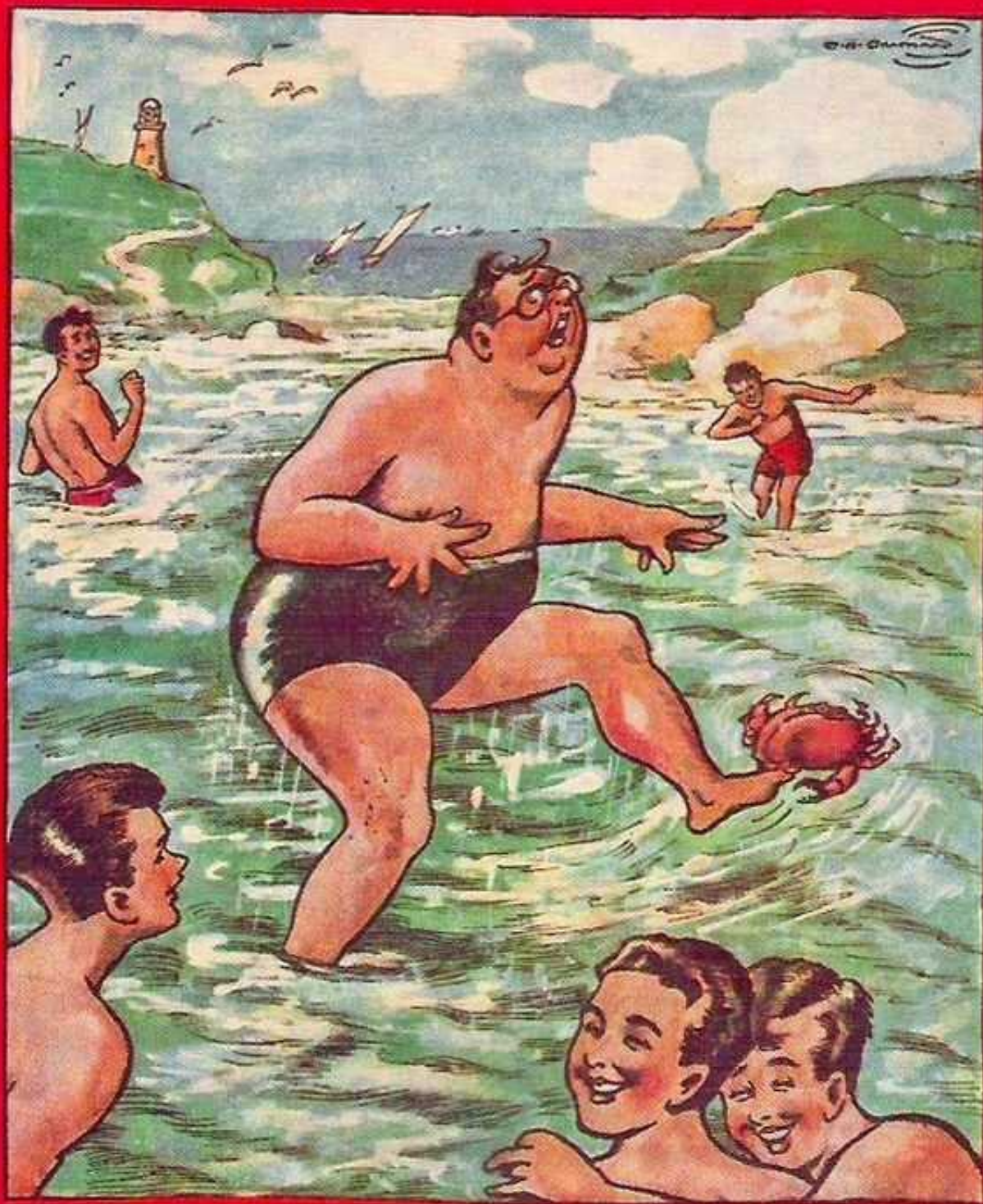


BILLY BUNTER'S OWN



BILLY BUNTER CATCHES A CRAB



Billy Bunter catches a crab

BILLY BUNTER'S OWN

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COKER'S CHRISTMAS PUDDING!

By

FRANK RICHARDS.



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, frumpious, 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—yaroooooooooh!"

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! oooooh!"

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 snoopied 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—."

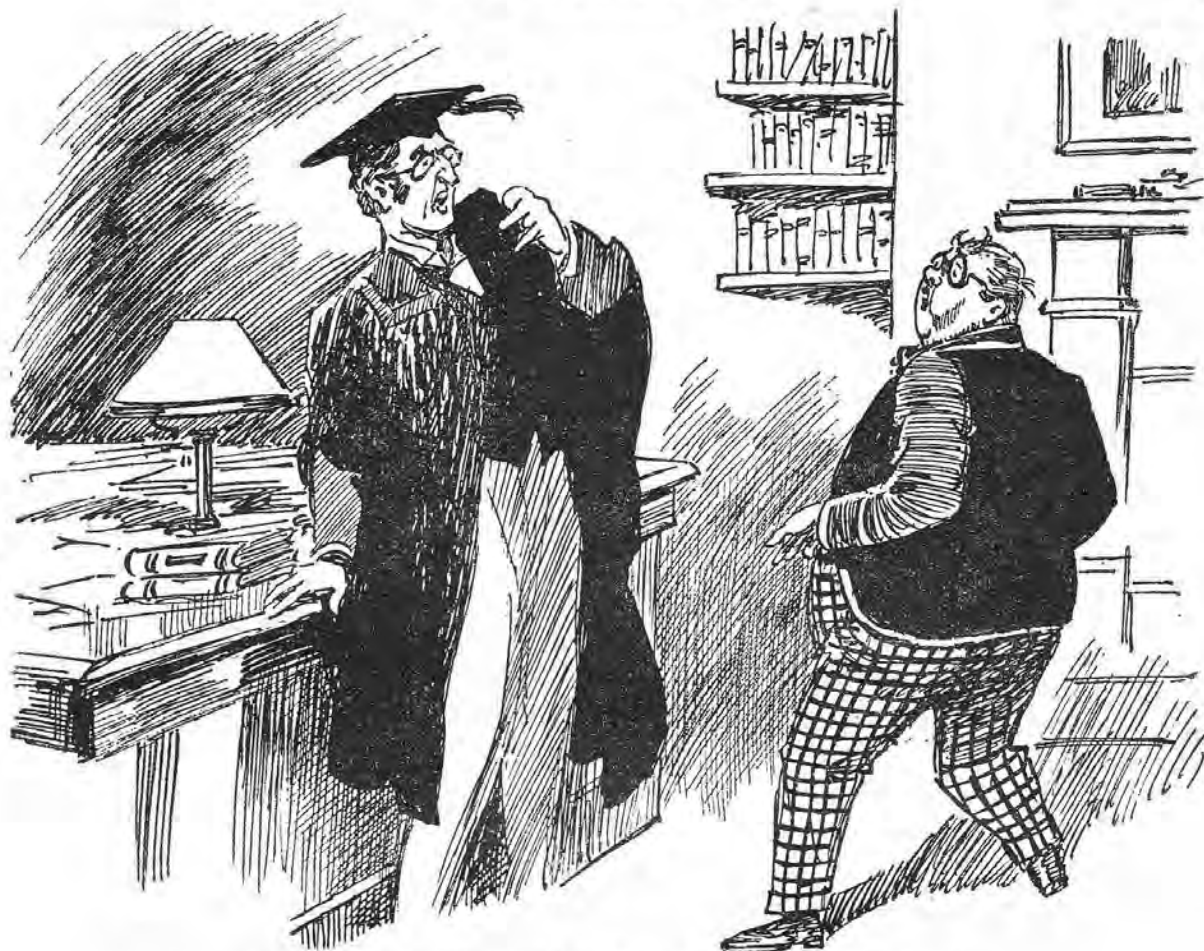
"That will do!"

"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

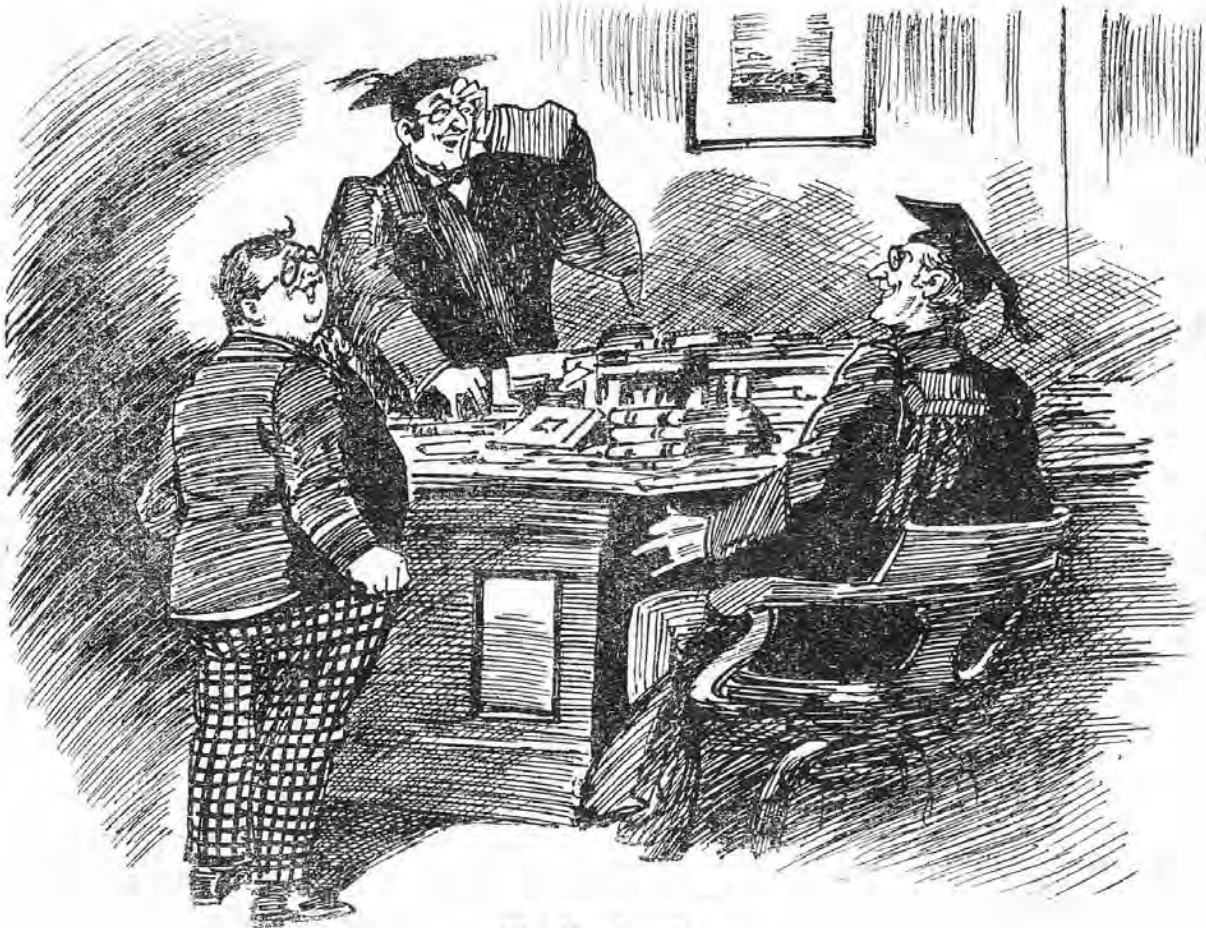
active service! Billy Bunter's glum fat face brightened. Really, it was like the sun coming out from the clouds. The Head smiled.

"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



It was a deep and rather husky voice that Bunter heard

CHAPTER I

SKINNER THE LEG-PULLER

"YOU will go on, Bunter."

"Oh, lor!"

"What? What did you say, Bunter?"

"Oh! Nothing, sir."

"Go on at once!" snapped Mr. Quelch.

"Yes, sir! Certainly, sir!" stammered Billy Bunter.

Bunter unluckily, was not prepared to "go on." Never, indeed, had he been more completely unprepared.

The Remove were in form. Latin was the order of the day. Every fellow in Quelch's form was—or should have been—giving attention to the proceedings

of the pious Aeneas. But quite a number of them were thinking of quite other things. It was the day before the big Soccer event of the term—the match with St. Jim's. Harry Wharton and Co. and other fellows, just couldn't keep Soccer quite out of their thoughts, even under Quelch's gimlet-eye in form. Six or seven juniors had already received lines for inattention or faulty construe, and Mr. Quelch's temper was growing sharp. His voice had a snap in it when he called on Bunter to—"go on".

Bunter, certainly, was not thinking of Soccer. Billy Bunter was most likely to be found in an armchair before the fire in the Rag, while other fellows were playing football. But Bunter had his own food for thought. Having given prep a miss the previous evening, his fat mind was a perfect blank on the passage in the Aeneid with which the Greyfriars Remove were dealing that morning. He was in dread of being called upon for "con". His eyes, and his spectacles, were fixed anxiously on Mr. Quelch in terror of the gimlet-eye singling him out.

So far he had escaped the gimlet-eye. Harry Wharton, Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, Vernon-Smith, Skinner, and several other fellows, had taken their turn. Billy Bunter's fat heart palpitated with mingled hope and dread. And then—!

Then Quelch called on him to "go on".

Willingly Billy Bunter would have "gone on", had he known how. But his little round eyes, and his big round spectacles, fixed dismally and hopelessly on a page of Latin that meant absolutely nothing to him.

"I said go on, Bunter!" came a snap from Quelch.

"Oh! Yes, sir! I—I—I—I've lost the place, sir!" stammered Bunter.

"Go on at Line 305," snapped Mr. Quelch."

"Oh! Yes sir!"

Billy Bunter could, at least, read out the Latin, even if it conveyed no meaning to his fat mind.

"At pius Aeneas, per noctem plurima volvens—," mumbled Bunter.

"Construe!" snapped Mr. Quelch.

Any fellow in the Remove could have told Bunter that that Latin line meant "But the good Aeneas, during the night revolving many matters—." To Billy Bunter it was an insoluble problem.

"I am waiting, Bunter!" Quelch's tone was ominous.

A faint whisper, which did not reach Mr. Quelch at his high desk, reached Billy Bunter's fat ear. It was a whisper from Skinner, who sat beside him.

"Aeneas rolled over during the night," whispered Skinner.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter, in great relief.

Harold Skinner was not really the kind of fellow to help another fellow out of a jam. He was the kind of fellow to play malicious tricks. But Billy Bunter,

in his present state of stress, forgot the kind of fellow Skinner was. He had no doubt that Skinner had given him the translation, and he bumbled on quite happily—

"At pius Aneneas, per noctem plurima volvens—Aeneas rolled over during the night—."

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Bob Cherry, involuntarily.

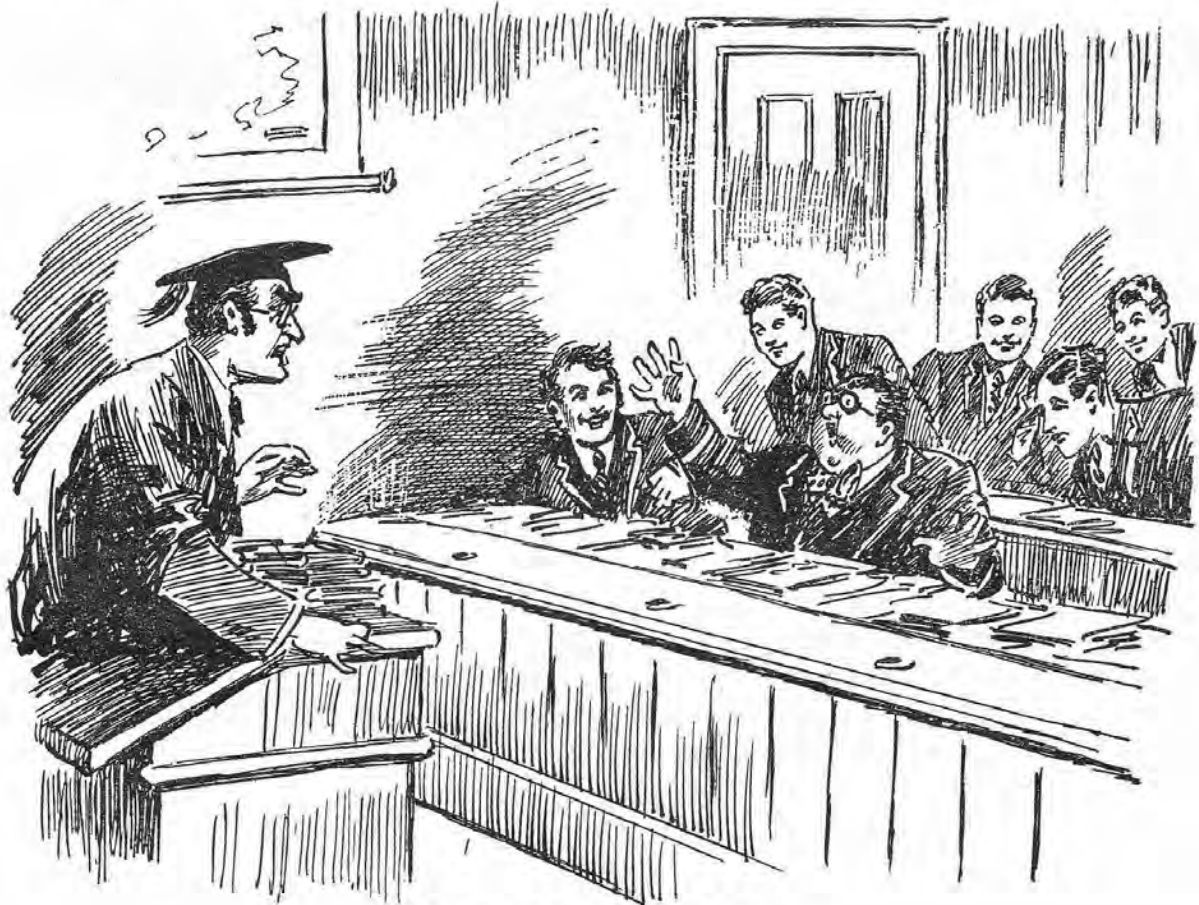
"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" Quelch almost roared, "Bunter! How dare you?"

"Is—is—isn't that right, sir!" stammered Bunter.

"Upon my word! You have no knowledge whatever of this passage in Virgil. How dare you utter such absurdities?"

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter. "You beast, Skinner." It dawned on his fat mind that Skinner had been pulling his fat leg. "I—I—I say, sir, I—I didn't mean that Aeneas rolled over during the night—."



"Is—is—isn't that right, sir!"

"Then what did you mean, Bunter?"

"I—I—I." The unhappy Owl of the Remove stammered helplessly. He knew now that the translation supplied by Harold Skinner was not the genuine article. But that was all he knew. That Latin line was still a mystery to him.

"Well?" Quelch's voice was deep.

"I—I—I—."

"That will do, Bunter. Obviously you have neglected your preparation, and know nothing of the lesson. For that, Bunter, I should give you an imposition of fifty lines. But—," Quelch's voice deepened, "You must learn not to utter such absurdities in the form-room. You will take five hundred lines, Bunter."

"Oh, crikey!"

"You will go on, Todd."

Many commiserating glances were cast in Billy Bunter's direction, as Peter Todd took up the tale, and the lesson proceeded.

Bunter's "howlers" often caused merriment in the Remove form-room—to the juniors, if not to Mr. Quelch. Quelch was often patient with the laziest and most obtuse member of his form. But this latest specimen was evidently too much for his patience. Aeneas rolling over in the night was the limit. Quelch had come down hard and heavy: and the hapless Owl sat in a state of collapse. Five hundred lines was an awful impot—really awful. It was likely to keep William George Bunter busy during all his leisure hours for days to come. Certainly it was also likely to impress upon his fat mind that it was worth while to give some attention to prep. But that was no consolation to Bunter.

"Oh, lor'!" mumbled Bunter, dismally.

The gimlet-eye glinted round at him.

"Did you speak, Bunter?"

"Oh! No, sir!" gasped Bunter, in alarm. "I never opened my lips, sir. I only said, 'Oh, lor', sir. I—I mean I—I never said anything, sir.'"

"If you speak again, I shall cane you, Bunter."

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

The fat Owl was silent during the remainder of that lesson. But his looks were expressive—alternately at Skinner and at Quelch. Skinner had pulled his leg, and Quelch had given him five hundred lines—and Bunter could not help feeling that what they both deserved was something lingering, with boiling oil in it! It was a dismal Owl that rolled out of the form-room when the Remove were, at last, dismissed.

CHAPTER II

CALLED TO ACCOUNT

"I SAY, you fellows!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Jolly old Aeneas still rolling over?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha."

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" hooted Billy Bunter, indignantly, "I've got five hundred lines—."

"Didn't you ask for them?" grunted Johnny Bull. "If you tell a beak that Aeneas rolled over—."

"I didn't!" howled Bunter, "It was Skinner."

"Eh! what?"

The Famous Five stared at the fat Owl. They had not heard Skinner's whisper in class, and knew nothing, so far, of Skinner's participation in that "howler" which had evoked Quelch's wrath.

They were talking Soccer when Bunter rolled up in the quad. The St. Jim's match on the morrow was the topic. Tom Merry and Co. of St. Jim's were coming over the next day to play football, and it was a great occasion. Certainly they commiserated a fat Owl landed with five hundred lines: but they were much more interested in Soccer than in Bunter. However, they gave him their attention now.

"What the dickens had Skinner to do with it?" asked Frank Nugent.

"We all heard you hand out that howler," said Harry Wharton. "Where does Skinner come in?"

"He gave me the translation," explained Bunter, "He whispered it to me, and of course I thought it was fair and square, and passed it on to Quelch."

"Oh!" ejaculated all the five, together.

"Rotten trick!" said Bob.

"Rotten!" agreed Nugent.

"The rottenfulness is terrific!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head.

Snort, from Johnny Bull.

"You might have known that Skinner was pulling your silly leg," he said, "Catch Skinner doing any fellow a good turn."

Harry Wharton glanced round at a group of three Remove fellows at a little distance—Skinner, Snoop, and Stott. All three were grinning and



"I'll jolly well punch his head for it," said Bunter

chuckling, evidently discussing something very amusing. The captain of the Remove could guess now what it was—Skinner's malicious trick on the obtuse fat Owl. He frowned. Skinner was as full of tricks as a monkey: and they were seldom good-natured. Evidently the fact that he had landed Bunter with a heavy imposition did not weigh on his conscience.

"I'd jolly well punch his head for it," said Bunter. "Only—only he would punch mine, you see—! But I say you fellows—I expect you to see fair play. Look here, Wharton, you're captain of the form, and it's up to you."

"I'll see fair play, if you're going to punch Skinner," said Harry. "But—you couldn't handle him, old fat man."

"I don't mean that. But look here, Skinner's landed me with five hundred with his rotten trick. Well, it's only fair for him to do the lines."

"Oh!"

Billy Bunter's fat brain had evidently been at work since the Remove had come out of form!

"He wouldn't!" said Nugent.

"Not likely!" said Bob Cherry.

"Catch Skinner!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"You fellows make him!" said Bunter.

"Oh!"

"Fair play's a jewel!" said Bunter, "Skinner got me the lines, didn't he? Perhaps he'll think twice about pulling a fellow's leg in form, if he has to do them himself."

"By gum, it's only fair," said Bob, "Bunter can't help being a silly, fat-headed, blithering ass—."

"Oh, really, Cherry—."

"And it's a dirty trick to land him in a row with Quelch, when he hasn't sense enough to go in when it rains—."

"Beast!"

"Right!" said Harry Wharton, "Let's go over and talk to Skinner. We can't make him do Bunter's lines, if he won't, but we can jolly well bump him for landing the fat chump in a row. We'll give him his choice."

"Hear, hear!"

"I say, you fellows, come on!" chirruped Bunter.

The Famous Five came on! They walked across to the grinning group under the elms. The practical joker was to be called to account!

"Fancy even that fat ass falling for it!" Skinner was saying, as they came up, "Aeneas rolled over in the night! Ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha!" echoed Snoop and Stott.

"No wonder Quelch went off at the deep end," chuckled Skinner. "But fancy that fat chump taking it in!" He grinned round at Harry Wharton and Co. "You fellows haven't heard the joke—."

"Yes, we've just heard it—from Bunter," said Harry. "Very funny, if it hadn't landed Bunter in a row. But five hundred lines isn't a joke. What about that?"

Skinner shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you've had your little joke," said Bob Cherry. "But the chap who calls the tune has to pay the piper. Are you going to help Bunter out with his lines?"

"What?"

"That's only fair!" said Nugent.

Skinner laughed.

"I say, you fellows—!" squeaked Bunter.

"Leave it to us, old fat man," said Harry. "Look here, Skinner, you can pull that fat chump's leg as much as you like: but you can't land him with a



"Leave it to us, old fat man!"

whacking impot for a joke. You got him that impot from Quelch, and it's only fair to do it for him."

"I'll watch it," said Skinner.

"You won't?"

"Not so's you'd notice it!" yawned Skinner.

"I say, you fellows—."

"Shut up, Bunter! Look here, Skinner, you're going to do those lines, or you're going to be bumped—hard! Yes or no," snapped the captain of the Remove.

Skinner made a move to back away. Five juniors surrounded him at once. There was no retreat for Skinner.

Snoop and Stott exchanged a glance, and strolled away. Skinner was left alone, scowling at five faces that encircled him.

"Can't you fellows mind your own business?" he snarled.

"We're minding Bunter's, for a change," said Bob. "You wouldn't have played that trick on a fellow who could wallop you for it, Skinner. You're going to do those lines."

"Quelch would smell a rat, if I did," muttered Skinner. "My fist isn't like that fat scrawler's."

"You can make it near enough. Make it look as if a spider had swum in the ink-pot and then crawled over the paper. That would pass for Bunter's fist any day."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—."

"Well, I won't do a single line for the fat chump!" snapped Skinner, "And you can't make me."

"You'll get a bumping if you don't,"

"The bumpfulness will be terrific."

Skinner made a sudden rush. But it booted not. Three or four pairs of hands grasped him at once.

Bump!

There was a frantic yell from Skinner, as he was swept off his feet, and landed on the hard, unsympathetic earth.

"Doing those lines?" asked Bob.

"No!" howled Skinner.

"Give him another!"

Bump!

"Ow! Oh! Leggo! Ow!" yelled Skinner. "I won't do a line! Wow!"

"One more for luck, then," said Bob.

Bump!

"Yooo-hooooop!"

"Now boot him!"

A breathless, enraged, dusty Skinner fled from lunging feet—evidently no longer enjoying that joke on Billy Bunter.

The fat Owl blinked after him as he fled, and then blinked at the Famous Five.

"I say, you fellows—!" he squeaked. "I say, if Skinner won't do those lines, what about you fellows doing them?"

"What?"

"I'll do some," said Bunter, hastily. "Look here, I'll do twenty-five. Then you chaps can whack out the rest. It will be only seventy each, for the five of you, to make up the five hundred."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at. I say, you fellows, don't walk away while a fellow's talking to you!" howled Bunter.

But the Famous Five did walk away, laughing. They had done all they could: and did not seem disposed to do Bunter's lines in addition. The topic of the St. Jim's match was resumed, and Billy Bunter was left to waste his sweetness on the desert air.



"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at"

CHAPTER III

BUNTER ON THE WAR-PATH!

HARRY WHARTON and Co. were looking merry and bright, when the Remove came out in the break the following morning. There was only one more lesson to come: after that, a half-holiday: and it was a fine, clear winter's

day, and St. Jim's were coming over to play football. So it was no wonder that the chums of the Remove looked as bright as the winter sunshine.

Their cheery looks contrasted with Billy Bunter's. The fattest face in the Remove was also the most lugubrious that morning. Five hundred lines impended over Billy Bunter's fat head, like the sword of Damocles.

Some fellows, with so extensive an impot on hand, would have got going without delay. Not so Bunter. Bunter had not even started on his lengthy task. Not a single line, or a single blot, had so far dropped from his pen. The lines had to be done: and if Skinner remained obstinate on the subject, in spite of bumpings, Bunter had to do them. There would be no lazy frowst in an arm-chair for Bunter, that afternoon, while Harry Wharton and Co. were playing St. Jim's at Soccer. Only lines, and lines, and lines! It was an awful prospect for a lazy fat Owl.

Five cheery juniors, sauntering in the quad, came on a woeful Owl, who greeted them with a dismal blink through his big spectacles.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Enjoying life, old fat man?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Oh, lor'!" mumbled Bunter.

"Anything the matter?" asked Harry Wharton.

"Oh, really, Wharton—" Bunter gave the captain of the Remove a deeply reproachful blink. Actually, the Famous Five had forgotten about Bunter and his woes: just as if a football match was more important than Bunter! "My lines—!"

"Oh! Your lines! Haven't you done them yet?"

"There's five hundred—."

"Well, how many have you done, so far?"

"I—I haven't started on them yet—."

"Better get going," said Nugent. "Quelch will want those lines, fathead."

"Lazybones!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Tain't fair!" hooted Bunter. "Skinner landed me with those lines, and it's up to him. Quelch will ask me for them to-morrow."

"Better get them done to-day," said Bob Cherry. "Quelch isn't exactly pleased with you already, old fat man. Might be whops!"

"That cad Skinner—."

"Skinner's a cad, but he won't do those lines for you," said Bob. "Make up your mind to it, you lazy old porpoise. After all, you did ask for them—you couldn't expect to please Quelch by telling him that jolly old Aeneas rolled over in the night—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cackle!" said Bunter, bitterly. "Quelch is a beast—coming down on a fellow like that for nothing—well, next to nothing. But perhaps he'll be sorry for it," added Bunter, darkly.

"Eh! How come?" asked Bob, staring.

"Perhaps I know how to make him sit up for it," said Bunter. "Perhaps he will like sitting down in a lot of ink next time he sits down in his armchair. Perhaps he won't! He, he, he!"

Billy Bunter's lugubrious fat face cleared, and he chuckled. The idea of Henry Samuel Quelch sitting down in a lot of ink seemed to cheer him up.



"You fat ass!" said Johnny Bull

The Famous Five gazed at him.

"You fat ass!" said Johnny Bull. "Are you thinking of playing tricks in Quelch's study?"

"Hasn't he given me five hundred lines?" hooted Bunter.

"He will give you something tougher than that, if he catches you playing tricks with ink in his study."

"He jolly well won't catch me," grinned Bunter. "You see, I heard him tell Prout that he's going out for a walk in break. He may come out any minute

now. As soon as he's gone out, what's to stop a fellow nipping into his study, and pouring the inkpot into his armchair?"

"Fathead!"

"Ass!"

"Forget it!"

"Wash it out!"

"Yah!" was Bunter's reply to those remonstrances. Evidently, the fat Owl was on the trail of vengeance: and his fat mind was made up.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, here comes Quelchy!" murmured Bob Cherry, as an angular figure, in coat and hat, emerged from the House. Mr. Quelch walked briskly down to the gates, walked out, and disappeared.

"Now, look here, Bunter, you ass—" said Harry Wharton.

"Yah!"

"Keep clear of Quelch's study—."

"Yah!"

"Ten to one you'd be spotted," urged Bob Cherry.

"The ten-to-oneness is terrific, my esteemed idiotic Bunter," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Yah!"

Billy Bunter's replies were monosyllabic, but emphatic. The Owl of the Remove was on the war-path. Words of wisdom were wasted on him.

"Look here, Bunter," said Harry. "We'll go and look for Skinner, and hump him again if he won't help with the lines. But leave Quelch alone. Quelch isn't safe to rag."

"Yah!"

"Look here, you fat as—"

"Yah!"

With that final monosyllable, Billy Bunter turned a fat back, and rolled away. Bunter was not losing this opportunity, while Quelch was out of gates! He rolled off to the House.

"Whops for Bunter, if Quelch catches him!" said Bob.

"The whopfulness will be terrific."

Harry Wharton knitted his brows.

"It's all that cad Skinner's fault," he said. "Let's go and look for him, and bump him again if he won't help Bunter out with the lines."

"Good egg!"

And the Famous Five went to look for Harold Skinner.

Meanwhile, Billy Bunter rolled into the House. Very cautiously he approached Masters' Studies. Bunter was not very bright: but he was bright enough to know that he had better not be seen going to his form-master's study,

when his object was to tip his form-master's inkpot into his form-master's armchair, for his form-master to sit in.

To his extreme annoyance, the vicinity of Quelch's study was not uninhabited, as he had hoped to find it. Portly Mr. Prout, the master of the Fifth, was standing at an open door, talking to Monsieur Charpentier, the French master, in the passage. Neither of them glanced at Bunter: but obviously the fat Owl could not roll undetected into Quelch's study while they were there.

"Beasts!" breathed Bunter.

He stopped at a window, and stood blinking out into the quad, hoping that they would go. Break did not last long, and Quelch would be back in time for third school. Minutes were precious. It seemed to the irritated fat Owl that Prout's drone, and Mossoo's squeak, would never end, as the precious minutes passed.

But they did end: Monsieur Charpentier, at last, came down the passage, and Prout disappeared into his study and shut the door. Billy Bunter waited



Grinning, he rolled, inkpot in hand towards Quelch's armchair in the corner

only till Mossoo was gone. Then he fairly shot along the passage to Quelch's door. That door was opened, and shut again, in a twinkling: and a breathless fat Owl panted for breath inside the study.

All was clear now.

Billy Bunter rolled across to the table, and reached to the inkstand. He jerked out the ink-well, grinning. Five hundred lines impended over Bunter: but it would be a consolation, while he was grinding through those endless lines, to think of Quelch sitting down in a swamp of ink!

Grinning, he rolled, inkpot in hand, towards Quelch's armchair, in the corner of the study—a dusky corner, where Quelch was not likely to discern ink on dark leather before he sat in it. He reached the armchair. In another moment, the inkpot would have been up-ended over the seat. But in that moment, he heard the door-handle turn!

Seldom was William George Bunter quick on the uptake. Seldom, very seldom, were his motions rapid. But the terror of being caught there by Quelch quickened his fat wits, and accelerated his movements. He had just time to whip round the armchair, and duck out of sight behind the high back, before the door opened. The next second it was open, and footsteps came into the study: and an invisible fat Owl, palpitating with dread, strove to suppress his breathing, as those footsteps approached the armchair behind which he huddled.

CHAPTER IV

SKINNER'S SCHEME

“**R**YLCOMBE one-O-one!”

Billy Bunter hardly refrained from jumping.

If Quelch had come in, no doubt he would sit down to rest after his walk, in the few minutes that remained before third School. Only the back of the armchair would be between him and Bunter. That was what the terrified Owl expected—and he could only hope to remain out of sight till the bell rang, and Quelch left the study to go to the form-room.

But, to his great relief, the newcomer did not sit down in the armchair. He stopped quite close to it, but apparently had no intention of sitting down.

A whirring sound reached Bunter's fat ears: and he understood. It came from the telephone, which stood on a little table close by the armchair. Quelch—if it was Quelch—had come in to telephone.

There was nothing surprising in that. But there was something very surprising in what followed. It was not Quelch's voice that Bunter heard: and that

voice was asking for a trunk⁵ call! And the number given was one well-known to Remove fellows—St. Jim's, the school in Sussex from which Tom Merry and Co. were coming to play Soccer that afternoon. Somebody was ringing up St. Jim's on Quelch's phone.

It was not Quelch's voice,—even if the Remove master could have been supposed to have anything to say to anybody at St. Jim's. Had it been Harry Wharton's, it might only have meant that the Remove captain wanted a word, for some reason, with the St. Jim's skipper, before the team came over, and had borrowed Quelch's phone, for the purpose, in his absence. But it was not Wharton's voice—it was not a boy's voice at all, or at all events did not sound like one. It was a deep and rather husky voice that Bunter heard asking for the call to St. Jim's.

Strangest of all, it was a voice unknown to Bunter. Bunter knew the voices of all the Staff at Greyfriars: from Prout's boom and Hacker's snap, to Wiggins' mumble and Mossoo's squeak. It was none of them.

"Is that St. James's School?"

"Yes, the School House. Mr. Railton speaking."

The telephone was so near the armchair behind which the fat Owl huddled, that the reply from St. Jim's reached his fat ears. Railton, house-master of the School-House at St. Jim's had taken the call at the other end.

"Good-morning, Mr. Railton. Mr. Quelch speaking from Greyfriars School."

Again Billy Bunter barely refrained from jumping.

It was not Quelch's voice. Bunter knew that, though naturally a master at a distant school did not. Yet whoever was using Quelch's telephone was using his name also.

"Good-morning, Mr. Quelch," came back from Mr. Railton: in polite but slightly surprised tones. Obviously the house-master at St. Jim's was not expecting a telephone call from the Remove master at Greyfriars, of whom he knew little more than his name.

"I am sorry to trouble you, Mr. Railton—."

"Not at all, sir."

"But the matter is urgent—very urgent. I understand that a junior football team is to come here this afternoon from your school—."

"Yes, that is so."

"I am sorry to say that the fixture must be cancelled."

"Indeed! May I ask why?"

"Owing to a case of polio here—."

"Polio!"

"It was not known for certain till this morning, when the school doctor

confirmed it. In the circumstances, every precaution is, of course, being taken, and I felt it my duty to apprise you—.”

“Bless my soul! I am sorry to hear such bad news, Mr. Quelch: but very grateful to you for warning me in time. The football match must, of course, be cancelled: I will speak to Merry, the junior captain here, at once. Thank you very much, Mr. Quelch.”

“Not at all, Mr. Railton. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, sir.”

Billy Bunter, behind the armchair, listened like a fellow in a dream. In fact he could hardly believe his fat ears.

It was not Quelch speaking, though the speaker had used Quelch's name. There was not a word of truth in the statement made over the wires. Nobody at Greyfriars had even the most distant acquaintance with that dread disease, polio. Mr. Railton, at St. Jim's, had taken that statement at face value, naturally enough. Billy Bunter knew that it was an invention. But the Soccer match, to which Harry Wharton and Co. were looking forward so keenly that afternoon, was going to be washed out. The expected visitors would not arrive: and the Remove footballers would be left wondering why. Somebody—evidently somebody with a bitter grudge against the Co.—had coolly and unscrupulously washed out the St. Jim's match for them.

Who was it?

Bunter could not begin to guess. What man at Greyfriars could want to play at treacherous and unscrupulous a trick on the footballers?

Then suddenly he was enlightened.

He heard the receiver jammed back on the hooks. That sound was followed by a low chuckle, and a muttering voice that Bunter knew.

“That's tit for tat, the rotters! They're going to keep on ragging me unless I help that fat idiot Bunter out with his lines, are they? Well, if they rag me, I'll give them something back as good, or better. If they make me stick in a study writing lines on a half-holiday, they can mooch about, wondering why St. Jim's don't come over to play football, while I'm writing them. Ha, ha!”

It was Skinner's voice.

Then it dawned on Billy Bunter that the voice he had heard was not a man's voice at all, but an assumed one: the young rascal had assumed that deep husky voice to delude the St. Jim's house-master at the other end.

“Beast!” breathed Bunter.

But he was careful to make no audible sound. He could guess what Skinner would feel like,—and what he would do—if he discovered that his cunning scheme had been overheard. At the mere thought of it, he could almost feel Skinner's fists hammering a fat face. Not a sound came from Bunter, and not a



It was Skinner's voice

movement, till he heard the door open. Then he ventured to raise a fat head above the level of the chair-back, as he knew that Skinner's back would be turned, and had a view of that unscrupulous youth as he left the study. The door closed on Skinner, and Bunter, at last, emerged from his hideout, the inkpot still in his fat hand.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter, at the sound of a voice from the passage. It was Prout's boom.

"What do you want here, Skinner?" Evidently, Prout had come out of his study, as Skinner emerged from Quelch's.

But Skinner's reply was prompt and plausible.

"I came to speak to my form-master, sir, but I found that he had gone out."

"Oh! Very well."

Skinner departed, and Bunter heard Prout's ponderous footsteps pass the

door. Both of them were gone: and the fat Owl lost no more time. The inkpot was upended, and its contents flooded out into the seat of the armchair.

"He, he, he!" chuckled Bunter.

A cautious blink from the doorway revealed that the coast was clear. Billy Bunter rolled out of the study: and rolled into the quad, with startling news for Harry Wharton and Co. And a few minutes later Mr. Qulech, coming in from his walk, sat in the armchair in his study to rest for a few minutes before going to his form-room—and his feelings, when he discovered what he had sat in, were deep—very deep indeed.



Mr. Quelch, coming in from his walk, sat in the armchair

CHAPTER V

"THIS way!" said Bob Cherry.

He linked an arm in Skinner's, when the Remove came out after third school. Johnny Bull linked on, on the other side of Skinner.

"Keep him till I come back!" said Harry Wharton.

"We'll keep him all right!" said Bob.

"The keepfulness will be terrific!" grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Harry Wharton hurried away: leaving Skinner with the Co. Skinner wriggled in the grip on his arms, as the Co. walked him down the corridor.

"Will you let me go?" he breathed.

"Not so's you'd notice it."

"I tell you I won't do Bunter's lines for him, and if you start ragging again, I'll go to Quelch," hissed Skinner.

"We're not bothering about Bunter's lines at present," said Nugent. "Quite another matter."

"What do you mean?" snarled Skinner.

"You can go to Quelch as soon as you like," said Bob. "We'll walk you there, if you like. Quelch would be interested to know what you had to say on his telephone while he was out in break this morning."

"Wha-a-t!" gasped Skinner.

"You rat!" grunted Johnny Bull. "I only half-believed—but there's no doubt about it now. Look at his face."

Skinner's face was quite sickly. Not for a moment had he dreamed that anything was known of that treacherous telephone call to St. Jim's.

"I—I—I—," he stammered, "I—I don't know what you mean. I—I haven't been to Quelch's study—I—I—."

"You didn't sneak there in break, and ring up St. Jim's?"

"N-h-no!"

"You didn't spin a yarn that there was an outbreak of polio here, to keep Tom Merry's team away this afternoon?"

"I—I—I—No!" gasped Skinner. "Did—did—did anybody?"

"That's what Wharton's gone to make sure of. He's going to ask Quelch to let him use the phone for a call to St. Jim's. Plenty of time to set the matter right, if you played that rotten trick."

"Oh!" gasped Skinner.

The Co. marched him out into the quad. They stopped at the fountain, to wait for Wharton to rejoin them. Skinner waited with them, having no choice in the matter, in a state of uneasy trepidation. The Co. had, perhaps, had some lingering doubt of the accuracy of Bunter's startling news: but Skinner's obvious uneasiness confirmed it. How they knew was a mystery to Skinner: but he knew that his cunning scheme had fallen to pieces like a house of cards, and that the consequences were likely to be extremely uncomfortable.

Harry Wharton came out of the House at last. His face was set and grim as he joined the group at the fountain.

"You cur, Skinner!" he breathed, as he came up. I got on to Mr. Railton, at St. Jim's. He was phoned this morning in Quelch's name, with a yarn about polio here. I've explained to him that it was a practical joke, and nothing in it: and Tom Merry's crowd will be coming over as arranged. It's all right now, Skinner, you rat."

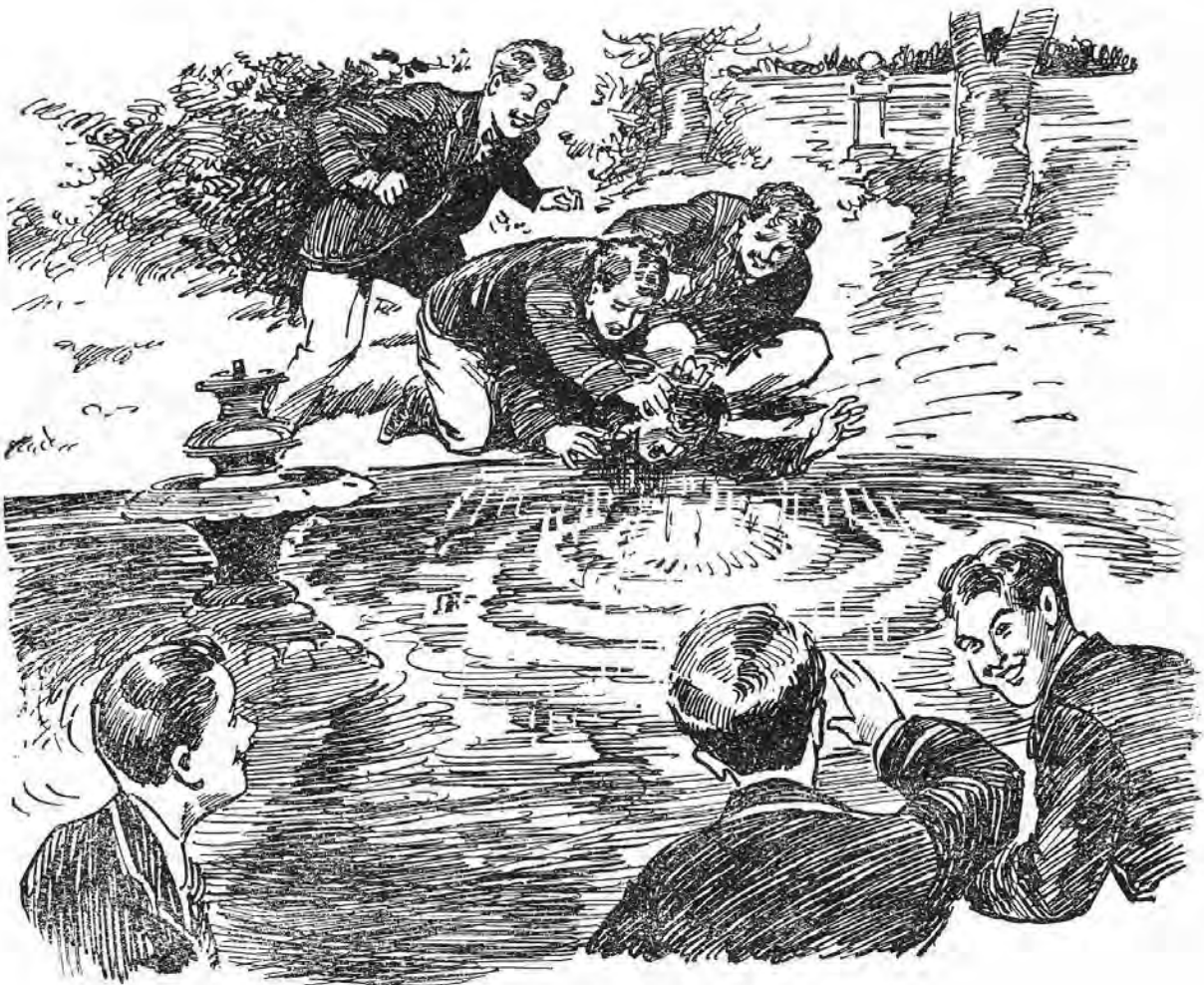
"Good egg!" said Bob.

"The goodfulness of the egg is terrific."

"Okay now," said Johnny Bull. "Wasn't that St. Jim's beak shirty about having his leg pulled like that?"

"He was!" said Harry. "He said that such a practical joke should be severely punished. I think you fellows will agree."

"Hear, hear!"



There was a gurgling howl from Skinner

"Duck him!"

Splash!

There was a gurgling howl from Skinner, as his head went over the rim of the fountain into the water. It came out dripping.

"Oooooogh! Grooogh! Leggo! Gurrgh!" gurgled Skinner.

"Give him another!"

Splash!

"Wurrrrgghh! Urrggh!"

"Now, you rotter—!"

"Wurrrrrrgghh!"

"You're going to do Bunter's lines this afternoon—the whole five hundred of them!" said Harry Wharton. "If they're not done by the time we're through with the football, look out for squalls. Now boot him."

How many kicks he collected, before he escaped, Skinner could hardly have counted: it seemed to him like hundreds. It was a wet, draggled, aching and painful Skinner who got away at last, sadly and sorrowfully realizing that the way of the transgressor was hard.

"I say, you fellows." Billy Bunter rolled up to the Famous Five in the quad. "I say, about my lines—I say, one good turn deserves another, you know. I put you wise about Skinner's dirty trick on Quelch's phone, didn't I?"

"You did!" agreed Harry Wharton.

"Fancy Bunter coming in useful for once!" said Bob.

"Well, he couldn't be ornamental!" remarked Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull! But I say, about my lines—one good turn deserves another, doesn't it?"

"It does!" assented Harry.

"Well, then, suppose you fellows do my lines for me this afternoon—"

"While we're playing football?" asked Bob.

"You can cut out the football," suggested Bunter. "Lots of the fellows would be glad to take your places to play Soccer, but they wouldn't do my lines. What about it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Famous Five.

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at. I haven't said anything funny, have I?" yapped Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

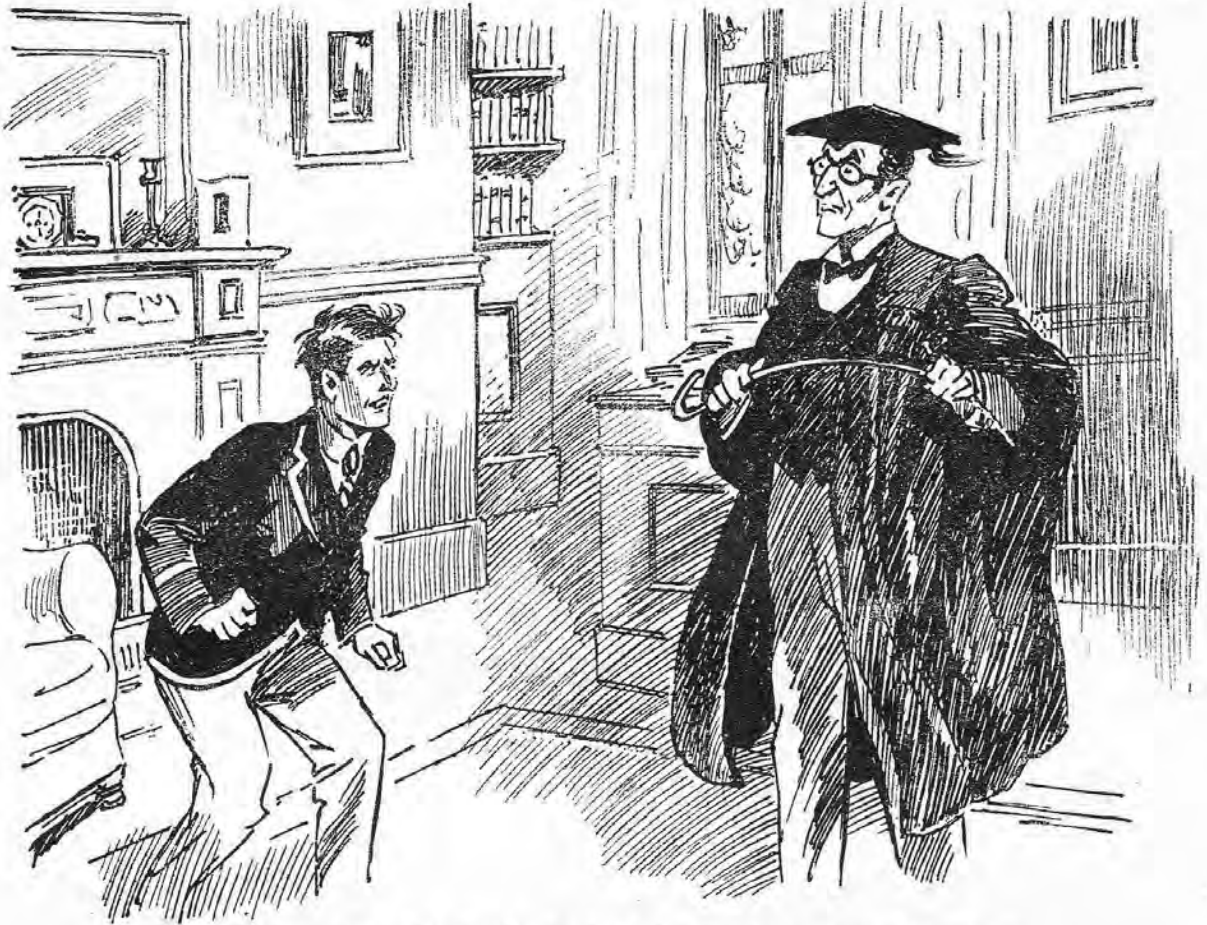
"Look here, you fellows—"

"It's all right about the lines, old fat man," said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"You can leave them to Skinner."

"But he said he won't—"

"If he doesn't, we're going to boil him in oil. It's all right."



"Did you enter this study, without leave, during my absence?"

"Well, if it's all right, all right!" said Bunter. "So long as I don't have to do them, I don't mind who does. I say, you fellows, I wonder what we're going to have for dinner!"

CHAPTER VI

SIX FOR SKINNER

THERE were many cheery faces at Greyfriars that afternoon. Tom Merry and Co. duly arrived from St. Jim's to play Soccer, and Harry Wharton and Co. went into the field with them, merry and bright. Billy Bunter, equally cheery though in a different way, settled down happily in an armchair before the fire in the Rag, with a bag of toffees he had found in Bob Cherry's study. Everyone in fact, seemed to be enjoying life, with the exception of Harold Skinner, whose

cunning scheming had come home so painfully to roost. Skinner had Bunter's lines to write, lest worse should befall him: and even that was not all. He received a summons to his form-master's study: and he obeyed it in fear and trembling, in dread that Quelch had heard something about that telephone-call to St. Jim's, so unexpectedly known to so many fellows.

He found Mr. Quelch looking his grimmest.

"Skinner!" rapped Quelch.

"Yes, sir!"

"During my absence in break this morning, some Remove boy entered this study, and poured ink into the seat of my armchair. I sat in it before I perceived it. I have made inquiries, Skinner, and I have learned that you were seen to leave my study during break. You were seen by Mr. Prout." Quelch picked up a cane. "Bend over that chair, Skinner."

"But I—I—I didn't—I—I—I never—!" stammered Skinner.

"Did you enter this study, or not, without leave during my absence?"



Billy Bunter lolled at his fat ease in the Rag and consumed Bob Cherry's toffees

"Oh! Yes! No! But—"

"That is sufficient. Bend over that chair. This is not the first time you have played disrespectful tricks in this study, Skinner. I trust it will be the last. Bend over that chair!"

Quelch had no doubts! He had sat in the ink, swamped in his armchair by a surreptitious hand. Skinner, whom he knew to be as full of mischievous tricks as a monkey, had been in the study at the material time. That was enough for Quelch. Six swipes from the cane were more than enough for Harold Skinner. From the bottom of his heart he wished that he had steered clear of Quelch's study that morning.

Skinner sat very uncomfortably while he scrawled five hundred lines that afternoon, what time Billy Bunter lolled at his fat ease in the Rag and consumed Bob Cherry's toffees, and Harry Wharton and Co. urged the flying ball on the football field.

THE END

AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR!

By
— CHARLES HAMILTON —



Lyn Strong and the Kikuyu dissappeared by the forest path

CHAPTER I

“BOBO! What do you hear?”

Bobolobo, the Kikuyu, did not answer.
His tall head was bent to listen.

The Kikuyu had stopped, suddenly, on the forest path, under the shadowy branches of the vast muhugu trees. Why he had stopped, why he was listening so intently, Lyn Strong did not know. Lyn heard nothing but the faint murmur of the wind in the high branches, though his own ears were keen. But the Kikuyu's were as acute as those of Tui, the leopard, or Kala, the jackal. Bobolobo had heard some sound that had not reached the boy hunter of Masumpwe.

Lyn did not repeat his question. He waited for the Kikuyu to speak. But his rifle was ready, his finger on the trigger. In the dusky shades of the Kenya

forest lurked lion, and leopard, and hyena, and there was peril at every step on the jungle path.

The tall Kikuyu stood motionless, a massive figure in his garb of black-and-white monkey-skins. Lyn watched him and waited. But Bobolobo stirred at last. His large black eyes turned inquiringly on the white boy at his side.

"Do your ears hear nothing, Bwana?" he asked.

Lyn shook his head.

"Only the wind in the trees," he answered. "What is it that you hear, Bobo? Is it Simba or Tui or Kala?"

"It is none of these, Bwana," answered the Kikuyu. "It is a cry."

"A cry?" repeated Lyn.

"It is the voice of a Mzungu."

"A white man?" exclaimed Lyn.



Lyn stared round him. He could see nothing

"It is far away, but my ears have heard it," said Bobolobo. "In the forest there is a Mzungu who is hurt and cries for help."

Lyn stared round him. He could see nothing but the great trunks, the massive branches, the tangled underwoods: he could hear nothing but the faint sound of the wind. But he did not doubt the Kikuyu. Bobolobo's ears did not deceive him.

"Lead the way, Bobo," he said.

"Follow me, Bwana."

Leaving the path, the Kikuyu plunged into the forest. It was hard and heavy going, through the tangled, prickly bushes and sprawling vines under the muhugu trees. Here and there Bobo had to clear a way with the broad blade of his spear. But he tramped on without a pause, Lyn Strong following in his footsteps.

It was to hunt for the spoor of a lion that had preyed on the cattle in the shambas of Masumpwe that Lyn and the native tracker were in the forest. And Lyn was very keen to return successful to his father's house in Masumpwe. But he dismissed Simba from his mind now. If there was a white man lost in the forest, in need of help, that came before all else.

He listened intently as he followed the Kikuyu. Bobolobo did not pause: evidently the sound he had heard from afar was a sufficient guide for him, even in the trackless depths of the Kenya forest. And at length, faintly, the sound that Bobo had heard came to Lyn's ears also:

"Help!"

It came faintly, almost like a whisper, but he heard it now, as Bobo had heard it earlier. The distance was still great. But he heard it, and it went to his heart. It was an English voice, calling in English: someone, of his own race, was hurt and helpless in the tangled wilderness: calling for help where there was no hope of being heard or heeded: but still desperately calling. Only by fortunate chance were there ears to hear.

"Hasten Bobo!" breathed Lyn.

The Kikuyu pushed on steadily, parting bush and branch and cleaving great tree-ferns with his spear. They emerged at last on the bank of a swampy stream: a tributary of the Popolaki river, on which the town of Masumpwe stood, several miles distant.

Then the Kikuyu pointed with his spear.

"Kumbe!" he said. "Look, Bwana!"

Lyn looked, and hurried on. Lying on the earth, between the trees and the swampy edge of the stream, was a boyish figure. It was a lad of about sixteen, no older than Lyn himself, who lay there: evidently unable to get on his feet. He was still calling faintly: but he ceased, as the boy hunter and the Kikuyu



Lyn dropped on one knee at his side

appeared from the forest, and his colourless face brightened at the sight of them.

Lyn dropped on one knee at his side.

"You are hurt!" he exclaimed.

"My angle—twisted—I cannot walk—I have lain here for hours, calling and calling, though I could not hope that there was anyone to hear in the forest—help me, or I must die here—"

"Thank heaven my Kikuyu heard you calling," said Lyn. "We are here to help you—and if you cannot walk, Bobolobo is strong, and he will carry you on his back, to my father's nyumba at Masumpwe."

"I was on my way to Maro—to the Anstruther plantation at Maro—"

"Maro!" repeated Lyn. "Maro is very far from here. You must have wandered far from your way. But no matter now—Bobo, you are more skilled than I—see what you can do for his hurt."

"Naam, Bwana!"

Lyn stood looking on while the Kikuyu, his strong muscular hands as gentle as a woman's in their touch, bathed and bandaged the injured limb. He was glad from the bottom of his heart that Bobolobo's keen ears had picked up that faint cry from afar: for there was no doubt that, unaided, the boy must have perished alone in the lonely forest. But he was saved now—saved and safe: and Lyn knew that his father, Grant Strong, would make him welcome in the nyumba at Masumpwe, till he was able to go on his way to Maro. And he little dreamed of what was to come of this chance encounter in the depths of the wild forest of Kenya.

CHAPTER II

"WHY does he not come?"

Ezra Hook, the planter of Maro, muttered the words, as he had muttered them over and over again during the long, hot, tropical day: and he followed the muttered question with a curse. He sat in the verandah of the bungalow on the Maro plantation, staring across the cultivated shambas towards the forest.

All was still and silent in the shambas, and in the bungalow, under the glare of the westering sun. Usually, Kikuyu field-workers were at labour in the shambas, and the bare feet of house-boys pattered in the bungalow. But now no one was to be seen or heard. The black-browed scowling man was alone on the plantation.

For hours and hours he had sat or lounged in the shady verandah, drinking, smoking, and staring towards the forest. His sunken gleaming eyes fixed continually on an opening in the forest, where there was a path under the branches. By that path he expected, every moment, to see a figure coming into sight. But moments, and minutes, lengthened into hours, and still no one came.

"Why does he not come? Why? The guide must have met him at Tati, to bring him here. He should have been here by noon. Yet he has not come. Why?"

He rose from the Madeira chair, and tramped restlessly about the verandah. But every moment his eyes turned on the distant forest path. His dark face grew blacker and blacker. He muttered and muttered.

"He can suspect nothing! Why should he? I had his letter from Nairobi—there was no doubt in that. He is but a boy—he has never even seen me, and knows nothing of me, except that I have managed his uncle's plantation since

the old man died. At Nairobi he can have heard nothing of what they say of me in this district. And even if he had, what difference would it make? He is coming to take possession, and give orders here—never doubting that I shall take orders from him, as from his uncle in the past. He could not even dream of danger here! But why does he not come?"

Ezra Hook came to a halt in his restless pacing, and leaning on the rail of the verandah, stared at the dim forest.

House-boys and field-hands had been surprised, that morning, when the planter had unexpectedly given them a day's holiday, ordering every one of them off to Maro for the day. Ezra was, as a rule, a hard master, a hard and driving man, feared and hated on the plantation. But for once, it seemed, he had relaxed. That he had some secret motive for desiring to be left alone that day, did not occur to the simple Kukes. But he had a motive, and a very strong one. What was scheduled to happen there that day was to be known only to Ezra himself. But—if the boy did not come, nothing could happen—and why did he not come? A boy, fresh from Nairobi, might very easily lose his way in the forests: but the guide from Tati would not lose his way. Why did not Cyril Anstruther come?

Why? That question hammered in Ezra's mind.

"He knows nothing," Ezra was muttering again. "He has never seen me—I have never seen him—we are strangers—all he knows of me is that I have managed this plantation for his uncle. The old man, if he had lived, might have found out that I managed it more for my own benefit than his—but the boy can know nothing. He would not have written as he did from Nairobi, if a doubt had crossed his mind. Yet—why is he not here?"

He resumed his restless pacing.

But as he tramped up and down the verandah, there was one spot that he carefully avoided in his tramping. It was a spot covered by a plaited rush mat. To all appearance, that spot was as firm and solid as the rest of the solid planking floor. But perhaps Ezra knew better, for he was very careful indeed not to step on the rush mat.

"He will come. He must come!" Ezra muttered again, "The Kukes will not be back from Maro till the morning—all is safe till then. He will come—he must come!"

Once more he stared towards the forest. Then a blaze came into his eyes, and he drew a deep, deep breath of relief.

"He is coming!"

From the shadowy forest a figure appeared at last: the figure for which Ezra had been waiting and watching through the long hot hours. Even at the distance he could make out a handsome boyish face under a shady hat. He

watched the lithe young figure, as the boy emerged from the shades of the forest, glanced about him, and then struck into the path leading to the bungalow.

"He must have lost his guide! He is coming alone!" muttered Ezra. "But he has found his way, guide or no guide, and he is coming—at last!"

And his dark evil face wrinkled in a grin, as he watched the boyish figure advancing up the path to the bungalow.

CHAPTER III

"**B**UT who are you, and why are you alone here?" asked Lyn Strong, his eyes on the pale face of the boy so strangely found in the forest.

The boy was sitting up now, his back to the trunk of a tree. He was more at his ease: Bobolobo's ministrations had eased the pain in his swollen ankle. But his limb was useless, and he could not walk, or even rise to his feet. It was clear that if he left the spot where Lyn and the Kikuyu had found him, he would have to be carried on Bobo's brawny back. But the powerful Kikuyu was more than equal to the task of bearing his weight the two or three miles down the stream to Masumpwe.

"My name is Cyril Anstruther—I was on my way to the plantation at Maro," the boy answered. "It was my uncle's—it is mine now. Mr. Hook, the manager, is expecting me to-day—he must have expected me hours ago—I should have been there before noon, and he must be wondering what has become of me. He must be anxious." He gave Lyn an inquiring look, "You live in this district?"

"Yes! My father, Grant Strong, is a big-game hunter, and has a house at Masumpwe—where you are going to rest until you are able to go on your way," added Lyn, with a smile.

"Then perhaps you know Mr. Hook, at Maro?"

Lyn shook his head.

"Maro is a great distance from Masumpwe," he answered. "I have heard of Mr. Hook, but I have never seen him."

His face clouded a little as he spoke. He had never seen the manager of the Maro plantation: but he had, as he said, heard of him: and he had heard no good. The Maro manager had a reputation that did not make him popular among the settlers. But he could see that young Anstruther knew nothing of Ezra Hook's unsavoury reputation.

"I have never seen him, either," said the boy. "He managed the plantation during the last years of my uncle's life. We lived in Nairobi, where I was at

school. After I lost my uncle, I remained at school, and Mr. Hook continued to manage the plantation at Maro. Now I am going there, to take up a planter's life. It was a rich plantation once, and I hope it may be prosperous again some day."

"It is a rich plantation now, from what I have heard," said Lyn.

The boy shook his head.

"No! No! There have been bad times, since my uncle fell sick and had to go to Nairobi," he answered. "The estate has produced less and less for years."

"And you are going there to take over?" asked Lyn. "Well, you will not get to Maro to-day, or to-morrow either. How came you alone here in the forest?"

"I left Tati early in the morning, with the guide Mr. Hook had sent to take me to the plantation," explained Cyril Anstruther, "I should have been there before noon but for the leopard—"

"The leopard!" repeated Lyn.

The boy shivered.

"The brute suddenly leaped at us from a tree. My guide fled at the sight of him, and I was left alone, and I—I ran for my life. I escaped the leopard, but I did not see my guide again, and the forest was trackless—how far I wandered, and where, I do not know—and then I caught my foot in a trailing vine, and fell—here! My ankle was hurt—I could not walk again—and if you had not heard my cries for help—" He shivered again, and was silent.

"It was Bobo who heard," said Lyn. "But you have wandered far, very far, from the way to Maro. It is to Masumpwe that you must go now, and Bobo will carry you on his back."

The boy's face clouded.

"But I am expected at Maro," he said. "Mr. Hook must be anxious already, and if I do not come, he will be alarmed. He expected me by noon." He paused, and gave Lyn an anxious look. "If your Kikuyu carries me to Masumpwe, could you—?" He broke off.

Lyn Strong paused for a moment. Then he nodded.

"Make your mind easy," he said. "It is a long way to Maro, but I am used to long treks. While Bobo takes you to my father's nyumba, I will go to Maro, and tell Mr. Hook what has happened, and that you are safe and sound at Masumpwe."

The boy's face brightened.

"If you will do that—!" he said.

"That's settled," said Lyn. "We were out to hunt for a lion that has been giving trouble in the shambas, but Simba can wait! Bobo, you will bear our friend to my father's house at Masumpwe."

"Naam, Bwana."

"Then you will follow me to Maro. I shall rest there until you rejoin me, and then we will set out together again to hunt for Simba." Lyn smiled, "You are swifter of foot than I, Bobo, and you will not be long after me at Maro."

"Paa, the gazelle, is not swifter, in his flight when he hears the roar of Simba the lion, Bwana," said the Kikuyu. "Long before the sun has touched the summit of the Great Mountain, I shall be with my lord at Maro."

"So be it, Bobo," said Lyn.

And in a few minutes more, Cyril Anstruther, hoisted on the Kikuyu's brawny back, was borne away down the bank of the stream, and Lyn Strong



On the Kikuyu's brawny shoulders

was left alone in the forest. To young Anstruther's eyes it was trackless: but not to those of the boy hunter of Masumpwe. Having watched Bobo and his burden out of sight, Lyn Strong set out with a swinging stride on the long trek to Maro, never dreaming of what awaited him there.

CHAPTER IV

LYN STRONG glanced round him in surprise, as he emerged from the forest path, and saw before him the planter's bungalow, and the cultivated shambas of the Maro plantation. The blazing sun was sinking towards the far Congo, but the sunset was still far off, and the shambas should have been busy with many workers. But not a man was to be seen in the fields, or among the out-buildings: the place seemed utterly deserted. Even at the bungalow itself there seemed no sign of life: till he caught sight of a dark face with watchful eyes that looked over the verandah rail. Not another face was to be seen: the whole plantation was silent and still.

It was a long path from the edge of the forest, to the planter's bungalow. Lyn tramped up it towards the building, conscious all the time that the keen watchful eyes were upon him. The man in the verandah, he had no doubt, was Ezra Hook, the manager: but why he was alone on the plantation was a mystery. He had never seen the man before: and now that he saw the dark face, seamed with excesses of late hours and heavy drinking, he had a feeling of repugnance. On his looks, Ezra Hook fully merited his evil reputation among the settlers.

However, that was no concern of Lyn's. All he had to do was to deliver Cyril Anstruther's message, and rest in the shady verandah till Bobolobo rejoined him there: and he was not likely to have to wait long, for the Kikuyu was almost as fleet of foot, as he had said, as Paa the gazelle. But it had been a long trek to Maro, and Lyn, strong and sturdy as he was, was a little fatigued, and he looked forward to a rest in the shade, out of the blaze of the African sun.

The man in the verandah did not stir, as he came nearer. He remained leaning on the rail, watching the boy with unwinking intentness. Not till Lyn reached the step, did he stir or speak. Then he moved, at last, and called over the rail:

"So you've come at last! You're late! You've had me guessing all day. Did you lose your guide and wander, or what?"

Lyn stared at him in surprise.

Then he smiled, as he realized the man's mistake.

Ezra Hook was watching and waiting for a boy to arrive at the bungalow: a boy he had never seen: and now that a boy had come, he had no doubt that it was the boy for whom he had watched and waited. Of what had happened in the distant forest, of Lyn Strong, he knew nothing. To his eyes, it was Cyril



"So you've come at last—." Lyn stared at him in surprise

Anstruther who had come, at last, after so much delay. It did not cross his mind to doubt.

Lyn was about to reply, when the planter stepped back from the rail, and disappeared from his sight. But his voice called again:

"Come in, come in, Anstruther!"

Lyn mounted the wooden step.

The verandah was deeply dusky, after the glare of the tropical sun. Lyn stepped into its shade.

Hook did not come forward to meet him. He was standing by the doorway that gave on the living-room of the bungalow. His eyes, under his bushy brows, glinted across at the boy.

He waved his hand towards the Madeira chair.

"You must be tired," he said. "Sit down, and then we can talk."

"Thank you, Mr. Hook," said Lyn. "I'd better explain—."

"Sit down, I tell you."

"Very well."

Lyn walked across to the chair. To reach it, he had to cross the wide rush mat that covered a section of the plank flooring. He stepped on the mat. ■

What happened the next moment seemed too startling to be real. Never had the boy hunter of Masumpwe been taken so utterly by surprise. Under his feet, the seemingly solid floor gave way, and he shot downward into darkness.



What happened the next moment — under his feet he shot down

Too utterly amazed even to utter a cry, he fell blindly into the dark. Splash!

He was plunging in water—deep water. The cold contact struck him like a blow. Instinctively, without thinking, for he was too amazed and dazed to think, he struck out and swam. His head came up over the water, and he floated, his brain in a whirl.

He was in a narrow circular pit, dug deep under the verandah. All was dark around him, but light glimmered above. As he swam, he stared up. He made out the trap-door in the verandah floor through which he had fallen. Over the edge of the opening, an evil face looked down, with sunken eyes that gleamed and glittered with triumph. Like one in a dream, he stared up, as the husky voice of the Maro planter came:

"You'd better have stayed at Nairobi, Cyril Anstruther! You've come here to Maro to take over, have you? Did you think it would be easy, after the plantation has been as good as mine for ten years? Fool! After I had your letter from Nairobi, I made all ready for you, and you have fallen into the trap as easily as an antelope into a game-pit. Fool! You seem to have lost your guide, but if he had come with you, I should have met you on the edge of the forest, and dismissed him there, and brought you here alone! You had it coming to you, Anstruther! You will not take over the Maro plantation—you will not learn what has become of the profits during the past years,—you will not charge your manager with fraud in the courts at Nairobi,—you will disappear, Cyril Anstruther, and no man in Kenya will ever know your fate!"

CHAPTER V

"YOU villain!" gasped Lyn.
He understood now.

Swimming strongly, he kept afloat in the deep water of the pit. From that pit, as a single glance told him, there was no escape. The level of the water was six or seven feet below the verandah, and the sides gave no hold for climbing. Unless help came, he could only swim till he was exhausted, and then sink—sink to death in the depths. That was what the manager of the Maro plantation had planned for the boy who had inherited the estate, and who was coming to take possession.

But the matter was not as the evil-faced man above believed. He had no doubt that it was Cyril Anstruther whose upturned face looked at him from the pit. But that mischance in the Kenya forest had saved Cyril Anstruther from this deadly trap. Young Anstruther was at Masumpwe, in the nyumba of Grant Strong, and it was a stranger who had fallen into the trap. And what would have been certain doom for Anstruther, was by no means so sure for the boy in the pit—for Bobolobo was coming to Maro, and must already be near at hand.

"You villain!" repeated Lyn, breathlessly. "If you think that you can get away with this—"

Ezra Hook chuckled.

"Why not? No one knows that you are here—there is not a soul on the plantation, and not a Kuke will come back from the village before morning. It seems that you can swim, my boy, but you will not swim so long as that. You should have stayed at Nairobi. Did you suspect that you were not receiving all that was your due from the plantation? Did you guess that your manager was feathering his own nest? It was rash to come here, and place yourself in my hands, if you did. Did you fancy I could be called to account for money that has gone on cards and drink? But you suspected nothing,—you, a silly schoolboy from Nairobi. You would soon have found out, here on the spot. You should have stayed at Nairobi, where you were safe."

"Fool as well as villain!" snapped back Lyn. "You had this trap ready for Cyril Anstruther, to rob him of his property, and if he had fallen into it, you could have carried on here as before: but let me tell you this—I am not Cyril Anstruther, as you fancy—."

The sunken eyes stared down at him blankly.

"You are not Cyril Anstruther!" repeated Ezra.

"I am not. I will tell you—."

He was interrupted by a harsh laugh.

"You need tell me no lies, boy!" jeered Ezra. "Do you think I am a child to be taken in so easily as that?"

"I tell you—!"

"That will do! A foolish lie like that will not save you, Anstruther. I am through with you."

He reached down to the trap door, to pull it up into place.

"Help!" shouted Lyn.

A jeering laugh came back.

"Shout as much, and as loudly, as you like," jeered Ezra. "There are no ears to hear. There is not a soul within three miles to hear you. Shout, if you choose."

"I tell you—."

"Pah!"

The trap-door closed with a snap. It left Lyn Strong in black darkness, and he heard the snap of a bolt that secured the trap. Ezra had fastened it from above.

"Help!" shouted Lyn.

His strong young voice came up sharp and clear. Any ear in the planter's bungalow must have heard. But there were no ears to hear—but Ezra's. And the evil man, sprawling in the Madeira chair, lighted a cigar, and poured a drink in a long glass, and shrugged his shoulders. All, as he believed at least,

was safe: and the trapped boy in the pit could shout, and shout, as he swam: till at length his strength was exhausted, and he sank down to his death: his fate never to be known, and Ezra Hook still master of the plantation.

"Help!"

Ezra smoked and drank. He knew that it could not last long. But he did not know that Bobolobo of the Kikuyu was drawing nearer and nearer with swift steps, seeking his young Bwana.



Ezra smoked and drank

CHAPTER VI

"GET out!"

Ezra Hook snarled the words savagely.

Who the black man, in his garb of black-and-white monkey-skins, with a rhinoceros-hide shield on his left arm, three spears in his muscular hand, was, and why he had come to the Maro bungalow, Ezra did not know. But he knew that he did not want ears to hear, and eyes to see, on the spot where Cyril Anstruther, as he believed, was sinking to death in the flooded pit beneath the verandah.

Almost an hour had passed, since Lyn Strong had fallen through the trap. Again and again he had shouted, hoping against hope that Bobolobo might already be at hand. To Ezra, his shouting indicated merely desperation. It passed him by unregarded. But at length the shouts came only at intervals as the boy's strength began to fail. There was no sound from below the plank flooring, when the massive figure in black-and-white monkey-skins emerged from the forest, and came with swift strides up the ndia, the narrow path between the shambas, towards the bungalow.

Ezra had counted on solitude at the plantation, till the Kukes came back from the Maro village, in the morning. Strangers were few and far between in the district, and he did not expect to see one. He was surprised and enraged when a tall Kikuyu in fighting-kit with shield and spear, appeared at the step on the verandah. Drinking and smoking, and listening for a sound from below, he had not heard the feet of the Kikuyu on the ndia. He started up from his chair, his face black with anger. It was only a Kikuyu who came: but Ezra did not want even a native within hearing of a call from the trapped boy below.

"Get out!" he snarled.

Bobolobo gazed at him, in astonishment.

He had arrived at Maro to rejoin his master, and with him to resume the hunt for Simba. He expected to see Lyn in the verandah as he came. But he saw no one but this angry man, who waved him away savagely.

"O Bwana!" he began.

"Get out, I tell you," snarled Ezra. "Your not wanted here! Go, before I take my whip to you."

He had no doubt that the black man, at his order, would go, and he was feverishly anxious for him to go, lest another cry should come from the flooded pit below.

But the Kikuyu did not go.



"Get out before I take my whip to you"

He halted, staring at the angry evil face. He was astonished by his reception, and in other circumstances, would not have disputed a white man's order. But he had come to Maro for his young Bwana, and they were to go together.

"O Mzungu," said Bobolobo, mildly. "It is for my master that I have come, and he awaits me here."

Ezra glared at him.

"No one awaits you here," he snarled. "You are dreaming! Go, or I will drive you off my land with this kikoto." He caught up a heavy whip, and lifted it with a threatening glare at the Kikuyu.

Bobolobo's eyes gleamed.

"It would not be wise to strike Bobolobo of the Kikuyu with your kikoto, O Mzungu," he said, "for it would mean death under my spear." And from the three spears in his left hand, Bobolobo picked one, and his eyes glittered over it at the angry planter.

"Go!" hissed Ezra. He was in momentary dread of a calling voice beneath the verandah planks.

"I have come for my master—."

"Your master is not here! I order you to go."

"My orders are from my Bwana, and your words are to my ears no more than the wind in the branches," retorted Bobolobo. "Where is my Bwana?"

"I tell you that he is not here—no one here. Who is your master?" snarled Ezra, as puzzled as angry at the Kikuyu's persistence.

"The young Bwana Lyn, son of the Bwana m-kubwa Strong, the great hunter of Masumpwe!" answered Bobolobo.

"I have not seen him! I have never seen him! He is not here! Go and look for him elsewhere!" snarled Ezra.

"But he came with a message—."

"He did not come! No one has come! Go!"

The Kikuyu stood puzzled. Lyn had left him, to trek to Maro with the message from young Anstruther. He must have reached Maro long before Bobolobo came, after carrying Anstruther to the nyumba at Masumpwe. Yet he was not to be seen, and this angry white man, declared that he had not come. But even as the Kikuyu stood wondering whether some mischance on the way had kept Lyn away from Maro, there came a sudden shout in a voice that he knew.

Bobolobo gave a sudden bound as he heard it.

"The Bwana!" he panted.

"Help!"

It was Lyn's voice, every tone of which the faithful Kikuyu knew. His master was there, crying for help. Bobolobo's black eyes burned like fire.

"Dog of a Mzungu!" he roared. "Where is my master? What is it that you have done to my young lord? O Bwana, Bwana-wangu, Bobolobo is here, and he hears your voice."

"Help! Bobo! Bobo, help and save me, or I perish here at the hands of that villain! I am sinking, Bobo—I shall drown if you do not save me." It was a wild and desperate cry, coming the Kikuyu knew not whence, only that it came from the bungalow.

"Bwana! Bwana-wangu! I come!" shouted back the Kikuyu.

He leaped up the step of the verandah. Ezra, his evil face aflame with rage and fear, barred his way. Savagely, he struck with the kikoto, as Bobolobo came, but the Kikuyu's spear caught the whip and cut it from his hand. In desperation Ezra thrust his hand into his hip-pocket, and it came out with a revolver in it. Another moment, and he would have shot down the Kikuyu at his feet.

But that moment was more than enough for the swift Kikuyu. Even as the revolver came up, he thrust with his spear, and the keen blade, keen as a razor's edge, drove through the planter's arm.

The revolver clattered down on the planks from a nerveless hand, and Ezra, shrieking with pain, clasped his right arm with his left hand, staggering.

Then the Kikuyu's grasp was on him.

In that mighty grasp he crumpled like a leaf. Bobolobo's eyes blazed at him as he gripped.

"Where is my master? Where is the young Bwana? Speak, before I cut your head from your shoulders with my spear-blade."

"Bobo! Help! I am here—under the floor, in a flooded pit—I drown if you do not save me. There is a trap-door under a mat—save me, Bobo."



With a swing of his powerful arms, the Kikuyu hurled Ezra Hook headlong

With a swing of his powerful arm, the Kikuyu hurled Ezra Hook headlong from the verandah. He crashed on the earth, and lay groaning with the pain of his disabled arm. A moment more, and Bobo had dragged the rush mat away and revealed the hidden trap: another moment, and the trap was wrenched open, and he was looking down at a white face that looked up from dark water.

"Bobo!" panted Lyn.

He was almost at the end of his tether. His strength was almost gone, and it was only by desperate efforts that he still kept afloat in the flooded pit. The Kikuyu had come only in time.

But he had come in time. At the eleventh hour, Bobolobo had come.

"O Bwana! Bwana-wangu!" panted Bobolobo. "Hold to my spear, and with my strong arm I will drag you up."

Leaning over the opening, he lowered the spear-shaft, and Lyn grasped it with both hands. Slowly, for it was a strain even upon his strong and powerful arm, the Kikuyu dragged him up: and he caught at the edge of the trap, and Bobo's hand helped him out.

"O Bobo!" panted Lyn. "My brave and faithful Bobo, you have saved me from drowning like a rat in a trap." He clasped the great black hand, and pressed it in both his own, "O Bobo, but for you my father would never see me again in the nyumba at Masumpwe."

He leaned, exhausted on the verandah rail, in a pool of water. His eyes fell on the groaning man who lay on the earth where Bobolobo had flung him. Ezra could not harm him now. Only his sunken savage eyes gleamed up at the boy whom he had so nearly done to death.

"O Bwana," said the Kikuyu. "It was not written that you should die at the hands of that wicked Mzungu: but it is written that he shall go to the land of the ghosts under a Kikuyu warrior's spear." And Bobolobo grasped his weapon.

"No! No!" said Lyn. "Hold your hand, Bobo. There is a law that will deal with him, and the prison at Nairobi waits for him. The askaris will come for him when we return to Masumpwe. Let him lie!"

"As the Bwana commands!" said Bobolobo, reluctantly.

"You will bind up his wound, Bobo, that he may live till the askaris come to take him," added Lyn.

In silence, the Kikuyu obeyed. And when Lyn Strong and the Kikuyu disappeared by the forest path, the evil man was left, to lie till the askaris came for him.

THE END

SKIP'S STRATAGEM!

By
FRANK RICHARDS



He backed away, very cautiously, from the big oak

CHAPTER I

SKIP was not really to blame.
It was all Reece's fault.

Skip had no more idea of shying that mouldy orange at Perkinson of the Fifth, than of shying it at his own beak, Mr. Charne, or even at the Head, the majestic Dr. Leicester himself.

In fact he did not even see Perkinson, until it happened.

Reece of the Fourth was the original possessor of the orange. Having ascertained that it was too far advanced in over-ripeness for mastication, Reece found another use for it. He buzzed it at Skip Ruggles in the quad, neatly catching Skip on a plump chin. Skip, in surprise, clapped a fat hand to a juicy chin, as the missile dropped at his feet. And Skip immediately did what any other Felgate fellow would have done in his place: he grabbed up the orange, and hurled it back at the hurler.

But Skip, as his chums in Study Four often told him, was cack-handed. Either Tom King or Dick Warren would have landed that squashy missile fair and square in the middle of Reece's features. Skip missed him by a yard or more, and the orange whizzed on its way past him. It was sheer ill-luck that Perkinson of the Fifth was passing at the time.

Perkinson, a big hefty senior, a great games-man, was taking no heed of the juniors. Possibly he was thinking of the goals he was going to score against Dolcot: or perhaps of his last spot of bother with his form-master, Kye. Anyhow he was not thinking of Skip Ruggles or of mouldy oranges, and that whizzing chunk of squashiness came to him like a bolt from the blue. It squashed on his left ear, and juice ran down his collar. And the glare that Perkinson cast about him was like unto the petrifying glare of the fabled basilisk, only more so.

"Oh!" gasped Skip, when he saw what he had done.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Reece.

To Reece it seemed funny. But it did not seem at all funny to Skip Ruggles, when a towering Fifth-form man strode at him.

"You cheeky little tick!" gasped Perkinson. "You little fat footling freak, why, I'll smash you up into little pieces for that. I'll—I'll—"

Skip did not wait to hear what the Fifth-form man was going to do. He had no time to explain. Moreover, explanation would not have removed fragments of mouldy orange from Perkinson's ear, or the juice that was oozing down his neck. Prompt retreat was indicated. The big senior's grasp was almost upon him. Skip fled for his life.

After him rushed Perkinson.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Reece. He was quite enjoying himself.

Skip was much too plump for a foot-race, especially with a long-legged senior like Perkinson. He put on speed: he panted, he puffed, and he blew: but Perkinson gained at every stride. Very fortunately for him, Mr. Kye, the master of the Fifth, bore down on the scene.

"Perkinson! Stop!" boomed Kye.

Perkinson reluctantly came to a halt. Kye frowned at him thunderously. He was never quite pleased with Perkinson, whose howlers in the Fifth-form room amused the Fifth but quite failed to amuse the Fifth-form beak. Only that morning, Perk had mixed his subjunctives in a way that showed that he was thinking more of Soccer than of the stately tongue of Horace and Cicero. And now Kye caught him in the act of chasing a fat fag across the quad. Kye let the thunder roll.

"Disgraceful!" boomed Kye. "You, a senior boy, chasing about with small boys in the quadrangle—absurd! Childish! Behave yourself with more circum-



Skip fled for his life

spection, Perkinson! Have some sense of propriety! Do not let me see you racing about with small boys again!"

With that, Kye rolled on, frowning: leaving Percival Perkinson in almost a foaming state. In the meantime, Skip had escaped: which was so much to the good from the point of view of Stanley St. Leger Ruggles. But he had a well-founded apprehension about what might happen the next time he met Perkinson: and during that day, it was a watchful Skip, with an alert eye wide open for Perkinson of the Fifth.

CHAPTER II

"ASS!" said Tom King.

"Fathead!" said Dick Warren.

That was all the comfort Skip obtained from his chums in Study Four.

However, they were prepared to stand by him, if Perkinson came up to the junior studies on the war-path. But a battle in Study Four, with so mighty a man as Perkinson, was a very doubtful proposition. Skip himself was of little use as a warrior: and while King and Warren were both strong and sturdy, they were only juniors, and Perkinson was a huge senior in the Fifth, capable of dealing with juniors like Gulliver with Lilliputians. Fortunately for Study Four, Perk did not come up. Skip, indeed, was far from anxious to commit his chums to so terrific a combat on his behalf. He was very relieved that Perkinson did not come up to the junior studies.

In fact, as the day waned, he began to hope that Perkinson had let the matter drop, as nothing had been heard from him.

Nevertheless, when after tea he rolled in the quad, a glimpse of Perkinson in the distance sent him scuttling for cover. Perkinson was walking with Purrings, his pal in the Fifth, and frowning as he walked and talked. Skip, spotting him from afar, backed promptly round one of the old Felgate oaks. There was a bench under that oak, and Skip had been going to sit down on it,—instead of which, he backed round the massive old trunk, and palpitated there out of sight, waiting till the two Fifth-form men walked on and disappeared.

But his luck was out. They walked on, but they did not disappear. They walked as far as the bench under that oak, and sat down on it. Skip trembled on his side of the trunk.

"Forget it, old man!" he heard Purrings say.

"Don't be a silly ass, if you can help it," came a growling reply from Perkinson. "How would you like a mouldy orange banging in your ear, and mouldy juice running down your neck?"

Skip was glad that that oak was between him and Perkinson! Evidently, Perk was not letting the matter drop! His wrath had not abated. Probably it had improved, like wine, with keeping.

"Not only that!" went on Perkinson. "But Kye! Old Kye! He spotted me chasing that cheeky young scoundrel, and jawed me! Does he ever lose a chance of jawing me! He fancied I was playing games with a small kid—what are you grinning at, Purring?"

"Oh! Nothing! But—"

"Nothing to grin at, is there, in old Kye making silly mistakes, and talking rot?" snorted Perkinson. "Me, a man in the First Eleven, called over the coals and jawed for chasing about with a fag! The old ass! I'd a jolly good mind to tell Kye where he got off."

"My dear chap—"

"Well, I can't slang old Kye, but I can jolly well give that cheeky little fat rascal the licking of his life!" said Perkinson. "And that's what I'm going to

do. I've had an eye open for him, but he seems to be keeping out of my way, and if I go up to the studies after him, that means a row, and Kye would butt in again if he got half-a-chance. But I know how. I've looked into the Fourth Form dormitory, and picked out young Ruggles' bed."

"What the dickens for?"

"I'm going to drop into that dorm after lights out, with a box-strap—."

"Oh, my hat!"

"A dozen or so with a box-strap will teach him not to buzz mouldy oranges at a Fifth-form man, I fancy. It won't take a couple of minutes."

"If you start a rough-and-tumble in a junior dormitory—."

"Rot! I shall be through, and gone, before the other young ruffians know what's happening, or that anything is. They won't even know who came. I suppose you know it's dark after lights out."

"You're not a cat, Perk." Purring pointed out. "You can't see in the dark. If you pitch into the wrong man—."



Skip trembled on his side of the trunk

"I tell you I've located his bed. It's the sixth from the window end. There'll be a bit of a glimmer from the window. I shall get the right man all right."

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Skip, inaudibly.

He backed away, very cautiously, from the oak. Keeping it between him and the bench, he retreated with infinite caution: and vanished from the spot without either Perkinson or Purring having the slightest idea that he had been there. He retreated safely: but in a dismal and apprehensive frame of mind. Only too clearly, Perkinson was not letting that matter drop, till he had administered the licking which, in his opinion, Ruggles of the Fourth richly deserved. And there was nothing to stop him. Once in the dormitory, there was no escape for Skip: and Perkinson was coming to the dormitory after lights out with a box strap! Skip could almost feel that box strap impinging upon his plump limbs. It was a very painful prospect.

CHAPTER III

REECE, who had caused that spot of bother in the first place, quite inadvertently and unintentionally solved that problem for Skip Ruggles.

It was a worried Skip who came up to the dormitory with the Fourth that night. There was a weight on Skip's plump mind. The impending visit of Perkinson of the Fifth, after lights out, hung over his fat head like the sword of Damocles of old. He could see no escape from the box-strap. There was no hope that Perkinson would miss him in the dark: for had not Perk ascertained which was his bed, counting the sixth from the window end. In the merest glimmer of starlight from the window, Perk could easily pick out the sixth bed. And a box-strap in a hefty hand was to come down on the inhabitant of that bed!

True, his chums would stand by him, if he called on their aid: but that was not really much of a resource: for the three of them could hardly have handled so redoubtable an athlete as Perkinson of the Fifth: especially wielding a box-strap. Such intervention was likely to lead to thrashings for three instead of for one. An alternative idea was to remain awake that night, and dodge under the bed when the avenger came. But Skip was doubtful whether he could remain awake—he was much better at sleeping than at waking, at the best of times. And if he did, could he dodge Perkinson?

It was a worried Skip: and his worry showed in his lugubrious fat face, and seemed to amuse Reece. Reece grinned at him, as he sat on the edge of his bed, slowly removing his socks.

"That Fifth-form man, still after you, fatty?" asked Reece.

Skip gave him a glare.

"It's all your fault," he snapped. "I never meant that orange for that Fifth-form fathead—."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled Reece. "Well, you're all right now—but look out for him to-morrow."

Skip grunted. He was not thinking of to-morrow: it was to-night that worried him, though Reece, of course, was not aware of that.

"You're so jolly cack-handed," grinned Reece. "If you chuck a thing at a chap, you should chuck it like this!"

Reece was standing at his wash-stand, with a sponge in his hand. He suddenly whizzed that sponge at Skip, as he sat on his bed. Reece, at any rate, was not cack-handed. The sponge flew straight to its target, catching Skip in a fat neck.

"Wow!" gasped Skip, as water spurted over him. "Why, you cheeky rotter!" He rolled off the bed, and clutched up the sponge. It whizzed back at Reece, missing him by a foot or more.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Reece.

It was the last straw! Skip had had enough,—more than enough—from Reece. With a flaming fat face, he grabbed up the water-jug from Reece's wash-stand and turned on him, swamping water from the jug.

"Take that!" he roared.

Reece did not "take it". He dodged in time, and the torrent of water passed him by. It did not touch Reece: but it landed in a flood on his bed. Reece's bed almost swam in water.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Reece. "You clumsy ass, look what you've done!"

Skip looked!

"Serve you jolly well right!" he retorted.

"Hear, hear," chuckled Tom King. "You've asked for that, Reece. You'll be a bit damp in that bed."

"Just a few!" grinned Dick Warren.

Reece was not laughing now. He stared at his bed, swimming in water. It did not look inviting. Like many practical jokers, Reece did not enjoy a joke when he was at the unpleasant end. His face was furious.

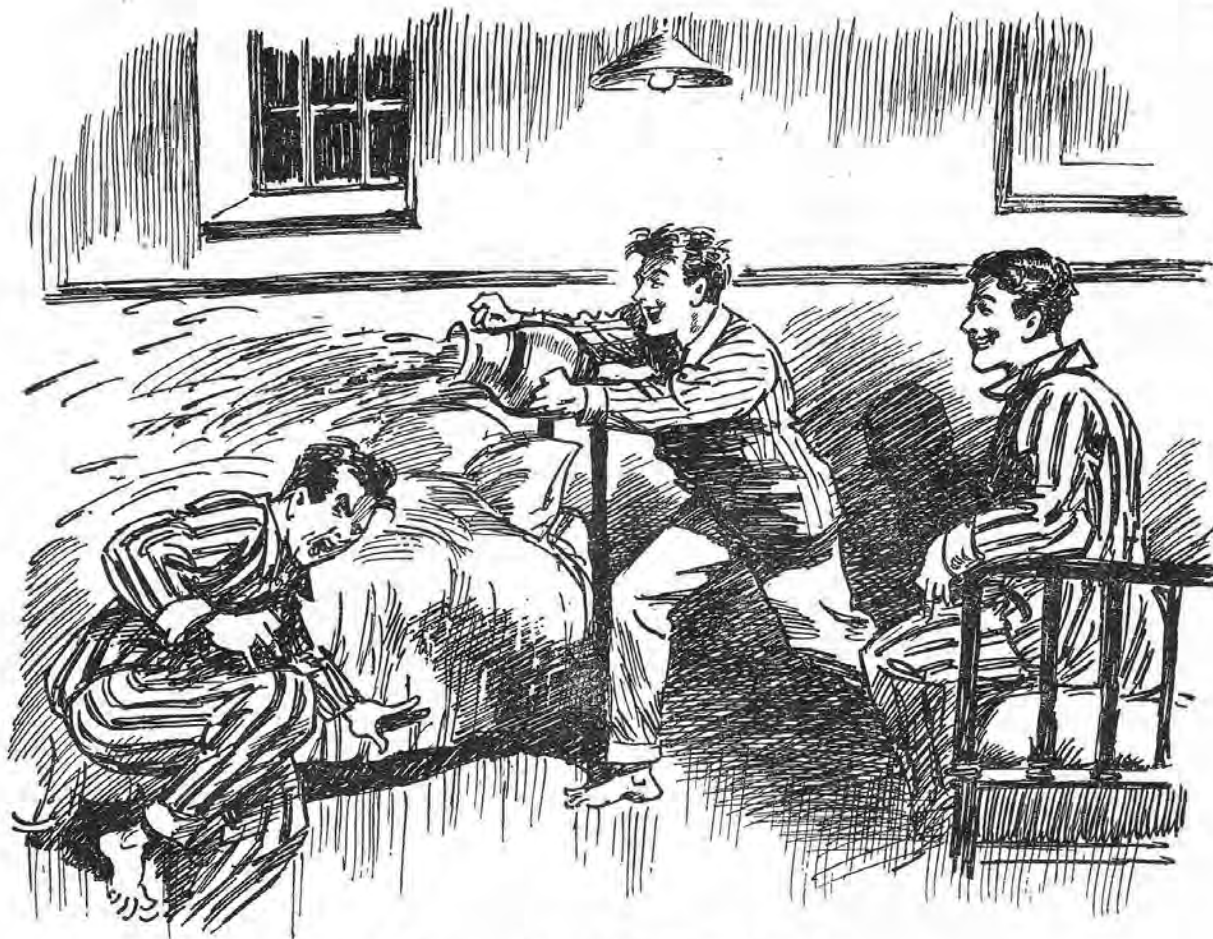
"You've drenched my bed!" he howled.

"Looks like it," agreed Skip.

"Think I'm going to sleep in that?" howled Reece. "You clumsy, cack-handed fat ass, you can have it yourself, and I'm jolly well going to have yours."

"Oh, are you?" yapped Skip.

"Yes, I am!"



The torrent of water passed him by

"That's fair," said Preece, who always backed up Reece.

"Not by long chalks," said Tom King. "Reece asked for it, and he can make the best of it."

"I'm going to have Ruggles' bed, I tell you, as he's swamped mine!" howled Reece.

"You're jolly well not!" said Tom.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Skip. His fat face was suddenly irradiated. "I say, let him have it! If you really want my bed, Reece—"

"Look at mine!" yelled Reece.

"Don't be a goat, Skip, said Dick Warren. "If Reece bags your bed, we'll jolly soon shift him out of it."

Skip shook his head!

"Let him have it, if he wants it," he said.

"Well, you're an ass," said Tom King.

"And a silly fathead!" said Dick Warren.

They left it at that. They were quite ready to stand up for their fat chum's rights. But if Skip chose to let Reece have his bed, that settled it.

And Skip did so choose!

He had good reasons. Quite a brilliant stratagem had flashed into Skip's fat brain, when Reece claimed his bed. Perkinson, as Purring had told him, was not a cat, to see in the dark. He was going to land that box-strap on Skip's bed—the sixth in the row. The occupant of that bed was welcome to the box-strap, so far as Skip was concerned. Reece's bed was certainly damp; but it was preferable to his own, in the unusual circumstances. Skip rolled up wet bed clothes, borrowed a blanket from Tom King, and turned contentedly into Reece's bed. Reece, triumphant, turned into Skip's. And when Mr. Charne had turned out lights for the Fourth, Skip grinned in the dark till he went to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

REECE hardly knew what was happening.

Who it was, how it was, why it was, he was too dazed and dizzy to begin to guess. It seemed like a wild nightmare, when his bedclothes were suddenly dragged off, and a box-strap descended on him with a terrific swipe. He heard a voice:

"Take that, you cheeky young scoundrel! And that! and that! and that! That'll teach you something about buzzing oranges! And that! and that! and that!"

Every "that" was accompanied by a swipe from the box-strap. Reece yelled and howled and roared, wriggling and twisting, hardly knowing whether he was on his head or his heels. Swipe! swipe! swipe! Reece's frantic howls awoke the whole dormitory. But the exciting scene was brief. A good dozen from the box-strap landed on the writhing, wriggling, yelling Reece: then there was a sound of departing footsteps and a closing door. The Fourth-form dormitory was left in a buzz of excitement and astonishment, while Reece howled and howled and howled. Only Skip Ruggles did not share in the general amazement and excitement. The din awakened him: but Skip only grinned, and turned his head on his pillow, and went to sleep again.



"Take that, you cheeky young rascal!"

SKIP did not need to dodge Perkinson of the Fifth on the morrow. Perkinson, having administered that strapping to the occupant of the sixth bed in the Fourth-form dormitory, was satisfied that he had done stern justice on the hurler of that mouldy orange, and he dismissed the matter from his mind. Perkinson was done with Skip: and Skip was only too glad to have done with Perkinson. Only Reece was dissatisfied with the outcome of Skip's stratagem.

THE END

NOTE. The stories of Felgate School, by Frank Richards, appear in Raymond Glendenning's *Book of Sport* annual.

COMPTON'S CATCH!

By
CHARLES HAMILTON



"I am glad to hear it, Head-master. I am glad to hear—"

CHAPTER I

CHARD was trumpeting.

Chard, a big and rather aggressive man, had a powerful voice. It was seldom subdued. When he was excited, it rose, and on such occasions it bore a distinct resemblance to the trumpeting of an elephant. At the present moment, the Fifth-Form master at High Coombe was undoubtedly excited. His voice fairly boomed. Perhaps Chard did not realize that that boom could be heard outside the Head's study where he was talking to Mr. James McCann. Or perhaps he did not care. Anyhow, he boomed and he trumpeted.

Several Fifth-form men, in the corridor, listened-in: some of them grinning. The fact that Mr. Chard was up against the new young head-master on every possible occasion, made him popular in his form: for practically everybody at

High Coombe was up against Jimmy McCann,—a much too energetic young man to be popular in the "School for Slackers". But though the Fifth-form men approved heartily of Chard making himself a thorn in the flesh to the new head-master, they could not help regarding him, privately, as rather an old ass. So they grinned as they heard him trumpeting at McCann: only Aubrey Compton apparently failing to be amused. Aubrey had a serious and thoughtful expression on his handsome face.

"Listen to the band!" murmured Teddy Seymour.

"Old ass!" grunted Bob Darrell.

"Peter's going it!" grinned Carter.



"Listen to the band!" murmured Teddy Seymour

"Peter" certainly was going it. Louder than ever, his deep throaty voice came booming through solid oak. He was putting on steam: and when Peter Chard put on steam, Stemtor of old had little or nothing on him.

"I protest, Head-master. I repeat that I protest!" Chard often repeated his

remarks, doubtless under the impression that they were worth hearing twice. "I trust my boys, sir! I repeat that I trust my boys."

Jimmy McCann's reply was not audible. McCann's voice was low, though very clear. It did not penetrate solid oak. But his reply was probably brief: for almost immediately the boom boomed on.

"I do not believe, I do not believe for one moment, that anything of a contraband nature is to be found in Study Three. The boys in that study, sir, Darrell and Seymour and Compton, are among the best in my Form! I am prepared to guarantee, sir, that no such thing as a packet of cigarettes, or a single cigarette, sir, can be found in that study."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Teddy Seymour.

"You ass, Aubrey!" breathed Bob Darrell.

Aubrey Compton started a little. It was one of Aubrey's ways to smoke cigarettes in Study Three: not particularly because he wanted to, but chiefly because it was against McCann's strict rule on the subject. But though he felt, with satisfaction, that his smokes were a defiance of McCann, he did not want the fact to come officially to McCann's knowledge. Jimmy McCann had a somewhat heavy hand with a cane: against which Aubrey's elegant, well-cut trousers were not much protection.

He whistled softly.

"So the Blighter's got on to that!" he murmured.

Carter chuckled.

"Better cut up to your study and make all clear, as Peter's put you wise," he suggested.

Chard was booming on.

"I repeat, sir, that I consider your doubts of that study wholly unfounded. Wholly and utterly unfounded. But if a search is to be made in that study, sir, that search should be made by the form-master concerned. By taking it into your own hands, sir, you put a slight on me, and one that the boys will assuredly notice and comment on, sir. If it is your desire, sir, to make me an object of disregard, I may say contempt, to my own boys, sir—"

There was a brief pause. Apparently Mr. McCann's reply was soothing, for the trumpeting went on in a lower key.

"I am glad to hear it, Head-master. I am glad to hear that you do not desire to lower a form-master in the estimation of his form. But I am bound to repeat, that if you take this matter into your own hands, you will be doing exactly that. Or, is it, sir, that you do not trust me to make a rigorous search of that study, and report the facts to you?"

Again the reply was unheard: but again it seemed of a soothing nature, for Chard trumpeted on:

"Thank you, Head-master. Thank you at least for assuring me that I am not actually distrusted. Nevertheless, by taking this matter into your own hands, distrust is implied, and will not escape the notice of the school. It will certainly be remarked upon in Common-Room, sir, that you, the head-master, made this investigation, and not the boys' own form-master. No doubt it is not for me to argue with you, sir! I am under your authority. I merely desire to point out, in a few words—a very few words—"

"Few!" murmured Teddy Seymour.

And there was a chuckle in the corridor. Chard's words were seldom or never few: and certainly he was uttering quite a considerable number on the present occasion.

But at that point, the Fifth-form group's entertainment came to an end. Mr. Mace came along, round the corner. Mace started a little, as he heard the boom from the Head's study, and noted the grins on the faces of the listeners-in. He coughed.

"You boys had better go," he murmured.

And they went. Chard trumpeted on in the Head's study, heard no longer by members of his form.

CHAPTER II

AUBREY COMPTON smiled.
It was a malicious smile.

Up in Study Three, Compton and Seymour and Darrell had gathered. Compton had opened the door of the study cupboard, and from an upper shelf, had removed a box of cigarettes. Having been "tipped", as it were, by the boom from Chard, the dandy of High Coombe was taking necessary precautions. That box of cigarettes was dropped into the ivy under the window, safe out of sight. Nothing of a contraband nature was to meet McCann's eyes when he came up to make that investigation, which Chard so strenuously objected to his making in person. Now that there was nothing contraband to be discovered. Aubrey at any rate did not object to McCann coming up. Indeed his malicious smile seemed to indicate that he had something agreeable in view.

"All clear now," said Teddy. "Jolly lucky we heard Chard roaring, though—McCann would have bowled you out, if we hadn't, Aubrey. Six of the best very likely, if he'd looked into that cupboard."

"Of course he would look into it," said Bob Darrell. "If McCann does anything he does it thoroughly."

"Quite!" smiled Aubrey. "The Blighter isn't the man to leave a stone unturned—what?"



Compton had opened the door of the cupboard and had removed a box of cigarettes

"Well, it's all right now," said Bob. "And if you'll take my tip, you'll chuck that rot, and not ask for trouble another time."

Teddy Seymour nodded.

"Yes, better mind your step, Aubrey, if McCann's taking to nosing in the studies," he said.

"He may get tired of nosing in the studies!" drawled Aubrey. "Quite possibly he won't be pleased by his visit here, when he comes up."

"That's rot!" said Bob. "He jolly well knows you smoke, like the silly ass you are, but he would be glad to find out that there was nothing wrong—he doesn't want to nail a fellow. If he found smokes here, you'd have to bend over in his study—but I know he'd be pleased to draw the place blank."

"He won't draw it blank."

"Eh? What the dickens does that mean?"

Aubrey laughed.

"Think a bit!" he suggested. "McCann's coming up to the study later, to search it for contraband goods. He couldn't miss that cupboard. We don't know he's coming, of course—we're as innocent as babes in the wood on that point. If we fixed up something in that cupboard to surprise him, he couldn't guess that we meant it for him—as we don't, of course, know that he's coming up at all."

"Oh!" murmured Teddy. "What a lark! What a chance! Why, the Blighter's just asking for it!"

"He's goin' to get what he's askin' for!" drawled Aubrey.

"Look here—!" began Bob.

"Shut up, old man, and watch," said Aubrey.

Bob Darrell frowned a little, as he watched. Teddy Seymour emitted a series of happy chuckles. Aubrey, apparently, had been thinking out that plan, while the Fifth-formers were listening-in to Chard's boom. He had it cut and dried now. He was quick and active, and it was a matter only of minutes.

He selected a large, flat cardboard box, turning out the shirts it had contained. He raked down soot from the study chimney till the box was nearly full: taking great care not to get a single flake on his own person. Into the soot he emptied the study inkpot, and a bottle of purple marking-ink. To a hole bored in the cardboard, he attached a length of string. Then he carefully placed the box on the top shelf of the cupboard, which was at a good height, just within reach. The string trailed out when he closed the cupboard door—within an inch or two.

"Look here—!" growled Bob Darrell.

"Shut up, old chap."

"Ha, ha, ha!" trilled Teddy.

Inserting fingers into the narrow space, Aubrey wound the string round the inner catch of the door-handle, pulling it taut. He knotted it carefully, and shut the cupboard door.

"That's that!" he drawled.

"Ha, ha, ha!" exploded Teddy, almost in ecstasies.

"You ass!" breathed Bob. "If McCann gets that—!"

"No 'if' about it," smiled Aubrey, "McCann will look into that cupboard. As soon as that door's pulled open, that box of soot will tip out—and who will get it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" from Teddy.

"You reckless fathead, what's McCann going to do, when he's smothered from head to foot by a booby-trap in this study!" exclaimed Bob.

"Will he look a picture?" chortled Teddy.

"You see, he can't do a thing!" drawled Aubrey. "Do we know he's coming up at all? Of course we don't! Did we set that booby-trap for our respected head-master? Of course we didn't! We set it for some fag who's been snooping tuck in our study. See?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" gurgled Teddy.

"How could we know that McCann was coming up?" asked Aubrey. "Of course we never knew a thing about it, when we set that booby-trap for some sneaking fag—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll bet you McCann will guess that we knew somehow—!" said Bob. "He may remember that Chard was bawling, and that fellows might hear—"

"What he may guess isn't evidence!" yawned Aubrey. "Even McCann can't come down on a fellow because he's good at guessing games. Don't you worry, you old Jonah. McCann will get the soot, and we're in the clear. But we may as well be well off the scene, like the innocent lads we are, when the balloon goes up. Come for a trot in the quad."



Teddy followed, still emitting chuckles

"But—!" said Bob, uneasily.

"Oh, come on," said Aubrey, and he linked his arm in Darrell's, and walked him out of the study: Teddy following, still emitting chuckles.

They strolled in the quadrangle: Bob rather worried, Teddy explosively joyous, Aubrey serenely anticipative. Other fellows, let into the secret, shared Teddy's mirth. Even Corkran of the Sixth, head-prefect: even old Tredegar, the captain of High Coombe, grinned: while Randal, and Carter, and Burke, and Peverill, and six or seven other seniors, chuckled with glee.

When Mr. McCann came out of the House, and passed the happy group, he glanced at them, perhaps wondering what the merriment was about. He walked on, however, without giving any special heed, and Aubrey cast a rather puzzled glance after him.

"He can't have gone up to Number Three yet," he muttered.

"He would look a bit blacker, if he had!" chuckled Teddy.

"Well, all's ready when he does!" said Aubrey. He glanced up at the window of Study Three. All was ready there, when McCann went up to make that investigation. They wished that he would get on with it. He was rather spoiling the joke of the term, by this delay. But he had walked away to the school library, so evidently they had still to wait.

But had they?

CHAPTER III

PETER CHARD did not know, for a moment, what was happening. He was taken so completely by surprise.

It was all old Mace's fault, really. If old Mace had not turned away that group in the Heads' corridor, they might have learned, from Chard's further trumpeting, that the head-master had conceded the disputed point. Jimmy McCann really was a kind-hearted young man, and very far indeed from wishing to seem to put a slight upon a member of the Staff. Chard having taken it as a personal matter, affecting his dignity as form-master of the Fifth, McCann had, though reluctantly, left it in his hands. He was well aware that Chard often closed his eyes to delinquencies in his form. He could not help doubting whether Chard might not turn a blind eye on any discovery he might make in Study Three. Nevertheless, as Chard was so indignantly insistent, McCann gave way, and consented that that search of a Fifth-form study should be carried out by the Fifth-form master. So it came about that Jimmy McCann went to the school library, while Peter Chard went up to Study Three in the Fifth to make that investigation.

Then it happened.

Aubrey's booby-trap had been only too well and truly laid. It worked like a charm, and made its catch. Chard pulled open the cupboard door, intending to give a glance within—not a very searching glance, perhaps. But he did not glance within. Anything like glancing was barred by a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming torrent of soot mixed with ink. The cardboard box, jerked off the shelf by the string as the cupboard door opened, thudded on Chard's portly head, smothering him from head to foot with clinging, smelly soot. In a fraction of a second, Chard was a pillar of soot, and his aggressive red face as black as a Hottentot's. He staggered backwards with a suffocated howl.

"Urrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrh!"



The cardboard box thudded on Chard's portly head

Chard tottered to and fro, the most astounded man in Devonshire. He reeled, he tottered, he clawed at soot, that smothered him in clouds. He tottered

to the open window for air. He gasped and gurgled and coughed and choked there, too overwhelmed with soot to see the crowd of fellows staring up.

"Urrrrggh! Goodness gracious! What—what—ooooooooooooooooogh!" Chard's frantic gurgles reached many ears below.

"Oh!" gasped Aubrey Compton.

"Chard!" said Teddy Seymour, faintly.

Bob Darrell grinned. It was his turn to grin.

CHARD, who trusted his boys, swallowed that explanation of a booby-trap laid for a snoopng fag. But he had also swallowed a considerable amount of soot: which did not improve his temper, and for some time afterwards, the Fifth had a very tart form-master in their form-room—in fact, for quite some time, lines fell in the Fifth-form like leaves in Vallombrosa, as a result of Compton's Catch.

THE END

The Rio Kid Horns In!

By

—RALPH REDWAY—



CHAPTER I

“YOU coyote!”

The Rio Kid started, and glanced round.

He had ridden into Kicking Mule, not intending to halt in the cow-town. But his mustang was thirsty from the dusty desert trail: and the sight of the water-trough outside the Red Dog saloon decided him to draw rein. He sat in the saddle, while Side-Kicker plunged his black muzzle into the water and drank. He did not notice the man and the girl on the plank side-walk till that sharp, angry, scornful exclamation drew his attention. Then he glanced round at them, under the shady rim of his Stetson.

She looked a pretty girl—one of the prettiest in Texas, the Kid reckoned. She was, he figured, a sight for sore eyes! But the man was the kind of guy that got the Kid's goat at sight. Only too well he knew that kind of hard face, with its icy ruthless eyes. It did not need the six-gun in the low-slung holster to tell him that guy was a gun-man: the variety of gallot that was ready to draw and

pull trigger at a word. The girl, clearly, did not fear him. But she was a girl,—the Kid reckoned that most male guys in Kicking Mule walked warily under those icy eyes. Kicking Mule was a remote and rough cow-town, which sheriffs were shy of: and the law of the Colt was the chief if not the only law there.

"You coyote!" The girl spoke again, and it was strange to hear such sharp and scornful tones come from such pretty red lips.

The man laughed, as if amused.

"I guess you can spill all the fancy names you can think of, Cora!" he drawled. "But I'll say that I'd like to hear young Andy Harris spill jest one! He wouldn't dare."

"Andy doesn't fear you any more than I do, Poker Pete! But Andy's an honest cow-puncher, and not so quick with a gun as a saloon-loafing gun-slinger of your sort. But if you figure that you've got him scared, you've got another guess coming."

"Says you!" grinned the gun-man, "I reckon he won't dare to show up in Kicking Mule while I'm around. Andy sure knows that his best guess is to stay out on the ranch. You expecting him to horn in?"

The girl did not reply to that question. She gave the gun-man one look of scorn and anger, turned on her heel, and walked away. Poker Pete stood looking after her, as she went, with a sneering grin on his hard face.

The Rio Kid set his lips.

Never had he been more disposed to pick a quarrel with any man, than he was at that moment. He would gladly have wiped that sneering grin off the gun-man's face with a lick of his quirt, and backed up the quirt with his gun. But the Kid, wild as his reputation was from the Rio Grande to the Panhandle, was in truth a peaceful guy, never looking for trouble. He checked the impulse to horn in, and turned his head away.

"Gee, Side-Kicker, old hoss."

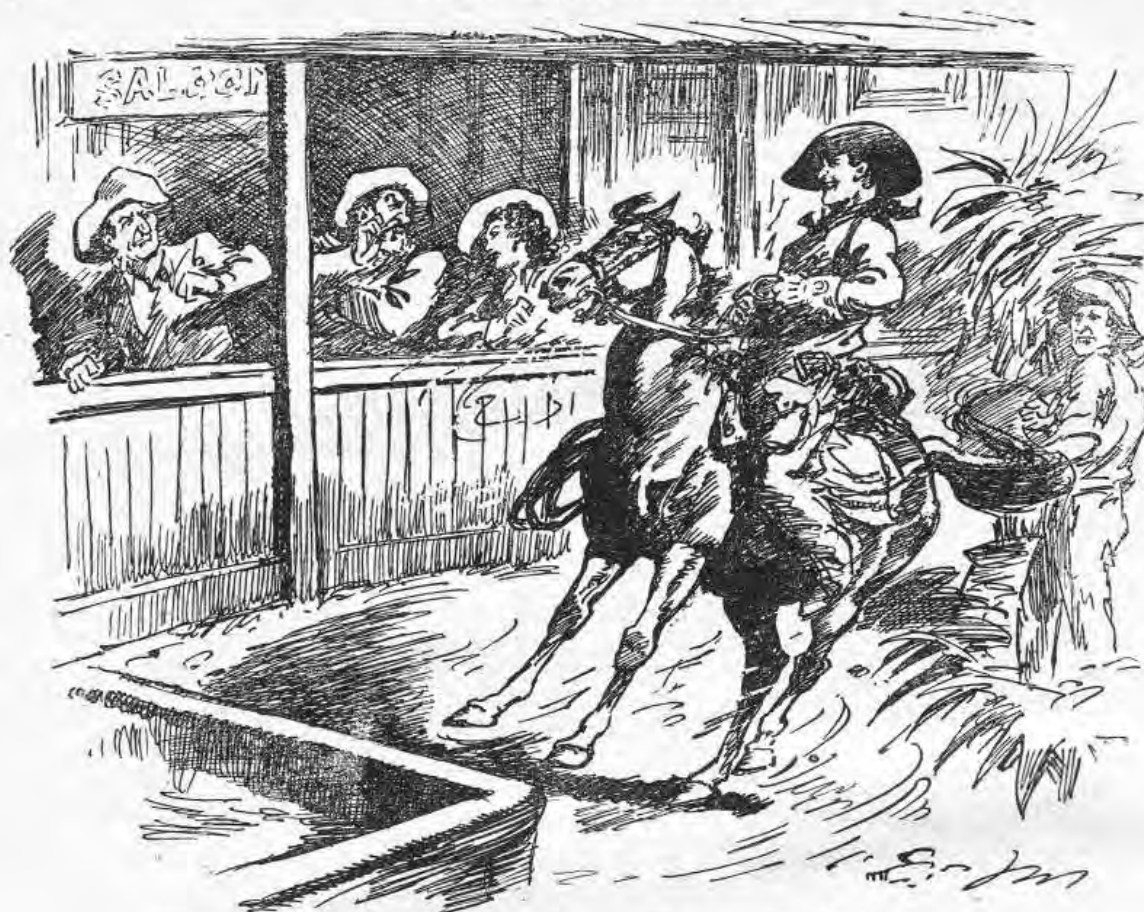
He rode on up the dusty street of Kicking Mule, till, clear of the cow-town, he broke into a gallop on the prairie trail beyond. He would have dismissed the incident from his mind: but somehow the pretty face, distressed as well as angry, of the girl Cora, haunted him: and he was still thinking of that chance encounter in Kicking Mule when he halted for a rest and a meal under the shade of a ceiba tree beside the trail.

CHAPTER II

BANG! bang! bang!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Kid could not help it. Himself one of the best shots in all Texas, as



Never had he been more disposed to pick a quarrel with any man

quick on the draw, and as accurate in his shooting, as any guy in the Lone Star State, what he now saw amused him. Every guy in Texas couldn't be a good shot: but that any guy that had ever packed a gun could be so bad as this made him wonder—and made him laugh. He sat watching the pistol-practice at a little distance, and could not repress his amusement.

He had had his meal, and was thinking of saddling up again and hitting the trail, when a rider came along. The Kid watched him idly, expecting him to ride past and disappear. But he did not ride past: he dismounted near the clump of trees where the Kid had camped, and tethered his horse. He did not glance in the direction of the Kid, and did not see him sitting there in the shade. The Kid watched him with some interest, wondering what his game was. He looked a mere lad—hardly over twenty—with a fresh pleasant face, a face the Kid liked as soon as he saw it. His sheepskin chaps showed that he was a

puncher from one of the ranches. To the Kid's surprise, he produced a Colt revolver, which he proceeded to load carefully. What he wanted with his hardware, in that lonely spot was a mystery. There was no one at hand but the Kid: and he did not even see the Kid: he figured himself alone on that solitary trail. So it perplexed the Kid what he was going to do with that shooting-iron.

To his further surprise, the young man pinned up a circular disc of bark on the trunk of a tree beside the trail. Then he backed across the trail, revolver in hand. And then the circus began. Taking careful aim, the young puncher fired at the target on the tree—missing not only the target, but the tree itself. He fired again, and scored another miss: a third time, and just hit the tree, nowhere near the target.

It amazed as well as amused the Kid. He had seen some poor shooting in his time: but this was his first experience of a guy who could hardly hit a tree at six yards. That young puncher looked fit and strong, as well as good-looking, and no doubt he was a good hand with a horse, or a cow, or a lariat: but with a gun he was the world's prize boob.

"Dog-gone it!" The Kid heard the exclamation from his distance, "Dog-gone it! I guess it's me for the camp cemetery at Kicking Mule if I don't shoot straighter than that! Dog-gone it!"

He aimed and fired again. Three bangs rang out in succession, and the young puncher was evidently putting into it all he knew. But the result was the same as before. One bullet hit the tree-trunk, a foot from the target: the other two whizzed away cutting twigs from the mosquito thicket. And it was then that the Kid laughed—he just couldn't help it.

That involuntary laugh seemed to reach the ears of the young puncher, and apprise him that he was not alone as he had figured. He stared round towards the Kid, sitting under the ceiba: and his face flushed crimson, as he realized that his wretched shooting had been observed. The Kid's laugh died out at once: he was amused, but he did not want to hurt any guy's feelings. But the young puncher had heard him: and with a flushed face, he came striding towards the Rio Kid, his eyes flashing with anger: the smoking gun in his hand.

"You seem sorta tickled, stranger," he said, staring down at the Kid as he sat. "Mebbe you'd like me to teach you manners."

The Kid looked up at him, smiling.

"Don't get your mad up, feller," he said, amicably. "Sure I shouldn't have snickered, but—Aw, carry me home to die! Ain't you never handled a shooting-iron better'n that?"

His smile, and his good-natured face, seemed to disarm the young puncher's resentment. His knitted brows relaxed, and his own face melted into a grin.

"I guess I ain-t got no kick coming, if a guy snickers at my shooting," he



The Kid looked up at him, smiling.

said, "I'll tell a man, it's bad enough to make a blind coyote snicker. I ain't much use with a gun."

"You said it!" agreed the Kid.

"They'd tell you at the Lazy-O that I ain't no slouch with a rope, and that I'd ride any guy in a rodeo: but shooting ain't my long suit." He grinned ruefully. "Sure I've ridden miles from the ranch to put up some pistol-practice, because I wouldn't let the bunch see such a show,—they'd sure laugh like you did. But it ain't no joke, I'm telling you: I'm a dead man if I don't shoot straighter than that at Kicking Mule." He gave an angry shrug of the shoulders. "I guess you can watch if you like, and snicker all you want—it cuts no ice with me."

He turned away.

The Kid rose to his feet. His sunburnt face was serious. If that young puncher was scheduled, as his words implied, for a shooting-affray at Kicking

Mule, and if that was the way he handled a gun, he was not likely to ride home alive to his ranch. It got the Kid's goat to think of that fresh, good-looking young puncher going like a lamb to the slaughter.

"Say, you going to the cow-town for gun-play, hombre?" he asked.

"Yup!"

"Sure I'm a stranger to you," said the Kid. "But if you'd take a word of advice from a stranger, you'll ride clear of Kicking Mule and gun-play. It ain't my funeral, feller, but you wouldn't have a dog's chance with a guy that could handle a gun."

"I'm wise to that."

"But you're hitting Kicking Mule all the same?" asked the Kid, puzzled.

"Sure!"

"Well, I'll say you've got grit," said the Kid. "But what's the matter with riding back to your ranch, and keeping alive, feller?"

The young puncher stood silent for a moment or two. But the kind friendliness in the Kid's face encouraged him to speak.

"It's a cinch," he said, "I got to go. I guess Poker Pete will make coyote's meat of me, but I got to go."

The Kid started. He remembered the name by which the girl Cora had addressed the cold-eyed gun-man outside the Red Dog in Kicking Mule.

"Poker Pete!" he repeated.

"You know him, mebbe?"

"I seen him, coming through Kicking Mule," answered the Kid, "Feller, if you've got a rookus on with that guy, you'll sure be horn mad to try gun-play with him. That guy is a killer, boy. I'd say, on his looks, that he's killed as many guys as he has fingers and toes. Feller, you'd be going to your funeral."

The Kid's tone was deeply earnest. The young puncher looked at him, smiled faintly, and nodded.

"I know!" he said.

"Ride clear," urged the Kid. "Whatever the trouble is, you ain't no call to face up to a dog-goned killer like that guy Poker Pete."

"I got to."

"How come?"

"There's a girl in it. She's not going to think me yellow." The young puncher's eyes blazed, "Poker Pete's picked on her for his fancy, and he's let all Kicking Mule know that the corral-bar is up against any other guy—and that counts me in, that she's promised to marry. If I go into town to see Cora—"

"Cora?"

"That's her name. If I go into Kicking Mule to see Cora, I got to meet

Poker Pete. He sure figures that he's got me scared stiff, and that I daren't go. But I'm riding into camp all the same, and that's why I've been putting up the shooting at that target that made you snicker."

"Great gophers!" muttered the Kid. So this was "Andy Harris".

He understood now. And he could see, in his mind's eye, what was going to happen when Andy Harris rode into Kicking Mule: gun-play with the ruthless gun-man, and not a mosquito's chance for his life. A guy whose shooting was anything like his, might as well not have packed a gun at all. And yet, the Kid had to admit, what else was the young puncher to do?

The puncher smiled faintly at the Kid's earnest face.

"Well, now I've spilled it, feller, you wouldn't advise me to ride clear, for fear of that gun-man?" he said.

"No!" said the Kid, slowly, "No! You got to stand for it! But—." He paused. It was at that moment, that the Rio-Kid made up his mind. "All the advise I got to give you, is to put in some more practice at that target with that gun of yourn, and put in all you know: and don't be in a hurry to ride into Kicking Mule."

"That's what I'm going to do. I guess sundown will be early enough to hit town. You riding?"

"Yep, I guess I got to be moving."

The Kid called to his mustang, and saddled up. Andy walked back to his target, and recommenced his pistol-practice. The Kid waved a friendly hand to him, as he rode away. Bang! bang! bang! followed on, so long as he was in hearing. The Kid smiled. So long as that quite futile pistol-practice kept Andy Harris away from Kicking Mule, it was okay by the Kid. The Rio Kid was not riding on his way. He was riding back to Kicking Mule: and the cracking of Andy's revolver died away behind him, as he rode at a gallop for the cow-town.

CHAPTER III

"SAY, fellers, is there a guy called Poker Pete around?"

The sunset was reddening the rugged street of Kicking Mule when the Rio Kid rode in. He hitched his mustang at the rail outside the Red Dog, and called to a group of punchers lounging by the door of the saloon. They stared round at him, and one of them drawled an answer:

"Sure Poker Pete's in the shebang if you want him, stranger."

"I sure do want him," said the Kid, "Jest to speak a civil word, and tell him that if he figures that he can bulldoze punchers from the ranches, he's got

another guess coming. It's sure time that that guy was told where he got off, and I'm here to tell him."

There was a gasp from the loungers at the Red Dog. The Kid's voice, though not loud, was clear and incisive, and his words reached ears within the saloon—as he intended that they should. And the Kid did not need telling that not a man there would have ventured to utter those words within the hearing of Poker Pete.

They stared at him—at his boyish face, sunburnt and handsome under the Stetson. And the man who had answered him spoke again, hastily.

"You dog-goned young gink, you git on that hoss and hit the trail, afore Poker Pete comes out to you. You ride back to your ranch while you're still in one piece."

The Kid laughed.

"I ain't riding yet a piece," he answered, "I've come here to see that gunman who seems to have this burg scared to a frazzle. I'll say that he don't



He was riding back to Kicking Mule

scare me worth a continental red cent. I hear that he's been bulldozing punchers from the ranches, and I'm sure a puncher born and bred, and I don't stand for it. That guy Poker Pete has got to climb down and walk soft. And I've jest rode into town to see that he does."

There was a step in the doorway of the saloon, and Poker Pete appeared there. Evidently, he had heard the Kid's words. He was not touching a gun, but his hand was very near the Colt in the low-slung holster. There was a glitter in the cold eyes as they fixed on the Rio Kid. And the little crowd outside the Red Dog parted to right and left, in haste to get out of the line of fire. In Kicking Mule, such words as the Kid had uttered had to be backed up with a gun.

"Say, puncher." Poker Pete's voice was a quiet drawl, but it was packed with menace. "Say, you sure are blowing off your mouth a few. I'm Poker Pete if you want me."

"Sure I've seen your ugly face once afore, when I rode through this burg," said the Kid, "I didn't like the look of it, and I'm telling you that I came powerful near to giving you a few with my quirt, jest on your ugly looks. You're sure the kind of galoot that gets my goat, and I jest wonder why the citizens of this cow-town don't ride you out of town on a rail. I'd sure be glad to lend them a hand."

A dead silence followed. Every eye was on Poker Pete. For a moment the silence was tense. Then the gun-man's hand dropped on his gun. All Kicking Mule knew his swiftness on the draw. All expected to see that boyish-looking stranger roll over under a sudden shot. The six-gun flashed from the holster.

But if Poker Pete was swift on the draw, the Rio Kid was swifter. Even as the gun-man's Colt came up, the Kid, with a movement that was too swift to be followed by the eye, whipped out his six-gun.

Bang!

Bang!

There was a hoarse yell from the gun-man. He staggered in the saloon doorway. His right hand streamed crimson. Even as he pulled trigger, the Kid's bullet had struck that hand. The Kid was no killer. He had not shot to kill. He had shot the Colt out of the gun-man's hand—and half a finger along with it. There was a buzz from the Kicking Mule crowd. They had not seen shooting like this before. There were many along the Rio Grande and the Rio Frio who knew the Kid's shooting, but it was a surprise in Kicking Mule.

The Kid smiled over his smoking Colt. But his eyes were as watchful as a panther's for what was coming. For a moment, the gun-man stared at his streaming hand, his face convulsed with fury. The gun had fallen from his shattered hand, exploding as it fell. Suddenly, swiftly, he reached down for it,



The Kid whipped out his six-guns

and grasped it in his left hand.

Bang!

Poker Pete needed only a moment, and it was well for the Kid that he did not give him that moment. His shot came like lightning, and the gun-man's Colt clattered on the ground again, his left hand streaming like his right.

The Kid holstered his gun.

"I guess that lets you out, feller," he said, quietly. "You sure want to get your paws doctored, but I ain't no killer. I guess you'll never handle a gun agin, Poker Pete, and I guess every guy in this burg will be glad of it. You've rode high and you've rode hard, but you'll never ride a guy agin—your best guess is to walk soft from now on. You're pizen bad medicine, feller, but your teeth is drawn, and you can beat it."

The gun-man staggered, groaning, into the Red Dog. The Rio Kid gave one

glance round at staring faces, and stepped to his mustang, and mounted. He hummed the tune of a Mexican fandango as he rode away from Kicking Mule.

CHAPTER IV

"CORAL!"

"Andy!"

"I had to come, Cora! You wouldn't want me to let that big stiff scare me away! I got to face up to it, Cora."

The girl laughed.

"I knew you would, Andy, and was I scared?" she said, "But it's all over—Poker Pete will never pull a gun again—he's been shot up in a gun-fight with some stranger who rode into town—."

Andy Harris whistled.



"Who was the guy?" he asked.

"Nobody knows—some kid puncher who happened along, they say. But am I glad, Andy, that he horned in?"

The Rio Kid, as he rode on his lonely trail, had left happiness behind him: and he too was glad that he had horned in.

THE END