or else—" The knuckles touched Dr. Locke's nose—a warning of what was coming, if he wasted time.

Dr. Locke panted. In the distance gleamed the lighted windows of the House: there was ample help within call, if he could have called. But he could not venture to call. Amazing as it was, such a happening within the very

precincts of Greyfriars, he was at the mercy of the tramp. Little piggy eyes glittered at him threateningly over the clenched fist.

"You scoundrel!" he breathed.

"Pack it up! You 'anding over that wallet?"

"No, you rascal!"

With that, Dr. Locke attempted to struggle. A sinewy arm was drawn back, to deliver a blow.

Up to that moment, Billy Bunter had blinked on, with bulging eyes, rooted to the ground, as if paralysed. But at that moment, something stirred in the fat Owl and woke him to action. Billy Bunter was not cast in heroic mould. He was utterly terrified of that ruffianly tramp. But—! But even Billy Bunter could not stand idle while that crashing blow knocked his head-master senseless. Without stopping to think—had he stopped to think, he might have taken to his heels instead—the fat junior jumped out at the tramp. He hit out with a



Jemmy Jorrocks went sprawling headlong

clenched fat fist, putting all his strength, and all his weight, into it. That fat fist crashed on the side of Mr. Jorrocks' shaggy jaw, and fairly sent him spinning. If strength was lacking, there was at least plenty of weight, and all Billy Bunter's extensive weight was in that punch. It was quite a terrific knock, and, taking the tramp wholly by surprise, it up-ended him.

Jemmy Jorrocks went sprawling headlong.

He sprawled on the earth, and the Head, released from his grasp, stared at him, as much taken by surprise as the tramp.

"Bless my soul!" gasped Dr. Locke.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter.

"Ooooooooooh!" came a howl from Jemmy Jorrocks. He sat up dizzily, both hands clasping his damaged jaw, "Ooooooooooh!"

"What—what—who is that—Bunter!" The Head blinked at the fat Owl."

"Is that Bunter? Bunter—!"

"Help!" yelled Bunter. "Help! I say, you fellows—help! Oh, crikey!" That frantic yell rang far and wide. "Help! Yaroooh! Help!"

"Bunter—"

Billy Bunter did not stay to listen. He had knocked that tramp down—but what that tramp would do, when he got up again, was too terrifying to contemplate. Yelling at the top of his voice, the fat Owl charged away at the top of his speed, and vanished from sight.

Dr. Locke stared after him for a moment. But only for a moment. Jemmy Jorrocks was scrambling up. Dr. Locke did not limber. He was too dignified a gentleman to run, even in such circumstances. But he walked very swiftly—very swiftly indeed—as he departed from the spot.

Bunter's frantic yells had been heard—voices were calling—footsteps were audible. The danger was over. Jemmy Jorrocks, when he got on his feet, still clasping his suffering jaw, abandoned on the spot his hope of fingering the old gentleman's wallet. He headed for the school wall, where he had climbed in, and clambered out again in frantic haste. By the time the Head, surrounded by a startled crowd in the quad, was explaining that there was a dangerous tramp within the walls of Greyfriars, that dangerous tramp was outside the walls, hitting the open spaces as fast as his legs could carry him.

CHAPTER IX

ALL RIGHT FOR BUNTER?

"BUNTER!"

"Oh, crikey!"

Billy Bunter dodged desperately. But he dodged too late! A hand dropped on a fat shoulder, and closed like a vice. Two gimlet-eyes glinted at the fat Owl.

"Bunter—!" barked Mr. Quelch.

"Ow! Leggo—!"

"Come!"

"Oh, lor'!" moaned Bunter.

He had to come! With that vice-like grip on his shoulder, there was no choice about that. With a grim brow, Mr. Quelch marched him off.

The Head had gone in, considerably breathless and perturbed by his startling experience under the shadowy elms. Following the alarm, there was a search going on for the tramp: several of the masters, and all the Sixth Form prefects, and Gosling the porter, were rooting about looking for him. Mr. Quelch was among the searchers. He saw nothing of a tramp, but he did spot a fat figure lurking in the dusky quad, and did not lose a moment in securing it. Leaving the search for the intruder to others, the Remove master marched Bunter into the House.

"I—I say, sir—!" mumbled Bunter, as he was marched in.

"You need say nothing, Bunter!" rapped Mr. Quelch. "I shall take you immediately to your head-master—."

"But I—I—I say—."

"You have ventured to disregard calling-over, Bunter. You have remained out of the House after lock-ups! I can only suppose, Bunter, that you were deliberately keeping out of my way!" said Mr. Quelch, sternly.

"Yes! I—I mean, no!" gasped Bunter, "I—I—I dud-dud-did-don't want to gig-gig-go to the Head, sir! I—I never had that Christmas pudding, and that tramp took it away from me, too, this afternoon in the wood, and—and—."

"That will do!"

"But—but I say—."

"Silence!"

"Oh, lor'!"

Billy Bunter trailed on dismally. He had dodged that flogging, so far. Even Bunter's fat brain must have realised that he could not dodge it for ever.



"I shall take you, immediately, to your headmaster . . ."

But at all events, he had been going to dodge it till the latest possible moment. Now the hour had come!

Still with that vice-like grip on the fat shoulder, Mr. Quelch tapped at the head-master's study door with his free hand.

"Come in!"

Quelch opened the door. Billy Bunter had a glimpse of the interior of the study. Dr. Locke was there, and on the table lay the birch, evidently in readiness. It had, in fact, been there in readiness for quite a long time—had Bunter been available! One glimpse of that birch was enough for Bunter! He gave a desperate wrench, and jerked himself loose from Quelch's grasp. He couldn't and he wouldn't get any nearer that birch—if he could help it!

"Bunter!" shrieked Mr. Quelch.

The fat Owl made a frantic jump to escape. But Quelch was after him in a

split second. He grasped at Bunter, and this time his grasp closed on a fat ear.

"Ow! Yaroooh!" roared Bunter.

"Come!" gasped Mr. Quelch.

And with that grasp on his ear, Bunter was marched into the Head's study. Mr. Quelch closed the door before he released the ear. Billy Bunter rubbed it ruefully. It had a pain in it.

The Head gazed at both of them.

"Mr. Quelch—."

"This boy, sir—."

"Has that tramp—that ruffian who attacked me within the precincts of the school—has he been found—?"

"I think not, sir, but he is being searched for. This boy—."

"Oh! Bunter!" said the Head. "Bunter! You have brought Bunter to me—."

"Yes, sir! This boy, Bunter, had the audacity to remain out of the House after lock-ups, and to disregard calling-over, sir—the audacity—the impertinence—."

"Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir! No, sir! It—it wasn't me, sir!" moaned Bunter, "I—I never went to Coker's study, sir, and the Christmas pudding wasn't on the table, sir, and I left it there, sir, just as it was—."

"Bless my soul!"

"I—I think very likely, sir, Coker ate it, and—and forgot all about it," gasped Bunter. "I—I don't like Christmas pudding, sir—and—and—if you please, sir, I—I—I don't want to be whopped—oh, lor'!"

"You had better say no more, Bunter—."

"Oh! Yes, sir! No, sir! Thank you, sir! Mum-mum-may I gig-gig-go now, sir?"

"I am glad you have brought this boy to my study, Mr. Quelch. I should have sent for him, to express my thanks—"

"Eh?" Mr. Quelch doubted his ears.

"I shall certainly not punish you, Bunter. Much as you deserve it, I feel bound, in the circumstances, to pardon you—."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

"Dr. Locke—" Quelch gasped. "This boy—!"

"This boy, Mr. Quelch, came to my aid when I was struggling in the grasp of that ruffianly tramp. Otherwise I might have received severe injury. Bunter, I am much obliged to you for your action."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter, again. He realized that the flogging was off! The birch, which had lain on the table so long in readiness, was not going to see

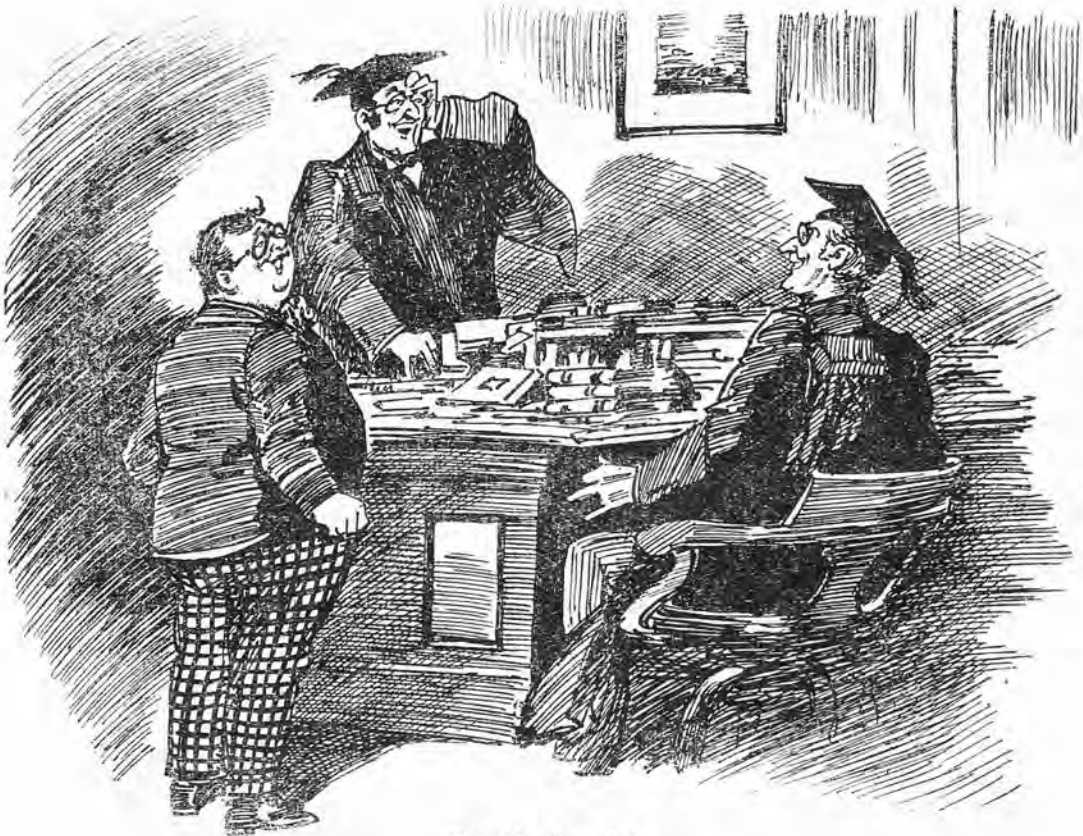
active service! Billy Bunter's glum fat face brightened. Really, it was like the sun coming out from the clouds. The Head smiled.

"I am sure you will agree, Mr. Quelch, that in the circumstances, Bunter should be pardoned. You may go, Bunter."

No doubt—in the circumstances—Quelch agreed! But Billy Bunter did not stay to ascertain whether he agreed or not. He was out of the Head's study almost before the Head had finished speaking.

"I SAY, you fellows."

A study supper was going on, in No. 1 in the Remove, after prep, when a fat face looked in at the doorway. The Famous Five suspended operations on a meat pie, to look round at Billy Bunter.



The Head smiled

"Licked?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Whopped?" asked Frank Nugent.

"Flogged?" inquired Harry Wharton.

"Skinned?" asked Johnny Bull.

"Was the skinfulness terrific?" inquired Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Billy Bunter chuckled. He did not look as if he had been licked, whopped, flogged, or skinned! He was looking merry and bright.

"No jolly fear!" he answered. "That's all right! But I say, you fellows, I've missed supper in hall, and that looks a jolly good pie—."

Billy Bunter broke off suddenly. There was a heavy tread in the Remove passage, and a loud voice: the voice of Horace Coker of the Fifth Form.

"Bunter—"

"Oh, crikey!"

Billy Bunter whirled round in the doorway. One glimpse of Coker, coming up the passage, was enough for him. He forgot that he had missed supper in hall—forgot the pie in No. 1 Study. He flew up the passage. The next moment the heavy tramp passed the door of No. 1 Study, as Coker of the Fifth charged in pursuit. Harry Wharton and Co. grinned, and went on with their supper. Billy Bunter was too busily engaged to join them. Billy Bunter was busy dodging Coker of the Fifth. He had heard the last of that flogging, but evidently he had not heard the last of Coker's Christmas pudding.

THE END