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THIEF IN THE TREETOPS

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CONCLUDING . . . THE ORIGINAL ADVENTURES OF THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS SCHOOLBOY . . . BY FRANK RICHARDS

BUNTER TO THE RESCUE!

Three shrieks blended into one as the Cliff House girls turned round and saw the lion on the edge of the court. In her wild haste to escape, Bessie Bunter charged straight into the badminton net.

THE STORY SO FAR

When Billy Bunter tells the Remove boys of Greyfriars that he has been in a lion's den, they do not believe him. But it is true. What he does not explain is that old Caesar, the lion at Muccolini's Circus and Menagerie, is as tame as a mouse, and that Marco the lion tamer had taught Bunter the necessary words of command. One day Bunter and the others are invited to tea at the nearby Cliff House School for Girls, where Bessie Bunter is a pupil. But Caesar escapes from the circus and is seen in the district. It looks as though the visit is off. To the amazement of Harry Wharton and his friends, Bunter says he is not afraid of lions and he sets off for Cliff House. The other juniors feel bound to follow.

THE TENTH CHAPTER

Alarm at Cliff House

"OOOOOOOH!" shrieked Bessie Bunter.

"What's the matter?" asked Barbara Redfern.

The four girls were playing badminton while they waited for their friends to arrive from Greyfriars for tea. Bessie was missing the shuttle with a regularity worthy of her brother Billy. Now she suddenly dropped her racket and stood screaming.

Her eyes and her spectacles were fixed on a form that had suddenly appeared on the edge of the court.

Looking round in the same direction, Marjorie and Clara and Barbara saw it also, and three shrieks were blended into one.

They had seen Caesar before, but behind iron bars in the cage in the circus arena. Now they saw him free as air, wandering at his own sweet will, and at close quarters. It was a terrifying sight.

"Run!" gasped Marjorie.

Bessie led the way, going all out. In wild haste, she did not remember that the badminton net stretched in her way. She charged into the net, tangled in it, and howled wildly.

"Yarooh! Help! Help me! Yooop!" howled Bessie.

Terrified as they were, Marjorie and Clara and Barbara ran to Bessie, dragged her out of the tangled net, and set her going again.

Bessie gurgled, and charged on. Between the badminton court and the School House was a wide shrubbery, and the schoolgirls scuttled away by the paths through it at a pace old Caesar could hardly have equalled, had he been in active pursuit.

But old Caesar was not, for the moment, bothering about Marjorie and Co. He had walked over the tangled net, which caught in his legs and annoyed him. He grabbed and clawed at the net, dragging it off the posts, and tangling it in his claws.

Bewildered and irritated by the clinging net, Caesar roared and roared, and clawed and clawed, his usual good temper rather failing him. His roaring rang like thunder.

Startled voices rang in all directions. The deep bass voice of Miss Bullivant, the maths mistress, was heard, alternating with the startled treble of Miss Penelope Primrose, the principal of Cliff House School.

"Go in—go in at once!" boomed Miss Bullivant.

"Goodness gracious! Are all the girls safe?" came the high-pitched voice of Miss Primrose.

"Run for your lives!"

"Oh, run!"

"The lion! The lion!"

"Oh dear!"

"Run! Run!"

Marjorie and Clara and Barbara scuttled in at the doorway. Miss Bullivant was holding the big oak door, ready to slam it when all were inside. Miss Primrose stood in the doorway, a fragile but determined figure. Behind her a frightened crowd buzzed and shrieked and gasped.

"Bessie hasn't come in!" gasped Clara.

"Bessie!" shrieked Miss Primrose, from the doorway. "Bessie! Bessie Bunter!"

Bessie Bunter had scuttled through the shrubberies with the others. But with Bessie it was a case of more haste and less speed. She had taken the wrong path, and charged on at full speed in the wrong direction, unnoticed by the others. Bessie was still in the grounds—with the lion!

Miss Primrose drew a deep, deep breath. She was a rather ancient lady, and looked as fragile as a piece of old china. But her heart was as stout as her ancient figure was slim. She was Head of Cliff House School—and duty was duty!

With a firm step, Miss Primrose went down the path. From a dozen windows terrified eyes watched her. The lion could not be seen; but at short intervals his booming roar resounded.

"Bessie!" called Miss Primrose, in a firm voice. "Bessie!"

From a distance came a shriek.

It came from Bessie Bunter. Finding herself at a distance from the house, the hapless Bessie had clambered into a tree. From the branch to which she clung, she could see the lion stalking to and fro, with fragments of the badminton net trailing from his limbs, growling and roaring by turns.

Miss Primrose, guided by the shrieks, hurried towards her. At the same moment she sighted the lion, and her blood ran cold. Discarding the fragments of a racket from his gnashing jaws, Caesar came lumbering towards Miss Primrose.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER

Follow Your Leader!

"I SAY, you fellows——"

"You fat idiot!"

"Funky?" grinned Bunter.

Harry Wharton and Co. glared at the Owl of the Remove as if they could have eaten him.

The Greyfriars juniors had emerged from the field-paths, into the road which ran down to the village of Pegg, past the gates of Cliff House School.

They had seen nothing of the escaped lion so far. It was possible that he had taken to the woods, and they hoped that he had. Certainly they did not want to fall in with him.

Bunter did not seem to mind.

"Come on!" grinned Bunter. "I shouldn't wonder if the lion came this way—I know he started in this direction. Well, that's all the more reason why we should go on to Cliff House. The girls will be fearfully frightened, if the lion turns up there."

"Not so frightened as you will be, if you see the lion a mile off!" snorted Johnny Bull.

"My dear chap, I can handle lions!" said Bunter breezily. "I told you how I went into the lion's cage the other day——"

"Don't tell us that silly yarn again!" snapped Harry Wharton. "Come on, you fellows! We can warn them at Cliff House that a lion has escaped from the circus, if they haven't heard already. Blessed if I like the prospect of walking back to Greyfriars, though, with that brute roaming about."

"I shall be with you!" Bunter pointed out.

"Shut up!" roared the Famous Five, with one voice.

"Yah!"

Billy Bunter rolled on, regardless of peril, being in the fortunate position of knowing that the peril was non-existent.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry suddenly. "Listen!"

Over the palings, from the trees and shrubberies within, came a deep, booming roar from the distance.

"It's the lion!" breathed Nugent.

"The absurd and terrific lion!" murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Wharton set his teeth.

"Come on!" he said. "The girls may be in danger—we can't do anything, I suppose, but we've got to see—come on!"

"You bet!" said Bob.

Billy Bunter was running as fast as his fat little legs would carry him, and was well ahead of the others. They panted after him.

Roar on roar was pealing over the palings. Amid the deep roars came shriek on shriek. They could hear the shrieks of Bessie Bunter now—loud and shrill! Breathless, the Famous Five tore in at the gate of Cliff House School.

And then, in sheer stupefaction they halted and stared at what they saw. It was not easy to believe their eyes.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER

Bunter the Hero!

BILLY BUNTER gasped for breath as he blinked round through his big spectacles.

From Bessie Bunter, hidden by foliage high up in the tree, came pealing shriek on shriek. Miss Penelope Primrose was not shrieking. She was silent, white as chalk, leaning feebly on the trunk of the tree, making mechanical motions with her hands, as if to wave the lion off. And within three yards of her, with bristling mane, whisking tail, and yawning cavernous jaws, stood Caesar, the circus lion—pawing the ground and roaring.

Dozens of pairs of eyes at the windows of Cliff House School saw Billy Bunter barge in the gates. And those eyes widened in utter astonishment as Bunter, instead of barging out again faster than he had barged in, at sight of the lion, cut across to the spot where Miss Penelope Primrose stood.

Bunter knew that eyes were on him—many eyes. His own little round eyes twinkled with satisfaction behind his big round spectacles. This was his big chance!

"All right, ma'am," squeaked Bunter, as he charged up, "don't be afraid, Miss Primrose. Leave him to me."

With perfect coolness William George Bunter stepped between the headmistress of Cliff House and the lion.

Standing in front of the lion, Billy Bunter raised a commanding fat hand.

Caesar blinked at him.

He knew Bunter! In fact, he liked Bunter! Bunter had fed him, which was a passport to Caesar's esteem! Caesar had taken Bunter on his back at his trainer's command! Bunter had spoken to him with his trainer's voice, and the fat ventriloquist had not forgotten that trick. He spoke now to the lion in an exact reproduction of Marco's commanding tones.

"Up!" commanded Bunter.

The gigantic beast rose slowly on his hind legs. To Miss Primrose's terrified eyes, he seemed to tower. But Billy Bunter was not terrified! Not Bunter!

"Dammi la zampa!" commanded Bunter.

The well-known words, which Caesar had obeyed hundreds, if not thousands, of times, produced their accustomed effect.

Amazed eyes stared, as the lion reared on his hind legs and extended a paw to Bunter!

Bunter, grinning cheerily, took it with a fat hand.

"G-goo-goo-goodness gracious!" stuttered Miss Primrose.

Bunter blinked round reassuringly at Miss Primrose.

"I can handle him all right, ma'am!" said Bunter. "I'm not afraid of lions, ma'am! I'll take him away——"

"Goodness gracious!"

"Down!" barked Bunter.

Caesar dropped on four legs.

Billy Bunter, cool as a cucumber, clambered on his back and gripped his mane.

"Houp-la!" he barked.

Caesar ambled away, with Bunter on his back! Bunter calmly guided him down the drive to the gates.

This was Bunter's moment! He knew that every eye in Cliff House School was on him. He saw the Famous Five fairly gaping! He heard the howl of amazement from Sister Bessie!

Releasing one hand from the lion's mane, the fat junior took off his hat and waved it to the packed windows as he rode Caesar out of the gateway. Life at that moment was well worth living to William George Bunter!

"BILLY!"

"Bunter!"

"Brave boy!"

"What pluck!"

"What courage!"

"Amazing!"

"Dear, brave lad!"

Bunter was the goods! Having ridden the lion out of gates, Bunter had left Cliff House in a buzz of amazement and admiration behind him. But he had not been long gone. Caesar was already hunted for, far and wide, and a party from the circus were coming up the road as Bunter rode Caesar out. He handed over the lion and walked back—rolling in with a cheery grin on his fat visage, and his little fat nose elevated even more than Nature had elevated it to begin with.

Bunter was surrounded at once. Miss Penelope Primrose overwhelmed him with praises and gratitude. A whole bevy of girls made a tremendous fuss of Bunter; for once, the Famous Five were nowhere, and Bunter was the hero.

There was tea at Cliff House—Bunter the guest of honour. Nobody seemed to notice that Bunter ate all the cake! Bunter, for once, was a privileged person!

When he walked back to Greyfriars with the Famous Five, he seemed to be walking on air! And he only hoped that nobody would find out that the escaped lion was a tame animal who would not have hurt a mouse!

That, Bunter could not help feeling, would have detracted considerably from his glory!

THE END

BEGINNING NEXT WEEK

THE CITY THAT SAILED THE SEAS

by JULES VERNE

Imagine a man-made island big enough to contain a great modern city of wide avenues, houses, shops and hotels—and fitted with engines powerful enough to sail it across the Pacific!

NEXT WEEK'S NEW SERIAL TAKES YOU ON THIS EXCITING AND HAZARDOUS VOYAGE