

FRANK RICHARDS

**BILLY
BUNTER'S
CONVICT**



PAUL HAMLYN

CHAPTER 1
Wet!

'IT'S wet!'

'What?'

'Wet!' snorted Billy Bunter.

'That,' said Bob Cherry gravely, 'must be because it's raining. I've noticed before that it's wet when it rains.'

Harry Wharton & Co. chuckled.

Billy Bunter did not chuckle. He snorted indignantly.

'It's cold!' he growled.

'Cold?' repeated Bob.

'Yes; horrid cold!'

'Put that down to January,' said Bob. 'Cold is not uncommon in January. I've noticed that before, too.'

'You silly ass!' hooted Bunter.

'What's the good of grouching, Bunter?' asked Harry Wharton. 'I suppose you're no wetter and colder than we are?'

Snort from Bunter.

The remark seemed to him frivolous.

That the chums of the Remove were wet and cold that stormy January evening was a

matter which, perhaps, concerned themselves, but did not concern William George Bunter in the very least. What really mattered was that William George was wet and cold. That circumstance transcended in importance anything else that was going on in the wide universe at the moment.

There was no doubt that it was very wet, and very cold. The rain was coming down hard, and through the rain a bitter winter wind blew. Harry Wharton & Co. had turned up their coat collars, and they tramped through wind and rain and mud as cheerfully as they could. But it was not Bunter's way to take his little troubles of life cheerfully. His grouching was long and loud.

'Look here, I'm fed up with this!' he snorted.

'Tell it to stop raining!' suggested Johnny Bull.

'Beast!'

'How many miles to the lodge now, Harry?' asked Frank Nugent.

'Not more than one.'

'Ow! One's enough.'

'The enoughfulness is terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, through his chattering teeth. 'But what cannot be cured must go longest to the well, as the English proverb says.'

'I say, you fellows—'

'Shut up, Bunter!'

'I tell you I'm fed up!' hooted Bunter. 'I'm not going on through this. We've got to find shelter somewhere. It's raining cats and dogs. Ow! The beastly water's trickling down my beastly neck! It's all your fault, Wharton.'

'Mine?' ejaculated Harry.

'Walking three miles to see a beastly football match!' groaned Bunter. 'Just like you silly chumps! Oh dear!'

'Why, you fat bounder!' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'We should have been home before this, if you hadn't taken root in a bun-shop and refused to move.'

'I suppose I had to have a snack after standing two hours in the cold, Bob Cherry. Why couldn't we have a taxi back?'

'Why couldn't you stand the taxi?' suggested Bob.

'Beast!'

'Oh, come on, Bunter,' growled Johnny Bull. 'It's wet, and grouching won't make it dry.'

'Beast!'

Certainly Billy Bunter's grouching had no perceptible effect on the weather. The rain was just as wet, and the wind was just as cold. But it must have afforded the Owl of Greyfriars some relief, for his fat chin did not cease from trembling, and allow the weary to be at rest. It was obviously Bunter's opinion that the weather had no right to act in this unpleasant manner when he was taking his walks abroad.

'Call this a holiday!' moaned Bunter.

'Come on.'

'I'm jolly glad I'm going home to-morrow.'

'And so say all of us!' sang Bob Cherry, and there was a chuckle from the Co.

'Beast!'

'Look here, it's downhill now,' said Bob. 'Suppose we turn Bunter on his beam-ends, and roll him home like a barrel?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' roared the Co.

'Like the idea, Bunty?'

'Beast!' howled Bunter.

‘Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag and smile!’ suggested Bob.
 Bunter did not smile.
 He groaned.
 ‘You could have telephoned to Wharton Ledge for the car, Wharton. If you fellows had been my guests at Bunter Court, I should have ‘phoned for the Rolls.’
 ‘If any!’ murmured Bob.
 ‘Ha, ha, ha!’
 ‘Look here, you beasts, I’m not going on through this!’ roared Bunter. ‘I’m wet! I’m cold! I’m soaked! I’m freezing! We’ve got to find shelter somewhere, see?’
 And Billy Bunter came to a determined halt in the muddy lane.
 ‘Oh, come on, Bunter.’
 ‘Shan’t!’
 ‘Look here—’
 ‘Beast!’
 ‘Oh, leave him to it!’ growled Johnny Bull. ‘He’s getting a wash, anyhow, and he can do with one.’
 Harry Wharton paused.
 William George Bunter was his guest at Wharton Lodge; and though he was undoubtedly a very troublesome and extraordinary guest, still he was a guest, of sorts. Standing still in the drenching rain was not agreeable. But Wharton’s comrades stopped when he did.
 ‘Is there any shelter, Harry?’ asked Nugent. ‘You know the country better than we do.’
 The lane ran between a deep wood on one side, and a high park wall on the other. In the wood there was little shelter; the rain swamped and soaked among the leafless trees.
 ‘Better keep on,’ said Harry. ‘I remember there’s a woodcutter’s hut some distance off the road here, but—but——’
 ‘That’s better than nothing!’ groaned Bunter.
 ‘It will be cold and damp, and this rain may last for hours,’ said Wharton. ‘Much better push on.’
 ‘I’m not going on.’
 ‘Now, look here, Bunter, have a little sense—’
 ‘I won’t take another step!’ roared Bunter. ‘Silly ass!’ growled Johnny Bull.
 ‘Beast!’
 ‘You fellows keep on,’ said Harry. ‘It’s up to me to stick to Bunter, but you needn’t bother. Keep on, and I’ll look after the fat chump.’
 ‘Rats!’ said Bob. ‘Sink or swim together. Where’s the giddy hut?’
 ‘No, keep on,’ said Harry. ‘You’ll be at the lodge in twenty minutes now. Leave Bunter to me.’
 ‘Better take him by the ears and yank him along,’ grunted Johnny Bull.
 ‘Yah!’
 ‘Cut on,’ said Harry, as cheerfully as he could. ‘I’ll take Bunter to the hut.’
 And after a little demur, four members of the Co. tramped on through the driving rain, and Harry Wharton was left with the Owl of the Remove on his hands.

CHAPTER II

Any Port in a Storm!

FIFTY yards from the lane was the woodcutter's hut. It was simply an open shelter, where the cut wood was stacked when the trees were thinned by the woodcutters. There was a roof and three walls, but on one side it was open to wind and weather. The interior was black as pitch.

At one side there was a stack of faggots, but the shed was nearly empty. Wharton tramped into it, glad to be out of the rain, at least. Bunter followed him in, and howled as he stumbled over a log.

'Is this the place?' he asked, his voice fairly shrilling with indignation.

'This is it.'

'Call this a shelter?'

'You silly owl!' roared Wharton, forgetting for the moment that Bunter was a guest.

'Did you expect a Grand Hotel here?'

'Beast! Bring the car for me.'

'Bring the car for me.'

'Oh!' said Harry.

'I know your uncle's a grumpy old josser—'

'What?'

'But I suppose he won't mind your having the car out to bring a guest home, in this frightful rain?'

There was a long pause.

'Very well,' said Harry, at last.

'And buck up,' said Bunter. 'I'm cold—and wet, see? Don't keep me hanging about here while you crawl. Buck up.'

Harry Wharton suppressed his feelings, and left the woodcutter's hut. He tramped away in the rain and disappeared.

Bunter grunted discontentedly.

'Oh, dear!' he murmured.

But he murmured under his breath. He did not dare to make the sound of his voice heard. He was growing into a state of hopeless funk; and he wished by that time that he had not let Wharton go. But it was too late to think of that; Wharton was halfway to the lodge by that time.

Bunter, huddling and blinking in the dense gloom, listened with fearful ears, and all sorts of unpleasant fancies and ideas passed through his fat mind. Bunter was a great reader of newspapers, and he knew all about people who had been robbed and murdered in woods, and stacked in black trunks, and disposed of in similarly disagreeable ways—and such things were most unpleasant to think of in his present situation.

He knew that there had been a burglary within a few miles of Wharton Lodge, and that the burglars were still at large; he knew that an escaped convict was being hunted by the police in the Surrey hills, and had not yet been recaptured. All these things, in spite of his efforts, recurred to him now, and followed one another in horrid procession through his fat mind.

By the time Wharton had been gone ten minutes, it seemed to Bunter that he had been alone in darkness and solitude for hours and hours, and that the shadows round him had become thickly populated with footpads, bandits, and escaped convicts.

'Ow!' he ejaculated suddenly.

There was a distinct movement in the hut.

It was not imagination this time; there was a movement among the stacked faggots at one end of the little building. Three or four of them rolled to the ground.

The Owl of the Remove stood rooted to the floor. Was it a ghost, or what? His mind

was filled with all sorts of weird and wonderful fancies.

Bunter told himself that it was the wind, but an icy fear crept into his heart.

A feeling came over him that he was not alone in that dim refuge from the rain; that some human being was near him, breathing in the darkness.

Some tramp, perhaps, had taken refuge there; it was likely enough. Billy Bunter blinked through the darkness towards the stack of faggots, with eyes wide distended behind his big spectacles.

There was a movement—undoubtedly there was a movement. It might have been a tramp, or a lost dog—but whatever it was, Bunter preferred the rain and the wind. He made a wild rush from the hut.

‘Yaroooh!’

He stumbled over a log and went to the ground. He bumped there breathlessly, palpitating with terror.

‘Oh, dear! Yaroooh! Help!’

He scrambled up to run, and as he did so, a grasp fell on his fat arm—not the imaginary effect of his terrors, but a real human grasp. A voice sounded quietly in his ears.

‘Shut up, you young fool! You’re not going to be hurt! Shut up, and stay where you are.’

CHAPTER III Awful for Bunter!

BILLY BUNTER stayed where he was. He had no choice about that. The grasp on his fat arm was like iron.

He could see nothing of the man who had grasped him save a black shadow. But his terrified eyes picked out at last the pale glimmer of a face. He was conscious of two eyes that gleamed at him.

‘Yow-ow! Help!’ gurgled Bunter.

‘Silence!’

The voice was still quiet, but there was a tone of menace in it. Bunter noted, however, that there was also a tone of cultivation in it, and he knew that he had not fallen into the hands of some rough and ruffianly tramp.

‘Keep where you are! If you try to run again I’ll wring your neck, you young fool!’

The man released Bunter at that, but stood between him and the open front of the hut. Bunter did not think of attempting to dodge round him; he was too thoroughly scared for that. He backed to the wall, and stood huddled against it, quaking.

‘Who—who are you?’ he panted.

‘I fancy you know,’ answered the quiet voice. ‘How did you know I was here? Does anyone else know? Answer me at once!’

‘I—I didn’t know—’

‘You knew I was here?’

‘No!’ gasped Bunter.

‘Then why were you going out into the rain? I heard you tell your friend that you’d wait here till he came back with a car. Why were you going out?’

‘I—I thought—’ stammered Bunter.

‘I—I never knew there was anybody here, but—but I thought—’

‘You fool! You were frightened by shadows!’ Bunter did not answer that.

It dawned upon his fat mind that, had he not yielded to his vague terrors, this terrifying unknown would never have shown himself. Bunter’s attempt to leave the

shed had made the hidden man believe that his presence was actually discovered. But who was he, and why was he hiding? Bunter's heart almost died within him as he asked himself that scaring question.

'Who are you?' rapped out the voice.

'My name's Bunter,' quavered the fat junior.

'Where has your friend gone?'

'To Wharton Lodge.'

'Where's that?'

'About a mile from here.'

'Then he won't be back just yet. I must be gone before he comes. There's only one way of silencing your fool tongue, and I cannot take that!' the man growled.

Bunter was extremely glad to hear it.

'Have you any matches?'

'Yes,' gasped Bunter.

'Strike one, and let me see you.'

With a trembling hand Bunter groped in his pocket for a box of matches. He struck one, and the wind blew it out instantly. But in that fraction of a moment Bunter saw enough to terrify him almost out of his fat wits. The shadowy form before him was clad in the garments of a convict, torn and muddy and wet, thick with mire, but unmistakable. The face was gaunt and almost wolfish. Bunter shuddered from head to foot. The police were still seeking for the man who had escaped from Blackmoor Prison, and Bunter, quite unintentionally, had found him. He would almost as soon have found a tiger or a rattlesnake.

'Clumsy fool!'

The convict jerked the matchbox from Bunter's hand. He struck a match, and sheltered it in the hollow of his hand, and examined the fat junior by its flickering light with searching eyes. Bunter blinked at him in sheer terror by the light. He saw a face that once had been handsome—that in better circumstances would have been handsome still—a well-cut face, with regular features and dark eyes—a face that once seen was not easily to be forgotten. But the gaunt wolfishness of it was what Bunter chiefly noticed. The hunted man was cold and famished, and he seemed to Bunter's scared eyes more like a wild beast than a man.

There was a grim and savage disappointment in the man's face as he eyed Bunter. No doubt he had hoped to see a person more of his own size, whose clothes he could have taken in the place of his own convict rags. Bunter's clothes were quite useless for that purpose. There was plenty of room for anyone in them sideways, but in length they were very much wanting. The convict was a young man, apparently about twenty-five, not less than five feet ten inches in height, and of slim, though athletic, build. He muttered a curse as he stared at Bunter.

'No use!' Bunter guessed that he was referring to the clothes, and he was glad to hear it. Certainly he did not want to change his clothes for the convict's rags. 'The coat will serve somehow. Take it off!'

Bunter did not dare to raise any objection. He obediently stripped off his overcoat.

'Turn out your pockets.'

Bunter obeyed.

His financial resources amounted to two shillings and sixpence. The convict grabbed it.

'Is that all?'

'That's all!' quavered Bunter.

‘Bah!’

The man satisfied himself by rummaging through Bunter’s pockets. He struck match after match during that process. Finally, he jerked off the fat junior’s cap. He jammed it on his own head, and drew the overcoat about him like a cloak, any covering being evidently welcome to the wretch, who was shivering with cold.



The convict's glare turned Bunter rigid with terror!

‘I’m going now,’ he muttered. ‘You’ve driven me out of my shelter, you fat fool. I’ve a good mind—’ He broke off. ‘Stay here! Do you hear?’

‘Yes,’ gasped Bunter.

‘If you take a step after I’m gone, I’ll come back to you and knock your foolish brains out!’

‘I—I won’t stir!’ stuttered Bunter.

‘You’d better not,’ said the man, in a tone of deep, savage menace. ‘And don’t say a word about me when your friend comes back for you. I’d wring both your necks as soon as look at you!’

‘I—I won’t say a word.’

‘I shan’t be far away. I shall be watching you. Be careful!’ snarled the convict.

‘Oh, dear!’

‘Stay where you are, and be silent.’

‘Yes,’ quavered Bunter.

CHAPTER IV Blue Funk!

‘HALLO, hallo, hallo!’ boomed Bob Cherry.

‘Bunter!’ called Wharton.

Two shadowy figures tramped into the woodcutter’s hut. Bob had come back with Wharton in the car to fetch the fat junior. Neither of them could see Bunter in the black interior of the hut, but they heard a gasping voice.

‘Oh, dear! I say, you fellows—’

‘Come on, Bunter,’ said Harry. ‘The car’s waiting in the road.’

‘Oh, dear! Ow!’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Ow! Nothing!’

Bunter knew that the fleeing convict must be far away by that time. But he was not taking any risks. To his scared eyes the shadows were peopled with gaunt-faced men in broad-arrow garb.

‘Got an umbrella?’ quavered Bunter.

‘No; it’s only a step to the car. You can’t get much wetter!’

‘Oh, really, Wharton, I think you might have brought an umbrella, when a chap hasn’t a coat on.’ ‘Eh! Have you taken your coat off, you ass? Put it on you again if you have!’

‘Oh, no! I mean—’

‘He’s got his coat off,’ said Bob, peering at Bunter in the gloom, ‘and he’s taken off his cap. Did you find it too warm here Bunter?’

‘Ow! Beast!’

‘Are you potty, Bunter?’ demanded Wharton. ‘For goodness’ sake, shove on your coat and cap and come along!’

‘I’ll come as I am!’ gasped Bunter.

‘Where’s your coat?’

‘I don’t know! I mean, I gave it away! Never mind my coat— let’s get out of this!’

He tore open the door of the car and plunged in head-first.

‘Get off!’ he shouted to the chauffeur.

‘Give a chap time to get in, Bunter!’ snapped Bob.

‘Buck up, you silly idiot! He may be watching us this very minute!’ howled the Owl of the Remove.

‘He— Who— What—’

‘Never mind! Get in, you dummy! What are you hanging about for?’ shrieked Bunter.

‘Can’t you move?’

Wharton and Bob Cherry got into the car. It glided away along the dark lane, with the rain beating on the roof.

‘Faster!’ panted Bunter.

‘We’re going fast enough,’ answered Harry.

‘Tell the man to go faster, you idiot!’

‘My dear ass, we can’t go all out in dark, narrow lanes,’ said Harry. ‘We don’t want an accident.’

‘You silly chump, we may all be murdered!’

‘Oh, my hat!’

‘All serene, old chap!’ said Bob Cherry soothingly. He had no doubt that the darkness and solitude in the wood had frightened Bunter into a state of blue funk. ‘You’re all right now.’

‘He might be after us!’ gasped Bunter.

‘Who might?’

‘Oh, nobody!’

‘There was nobody in the hut, surely?’ exclaimed Wharton.

‘Eh! Oh, no! Not at all!’

‘You haven’t been frightened by some tramp?’ asked the perplexed captain of the Remove.

‘Ow! No! Worse than that!’ groaned Bunter.

‘Has anything happened while I’ve been gone?’

‘Oh, no, nothing!’

‘Something’s frightened him!’ said Bob. ‘He’s as white as chalk. Some tramp’s taken his coat, perhaps. I don’t see why he can’t say so. Can’t you understand that you’re safe now, Bunter— that we’re with you?’

‘Fat lot of use you’d be against a convict!’ groaned Bunter.

‘A convict!’ exclaimed the two juniors together, in amazement.

‘Oh, no; nothing of the kind!’

Bunter was peering with terrified eyes out of the windows of the car as it glided along the dark road. It was easy for the two juniors to see that he had had a fright; though it was not easy to determine whether there had been any real cause for it. Fright came rather easily to William George Bunter of the Greyfriars Remove.

‘I suppose he got scared in the dark,’ said Harry, after a pause.

‘That’s it,’ said Bob. ‘Only what’s become of his coat and cap? Even Bunter isn’t idiot enough to take them off for nothing.’

‘Oh, really, Cherry—’

‘According to the papers, there was a convict got away from Blackmoor the other day,’ said Bob. ‘I suppose Bunter hasn’t dropped on him?’

‘Not likely,’ said Harry.

‘That’s all you know!’ gasped Bunter.

‘Well, have you?’ demanded Bob.

‘Oh, no; nothing of the sort! I’m not going to say anything till we’re indoors. He said he would be watching!’

‘Who did?’ yelled Bob Cherry.

‘Oh, nobody!’

‘My only hat!’

‘Tell the man to go faster!’ gasped Bunter. ‘He might be after us! He might shoot the lot of us and take the car—’

‘Who might?’

‘Nobody!’ stuttered Bunter. ‘Nobody at all!’

‘Oh, crumbs!’

The car was eating up the distance. Already the gates of Wharton Lodge were in sight. Bunter gasped with relief as he recognised the drive. He gasped again as the lighted facade of the house burst upon his view.

Wharton and Bob Cherry followed Bunter in. Colonel Wharton came into the hall.

‘You had better change at once, Bunter!’ he said rather curtly. ‘You are drenched!’

‘Ow, yes! Soaked!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I say, telephone to the police station. They may be able to get my coat back.’

‘What!’

‘And my money! The beast took all my money!’ Colonel Wharton stared at him.

‘What do you mean, Bunter?’

‘The convict!’ yelled Bunter.

‘The convict! What convict? Are you wandering in your mind?’ asked the old gentleman testily.

‘He robbed me!’ hooted Bunter. ‘Took my coat and my cap and all my money! He’d have taken all my clothes if they’d fitted him. I could see it in his eyes. An awful-looking villain in convict clothes! Oh, dear!’

‘Has anything happened to Bunter, Harry?’

‘I think something must have, uncle,’ answered Wharton. ‘We found him in the woodcutter’s hut without his coat or cap, and frightened out of his wits.’

‘I wasn’t frightened!’ snorted Bunter. He was not frightened now, at all events. ‘I’d have knocked him spinning, only—only I was taken by surprise. Besides, I was afraid he might go for you fellows; I wasn’t thinking of myself. This is all the thanks I get, of course!’

‘I shall telephone to Inspector Hotham at Woodford, Bunter,’ said the colonel at last.

‘Now go and change your clothes.’
And Bunter went.

CHAPTER V

Nothing for Bunter!

WILLIAM GEORGE BUNTER came down to a late tea at Wharton Lodge, quite a new Bunter. Within the walls of the Lodge, even Bunter was not afraid of the escaped convict; and he had had time to realise the importance of his adventure. For three days Convict No. 19 had been at large, baffling all the efforts of the police to recapture him: his track had been completely lost. Bunter—inadvertently, certainly—had found it. There was snow on the Surrey Hills, and for days the weather had been wild, with few fine intervals; and that had given the hunted man a chance to elude his pursuers—though it must also have entailed much suffering upon him.

In prison garb, ragged and tattered and torn, hungry and worn down by exposure, the convict’s experiences in the wild, wintry weather, amid snow and sleet and rain, must have been terrible. The search was difficult enough, and hitherto it had been totally unsuccessful. In all parts of the county the police were eager for news of the escaped man; and it was William George Bunter who had news of him. The Owl of the Remove swelled with satisfaction and importance at that thought.

When he came down the colonel told him that Inspector Hotham was coming over from Woodford in a car to hear his story; and that gave the final touch to Bunter’s swelling importance. The police-inspector was making a special journey that wild night, specially to see William George Bunter and hear what he had to tell. No other fellow at Wharton Lodge was so important as William George; there was no doubt that upon this occasion, at least, he was the ‘goods’.

Miss Amy Wharton, the colonel’s sister, gave him a look of concerned interest when he sat down to tea with the Famous Five.

William George Bunter devoted himself to the cake. He was still going strong when Wadham brought in word that Inspector Hotham had arrived and was waiting for him in the library with Colonel Wharton. Billy Bunter rose from the tea-table and bestowed a disdainful blink on the grinning chums of the Remove.

‘The police-inspector thinks it worth while to come over and see me about it, anyway,’ he sneered.

‘Leave out the “extras” when you tell Mr. Hotham about it,’ advised Bob Cherry.

‘Keep as near to the facts as you can. It won’t be very near, anyhow.’

‘Yah!’

Bunter rolled away to see the inspector from Woodford. Under the official’s calm and penetrating eye Bunter felt that talk of grips of iron, threatening revolvers, and ‘Hands up!’ had better be omitted. Mr. Hotham soon elucidated all that the Owl of the Remove could tell him; and though it was not the thrilling tale that Bunter would have liked to make it, the inspector seemed very satisfied.

‘There is no doubt that the young gentleman has seen George Waring, who was Convict No. 19 at Blackmoor Prison,’ he said to Colonel Wharton. ‘This information will be extremely valuable to us. It was not known that Waring was around here at all; in fact, it was supposed that he had succeeded in escaping to London, where he has relations. He was a tutor before he went to Blackmoor, and some of his connections are very respectable people in a good position.’

‘Then they would surely not help a rascal fleeing from the police?’ exclaimed the colonel.

‘One can never tell—blood is thicker than water, as the saying is. They might,’ answered the inspector. ‘But from the information Master Bunter has given us, I think we may be able to lay this rogue by the heels before he can escape to London. We shall lose no time, at all events. I am very much obliged to you, Master Bunter, and I hope you did not have a very severe fright.’

‘Oh, not at all, sir!’ answered Bunter airily.

In the morning there was no news of the convict’s capture, and there was still no news when the time came for Bunter to take his train.

Neither was there any news of him before the vacation came to its end, and the other Remove fellows returned to Greyfriars School.

George Waring, otherwise Convict No. 19 of Blackmoor, seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth that wild, rainy night; since Billy Bunter had seen him by the light of matches in the woodcutter’s hut, no one had seen him.

And by the time he joined up at Greyfriars for the new term, Billy Bunter’s hope of bagging the fifty pounds reward for the convict’s recapture had sunk to zero.

CHAPTER VI Back to Greyfriars!

‘HALLO, hallo, hallo!’

‘Cheerio!’

Five juniors met on the platform at Courtfield Junction. They met amid a crowd of other Greyfriars fellows, swarming out of the train that had stopped at Courtfield. It was the first day of the new term; cold and windy, with a light fall of snow. But the faces of the Famous Five were bright and cheery. They had enjoyed their Christmas holidays; but they were not sorry to be going back to the school. The five had come from various directions; those who arrived earlier waiting for the others at Courtfield Junction to take the local train to Friardale together. Frank Nugent was the last of the five to turn out at Courtfield, and with him was his minor, Dicky Nugent of the Second Form.

Dicky Nugent was not looking his usual cheery self. In fact, he seemed rather sulky. But that was not uncommon with Dicky after a holiday. He was the darling of his mother and sisters at home, and a week or two at Greyfriars was needed for the effect of his spoiling during the holidays to wear off.

‘Here we are again!’ said Bob Cherry cheerily. ‘Hallo, hallo, hallo, Dicky! Enjoying life, what?’

‘Oh, rats!’ said Nugent minor. ‘We’re getting a new Form-master this term in the Second, and he won’t be like old Twigg, I know that. I can get on with old Twigg; he never makes a chap work, and if he gives a man lines he hardly ever asks to see them. The new blighter won’t be like that—stands to reason. I call it rotten!’

‘You’d better not let your new Form-master hear you calling him a blighter, at any rate,’ remarked Wharton.

‘I don’t care! He may be some old hunks with a jaw like a vice, like your Form-master, old Quelch,’ said Dicky dismally. ‘If he is, we jolly well shan’t stand him in the Second, I can tell you!’

The chums of the Remove grinned. Richard Nugent of the Second Form spoke with lofty independence; but how he was to avoid ‘standing’ his new Form-master, even if that gentleman turned out like Mr. Quelch of the Remove, was not clear.

‘I say, you fellows—’

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo! Bunter! Fatter than ever!’

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'Still feeling those revolvers?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Beast! I say, you fellows, they never got that man,' said Bunter. 'I never got the reward. Bit thick, isn't it? Lot of use a fellow running these fearful risks to help the police capture escaped convicts when they let him slip through their fingers, after all. Sickening, I call it!' Bunter blinked seriously at the Famous Five. 'Owing to that, you know, I've come back to Greyfriars short of money. I've been disappointed about a postal-order, too.'

'For the first time in your life?' asked Bob sympathetically.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'If you fellows have got half-a-crown you don't want I can do with it till my postal-order comes. Don't all speak at once.'

The Famous Five did not all speak at once. They did not speak at all. They only grinned. Apparently they had no half-crowns that they did not want.

CHAPTER VII

First Day of Term!

FIRST day of term at Greyfriars, as at all schools, was a busy day. Everybody had plenty to do, and plenty to say. Medical certificates had to be handed in, night bags unpacked, studies taken possession of, and arranged and re-arranged, new fellows surveyed and commented on—disparagingly, as a rule—and there was supper in Big Hall, and a speech from the Head—the same speech to which generations of Greyfriars fellows had listened, and which some of them knew almost by heart. Form-masters whisked about incessantly, with hardly time to snatch a hurried meal in Common-room; and even the best-tempered masters had rather an edge to their temper.

Even Billy Bunter forgot all about his escaped convict, in the pressure of other affairs. Mr. Quelch, the master of the Remove, called over his Form, and told them that he expected better results this term than last; as he always did. If the Remove master really nourished these expectations, his scholastic life must have been a series of disappointments.

After supper in Hall, Wharton and Nugent went to their study, No. 1, in the Remove, to arrange certain articles which they had brought from home for the adornment of that celebrated apartment.

They were busy in the study when Dicky Nugent came in. Nugent minor was looking very gloomy.

'He's a beast!' he remarked.

'Eh! Who?' asked Frank.

'Gilmore.'

'Who's Gilmore?' asked Wharton.

Snort from Nugent minor. The most important happening at Greyfriars was the appointment of a new master of the Second Form, in place of Mr. Twigg, who was away on account of ill-health. At all events, that seemed to the Second Form the most important happening.

'It's Dick's new Form-master,' said Frank.

'Oh! I remember! Got the tacks?' asked Harry. Pictures in the Remove studies were hung by means of tacks.

'Here they are! What's the matter with Gilmore, Dicky?'

'He's a rotter!'

'Not licked already, kid?'

Dicky Nugent sniffed.

'If he had the neck to lick a man on the first day of term, I'd jolly well hack his shins!' he retorted.

Nugent smiled.

'Well, what's he done, then!' he asked.

'He's a beast!' groaned Dicky. 'He's had us all up in the Form-room—on the first day of term, you know—and gone for us. We were playing leap-frog when he came in, and he had the cheek to say that it mustn't occur again in the Form-room.'

'Some masters don't like leap-frog in their Form-rooms,' observed Wharton gravely.

'Ain't it the first day of term?' hooted Dicky. Evidently, from Nugent minor's point of view, first day of term, like charity, covered a multitude of sins.

'I say, you fellows.'

Billy Bunter rolled into the study. His little, round eyes were wide open with excitement behind his spectacles. He gasped as he rolled into No. 1.

'I've seen him!' he panted.

'You've seen Gilmore?' asked Dicky.

The new master of the Second was uppermost in the fag's mind.

'Eli! Who's Gilmore?'

'My new Form-master!'

'Blow you and your new Form-master. Never knew you had a new Form-master.

What the thump does your new Form-master matter to anybody?'

'Why, you cheeky fat idiot—'

'Oh, shut up! I say, you fellows, I've seen him!'

'Who's him?' asked Nugent. 'Is it a him ancient or modern?'

'The convict.'

'What!'

'The convict!' gasped Bunter, in great excitement. 'He's here—at Greyfriars! What do you think of that?'

Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent stared at Bunter. Dicky Nugent blinked at him.

Apparently Bunter expected to thrill Study No. 1 with that startling news. Study No. 1 was not thrilled in the very least.

'You burbling ass!' exclaimed Wharton. 'What idiotic bee have you got in your bonnet now?'

'Oh, really, Wharton—'

'Are you trying to pull our leg again with your silly convict, you frabjous fathead?'

'I've seen him!' yelled Bunter. 'I say, you fellows, you could have knocked me down with a feather. I'd forgotten all about him, you know—and then, all of a sudden, I came on him.'

'You came on the escaped convict?' yelled Nugent.

'Yes!' gasped Bunter.

'Here—at Greyfriars?'

'Yes!'

'You burbling ass—'

'He's here! It was in Masters' passage,' gasped Bunter. 'I was coming along, you know, and I nearly ran into him. When I saw that it was the convict I jumped, like—like anything.'

'You saw an escaped convict walking down Masters' passage at Greyfriars?' howled Wharton.

‘Yes,’ gasped Bunter.
‘Ha, ha, ha!’ yelled Nugent minor. ‘I’ll tell the fellows this! Ha, ha, ha!’
And Dicky Nugent departed from Study No. 1 yelling. Bunter did not heed him. He blinked excitedly at the captain of the Remove.
‘What’s going to be done, Wharton?’ he exclaimed.
‘Done?’ repeated Wharton.
‘Yes. Suppose you call all the fellows—’
‘Call all the fellows?’
‘And seize him!’ said Bunter.
‘Seize him?’ gasped Wharton.
‘Yes—before he can get away, you know. Mind, the reward belongs to me,’ added Bunter anxiously. ‘That’s understood. I recognised him, you know—I can identify him. You fellows can’t put in for the reward. The reward belongs to me. You understand that?’
Harry Wharton stepped down from the chair, upon which he had been mounted to tack up the picture.
‘You burbling bandersnatch,’ he said. ‘You’ve got that reward on the brain. You’re beginning to fancy that you see an escaped convict round every corner. Chuck it!’
‘He’s here—at Greyfriars—he may be here to rob the house— or to murder the Head—or—or——’
‘Chuck it!’ roared Wharton, exasperated. ‘If you say the word convict again we’ll bump you hard.’
‘I say, you fellows, that convict—’
‘That does it! Collar him—’
‘Yaroooooh! Leggo! Oh, my hat! Yooooop!’
Bump!
Billy Bunter, in the grasp of Wharton and Nugent, smote the floor of Study No. 1. He roared as he smote.
‘There!’ gasped Wharton. ‘Now go and pull somebody else’s leg, you fat chump.’
‘Yarooooogh!’
‘Roll him out!’
‘Whooooop!’
Billy Bunter was rolled out into the Remove passage, and the door of Study No. 1 slammed after him. He rolled and roared.
Whether Billy Bunter had seen an escaped convict walking down Masters’ passage at Greyfriars, or only fancied that he had seen one, it was clear, at least, that Study No. 1 had no use for the story.

CHAPTER VIII

Rough on the Second Form!

ON the second day of the term Greyfriars began to settle down; fellows dropped into their places, boxes were unpacked, late-corners turned up; classes began, a little work was done—not much, it is true, but enough to give a foretaste of the wrath to come, as it were. Nobody liked settling down to work after the freedom of the holidays, and probably the masters liked it no better than their pupils, though they were sometimes suspected of taking a fiendish delight in it.
But of all the Forms at Greyfriars, no Form suffered or repined as the Second Form suffered and repined. The Second were on the verge of mutiny.
Indeed, had mutiny been practicable, those lively young gentlemen would have gone

right over the verge. Fortunately, it wasn't.

The fags told one another, in thrilling voices and with dark looks, that they wouldn't stand it.

After class that day Frank Nugent looked for his minor, to inquire how he was getting on with his new master.

Dicky looked at him dolorously.

'Awful!' he said. 'I say, Frank, you offered last term to help me with my Latin.'

'The offer's still open,' said Frank, with a grin.

'Look here, I'll come to your study after prep with the Beast. Life won't be worth living in the Second if a man doesn't pull up a bit!' said Dicky Nugent dismally. 'He doesn't let a fellow off if a fellow doesn't know a thing, you know. He takes it for granted that a fellow wants to know, and keeps on till a fellow does know! I'm blessed if I don't think it will be easier to work than to slack so long as we have that awful beast!'

Frank Nugent chuckled. He sympathised with his minor; but he could not help thinking that a Form-master like Mr. Gilmore was exactly what the Second wanted, if they had only known it. Certainly a master with whom it was easier to work than to slack was likely to do the Second Form a lot of good.

'There he is!' added Dicky. 'Look at the brute. You wouldn't think he was such a beast to look at him.'

Frank Nugent glanced at Mr. Gilmore, who was chatting with Mr. Quelch in the doorway of the House. Certainly he did not think that the handsome, good-tempered-looking young man looked a beast.

'Looks a decent chap, Dicky,' he said.

'Looks!' snorted Dicky. 'I'll come up to your study after prep, Frank.'

'Do, old chap,' said Nugent.

Dicky scuttled away as Mr. Gilmore, leaving the Remove master, came out into the quad. The young master sauntered away, apparently taking a stroll round Greyfriars, of which he had seen little, so far. Frank Nugent looked for Harry Wharton & Co., and found them walking under the elms. Bob Cherry was grinning.

'Bunter's seen his convict again, Franky!'

'Ha, ha! Where?'

'Walking along the Form-room passage!' chuckled Bob. 'I'm beginning to think that the fat idiot is seeing visions. Who can it be that he takes for the convict?'

'Goodness knows!'

'I say, you fellows—'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here he is! Seen him again, Bunter?' roared Bob.

'Ow! Yes!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I say, you fellows, he's in the Cloisters now!' gasped Billy Bunter. 'He passed only six feet from me—'

'You potty ass!' growled Johnny Bull. 'How could he be here?'

'He is here!' yelled Bunter. 'You fellows go into the Cloisters now and you'll see him, walking as cool as you please!'

'Let's go!' said Wharton. 'Come on, Bunter!'

'No fear! I'm not going near him—he's dangerous! You fellows go and collar him, and I—I'll go and get help!'

And Billy Bunter scudded into the House, perhaps to get help, but more likely to place himself at a safe distance from the supposed convict.

The Famous Five trotted across to the Cloisters. That Convict 19 was there they

certainly did not believe for a moment; but they were curious to see whether anybody was there whom Bunter could possibly have taken for the fugitive from Blackmoor. 'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Somebody's here!' exclaimed Bob Cherry, as the juniors entered the old stone Cloisters. 'Who's this?'

'Ha, ha, ha! It's Mr. Gilmore, the master of the Second—my minor's jolly old Form-master!' chuckled Nugent.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

CHAPTER IX

Doubting Thomases!

'SLEW him round, you fellows,' said Bob. 'You see, Bunter, we're fed up with escaped convicts. A kick or two—'

'A kick in time saves nine!' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I say, you fellows—leggo, you silly owls, I tell you—yaroooh!'

'What is this?' asked a voice like very cold and sharp steel, and the playful juniors released William George Bunter as Mr. Quelch appeared from nowhere like a gimlet-eyed ghost, and spoke.

'Yaroooh! You silly chumps—'

'Bunter!'

'Oh, is that you, sir?' gasped Bunter, blinking at the Remove master. 'I didn't see you, sir. I thought it was some other silly idiot—'

'What!'

'I—I—I mean—'

'Silence! This disturbance in the passages—' began the Remove master, with portentous severity.

'Those silly asses don't believe about the convict, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'I say, sir, he ought to be caught, sir! He's a dangerous character, and there's fifty pounds reward, sir.'

'What does the boy mean?' asked Mr. Quelch, staring at the Owl of the Remove.

'The convict, sir—'

'What convict?'

'No. 19, sir!' gasped Bunter.

'Have you been deluding this foolish boy with some absurd practical joke?'

exclaimed Mr. Quelch sternly. 'I remember that last night he was frightened with some childish story of an escaped convict.'

'Nunno!' stammered Harry Wharton. 'Bunter really thinks there's an escaped convict hanging about the school, sir.'

'Nonsense!'

'There is, sir, really and truly,' stuttered Bunter.

'An escaped convict—at Greyfriars!' articulated Mr. Quelch. 'Are you out of your senses, Bunter, to make such a statement?'

'I've seen him, sir. Of course, he ain't dressed like a convict now,' explained Bunter.

'He's changed his clothes, and looks quite decent, sir.'

'Then how do you imagine that he, whoever he may be, is a convict at all!' demanded the Form-master.

'I know his face, sir.'

'You know a convict's face!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

'Yes, sir, just like yours—'

‘Like mine?’ almost shrieked the Remove master.

‘I—I mean, I know his face, just like I know yours, sir!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I don’t mean he looks like you, sir. He’s quite good-looking, sir, if you come to that.’

‘Oh, my hat!’ murmured Bob Cherry.

The expression on Mr. Quelch’s face was really extraordinary just then. He did not look like a convict, certainly, but he looked a good deal like a Gorgon.

‘You incredibly stupid boy!’ he exclaimed at last. ‘If this is intended for impertinence—’

‘Oh, no, sir! I—I— Why, there he is!’ yelled Bunter suddenly. ‘Help! Keep him off! I know he’s come here to murder me! Yaroooooh!’

Bunter dodged round behind Mr. Quelch, almost upsetting that dignified gentleman in his haste. Mr. Quelch staggered and whirled round on Bunter.

Smack!

‘Yaroooooh!’

It was almost unknown for Henry Samuel Quelch to box a fellow’s ears. He was far too dignified for such a proceeding. But there were occasions when even the Remove master was human. He gave Bunter a resounding smack; and, seeming to derive solace therefrom, gave him another.

Smack!

‘Yoooooo-hoooooop!’

‘Now, you young rascal!’ thundered Mr. Quelch.

‘Yow-ow-ow-ow!’

Mr. Quelch grabbed him by the shoulder.

‘You stupid boy, tell me what you mean, at once. You have stated that you have recognised an escaped convict within the precincts of the school. I require to know what you mean. What have you to say?’

‘Yaroooooh!’

That, apparently, was what Bunter had to say; but it did not seem to satisfy Mr. Quelch. His wrathful hand rose again, and Harry Wharton spoke hastily.

‘Bunter really saw an escaped convict in the holidays, sir, and he thinks—’

‘How can Bunter possibly have seen anything of the kind?’ snapped Mr. Quelch.

‘What nonsense are you telling me?’

Wharton hurriedly explained. The Remove master listened impatiently but he was enlightened to some extent. But it was impossible for Wharton to explain why Bunter fancied that he had seen Convict No. 19 again, and within the walls of Greyfriars.

That was a mystery to the captain of the Remove.

‘I understand, so far,’ said Mr. Quelch. ‘Bunter, for what reason have you stated that you have seen this—this fugitive from justice in the school?’

‘He’s here, sir,’ groaned Bunter, rubbing his fat ears. ‘I’ve seen him six or seven times, sir, walking about the school.’

‘Cannot you understand, you obtuse young rascal, that no stranger could be walking about the school unquestioned?’

‘He’s here, sir! He passed while I was speaking to you a few minutes ago,’ gasped Bunter.

‘Did you boys see anyone pass?’ asked the Remove master.

‘Only Mr. Gilmore, sir.’

‘This must be looked into,’ said Mr. Quelch, frowning. ‘It is impossible for any stranger to be within the school precincts, of course. Bunter, come with me and point out the person, if he exists.’

‘I—I’d rather not, sir. He—he may have a revolver, sir.’

‘Do not be absurd! Come at once.’

‘Oh, dear!’

Mr. Quelch marched the Owl of the Remove into the quadrangle. Harry Wharton & Co. looked at one another in wonder.

‘If Bunter isn’t off his rocker, what on earth does it mean?’ asked Frank Nugent.

‘He’s blind enough to mistake anybody for anybody else, but I suppose he can’t have taken a Form-master for a convict, can he?’

‘Ha, ha, ha! Hardly.’

‘Off his rocker,’ said Bob Cherry. ‘He was always nearly off, and now he’s quite off.’

‘The quitefulness is terrific.’

From the doorway the Famous Five watched Mr. Quelch and Bunter, so long as they remained in sight. Mr. Quelch obviously did not believe that Bunter had seen Convict No. 19 walking about within the school walls; but he was putting the matter to the test. They disappeared into the Cloisters, and the Famous Five gave it up and went to the Remove passage to tea.

Billy Bunter joined them there half an hour later. He was looking dolorous.

‘I say, you fellows, Quelch doesn’t believe me,’ he said.

‘Go hon.’

‘He’s given me a hundred lines. Makes out that I was spinning a yarn,’ said Bunter warmly.

‘Weren’t you?’

‘No!’ roared Bunter. ‘I say, you fellows, do you think I’d better go to the Head about it?’

‘Not with a yarn like that,’ chuckled Bob Cherry. ‘You’d better tell the Head an easier one.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘It’s true!’ howled Bunter.

‘Then it’s a fact that truth is stranger than fiction—as usual. It’s not so steep.’

Bunter did not go to the Head. Perhaps he thought that Dr. Locke might be as sceptical as Mr. Quelch on the subject. Perhaps he thought that the spread on the table in Study No. 1 was more attractive than an interview with the Head. At all events, he drew a chair to the table and helped himself, and the escaped convict was dismissed from his fat mind while he attended to more important matters.

CHAPTER X

The Opinion of the Second!

‘I’LL ask my major!’ said Sammy Bunter.

‘Good!’

For the first time in the history of the Second Form at Greyfriars a suggestion from Bunter minor was received with unanimous approval.

‘Good egg!’ said Dicky Nugent. ‘A Remove man will be all right.’

‘Right as rain!’ said Gatty.

‘And it would have to be a silly ass, or he wouldn’t do it,’ remarked Myers. ‘Bunter major is a silly ass, just like Sammy.’

‘Look here—’ hooted Sammy.

‘But will Bunter major do it?’ asked another of the fags.

A crowd of the Second Form were in solemn conclave in their Form-room. The term was three days old now, and in three days the Second were more than fed-up with their new Form-master, Mr. Eric Gilmore. They did not merely detest him. They

loathed him.

More work had been done in the Second in three days than the Second were accustomed to put in in three weeks. Knowledge on all sorts of subjects was growing in the Second Form, springing up like mushrooms in a night. As Dicky Nugent had told his major, it was really easier to work than to slack, with a beast like Gilmore; a slacker had all the trouble of dodging the acquisition of the undesired knowledge to follow.

Like the Israelites in the desert, who looked back with longing to the flesh-pots of Egypt, the Second Form looked back to their easy days with Mr. Twigg. The difference between past and present was appalling.

Having agreed on all hands that they wouldn't stand it, the Second had to realise that there was no choice about the matter; they had to stand it. But they could, at least, tell the Beast what they thought of him. Not exactly by word of mouth—there was something in Mr. Gilmore's eye that checked anything of that sort. In class and at prep the Second walked delicately. Ragging in class was quite unknown now; so far from attempting it, the fags did not even think of it. Nevertheless, they had determined to let the Beast know what his Form thought of him, and it was Gatty who had propounded the masterly wheeze which was adopted.

Gatty had written in large capital letters, on a sheet of impot paper, the crushing sentence:

WE ALL THINK YOU A
BEEST!

This expressed the sentiments of the Second Form to a man. Even the spelling was characteristic of Mr. Twigg's Form.

Capital letters gave no clue to the writer. The paper was carefully folded and placed in an envelope. This was to be delivered to Mr. Gilmore in his study.

It was at that point of the proceedings that a difficulty arose.

Nobody wanted to be the person who delivered the letter.

That it should be delivered, that it had to be delivered, all the Second agreed. It was exactly what Gilmore wanted to open his eyes as to the opinion of his Form. Once he knew what the Second thought of him there might be a possibility of amendment on his part. At least there was satisfaction in 'telling him off'. He couldn't pick on the fellow who had written the letter, and he couldn't very well punish the whole Form on suspicion. It was a masterly move, only there was a great shyness in the Second about the delivery of the letter. Not a man was willing to convey it to Mr. Gilmore.

So Sammy Bunter's suggestion was very welcome. There was still a question as to whether Bunter major would do it. He was fool enough—that was admitted at once. Nevertheless—'Look here, fetch your major here, Sammy,' said Dicky Nugent. 'Tell him we've got some tarts.'

'That'll fetch him!' grinned Sammy.

And he departed in search of William George of the Remove. He returned within five minutes with the fat and fatuous youth.

Evidently the story of the tarts had 'fetched' Billy Bunter.

The Owl of the Remove had rolled into the Second Form-room with a genial grin on his face. Most Remove men would have disdained a feed with the Second. Bunter disdained the Second, but not the feed. He blinked round inquiringly. There was no sign of the tarts.

'Look here, Sammy told me—' began Bunter warmly.

'That's all right,' said Nugent minor hastily.

'Is it?' grunted Bunter. It did not seem to him all right, unless the tarts were in evidence.

'Myers is just going down to the tuck shop,' explained Dicky Nugent.

'Oh, all right! I'll wait.'

Bunter sat down on a desk.

'There's a letter for Gilmore there,' remarked Dicky Nugent in a careless sort of way.

Bunter blinked at the envelope lying on a desk.

'What about it?' he asked.

'It's got to be taken to him.'

'Take it, then.'

'You take it, old chap,' said Dicky.

'Rot!' replied Bunter.

'The fact is, we never go to Gilmore's study,' said Gatty. 'We bar him, you know.'

'Leave it where it is, then,' said Bunter.

The fags exchanged glances. Obviously it would not do to tell Bunter what was in the letter. Even Bunter was not ass enough to deliver such a letter if he knew what was inside it.

'Well, you see, he ought to have it,' said Gatty. 'He—hem— might think that one of the chaps ought to have given it to him. Look here, Bunter, you take it. He can't give you lines. See?'

'He wouldn't give you lines for taking him a letter,' said Bunter.

'He's such a beast, you know,' explained Gatty. 'It's practically impossible to see him without getting lines or something.'

'Only he can't line a Remove man,' said Myers.

'Look here, Billy, you take it, and we'll have the tarts ready when you come back,' said Sammy.

Billy Bunter blinked at the fags. A brighter youth than William George Bunter might have suspected that there was some trick in all this. But Bunter's thoughts, naturally, ran on the tarts. It was only a couple of minutes' walk to Mr. Gilmore's study; not a very great exertion, even for Bunter. He rolled off the desk.

'Oh, all right!' he said. 'I'm not afraid of your blessed Form-master. You fags are a funky lot.'

The Second Form did not hurl themselves on Bunter and slay him. The delivery of that important letter, conveying to Mr. Gilmore the considered opinion of the Form, came first.

'Well, go it, old chap,' said Sammy.

Bunter picked up the letter and rolled out of the Form-room. The fags looked at one another breathlessly.

'It's all right now!' breathed Gatty. 'It's worth two or three tarts, what?'

'Two!' said Nugent minor. 'I don't see wasting three.'

'What about one?' asked Sammy.

'Well, we said tarts,' said Dicky Nugent. 'Make it two. I say, though, let's see that he really takes the letter.'

'Yes, rather! Come on!'

A crowd of fags stalked Bunter stealthily along the passages. Almost breathlessly they followed him till they saw him arrive at the door of Mr. Gilmore's study in Masters' passage. At the corner of that passage they stopped, peering round with gasping interest. They saw Billy Bunter raise a fat hand and tap at the door.

Apparently he was bidden to enter, for he opened the door and went in.

'Now!' breathed Gatty.

'Now— Why, what—what—what the—' stuttered Nugent minor.
From the study of the Second Form-master there came a sudden wild yell of terror.
The next moment Billy Bunter came tearing out as if the study were on fire, yelling as he came.
'Help! Help! Help!'

CHAPTER XI The Convict!

'HELP!'
Bunter roared as he came down the passage.
His fat face was terrified, and the speed with which he negotiated the passage was remarkable, considering the weight he had to carry.
There were yells from the startled fags as he crashed into them.
Right and left the fags were strewn, under Bunter's hefty charge.
'Oh, crumbs!'
'Oh, scissors!'
'You fat idiot—'
'Oh, my hat!'
'Help!' roared Bunter. 'It's him! He's there! Yaroooh! Help!'
Mr. Quelch's door opened, and the Remove master fairly glared out into the passage.
'What is this disturbance?' he thundered.
'Help!'
'Bunter!' shrieked Mr. Quelch.
'Yow-ow! It's him! Help!'
'Bunter! Stop!'
Billy Bunter did not stop. Even his Form-master's terrifying voice had no effect on him. He rushed on and vanished from Mr. Quelch's amazed sight.
'You young ass!' roared Wingate of the Sixth, as the Owl of the Remove bumped into him.
Billy Bunter was past reasoning with. He slammed the door of his study and turned the key in the lock. Behind the locked door he gasped with relief.



'It's him! He's there! Yaroooh! Help!'

Mr. Quelch rustled into the Remove passage. The expression on his face almost scared the Removites.

‘Where is Bunter?’ demanded Mr. Quelch in a deep, rumbling voice. ‘He has created a disturbance in Masters’ passage! Where is he?’

‘I—I think he went into his study, sir!’ stammered Squiff. Rap! Rap! Rap!

Mr. Quelch turned the handle of No. 7, and finding the door locked, rapped and rapped again furiously.

‘Yaroooh! Keep off!’ yelled Bunter. ‘I say, you fellows, keep that beast off. Go away, you villain!’

‘Bunter!’ shrieked Mr. Quelch.

‘Go away!’ yelled Bunter. ‘Send for the police! Oh, dear! Help! I won’t be murdered! Yaroooh!’

‘The boy must be out of his senses,’ gasped Mr. Quelch. ‘Bunter! It is I, your Form-master!’

‘Oh!’ Bunter recognised the voice at last. ‘Is that old Quelch? I—I mean, is that Mr. Quelch? Keep him off!’

‘There is no one here, Bunter—only myself and your Form-fellows—’

Mr. Quelch, in spite of his wrath, spoke soothingly. He really feared that the fat junior had taken leave of his senses.

‘Isn’t that convict there?’ gasped Bunter.

‘No, no! Open the door, Bunter! Calm yourself, and open the door.’

Billy Bunter reluctantly unlocked the door. He peered out into the passage, and was relieved to see only his Form-master and the crowd of amazed Removites.

‘Now, Bunter, calm yourself,’ said Mr. Quelch. ‘Tell me what has frightened you.’

‘That convict, sir!’ gasped Bunter.

‘This seems to be an obsession with the unhappy boy,’ said Mr. Quelch. His keen eyes could see that Bunter was fairly quivering with terror. ‘Calm yourself, Bunter. You are safe. Now explain to me why you fancied that you had seen that convict here.’

‘He’s here, sir—’

‘Where?’

‘In old Twigg’s study—’

‘What?’

‘Mr. Twigg’s study, sir!’ groaned Bunter. ‘The Second Form-master’s study, sir. I went there and saw him—saw him as plain as I see you, sir—’

‘Calm yourself, Bunter! You must surely be able to realise that what you state is impossible.’

‘I saw him, sir!’ gasped Bunter. ‘He was there, sir, sitting at the table, with a pen in his hand, sir, when I went in.’

‘This is most extraordinary,’ said Mr. Quelch. ‘This boy must be suffering from delusions. Come with me, Bunter. I will take you to Mr. Gilmore’s study and demonstrate that you are in error. Come!’

‘He—he may have a revolver, sir—’

‘Come, come! You surely realise that you are safe in your Form-master’s presence,’ said Mr. Quelch. ‘I fear that this is a matter for a doctor; but at all events, I will do my best to reassure you, Bunter. Come with me!’

‘I—I’d rather not, sir—’

‘Come!’

Mr. Quelch’s hand dropped on Bunter’s shoulder, and the fat junior was led away down the Remove passage. Shell fellows and Fourth, Third and Second, Sixth Form-

men and Fifth, mingled with the crowd of Removites, and it was quite an army that marched along Masters' passage to the door of Mr. Gilmore's study.

That door was closed; and Mr. Quelch tapped on it.

'Come in!' called out a cheery voice.

Mr. Quelch opened the door.

Bunter hung back, gasping.

'I—I won't go in!' he howled. 'He's there—'

'I will enter first, Bunter,' said Mr. Quelch.

He strode into the study. Mr. Gilmore rose from the table, where he had been at work correcting exercises for the Second, with a slightly surprised expression on his face.

He had heard the exchange of words at his door.

'Is anything the matter, Mr. Quelch?' the young master asked. 'An extraordinary delusion of a boy in my Form, Mr Gilmore,' said Mr. Quelch. 'This boy, Bunter, encountered an escaped convict in the Christmas holidays, and is obsessed with a belief that the man is now within the precincts of the school. I regret very much disturbing you but in the circumstances you will excuse me.'

'Certainly, sir,' said Mr. Gilmore wonderingly.

'There is, of course, no one but yourself in the study, Mr. Gilmore?'

'No one, Mr. Quelch.'

'Bunter! Come into the room,' said the Remove master. 'You will see with your own eyes that there is no one here but Mr. Gilmore.'

'Perhaps—perhaps he's under the table, sir,' gasped Bunter.

'Nonsense! Come in immediately!'

'I—I—I——' stammered the Owl of the Remove.

'Shall I help him in, sir?' asked Bob Cherry.

'Certainly, Cherry!'

Bob gave the Owl of the Remove a hefty shove. It was really more help than Bunter needed. He went headlong into the study, and landed there on his fat hands and knees with a howl. There was a chuckle from the crowd in the passage.

'Get up, Bunter!' said Mr. Quelch, frowning.

'Ow! Wow! That beast Cherry has—'

'Get up at once!'

Billy Bunter picked himself up. He blinked uneasily round the study through his big spectacles. Then, as his glance fell on the handsome face of Eric Gilmore, he gave a yell and made a jump for the door.

But the doorway was blocked now. Fellows crowded the doorway and the passage beyond, and there was no room for a fly to pass.

'Yaroooh! Lemme out!' yelled Bunter. 'He's here! It's the convict! He's got a revolver! Help!'

'Bunter!' thundered Mr. Quelch.

'Yow-ow! Help!'

Mr. Quelch grasped the fat junior's shoulder and forcibly spun him back into the study.

'Bunter! Cannot you see that there is no one here but Mr. Gilmore, or are you absolutely out of your senses?'

'It's him!' shrieked Bunter.

'Him! Who?' gasped Mr. Quelch.

Bunter, squirming behind the Remove master's angular form, pointed a fat forefinger at the amazed face of Eric Gilmore.

'That's him!' he gasped.

‘Mr. Gilmore! That is Mr. Gilmore.’

‘I don’t care!’ howled Bunter. ‘I don’t care what he calls himself! He’s the convict!’
‘Bunter!’

‘He’s the convict—Convict 19—that I saw in the woodcutter’s hut, that stole my overcoat!’ yelled Bunter. ‘It’s him! I’d know him anywhere! That’s the convict! Help!’

‘Is that extraordinary boy alluding to me, Mr. Quelch?’ exclaimed Eric Gilmore in a gasping voice.

‘Apparently he is,’ said the astounded Remove master. ‘It would appear that he sees some resemblance between you and the convict he unfortunately encountered in the holidays. No doubt his short sight is the cause; the foolish boy’s sight is very defective. He is also very obtuse—the stupidest boy in my Form!’

‘I should imagine so!’ said Mr. Gilmore dryly.

‘Bunter!’ The Remove master was crimson now with mortification. ‘You stupid boy, listen to me! This gentleman is Mr. Gilmore, the new master of the Second Form—well known to your headmaster—who has come to Greyfriars with the very best recommendations, and is widely known and respected. If you see some real or fancied resemblance between him and the—the fugitive you saw in the holidays, it is merely a mistaken impression on your part. Do you understand me?’

‘It’s the convict, sir!’

‘Goodness gracious! Do you dare to repeat that ridiculous statement?’ exclaimed the exasperated Mr. Quelch. ‘I tell you this gentleman is well known to the Head!’

‘The Head can’t know that he’s a convict, sir!’ gasped Bunter.

‘He is nothing of the kind, you incredibly stupid boy!’ thundered the Remove master.

‘Oh, yes, sir—Convict 19, sir! There’s a reward of fifty pounds for him, sir! Hadn’t you better telephone for the police, sir, before he gets away?’ gasped Bunter.

The Remove master breathed hard and deep.

‘Mr. Gilmore, I can only apologise for this conduct of a boy in my Form,’ he said. ‘I need not assure you that he will be adequately punished for his absurdity and insolence. Come with me, Bunter!’

‘I—I say, sir—’

‘Silence!’

Bunter was led away. Mr. Gilmore, with a very flushed face, closed his door on the crowd in the passage.

The crowd broke up, discussing the amazing affair in breathless excitement. From Mr. Quelch’s study came sounds of woe. The Remove master, deeply incensed by what he could only regard as obstinate insolence on the part of the fat junior, did not spare the rod.

When Billy Bunter limped back to the Remove passage it was obvious that he had been through it severely. The caning had not, perhaps, convinced William George Bunter that Mr. Gilmore, the master of the Second Form, was not Convict 19, the fugitive from Blackmoor Prison. But it had, at least, convinced him that the less he said about the matter the better.

Bunter was, indeed, beginning to wonder whether he had, after all, made a mistake. Was the man who called himself Eric Gilmore, at Greyfriars, really the hunted convict he had seen lurking in the woodcutter’s hut near Wharton Lodge? Was the new master of the Second Form in reality Convict 19, the desperate fugitive from Blackmoor, known to be still at large?

Only the future could tell.

CHAPTER XII

In the Lion's Den!

DICKY NUGENT came up the Remove staircase whistling shrilly through his teeth. His shrill and piercing whistle came to a sudden stop as he beheld William George Bunter reposing outside Study No. 1 in what a novelist would have called an attitude of unaffected grace.

Nugent minor stared down at him and grinned.

'Taking a rest, old fat bean?' he asked.

'Groooogh!'

'My major chucked you out of his study?'

'Blow your major! Groogh!' Bunter gasped for breath. 'You wait till I get my wind, you cheeky little beast, and I'll get up and pull your ear!'

'I'm looking for a coon like you,' explained the fag. 'My Form-master wants to see you.'

Bunter jumped.

Nugent minor's Form-master might want to see him, but most decidedly he did not want to see Nugent minor's Form-master.

William George Bunter preferred to give Mr. Gilmore a wide offing.

'I'm not going!' he gasped.

'You'd better go,' grinned Dicky. 'Form-masters don't like to be kept waiting.'

Anyhow, I've given you his message.'

And Dicky Nugent turned and travelled down the Remove staircase again, bursting forth into a shrill whistle as he went.

Unfortunately for the independent fag, who did not care two straws for the Remove men, Peter Todd of the Remove was coming up just then.

'What's that thumping row?' asked Peter. 'Don't you know that fags mustn't kick up a shindy in the Remove?'

Dicky Nugent dodged past—not quite quickly enough. A hand grasped his collar as he flew.

Crack!

There was a fiendish yell from Richard Nugent of the Second Form as his head came into contact with the banisters.

Then Peter rolled him gently down to the landing and landed him there in a heap and left him. Richard Nugent was a dusty and breathless fag when he picked himself up and went on his way, with no breath left for whistling.

That duty done, Peter Todd resumed his way up to the Remove passage. Billy Bunter stopped him on the Remove landing.

'I say, Peter, that beast Gilmore has sent for me to come to his study.'

'Well, cut off, then,' said Peter.

'Of course, I'm not afraid,' said Bunter.

'What is there to be afraid of, fathead? Form-masters don't bite!'

'But I'd rather not go alone, considering that he's an escaped convict, you know.'

'You frabjous ass!'

'You come along with me, Peter,' urged Bunter. 'If he's got a revolver we'll—'

'Ha, ha, ha!' roared Peter.

'You can cackle,' howled Bunter, 'but I can jolly well tell you he's dangerous. A man who's wanted by the police—'

'He may be rather dangerous if you tell him that,' chuckled Peter, 'though I think he would be more likely to produce a cane than a revolver. Cut along, and don't be a

silly ass!’

‘You come with a fellow,’ urged Bunter. ‘He may mean murder—’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ shrieked Peter.

‘Dead men tell no tales, you know,’ said Bunter. ‘He may want to silence me, like that villain on the films at the Courtfield Picture Palace. He knows that I know who he is.’

‘You priceless idiot!’ said Peter Todd. ‘You’ll get a Head’s flogging if you keep on this idiotic yam about a Greyfriars master. But I’ll come with you, if you like, if only to prevent you making a fool of yourself!’

And Peter Todd good-naturedly accompanied the fat junior to Masters’ passage, for his dreaded interview with Eric Gilmore. On the way there Bunter showed him the description which he had taken down in his pocket-book. Its resemblance to Eric Gilmore struck Peter at once, and for the first time it occurred to him that Bunter’s story was not the fatuous absurdity he had supposed it to be.

There was, at least, some resemblance in some respects between Mr. Gilmore and Convict No. 19. Certainly that general resemblance would not have made Peter suspect him to be the missing man, but it accounted to some extent for Bunter’s delusion.

‘You see how it fits him, Peter,’ said Bunter eagerly. ‘All except the hair, and, of course, that’s dyed.’

‘It’s rather like him,’ said Peter. ‘But he isn’t and couldn’t be the man, as you’d know if you had as much brains as a bunny rabbit. Do you think the Head would take a man on his staff without knowing all about him?’

‘He’s spoofed the Head somehow, of course.’

‘And you’re a bit wider awake than the Head—what?’ asked Peter, with deep sarcasm.

‘Exactly!’

Sarcasm was wasted on William George Bunter.

‘Now, you watch him when you’re in the study,’ said Bunter. ‘I’m rather short-sighted, you know—just a trifle.’

‘A mere trifle!’ agreed Peter. ‘You can see a barn if it’s not more than a couple of feet away.’

‘You keep an eye on his hair, and see whether it’s dyed,’ said Bunter. ‘You see, it must be dyed, because Convict No. 19’s hair is dark, and Gilmore has light hair.’

‘Fathead!’

The two Removites reached Mr. Gilmore’s study, and Peter knocked.

‘Come in!’ said the deep, pleasant voice of the Second Form-master.

Peter opened the door and signed to Bunter to enter. But the Owl of the Remove hung back.

‘You go in first, Peter!’ he whispered—a whisper that easily reached the ears of Mr. Eric Gilmore.

‘You frabjous chump!’ breathed Peter.

And he grasped Bunter by the arm and led him into the study. Mr. Gilmore was sitting at his table—a tall, handsome young man, with pleasant features, blue eyes, and flaxen hair; as agreeable-looking a young man as had ever been seen at Greyfriars School. Peter could not help grinning at the idea of associating him for one moment with the desperate fugitive from Blackmoor Prison.

Mr. Gilmore seemed a little surprised to see two Visitors when he had sent only for one.

‘I sent for Bunter,’ he remarked.

‘Pip-pip-pip——’ stammered Bunter.

‘What?’

‘Pip-pip-Peter came with me!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I—I didn’t want to come alone, sir. I—I don’t think you’ve got a revolver. B-b-b-b-but——’

‘You utterly absurd boy!’ exclaimed Mr. Gilmore.

‘Bunter can’t help being a fool, sir,’ said Peter politely.

‘Oh, really, Peter——’

‘I have no objection to your friend coming with you, Bunter,’ said Mr. Gilmore patiently. ‘I desire only a few words with you.’

‘Yes, sir! Thank you, sir! C-c-can I go now?’ gasped Bunter. ‘Bless my soul! The boy seems to be absolutely stupid!’ said Mr. Gilmore. ‘You may sit down, both of you.’

The two juniors sat down—Bunter on the very edge of a chair, as near to the door as he could manage. It was obvious that Billy Bunter was in a state of blue funk, prepared for some hostile move on the part of the Form-master, and ready to bolt at the first alarm. And the fact that Mr. Gilmore did not box his ears was a proof that he was, at least, a very good-tempered young man. Daniel in the lion’s den probably felt a good deal like Billy Bunter at the present moment; and only too obviously William George Bunter did not dare to be a Daniel.

CHAPTER XIII

Startling!

MR. GILMORE pursed his lips.

That he was annoyed was clear. It was scarcely possible, in the odd circumstances, for him to be anything else. But he remained patient and good-tempered.

‘Now, Bunter——’ he began.

‘I—I didn’t!’ gasped Bunter.

‘Eh? You did not what?’

‘Oh, nothing!’

Mr. Gilmore breathed hard.

‘I desire to speak to you, Bunter, concerning the absurd story you have told about me,’ he said. ‘You can surely understand, stupid as you are, that the matter is most unpleasant.’

‘I—I know!’ gasped Bunter. ‘It’s beastly to have a convict in the school.’

‘What?’ thundered Mr. Gilmore.

‘I—I mean, it’s nice to have a convict in the school!’ gasped Bunter. ‘That’s what I really meant to say, sir. I—I don’t mind you being a convict, sir. I—I like convicts.’

‘Oh, my hat!’ murmured Peter.

Mr. Gilmore looked fixedly at Bunter.

‘Then you still believe this absurd story you have told, Bunter?’

‘Yes sir. I mean, no! Not at all, sir!’ groaned Bunter, with a longing eye on the door.

‘Never, sir! Nothing of the kind. C-c-can I go now, sir?’

‘You cannot!’ snapped Mr. Gilmore.

‘Oh, lor’!’

‘You must explain to me why this absurd fancy came into your mind, and perhaps I may be able to clear up the matter. You must know very well that if I laid a complaint before your headmaster you would be flogged for your insolence. But I should much prefer to disabuse your mind of this singular obsession. You understand me?’

‘Oh, dear! Yes, sir.’

‘I am told that during the Christmas holidays you came into contact with an escaped convict.’

‘Ow! Yes. He bagged my overcoat, sir. I—I really think you ought to let me have it back now, sir. It’s no good to you, really!’

‘Shut up, you ass!’ breathed Peter Todd.

‘Upon my word!’ said Mr. Gilmore. ‘This is too much! I am wasting my time in reasoning with you, Bunter,’ exclaimed Mr. Gilmore. ‘Knowing you to be the stupidest boy at Greyfriars, I should have preferred to convince you rather than to request Dr. Locke to flog you for your impertinence. But if you will not listen to reason—’

‘Oh, yes, sir. I—I will, sir!’ gasped Bunter. ‘I—I—I believe every word you say, sir. Every syllable!’

‘Then you are convinced?’ asked Mr. Gilmore.

‘Oh, certainly, sir! Quite!’

Convinced or not, Billy Bunter was quite certain that he did not want a Head’s flogging.

‘In that case, you may go,’ said Mr. Gilmore, ‘and I trust I shall hear no more of this nonsense.’

Bunter jumped up.

‘Yes, sir! Very well, sir. I—I suppose you won’t mind giving me the half-crown, sir?’

‘Eh? What half-crown?’

‘The two-and-six you took from me when you bagged my overcoat.’

‘Bless my soul!’

‘My pater bought me a new coat, sir, so that’s all right. But the two-and-six——’

‘Will you shut up, Bunter?’ hissed Peter Todd.

‘Oh, really, Peter——’

Mr. Gilmore rose to his feet.

‘I see it is futile to reason with you, Bunter,’ he said. ‘I shall take you to your headmaster and place the matter in Dr. Locke’s hands.’

‘Oh, lor’!’

‘Bunter can’t help being a fool, sir,’ said Peter Todd, feeling called upon to put in a word for the hapless Owl of the Remove. ‘He was frightened out of his wits by that convict in the holidays, sir. And—if you’ll excuse me, sir—the published description is a bit like you—I mean, it’s like enough for a fool like Bunter——’

‘What do you mean, Todd?’ exclaimed Mr. Gilmore, really angry now. ‘How can the description of an escaped convict be in any way like me?’

‘It is really, sir,’ said Peter. ‘Except that your hair is a different colour, sir, the description is rather like you. Of course, it’s only a general resemblance; anybody but Bunter would know that. But, so far as the printed description goes, you are rather like that man Waring——’

‘What!’

Mr. Gilmore shot out that ejaculation like a bullet. He stared blankly at Peter Todd.

‘What name did you say?’ he exclaimed.

‘Waring, sir—George Waring,’ said Peter, in wonder.

‘Good heavens!’

Mr. Gilmore stood resting his hand on the table, with every vestige of colour gone from his handsome face. His eyes were dilated as he stared at Peter Todd. Peter stared back at him in blank bewilderment. The mention of the convict’s name seemed to have an electrical effect on the new master of the Greyfriars Second.

‘Todd, if you are daring to jest with me on this subject——’ exclaimed Mr. Gilmore at last.

‘Not at all, sir,’ said Peter, in wonder.

‘You say that the escaped convict’s name was George Waring?’

‘Yes, sir—it’s in the papers—it’s posted up outside the police station at Courtfield—’

‘Oh!’

The effort that the Second Form-master made to recover his composure was visible to the eye, and almost painful to witness. Peter Todd’s eyes were fixed on him, as if fascinated. There was suspicion now mingled with the wonder in Peter’s face.

‘You may go,’ said Mr. Gilmore, speaking calmly. ‘I shall waste no more words on you, Bunter. I warn you, however, that if you couple my name again with that of an escaped convict, I shall complain very seriously to Dr. Locke, and request that you may be expelled from the school.’

‘Oh, lor’!’ gasped Bunter.

‘You may go!’

Mr. Gilmore sat down again, and picked up some Latin papers on his table. Peter Todd could not help noticing that the papers shook in his hand.

He left the study, quite bewildered. Billy Bunter rolled after him down Masters’ passage. At the corner he clutched Peter by the sleeve.

‘I say, Peter—’

‘Oh, dry up!’ said Peter irritably.

‘Did you notice whether his hair was dyed?’

‘Bother his hair!’

‘Oh, really, Peter—’

Peter Todd jerked his arm away, and hurried off. There was suspicion in his mind now; which he certainly did not intend to confide to Billy Bunter. If Mr. Gilmore was not, as Bunter supposed, the escaped convict himself, he knew something of the man, that was clear to Peter Todd. There was some strange and mysterious connection, at least, between the master of the Greyfriars Second, and the hunted fugitive from Blackmoor Prison. On that point there was no doubt in Peter’s mind, and it was a startling and discomfiting discovery.

CHAPTER XIV

Very Queer!

‘YOUR deal, Snoopey.’

Harry Wharton started as he heard Skinner’s voice.

The words showed that Harold Skinner, the black sheep of the Remove, was at his old game—in a rather unexpected place.

The early winter dusk was falling, as Wharton strolled through the old Cloisters—silent and deserted at that hour.

The captain of the Remove had been out of gates since class, and had returned a few minutes late for lock-up.

Once the school gates were locked, there was no admittance without a fellow giving his name to Gosling to be reported in due course to his Form-master. The captain of the Remove very naturally did not want Mr. Quelch to be bothered with such a trifling matter. He was not anxious to add fifty lines to those he had already on hand.

So, as there was still ample time before call-over, he entered by way of the Cloisters—where an ancient wall gave easy access to an active climber—a spot well-known, as a matter of fact, to most fellows in the Lower School at Greyfriars.

Strolling out of the Cloisters into the quad, there would be nothing to indicate that he had been out of gates after lock-up. Skinner’s voice came to his ears quite unexpectedly from the shadows that were already deepening among the old stone

pillars and arches.

'Last deal, Skinner,' came Snoop's voice. 'It's getting jolly dark here.'

'Light enough till call-over!' said Skinner.

'It's cold, too!'

'You're losing, you mean?' came Skinner's unpleasant voice.

'Oh, rats! I'd rather be in the study.'

'So would I, only that rotter Wingate of the Sixth might look in. He looked in yesterday, and I could see in his eye what he expected to find out, blow him!'

Harry Wharton came through the stone pillars, and glanced at the two black sheep of the Remove. Sidney James Snoop gave a sudden start.

'Who—what——' he ejaculated.

Harry Wharton laughed.

'Only little me!' he said.

'Oh, you ass! You startled me.'

'Did you think it was Wingate of the Sixth?' asked Harry, with a curl of the lip.

'Serve you right if it had been.'

Skinner looked up at him.

'Couldn't mind your own bizney, by way of a change?' he suggested. 'What do you want here?'

'Not your company, at any rate,' answered the captain of the Remove contemptuously. 'I heard you speaking, as I came along, that's all. Anybody might have heard you.'

'I told you it was risky, playing nap here, Skinner,' muttered Snoop. 'That man Gilmore strolls in the Cloisters sometimes.'

'Oh, rot! You've been out of bounds, Wharton,' said Skinner. 'Nice sort of example for a model youth to set to his Form. Do you mind my mentionin' that I'm shocked at you?'

'Fathead!'

Harry Wharton went on his way, leaving Skinner and Snoop to finish their little game; though he was strongly tempted to take the two sportsmen of the Remove by their necks, and knock their heads together. It was cold and growing very dusky in the Cloisters, and Sidney James Snoop, at least, was not enjoying himself—perhaps because he was losing. Skinner, who was winning, did not seem to mind the cold and the growing gloom. But both of them were careful not to speak again above a whisper after the start Wharton's sudden appearance had given them. The Cloisters were generally quite deserted at dusk; but there was always a possibility of ears that might hear.

The captain of the Remove had almost reached the end of the dusky Cloisters, when he stopped suddenly and peered round among the shadowy pillars.

'Is that you, Skinner, you fathead?' he exclaimed.

There was no reply.

Wharton stared about him, convinced that he had heard a stealthy step quite close at hand. He naturally suspected that Skinner was 'stalking' him through the Cloisters, by way of a jest. It was not likely that anyone else was lurking there.

Wharton frowned.

In the silence, he caught a sound of hurried breathing, and he made a dash under the shadowy arch from which it came. If a practical joker was dogging him through the Cloisters, intending to startle him, Wharton was prepared to startle that practical joker emphatically.

A shadow flitted before him, and vanished round a stone pillar.

‘My hat!’

Wharton caught a glimpse of a brown, thick jacket; and he knew now that it was not Skinner. Skinner was in uniform. And though he had only a momentary glimpse of the figure, he could see that it was too tall for Skinner—indeed, he had an impression that it was too tall for even a Sixth Form man.

Wharton paused a moment, and then pursued the shadowy figure.

He came suddenly on the shadowy form as it turned.

‘Hold on, whoever you are!’ said Wharton coolly. ‘Who are you, and what do you want here?’

Then, as he peered at the face turned towards him in the shadows, he started, and flushed crimson.

‘Oh, I beg your pardon, sir! I—I had no idea it was you, Mr. Gilmore.’

The captain of the Remove beat a hurried retreat, covered with confusion, without waiting for the master of the Second to reply.

He hurried on to the quadrangle, and to the House.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’ Bob Cherry met him as he came into the lighted House. ‘You’re late. Did Gosling nail you?’

‘No; I got in through the Cloisters,’ answered Harry.

‘Anything happened?’ asked Bob, scanning his face.

‘Well, yes. It’s awfully queer!’

‘Give it a name!’

‘Mr. Gilmore was in the Cloisters.’

‘Nothing queer about that—he often mooches about the Cloisters,’ answered Bob.

‘It’s his favourite walk, I believe. I’ve seen him there lots of times.’

‘Only he dodged away as if he wanted to avoid being seen.’

‘Eh?’

Wharton coloured under Bob’s astonished stare.

‘It’s a fact,’ he said. ‘I thought it was some tramp, or somebody who had sneaked in, and ran him down. And it was Gilmore.’

‘My hat! What did he want to dodge a Lower Fourth man for?’ ejaculated Bob. ‘Sure it was Gilmore?’

‘Yes, ass. Blessed if I know why he wanted to dodge out of sight, but he did. Isn’t it queer?’

‘Jolly queer, if you’re not dreaming, old chap,’ grinned Bob.

‘Oh, don’t be an ass!’ grunted Wharton. ‘I suppose I know Gilmore’s face when I see it, though he was dressed differently from usual. I can’t make it out. Still, it’s no bizney of mine, I suppose. What about tea?’

‘Ready in the study, and waiting for you,’ said Bob cheerily. And the two juniors went up to the Remove passage, and Wharton dismissed the peculiar incident from his mind.

CHAPTER XV

‘For It!’

‘OH, chuck it!’ muttered Snoop.

‘Another game!’ urged Skinner.

‘Rats! It’s too dark.’

‘Lots of light yet.’

‘Rats!’

Skinner shuffled the cards.

With the cards shuffling in his thin hands, and a cigarette sticking out of the corner of his mouth, Skinner looked the arrant young blackguard that he was. He regarded his comrade with a sneering grin. Sidney James Snoop was a bad loser, and he was angry and sulky. He, too, was smoking, but he was obviously fed-up with the fascinating game of nap.

‘Oh, one more round, old bean!’ said Skinner airily. ‘Luck will turn, you know’

‘You wouldn’t want another round if you thought so,’ grunted Snoop.

‘Be a sport, you know,’ urged Skinner.

He began to deal the cards, Snoop watching him sulkily, disinclined to play, but tempted by the hope that fortune might change. It was at that moment that a hurried footstep was heard among the shadows of the Cloisters, and a figure came quickly up—so quickly, that the newcomer almost stumbled over the two juniors.

Snoop gave a gasp of terror.

A tall man in a thick, brown jacket stopped and stared at the two juniors, and one glimpse of his face was enough for them. They knew the well-marked features of the master of the Second Form, though the man was strangely dressed, wrapped up in the thick jacket, which was worn over a rough, high-necked jersey.



‘Mr Gilmore!’ stuttered the horror-stricken Skinner

The cards seemed to freeze to Skinner’s palsied hands.

‘Mr. Gilmore!’ he stuttered.

The next instant the man had passed on, and the shadowy pillars hid him from the terrified eyes of the juniors.

Skinner and Snoop stared at one another in terror.

At that moment they did not feel like sportive young sportsmen, recklessly defying the rules of the school. They felt like what they were—a pair of young rascals fairly caught and in danger of expulsion.

Why Mr. Gilmore did not stop to speak to them they did not know, and did not care. It was enough for them that he had seen them, and seen how they were occupied.

Snoop threw away the cigarette with a trembling hand.

‘We’re done for now!’ he muttered huskily. ‘Oh, you fool, Skinner! The study would have been safer than this, Wingate or no Wingate!’

‘What’s the good of telling me that?’ snarled Skinner. ‘Who was to guess that that rotter would be loafing about here at dark?’

‘We’re caught now!’

Skinner made no reply to that. It was only too obvious that the black sheep of the Remove were caught.

Skinner was as thoroughly scared as his associate, though he had a little more nerve. He hurriedly concealed the cards and the cigarettes in a crevice of the flagged floor of the Cloisters. At least, he did not want to have any incriminating evidence upon him when he was called up before the Head.

Snoop watched him, with a scared sneer.

‘Fat lot of good that is!’ he muttered. ‘Do you think Gilmore didn’t see the cards, and the smokes, too?’

‘He may not report us,’ said Skinner. ‘After all, we’re not in his Form. He has nothing to do with the Remove.’

Snoop laughed harshly.

‘Do you think any Greyfriars master would see two fellows smoking and gambling without reporting them?’ he snapped. ‘Don’t be a fool! We’re for it, now, both of us. It’s the sack!’

‘If it’s a flogging, we can stand it.’

‘It won’t be a flogging. We’ve been warned before!’ groaned Snoop. ‘It will be the sack this time!’

‘Oh, shut up!’ snarled Skinner.

Harold Skinner had only too much reason to fear that it would be the ‘sack’ this time. Skinner’s record was not good in his Form, and he had received more than one warning from his Form- master, and more than one from the Head. And the present case was an absolutely flagrant one; there was no excuse and no explanation. The two young rascals had been fairly caught.

In a dismal mood they limped out of the Cloisters and made their way across the dusky quad to the House.

It was near time for calling-over now, but they fully anticipated being called to Mr. Quelch’s study before Hall. The Remove master was not likely to delay in such a matter. Mr. Gilmore was not likely to delay in making his report, or the Remove master in acting upon it. It was in a state of sheer terror that Skinner and Snoop entered the House.

‘I say, you fellows’—Billy Bunter blinked at them with a fat grin— ‘I say, what’s up? You look awfully sick.’

‘Shut up, you fat toad!’ growled Skinner.

‘Oh, really, Skinner— Yaroooh!’ roared Bunter, as Skinner gave him a savage shove and he sat down.

Skinner and Snoop went into the Rag. There they waited for the call to Mr. Quelch’s study.

But it did not come.

Call-over came, and the two culprits limped rather than walked with the rest of the Lower Fourth into Big Hall.

Mr. Quelch was taking the roll.

Two or three other masters were present, among them Mr. Gilmore, of the Second. He did not glance at the Remove, and Mr. Quelch gave the two shivering young rascals no special attention. It was evident that they had not been reported yet.

After call-over Skinner and Snoop went out with the Remove. They went up to the Remove passage, worried and wondering.

‘The beast mayn’t be going to report us, after all,’ said Skinner hopefully. ‘He mayn’t care anything about fellows who ain’t in his Form.’

‘Rot!’ said Snoop.

‘Well, he hasn’t reported us yet.’

‘Playing with us, like a cat with a mouse,’ groaned Snoop. ‘All the fags of the Second

say he's a beast. So he is.'

'I believe he's a good-natured man,' said Skinner. 'The fags loathe him because he won't let them slack as old Twigg used to.'

'You think he's good-natured enough to let us off?' sneered Snoop. 'Jolly queer schoolmaster, if he did. It's his duty to report us, and you jolly well know it!'

Skinner nodded gloomily, feeling his brief hope fade. Mr. Gilmore might be good-natured—in fact, was known to be good-natured, in spite of the low opinion the Second had of their Form-master. But no man could carry good nature to the extent of passing over what had been seen in the Cloisters. That would not be good nature, but a dereliction of duty.

Snoop went into Study No. 11, not for prep. He was in no mood for prep. What was the use of prep when he was expecting every moment to be called up by his Form-master, to be taken to the Head and expelled from the school?

Skinner went along to Study No. 1, where Wharton and Nugent had taken out their books for prep. The black sheep of the Remove was not a welcome visitor in that study; and he would have been told so, in the plain English that was characteristic of the Lower Fourth, had not the juniors there noted the haggard wretchedness in his face, which quite disarmed them.

'What on earth's the matter, Skinner?' exclaimed Wharton, while Frank Nugent stared wonderingly at the crestfallen sports-man.

Skinner shut the door.

'I'm for it!' he muttered.

'What's happened?' asked Nugent.

'I've been spotted.'

'Oh!' said Harry. 'In the Cloisters, do you mean, where I saw you?'

'Yes,' groaned Skinner.

'Well, you asked for it!'

Skinner gave the captain of the Remove a savage look.

'Rub it in!' he said bitterly.

'I don't want to do that,' said Harry quietly. 'I'm sorry for you, if you come to that. I'd help you if I could.'

'So would I,' said Frank Nugent. 'When a fellow's down, it's not much good telling him it was his own fault. But I suppose there's nothing we can do, Skinner, if you're caught out?'

'I—I don't know. If you were to speak to Gilmore, Wharton—'

'Gilmore?' repeated Frank.

'It was Gilmore who caught you?' asked Harry. 'I suppose it would be. I saw him in the Cloisters, after I saw you. Has he reported you to Mr. Quelch? He would go to Mr. Quelch, not to the Head, I think.'

'Not yet. He can't have, as Quelch has said nothing. I can't understand it,' muttered Skinner. 'Do—do you think he's likely to say nothing about it, as I'm not in his Form?'

'That's rot! He couldn't keep such a thing dark. You and Snoop were smoking and gambling. He saw that, I suppose?'

'Yes,' muttered Skinner.

'He couldn't keep that dark; it's his duty to report you.'

'Blow his duty!' snarled Skinner.

'Well, he would be bound to do it. Anyhow, he's jolly sure to. It's odd that he didn't speak to Quelch before call-over.'

'Snoop thinks he's playing with us like a cat with a mouse.'

'That's rot! Gilmore's not that sort.'

'Then why hasn't he acted already?'

'Goodness knows! Are you sure he recognised you?'

Skinner's face brightened for a moment with hope at the suggestion. But it was only for a moment.

'He must have recognised us. He was as near as I am to you, and he stared right at us, and went on without speaking a word. He knows us all right.'

'He may be thinking it over. Anyhow, he's bound to report you, if he knows you. Better make up your mind to that.'

'If you were to speak to him,' muttered Skinner.

'What could I say?'

'Well, you're my Form captain, and you might put in a word. Ask him to go easy, because—because you know I'm not that kind of chap. You know I've never done anything of the kind before, and all that. He's new here, so he may take it all in—'

Skinner broke off at the expression on the face of the captain of the Remove.

'I can't go to Mr. Gilmore and tell him a pack of lies, Skinner,' said Harry quickly. 'It would be no use, either; he would be bound to speak to Mr. Quelch.'

'Then it's all up with me,' groaned Skinner. 'You'll see me sacked from Greyfriars to-morrow. I dare say that's what you want.'

'Nothing of the kind,' said Harry, with a compassionate glance at the wretched junior's face. 'I'd help you if I could. I hope I'd help any fellow who was down on his luck. What about going to Mr. Gilmore yourself?'

'What good would that do?'

'It's a chance, at least. Tell him the truth, that you've played the fool, that you're sorry, and that you'll never do such a thing again, if he gives you a chance. That might make him keep it to himself, though I warn you that he's the man to keep an eye on you afterwards, and see that you kept your word.'

'I don't care about that, so long as I get clear of this,' muttered Skinner. 'If—if you think there's a chance—'

'It can't make matters worse, anyhow, as he knows what you were up to.'

'That's true,' muttered Skinner. 'I—I think I'll try it on. It can't do any harm, as you say.'

And Harold Skinner left Study No. 1 with a faint glimmering of hope in his breast.

CHAPTER XVI

Great Luck for Skinner!

HAROLD SKINNER was loitering dismally about Masters' passage when Mr. Gilmore came back to study after taking the Second in prep.

Skinner had resolved to act on the advice Wharton had given him; it was not a hopeful chance, but it was the only chance he had. But by the time he had made up his mind and came along to see Mr. Gilmore, that young gentleman had gone to the Second Form-room.

Skinner waited about dismally for him to return. He could not, of course, speak to Mr. Gilmore during prep with his Form.

It was a dismal wait for Skinner.

Sidney James Snoop had refused to come with him. Snoop was in a state of hopeless funk, bemoaning his fate in his study in the Remove. Skinner, as he hung about waiting for the young master, was more than once tempted to give up the idea. But he continued to wait; and at last he saw Mr. Gilmore coming round the corner of the

passage.

The young man passed him without a glance, and went to his study.

Skinner noticed that his face was very thoughtful, and that there was a deep line in his brow.

He augured ill from it.

Skinner hesitated for long minutes; but he screwed up his courage and followed Mr. Gilmore to his study at last. If he was going to be reported, and flogged or sacked, an appeal to the Second Form-master could make matters no worse, if it did not make them better. But Skinner's hand was shaking as he tapped at Mr. Gilmore's door.

'Come in!'

Harold Skinner entered.

Mr. Gilmore was standing by his fire, staring down into the red embers, the thoughtful expression still darker on his handsome face. He glanced at Skinner, and raised his eyebrows a little, as if surprised by the visit of a fellow who did not belong to his Form.

'Excuse me, sir!' stammered Skinner.

'Certainly! Do you wish to speak to me?'

'Yes, sir—if you'll let me.'

'Please come in!'

Skinner advanced into the study. He could not understand Mr. Gilmore's manner in the very least.

His look was civil enough, but utterly indifferent. Assuredly he did not look like a man who held the fate of the wretched junior in his hands, impending over his head like the sword of Damocles. Snoop had surmised that the master was playing with the miserable culprits like a cat with a mouse; and Skinner wondered whether Snoop was right. At all events, the line Eric Gilmore was taking was very difficult for him to understand.

'Well,' said Mr. Gilmore, with a touch of impatience as Skinner did not speak. His manner only indicated that he did not wish to be disturbed.

'I—I wanted to—to ask you, sir—' stammered Skinner. 'You wish to ask me something?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, you may speak,' said Mr. Gilmore. 'Kindly lose no more time.' He looked at Skinner with some attention. 'You are a Remove boy, I think?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I am not aware of your name.'

Skinner breathed quickly. Was that why the man had not reported him yet? Yet he knew that Skinner was a Remove man, and that was sufficient for a report to Mr.

Quelch.

'Skinner, sir,' mumbled the junior.

'Well, Skinner, what do you wish to ask me?'

'If—if you'd let me off, sir—'

'What?'

'Me and Snoop, sir,' stammered Skinner. 'We—we—we'd be very thankful, sir, if you'd give us a chance. When you came on us in the Cloisters, sir, we—we—we——'

Skinner broke off in sheer astonishment at the expression on Mr. Gilmore's face.

'I do not understand you, my boy,' said the Second Form-master. 'I have no recollection of seeing you and Snoop in the Cloisters.'

'Wha-a-at?' gasped Skinner.

'Is this some absurd jest?' snapped Mr. Gilmore. 'I have not been in the Cloisters to-day, and certainly have not observed you and Snoop there. What do you mean, Skinner?'

'I—I—I——' gurgled Skinner. He was utterly astounded.

'You have been playing some trick, I suppose, and fancied that you had been observed,' said Mr. Gilmore, his handsome face breaking into a smile. 'You are quite mistaken, Skinner.'

'Oh!' gasped Skinner.

'I trust it was nothing of a serious nature,' said Mr. Gilmore, his face growing a little stern.

Skinner could only stare.

'The Cloisters are my favourite walk,' said Mr. Gilmore, 'and once or twice I have noticed cigarette-ends there lying about, and suspected that some foolish boys smoked there. Is that it?'

'Oh, no—yes——' stuttered Skinner, hardly conscious of what he was saying, in his bewilderment.

Mr. Gilmore's eyes were sharply on his face.

'If you and Snoop were smoking in the Cloisters, Skinner, I recommend you to go to your Form-master and confess your folly, and promise amendment,' said Mr.

Gilmore. 'As I am not your Form-master, I shall take no heed of what you have told me under a misapprehension. You had better go, I think.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir!' stammered the bewildered Skinner.

He went dazedly from the Second Form-master's study.

His mind was fairly in a whirl.

That Mr. Gilmore had seen the two young rascals smoking and gambling in that secluded corner of the Cloisters Skinner was as certain as he could be of anything. Yet the master of the Second professed to have no knowledge whatever of the matter.

That, so far as it went, was reassuring. If, for some mysterious reason, Mr. Gilmore wanted to pretend that he hadn't seen what he must have seen, Skinner was only too willing to give him his head. It meant that there would be no report to Mr. Quelch, no calling up before the Head, no flogging, and no 'sack'. Skinner could scarcely believe in his good luck. But what on earth did it all mean?

He hurried to Study No. 11 in the Remove. Sidney James Snoop was there with Stott. Stott was at prep; but Snoop was rambling miserably about the room, unable to work, unable to sit down, or keep still. Never had Sidney James Snoop been in such a state of miserable funk and apprehension. He gave Skinner a savage and dismal glare as he came in.

'Seen Gilmore?' he muttered.

'Yes.'

Snoop felt a throb of hope at the expression on Skinner's face. He could see that a weight had been lifted from his comrade's mind.

'He—he—— Is he going to keep it dark?' he breathed.

'Yes.'

'Oh!' Snoop fairly panted with relief. Frederick Stott looked up from his prep.

'You're in luck, then!' he remarked.

Snoop sank into a chair, almost overcome with relief.

'Look here, Snoop,' said Skinner, 'you saw that man looking at us in the Cloisters. Whom did you take him to be?'

'Eh? It was Gilmore.'

'Well, I know it was,' said Skinner. 'But he says it wasn't! Either he's forgotten all

about it or he's pretending that he has. I was fairly knocked out. He said he hasn't been in the Cloisters today at all, and that he never saw us.'

'Wha-a-at!' stammered Snoop.

'That's what he says. It's jolly good luck for us. But what the thump is Gilmore telling such thumping lies for?'

'Blessed if I know!' said Snoop, staring. 'He was there right enough, and he saw us. He's not going to report us?'

'No.'

'That's all I care about,' said Snoop. 'He can tell all the lies he likes so long as he doesn't tell the truth—to Quelchy!'

Skinner nodded and left the study. He went along to Study No. 1, where he found Wharton and Nugent, who had finished prep. The look on Skinner's face told the chums of the Remove that he was out of his trouble, and they were glad to see it, little as they liked Skinner.

'All serene, then?' asked Nugent.

'Yes. You mentioned that you saw Gilmore in the Cloisters, Wharton?' said Skinner.

'Yes, I saw him.'

'He says he wasn't there.'

'What rot!' said Harry.

'That's why he's not reporting Snoop and me. He says he's not been in the Cloisters to-day, and never saw us there. It's ripping luck for us. But what is he telling such lies for? What's his game?'

Wharton looked at Skinner in amazement.

'Mr. Gilmore's not the man to tell lies,' he said. 'That's rubbish! Besides, why should he?'

'I don't know why he should, but he has. It's jolly queer!' said Skinner. 'I saw him as plain as anything there, and so did Snoop. And you say that you saw him—'

'I certainly did!'

'And he says he hasn't been in the Cloisters—knows nothing about Snoop and me with the cards and smokes—didn't seem even to know what I was driving at. Is he mad—or what?'

'Blessed if I can make it out!' said the captain of the Remove. 'I know he was there, because I saw him. He's not absent-minded like old Wiggins—he can't have forgotten. You're in luck, anyhow.'

'Yes, that part's all right,' said Skinner. 'But I'd like to know what it means.'

'I give it up,' said Harry, completely puzzled. 'What do you think, Franky?'

'Same here,' answered Nugent.

Skinner had to give it up, too. It was a stroke of the greatest good luck for him; but it puzzled and mystified him sorely.

Harry Wharton looked at Nugent when Skinner was gone.

'That man Gilmore seems to be an odd fish, Frank,' he said.

'He does—if Skinner's telling the truth.'

'Well, it's plain that he's not going to be reported, and that looks like it. I told you I saw Gilmore in the Cloisters at dusk—got up in a cap and thick jacket, dodging and keeping out of sight. I couldn't make it out; and now it seems that he doesn't want to admit that he was in the Cloisters at all. What on earth can it all mean?'

'Goodness knows. It's queer!'

And when the rest of the Co. came along after prep, and were told of the curious incident, Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull admitted that it was very queer indeed; while

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh declared that the queerfulness was terrific. And at that the Famous Five had to let it go.

CHAPTER XVII

Bunter Takes the Plunge!

‘FIFTY pounds!’

‘Oh, cheese it!’

‘Fifty pounds is a lot of money, Peter.’

‘Fathead!’

‘I mean, a lot to a fellow like you,’ Bunter amended hastily. ‘Not so much to me!’

Still, I’d like to handle it!’

‘Ass!’

‘As I know exactly where to lay my finger on Convict No. 19, Peter, it would be sheer waste to let that fifty pounds reward go,’ said Bunter. ‘You can see that, Peter?’

Peter Todd grunted impatiently.

All the more because he had uneasy suspicions in his mind concerning Mr. Gilmore, he was fed-up with Bunter’s convict story.

It was some days since that visit to the Second Form-master’s study, when Eric Gilmore had been so palpably struck by the mention of the name of George Waring, Convict No. 19, of Blackmoor Prison.

Peter—whose tastes were quite unlike Bunter’s—had not sought to learn anything further, but had rather tried to dismiss the matter from his mind.

‘I’m going to make you a generous offer, Peter,’ continued the Owl of the Remove, blinking seriously at his restive study-mate—‘a really generous offer, old chap!’

‘Oh, good!’ said Peter. ‘You’re going to square the seven-and-six you’ve owed me for two terms?’

‘Oh, really, Peter—’

‘Shell out!’ Toddy held out his hand.

‘At the present moment,’ said Bunter, with dignity, ‘I happen to be short of ready money. I’ve been disappointed about a postal-order.’

‘Oh, ye gods!’ exclaimed Peter. ‘Give the postal-order a rest, at least. Stick to the convict!’

‘I shall be rolling in it soon,’ said Bunter. ‘I’m going to share with you, Peter. You help me to nail that scoundrel, and I’ll whack out the reward with you! I—I’ll let you have a pound.’

‘A pound?’ repeated Toddy.

‘Yes, old chap. That will leave only forty-nine pounds for me out of the fifty,’ said Bunter, blinking at him. ‘What do you think of that for an offer, Toddy?’

‘Aren’t you erring on the side of generosity?’ asked Peter, with deep sarcasm.

‘Well, I was always a generous chap, you know. It’s always been my weakness,’ explained Bunter. ‘Of course, I shall expect your help. As the matter stands, I can lay my finger on an escaped convict; but it’s no good telling the Head so. I’ve told Quelchy, and he caned me!’

‘Good old Quelch! Tell him again,’ suggested Peter.

‘Do you think it would be any good telling him again?’

‘Yes, he would cane you again!’

‘You silly ass!’ roared Bunter. ‘Look here, Peter, the proper person to be told is Inspector Grimes, at Courtfield.’

‘You fearful, frabjous bandersnatch!’ exclaimed Peter, aghast. ‘If you told such a tale

about a Greyfriars master outside the school, you'd be sacked. The Head would kick you right out. Not that it would be any loss!

'That's what I'm afraid of,' admitted Bunter. 'Of course, Gilmore is the man right enough. But suppose he pulled the wool over Grimes' eyes! He might. The police are rather duffers, you know. I've often thought that I could manage the whole thing better if I were head of Scotland Yard. Gilmore has fooled the Head, and he might fool old Grimes. And, then, where should I be?'

'Kicked out of Greyfriars!'

'Well, I don't want that,' said Bunter. 'I'm not taking the risk. That's why I haven't been to Grimes yet. I've thought of telephoning. You see, I could telephone to Inspector Grimes and tell him that the convict is here. He would come over and collar him. Then I should put in for the reward. On the other hand,' explained Bunter astutely, 'if Gilmore stuffed old Grimes and got off, I shouldn't mention that I was the chap who had telephoned. See?'

'It would be jolly likely to come out, all the same!' said Peter.

'That's why I haven't phoned,' admitted Bunter.

'Well, now suppose you chuck up the subject, and don't talk any more for a whole minute?' suggested Toddy. 'Your jaw needs a rest—it's been going on since rising-bell this morning!'

Bunter did not heed the suggestion. Perhaps his plump jaw did not require a rest, being accustomed to extensive exercise. Or perhaps it was a physical impossibility for William George Bunter to remain silent for a whole minute.

'I've thought of a wheeze,' resumed Bunter. 'That's where I want your help, Peter; and that's why I'm offering you a share in the reward. Suppose you telephone to Grimey?'

'You can suppose it,' assented Peter. 'Suppose anything you like, old fat man. Can you do your supposing in silence?'

'Oh, really, Toddy! Look here, it's a fellow's duty to assist in the execution of the law, and all that,' said Bunter. 'Besides, there's your share of the reward—a whole pound, Toddy. You slip into Quelchy's study while he's in Common-room, and ring up Grimey. Safe as houses! Only needs a little nerve. Tell him the Blackmoor convict is here, and he will come over at once—stands to reason!'

'And suppose it came out?' said Peter, glaring at the Owl of the Remove. 'Then I should get the licking, or the sack, instead of you?'

'That's it,' assented Bunter. 'You see, it wouldn't matter so much in your case, Peter. You're nobody in particular, if you don't mind my saying so, and if you were sacked, it isn't like a fellow in my position being sacked. You see that?'

Peter Todd looked round Study No. 7 with a searching eye. Bunter blinked at him impatiently.

'What are you looking for, Toddy?'

'My fives bat.'

'What the thump do you want a fives bat for?'

'To lay round a cheeky fat porpoise.'

'Oh, really, Peter—'

The Owl of the Remove retired hurriedly from Study No. 7.

'Beast!' he grunted, as he rolled hurriedly along the Remove passage. 'Fifty pounds going begging! I—I wonder—'

It was clear to William George Bunter that if anyone was going to telephone to Inspector Grimes at Courtfield the interesting news that Convict No. 19 was at Greyfriars, that telephoning would have to be done by W. G. Bunter himself.

It was not an attractive idea.

Bunter was extremely keen on the arrest of Convict No. 19, but he had a lurking doubt whether Eric Gilmore might not succeed in 'stuffing' Inspector Grimes, as he had 'stuffed' all Greyfriars, with the single, solitary exception of W. G. Bunter.

If Mr. Grimes came over and clapped the handcuffs on Convict No. 19, and Mr. Gilmore was marched away like a master-spy, with cuffs upon his wrist, no doubt Bunter would be the hero of the hour, as well as the recipient of the substantial sum of fifty pounds.

But if Mr. Grimes took the information as a schoolboy's attempt to pull his official leg—as was very probable—and reported it to the Head, the outcome was likely to be much less agreeable.

Between his desire to do his duty as a law-abiding citizen for the consideration of fifty pounds, and his fear of the possible consequences, Bunter was in a very uncertain frame of mind.

He drifted along to Masters' passage, where it was possible to use a telephone in the absence of the owner. There he hesitated.

It is well said that he who hesitates is lost.

The door of Mr. Quelch's study had been left open, and Bunter was able to observe that Mr. Quelch was not in his quarters. No doubt the Remove master was at tea in Masters' Common-room, in which case it was likely to be some time before he returned to his study.

Bunter blinked at the telephone.

He rolled into the study at last, and closed the door, in fear and trembling. He placed his fat hand on the instrument, and still he hesitated. But he jerked off the receiver at last, and gave a number to the exchange. A voice came through.

'Courtfield Police Station?' gasped Bunter.

'Yes.'

'Oh, dear!' gasped Bunter.

'What?'

'Ask Inspector Grimes to come to the telephone.'

'Inspector Grimes speaking!' came the curt incisive voice. 'What is wanted?'

Billy Bunter drew a deep, deep breath. The die was cast now. 'Do you want Convict No. 19, who escaped from Blackmoor Prison in the Christmas holidays?' he asked.

'Eh? What? In the what? Is that a schoolboy speaking?'

'Oh, no, not at all!' gasped Bunter.

'Who is speaking?'

'A—a man—a man named Jones.' Bunter did not intend to give away the fact that he was a schoolboy until all was safe, and was blissfully unconscious that he had already given it away.

'Have you anything to tell me?' snapped the inspector.

'Convict No. 19 is at Greyfriars School.'

'Wh-a-t!' stuttered Mr Grimes. 'Are you speaking from Greyfriars?'

'Oh, no, not at all! I—I'm speaking from—from Harrow.'

'Good gad!'

'Don't get the idea into your head that I'm a Greyfriars man,' said Bunter hurriedly.

'I'm at Eton. See?'

'Who are you?'

'My name's Smith. I say, that man Waring—Convict No. 19—is here now—I mean, he's at Greyfriars. He calls himself Eric Gilmore, and is master of the Second Form. He's stuffed the

Head and all the fellows. When you've got him I shall claim the reward. See?' 'Give me your name at once!' 'Robinson.' 'You young rascal!' 'Eh?' 'How dare you play such tricks on a police-inspector? I shall come and see your headmaster at once!' 'It ain't the headmaster, it's the master of the Second Form.' 'It is your headmaster whom I shall see, you young rascal, and I shall see that you are caned for this foolish trick.' 'Oh, lor'!' 'Tell me your name immediately!' 'Jackson.' 'I shall see whether your name is Jackson when I call,' said Mr. Grimes grimly. 'I—I say, don't forget I'm speaking from Harrow—I mean, Eton—that is to say, Winchester!' gasped Bunter. 'No good coming to Greyfriars, you know, if you're going to see the head. You'll waste your time coming here.' There was no reply to that last masterly sample of Bunter's astuteness. Inspector Grimes had rung off. 'Oh dear!' groaned Bunter, as he put up the receiver. He could not help realising that Mr. Grimes had not taken his important information seriously. It was set down as a schoolboy jape, and Mr. Grimes seemed annoyed. Bunter's only consolation was that he had concealed his identity in such a masterly manner. He rolled to the door of the study and opened it, and very nearly rolled into the arms of Mr. Quelch, who was not at tea in Masters' Common-room, after all. Bunter jumped back. 'Bunter! What are you doing in my study?' demanded Mr. Quelch, frowning. 'Oh, nothing, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I haven't been using the telephone, sir.' 'Bless my soul! Take two hundred lines, Bunter!' 'Oh, dear!' Billy Bunter rolled away dismally. Matters altogether seemed to be going very unfortunately for a law-abiding citizen, who was only keen on doing his law-abiding duty—for a consideration of fifty pounds.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Arrest!

'BLESS my soul!' Dr. Locke, the Head of Greyfriars, stared at Inspector Grimes over his glasses in great astonishment. When the Courtfield inspector had been announced the Head had wondered what he could possibly want at Greyfriars. He was in a still greater state of wonderment when Mr. Grimes explained. 'It is really incredible!' exclaimed the Head. 'You tell me that a Greyfriars boy actually telephoned to you, making the utterly absurd statement that an escaped convict was hiding at Greyfriars? I can scarcely believe my ears.' And indeed Dr. Locke hardly could. It was the most startling thing he had ever heard in his long career as a schoolmaster. 'That is the case, sir,' said Inspector Grimes. 'The boy who telephoned gave me a

false name—in fact, several false names. He appears to be an unusually stupid and obtuse boy. But he made the definite statement that an escaped convict, who is still at large, was at the present moment at Greyfriars School.’

‘I need not tell you, Mr. Grimes, that the absurd statement is utterly without foundation.’

‘Quite so, sir,’ assented the inspector. ‘My view is that a schoolboy who attempts to play such foolish tricks upon police-officers should be punished as a warning.’

‘I fully agree,’ said the Head. ‘The boy shall certainly be discovered and severely punished. I am sorry you should have been given such trouble by any Greyfriars boy. You are assured that the call came from Greyfriars?’

‘Quite,’ said Mr. Grimes.

‘The matter shall be investigated at once, and you may take my assurance that this practical joker will be adequately punished,’ said the Head, with emphasis.

That point being settled to the mutual satisfaction of the two gentlemen, Dr. Locke expected Mr. Grimes to take his leave. But Mr. Grimes was in no hurry to take his leave.

‘I have no doubt, sir, that the affair is a foolish and reckless practical joke,’ he said.

‘Nevertheless, as an officer of the police, I have no choice but to take some notice of the matter. The boy referred to a Mr. Gilmore. I suppose there is no objection to my seeing Mr. Gilmore?’

Dr. Locke raised his eyebrows.

‘None!’ he answered. ‘But it is surely unnecessary to acquaint Mr. Gilmore with the fact that a foolish boy has so insulted him.’

‘If the matter is to be investigated, sir, it can hardly remain unknown to Mr. Gilmore,’ suggested the inspector.

‘That is true. I can only surmise that it is some foolish boy in Mr. Gilmore’s own Form who has done this—perhaps in thoughtless revenge for some punishment,’ said the Head. ‘Still—’

‘The fact is, sir, that although the matter appears to be a foolish practical joke, it is a very singular one,’ said Mr. Grimes. ‘Something must have put the idea into the boy’s head. It is not an idea that would occur to any boy without something to suggest it. The boy who telephoned has obviously heard of the escaped Blackmoor convict, and such matters do not, as a rule, come within the knowledge of schoolboys. Another circumstance is that, although it is some weeks since Waring escaped from Blackmoor, he is still at large, and the police of this county have been warned to look out for him.’

‘I hardly see why,’ said Dr. Locke. ‘Blackmoor Prison is in Surrey, I believe.’

‘The man has been traced into Kent,’ explained Mr. Grimes. ‘He has been seen on several occasions, once near Maidstone, and once or twice nearer in this direction. It is known that he has been able to discard his convict clothing, and to obtain other garments. The fact that he is in all probability in this part of Kent is a very serious coincidence.’

The Head looked slightly impatient.

No coincidence or anything else justified a police officer in supposing that an escaped convict might possibly have taken refuge within the precincts of Greyfriars, in Dr. Locke’s opinion.

‘The gentleman who was mentioned, this Mr. Gilmore, has been with you a long time, doubtless?’ asked Mr. Grimes.

‘No; he commenced his duties here this term,’ said Dr. Locke. ‘He has taken the place, temporarily, of a Form-master who is away ill.’

‘He is doubtless well known to you?’

‘Not personally,’ said the Head. ‘But by reputation, of course. As you may easily imagine, the strictest credentials are required from anyone applying for a post at Greyfriars.’

‘Naturally,’ assented Mr. Grimes; but there was a gleam in his eye now. It was, at least, another coincidence that the accused man was new at the school, and personally unknown to the headmaster.

Mr. Grimes was beginning to think that perhaps that communication on the telephone was not, after all, wholly a schoolboy prank.

‘If you desire to see Mr. Gilmore I will request him to step here,’ said the Head politely, but somewhat coldly.

‘In view of the peculiar circumstances, sir, it would be more satisfactory to all parties.’

‘Very well.’

Dr. Locke touched the bell, and when Trotter appeared he directed him to request Mr. Gilmore to come to the study.

The Head’s manner was a little chilly when the door closed behind the House page. He could not help feeling that Mr. Grimes was rather over-doing his official duty. There was an awkward silence, which was broken by the sound of footsteps in the passage. A tap came at the door.

‘Come in!’ said the Head quietly.

The door opened, and Mr. Gilmore entered.

‘You wished to see me, sir?’ he asked in his pleasant voice.

‘Yes; pray come in, Mr. Gilmore.’

The young man closed the door and advanced into the study, not for the moment observing Mr. Grimes, his eyes being fixed on Dr. Locke. He became suddenly aware of Mr. Grimes’s presence

as the portly Courtfield inspector gave him one shrewd, penetrating glance, stepped forward, and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

‘George Waring, you are my prisoner!’ said Inspector Grimes.

Click!

It came like a flash, and Dr. Locke, with his eyes almost starting from his head, saw the handcuffs on the wrists of Eric Gilmore, the master of the Greyfriars Second Form.



'George Waring, you are my prisoner!'

CHAPTER XIX The Wrong Man!

ERIC GILMORE stood for some moments like a statue, as if turned to stone. He stared at the handcuffs locked on his wrists, hardly knowing how they had got there. Inspector Grimes's plump face was full of a grim satisfaction. He had not the slightest doubt that he had snared his 'bird'. The amazement and growing anger in the young man's face did not affect him at all.

'You are my prisoner, George Waring,' he repeated.

Dr. Locke started to his feet. His face was scarlet; his silvery hair fairly bristled with indignation.

'Mr. Grimes, what does this mean? Are you out of your senses?' he exclaimed.

'No, sir!' said Mr. Grimes quietly. 'I have arrested a man who has been wanted for weeks, whose description is posted up outside every police—station in the county.'

Mr. Gilmore found his voice. Amazement, or rather stupefaction, had held him silent for long moments.

'Sir, how dare you place these manacles upon me! Remove them at once!'

The inspector smiled grimly.

'Hardly, Mr. Waring—or Convict No. 19, which ever you prefer to be called. Dr. Locke, I am sorry to give you this shock; but this man is wanted, and I am bound to arrest him. He has deceived you as to his identity, of course—'

'He has done nothing of the kind, sir!' exclaimed the Head.

'You were surely not aware that he was George Waring, who escaped from Blackmoor just after Christmas?'

'I am aware that he is Eric Gilmore, Master of Arts of Oxford, and a man of impeccable character and reputation!'

The inspector snorted. He did not like the Head's tone, and he did not like the angry scorn that gleamed in Mr. Gilmore's eyes. But he had his prisoner, and he had not the slightest doubt that the Form-master was the man he wanted.

'Will you remove these handcuffs, sir?' said Mr. Gilmore in a low, concentrated voice of anger.

'Silence, you!' said Mr. Grimes gruffly. 'If you deny your identity, you will have every chance to speak for yourself later. At present my duty is to get you to the

station! Dr. Locke, may I use your telephone to summon a taxicab?’

‘Bless my soul!’ gasped the Head. ‘You—you intend to take this member of my staff to the station?’

‘Certainly!’

‘Before doing so, sir, let me speak,’ said Mr. Gilmore, more quietly. ‘You are making a terrible mistake!’

‘I shall take the risk of that!’ said Mr. Grimes derisively. ‘If you are not George Waring, you are his twin, at least—and I have still to learn that Convict No. 19 has a twin brother!’

‘George Waring has no twin brother,’ answered Mr. Gilmore steadily. ‘But he has a half-brother two years younger than himself, and I am that half-brother.’

‘Mr. Gilmore!’ exclaimed the Head.

The master of the Second turned to him.

‘I was unaware, sir, when I accepted a position here that my half-brother, George Waring, was a convicted prisoner at all. I had not seen him for years, and had lost all touch with him. It is only since I have been at Greyfriars that I have made the discovery. A foolish boy in the Remove, who by some chance encountered Waring in the Christmas vacation, supposed that I was the man when he saw me here, and told his Form-master so. The likeness is so great that it excuses this officer’s present mistake.’

Inspector Grimes compressed his lips. He could not help being impressed by the young master’s manner, but he was far from willing to admit that he had made a mistake.

‘Since the circumstances came to my knowledge, Dr. Locke,’ went on Mr. Gilmore, ‘I have been debating in my mind whether it was my duty to acquaint you with them. I had not yet decided; but now, of course, I have no choice in the matter. My half-brother was at school with me years ago. I have not seen him since I left school, but I had reason to believe that he had gone to the bad, though I was not aware that he had been sent to prison. At school we were nicknamed the “Siamese Twins”, on account of our likeness to one another.’

‘And that school?’ rapped out the inspector. ‘If the matter is as you state, there must be many witnesses, and—’

‘Wodehouse School,’ said Mr. Gilmore. ‘My old headmaster is still headmaster there, and will answer any questions on the subject.’

‘Oh!’ muttered Mr. Grimes.

‘As for my own identity,’ resumed Mr. Gilmore, with a faint smile, ‘that is easily proved. I can call a score of men belonging to my college at Oxford to identify me, if necessary. Dr. Locke has seen my credentials, and is not likely to be deceived in such a matter, but it is easily put to the test. Moreover, if you examine me a little more attentively, sir, you will see that, although I am my half-brother’s double in many respects, there are certain differences which would make it impossible for anyone acquainted with both of us to mistake one for the other.’

‘Indeed!’ said Mr. Grimes curtly. ‘And what are those differences?’

‘My hair is light in colour, and George Waring’s hair is dark.’ Mr. Grimes set his lips again. He took a paper from his pocket and ran his eye quickly over it.

‘Quite so!’ he assented reluctantly. ‘But the colour of the hair is easily altered for the purposes of disguise.’

‘You are welcome to ascertain whether my hair is dyed, sir!’ said Mr. Gilmore, smiling.

The inspector looked at him grimly, with an expression very like that of a bulldog

who sees his bone taken away. It was being forced into his mind that he had indeed made a mistake. The likeness between Mr. Gilmore and George Waring was undoubtedly striking and unusual, though if they were, as the young master stated, half-brothers, it was fully accounted for. Mr. Gilmore was wearing cap and gown; but when his mortar-board was removed, revealing a rather thick mop of flaxen hair, even the disappointed inspector could not doubt that it was naturally light hair; he could not have been deceived by the most skilful dye.

Mr. Grimes was not feeling happy then.

He had been absolutely certain of his man, and now he knew that he had handcuffed a man who was no more George Waring than he was himself. In silence, with a very red and a very grim face, he removed the handcuffs from Eric Gilmore's wrists.

'Bless my soul!' said Dr. Locke. 'You understand now, Mr. Grimes, that you have made a mistake?'

'It would appear so, sir,' said Mr. Grimes reluctantly. 'I cannot blame myself or the Greyfriars boy who supposed that he was giving me valuable information. Mr. Gilmore answers to the description of George Waring in every respect but one, which escaped my notice for the moment.'

'A most unfortunate resemblance,' said the Head.

'Very!' grunted the inspector.

His eyes were still upon Mr. Gilmore with lingering suspicion. But the handcuffs had disappeared into his pocket.

'I—I beg your pardon, Mr. Gilmore,' he said, with a visible effort.

'Pray say no more, sir,' said the young man courteously. 'The mistake was a natural one, though very disagreeable for me. If you are satisfied now I have no complaint to make.'

'I—I am satisfied!' muttered the inspector.

Yet some vague suspicion still lingered in his eyes.

Mr. Grimes rather hurriedly took his leave, deeply disappointed and chagrined. He felt that he had made a fool of himself, and yet he had not been to blame; the keenest police-officer might have made the same mistake in the same circumstances.

There was silence for some minutes in Dr. Locke's study after the Courtfield inspector had gone.

The headmaster broke it.

'This is most unfortunate, Mr. Gilmore!' he said at last.

'I agree with you, sir,' said Mr. Gilmore in a low voice, 'and I think I catch your meaning, sir. A man whose half-brother has sunk into the criminal classes is not suitable for a post at this school. This unhappy resemblance may lead to further mistakes and misapprehensions of a very disagreeable nature. I place my resignation in your hands, sir!'

'Nothing of the kind, Mr. Gilmore!' answered the Head. 'You are not to blame in any way for your relative's faults; your own name and reputation are unassailable. It is extremely unfortunate, and I need not say that your connection with this man Waring should not be spoken of or made known at Greyfriars. You have, of course, no communication whatever with him?'

'None, sir,' said Mr. Gilmore, colouring. 'It was almost a stunning blow to me when I heard his name mentioned as that of the convict who had escaped from Blackmoor. It is many years since I have seen him or heard from him, and I have no intention of seeing him or hearing from him again in any circumstances whatever.'

'Then this unfortunate relationship need make no difference to your position here. I shall not accept your resignation, Mr. Gilmore. You are a valued member of my staff,

and will remain so.'

'You are very kind, sir!' said Mr. Gilmore, in a voice full of emotion. 'I shall try to prove that I am not ungrateful.'

'Let the matter fall into oblivion as soon as possible,' said Dr. Locke. 'No doubt the man Waring will soon be recaptured, which will demonstrate to anyone who has observed the likeness that it is merely a likeness and nothing more. We will say no more about the matter, Mr. Gilmore.'

'Thank you, sir!' said the master of the Second.

And he took his leave of the Head, his handsome face darkly clouded as he went.

CHAPTER XX

Bad for Bunter!

'I SAY, you fellows!'

Billy Bunter burst into the Rag with excitement in his fat face. His very spectacles gleamed with it.

'I say—' he gasped. 'He's after him!'

'Halo, hallo, hallo! Who's after whom?' asked Bob Cherry.

'He!' gasped Bunter. 'He's after him! I've seen him—I mean, he—that is, him—and him—I mean, he's after he—him!' The fat junior seemed to be getting a little tangled.

'That convict, you know—'

'Oh, my hat! Shut up, Bunter!' roared a dozen voices. Nobody in the Rag wanted to hear anything about Bunter's convict.

'He's after him!' shrieked Bunter. 'He's come here to collar him! You'll see him taken away handcuffed!'

'Who?' yelled Peter Todd.

'Him!' gasped Bunter.

'And who's going to take him away?' demanded Nugent.

'Him—he— Old Grimes—'

'Inspector Grimes!' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

'Yes; from Courtfield.'

'Mean to say that old Grimey has come over to Greyfriars?' exclaimed Johnny Bull.

'Yes!' gasped Bunter. 'He's just been shown in to the Head. I was keeping my eyes open. He's here. He's after the convict!'

Peter Todd stared at the fat junior.

'You frabjous owl! Did you have the neck to telephone to Grimes?' he ejaculated.

'Oh, no! Certainly not!' said Bunter hastily. 'Don't you think I know anything about it—I don't. Nothing at all. I—I just happened to see Grimes come in. That's all.

Besides, it was a fellow's duty to let him know the convict was here. There's the reward, too!'

'Then you telephoned to the police-station?' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

'No, I didn't—I mean, not unless he arrests that convict,' said Bunter cautiously. 'If the fellow stuffs him and gets off, I'm keeping it dark. Not that I telephoned, anyhow. I haven't the faintest idea who telephoned to old Grimes.'

'Did anybody?' asked Squiff.

'Oh, yes, that's why he's here. Not me, you know,' said Bunter anxiously. 'I was careful not to mention my name.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Well, Grimey hasn't come over on the war-path,' said Peter Todd. 'He's come over to tell the Head that a silly owl has been trying to pull his leg on one of the school

telephones. You'll be wanted soon, Bunter. Put some exercise books in your bags.'

'Oh, really, Toddy—'

'Has even Bunter been such a priceless idiot as to spin that yarn to a police officer!' said Bob Cherry in wonder.

'Oh, really, Cherry! It's true, you know—the man's an escaped convict. Look here, you come along and see him taken away—in irons, you know!'

'I don't think!' chuckled Bob.

But there was a general exodus from the Rag. If the Owl of the Remove had really brought a police-inspector to Greyfriars on a fool's errand, the Remove fellows were interested to see what would come of it. They had no doubt that the outcome would be a flogging for Bunter.

Quite a little army of fellows gathered near the end of Head's corridor, and when Trotter was summoned by the Head's bell, several fellows asked him whether Inspector Grimes really was there—and learned that that much, at least, was correct. The Courtfield inspector was there—and when Trotter came back along the passage they learned that he was sent to fetch Mr. Gilmore. This caused great excitement; and Billy Bunter's fat face beamed with triumph. Bunter had not the slightest doubt now that Eric Gilmore had been sent for to be arrested; and he was prepared now to own up that he was the fellow who had phoned to Mr. Grimes.

A sea of eyes were turned on Mr. Gilmore when he came along the corridor. The young master glanced at the juniors, apparently surprised to see so many of the Lower School gathered there; but he passed on his way without a remark, and disappeared into the Head's study.

Bunter gave a breathless chuckle.

'Now he's for it!' he gasped.

'Did you mention Gilmore's name to Grimey on the phone?' asked Peter.

'Eh? Yes, of course!'

'You frabjous dummy! Got those exercise books in your bags?'

'Oh, really, Peter—'

'You'll need 'em soon.'

'Yah!'

Excitement was keen, and growing keener. More and more fellows came along to join the crowd at the corner of Head's corridor—among them some of the Second Form. It was time for prep in the Second Form-room; and Mr. Gilmore had not turned up there punctually as usual. The talk among the Remove fellows caused Dicky Nugent & Co. of the Second to exchange blissful glances. If the 'Beast' really was in trouble with the police, there would be no prep in the Second Form-room that evening. But this was too good to be true, all the fags felt that.

Minute followed minute, and the door of the Head's study did not reopen. The watching army of juniors would have given a great deal to know what was going on behind that closed door. Even fellows who were not usually inquisitive in the least were very curious indeed now.

'He's arresting him, you fellows,' said Billy Bunter, with conviction.

'He's taking his time about it, then,' grinned Bob Cherry.

'The timefulness is terrific,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'I dare say the villain's trying to stuff him—but he'll have him all right,' declared Bunter. 'You'll see what you'll see.'

'And what we shall see is a fat idiot called on the carpet for a flogging!' said Frank Nugent.

'It's too good to be true!' sighed Nugent minor. 'No such luck.'

‘You young rascal!’ said Frank. ‘Do you want your Form-master to be taken up by the police?’

‘Yes, rather!’ said Dicky promptly. ‘I shouldn’t wonder if he’s a bad hat, just as Bunter says. Look at the way he makes a fellow work!’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Here they come!’ breathed Bunter.

The Head’s door opened at last. But it was not ‘they’ who came. It was the portly figure of Inspector Grimes, of Courtfield, that emerged; and he came alone. He came down the passage with his ponderous tread, and with a frowning brow; and only too evidently without a prisoner. Billy Bunter stared at him, his little round eyes growing wide behind his glasses.

The inspector gave the crowd of juniors a frowning look, and passed on. But Bunter, in his excitement and eagerness, caught at his sleeve as he passed.

‘Haven’t you got him?’ he demanded.

‘What!’ snapped the inspector.

‘Him! Haven’t you got him—the convict?’ stuttered Bunter.

Mr. Grimes gave the fat junior a grim look. No doubt there was a familiar ring in Bunter’s voice that reminded him of his unknown interlocutor on the telephone.

‘So it was you who rang me up!’ he grunted. Bunter jumped.

Had Inspector Grimes come along the passage with a handcuffed prisoner, Bunter would have been only too eager to claim the distinction of having called him in. But he realised that there was, after all, to be no arrest at Greyfriars.

‘Oh!’ he gasped. ‘Oh, no! I—I haven’t been near Mr. Quelch’s telephone. I—I don’t know your number at Courtfield, and I never thought of looking in the directory. Nothing of the kind.’

Mr. Grimes eyed him surlily. But perhaps he realised that the Owl of the Remove had only made the same mistake that he himself had made, deceived by the resemblance of Mr. Gilmore to the missing convict. He said no more, and went on his way. Bunter was glad enough to see him go. Something evidently had gone wrong; and Bunter was not now anxious to claim the distinction of having called in the police.

‘I say, you fellows, that convict has stuffed that silly idiot somehow,’ groaned Bunter.

‘You fat duffer!’ said Harry Wharton. ‘It must have been easy enough for him to prove that he was not the man, if Mr. Grimes suspected for one moment that he was.’

‘But he is the man, you know.’

‘Fathead!’

‘Here comes Gilmore,’ said Hazeldene.

There was silence as the master of the Second Form came back from the Head’s study. All the juniors could see that he was looking disturbed and harassed. He walked with his eyes on the floor, and did not observe the crowd of fellows till he was quite close on them. Then he started a little, halted, and fixed a frowning look on them.

‘Bunter!’

The Owl of the Remove wriggled behind the other fellows. Bolsover major and Skinner gave him a shove together, and he tottered towards Mr. Gilmore.

‘Oh! Yes, sir!’ he gasped. ‘It wasn’t me.’

‘You telephoned to Courtfield Police Station, I think, Bunter, repeating to Mr. Grimes the absurd statement you had already made in the school.’

Mr. Gilmore’s voice was very quiet, but there was a glint in his eyes. The juniors stood silent. They were not surprised that the Second Form-master was angry. The best-tempered of masters might have been angered by what the Owl of the Remove

had done.

The denial died on Bunter's lips under the stern gaze of the young master. He mumbled helplessly, palpitating with terror.

'You have acted very foolishly and very disrespectfully, Bunter,' said Mr. Gilmore.

'You have given Inspector Grimes a journey here for nothing, and wasted your headmaster's time—and my time. I have hitherto treated you folly with leniency, but I feel bound now to report your conduct to your Form-master.'

'Ow!' gasped Bunter.

Mr. Gilmore's eyes fell upon the Second Form fags in the crowd.

'What are you boys doing here?' he asked. 'It is past the time for preparation in your Form-room.'

Dicky Nugent and his comrades fairly flew.

Mr. Gilmore walked on.

'I—I—I say, you fellows,' groaned Bunter. 'I—I say, I—I shall get an awful licking from Quelchy!'

'What did you expect?' asked Peter Todd.

'Beast!'

'You can't say you didn't ask for it,' grinned Skinner. 'But perhaps Gilmore will forget to report you. He forgot Snoop and me the other day.'

'I—I say, Toddy, old chap, Quelchy will believe that I phoned,' groaned Bunter. 'He won't take a fellow's word about it. I—I say, it's really your fault, you know. You ought to own up that you did it.'

'I?' yelled Peter.

'Well, I asked you to phone—you can't deny that,' said Bunter. 'If you'd not been such a beast I shouldn't be in the scrape. Look here, you go to Quelchy and own up—Yarooogh! Leggo my ear, you beast!'

Ten minutes later William George Bunter was called into Mr. Quelch's study.

Remembering the story of Skinner and Snoop in the Cloisters, Bunter had had a faint hope that Mr. Gilmore might forget to report him. That hope proved ill-founded.

When Billy Bunter emerged from his Form-master's study, he wriggled his way to the Remove passage with many groans. The episode had ended, with nothing but a severe caning for Bunter as the outcome—and the fifty pounds reward seemed farther off than ever.

CHAPTER XXI

Dicky Nugent Makes a Discovery!

DICKY NUGENT jumped.

He was alarmed; and he had reason to be alarmed.

Only ten minutes before, Richard Nugent of the Second Form had watched his Form-master walk away to Masters' Common-room with Mr. Quelch to take tea there. It was the day following the visit of Inspector Grimes to Greyfriars; and that day Mr. Gilmore had been much less good-tempered than usual in the Second Form-room. No doubt the extraordinary conduct of Bunter of the Remove and the Courtfield inspector's visit to the school had irritated him. That was natural enough, and it was very probable that the Second Form had an irritating effect upon nerves already irritated.

Mr. Gilmore had been quite cross several times, and Richard Nugent had actually been caned—a caning that was quite different from the gentle flicks Dicky had sometimes received from Mr. Twigg. That he had been idle, careless, and impertinent

did not count; he had been all these things in Mr. Twigg's time without getting such a licking. Richard Nugent of the Second Form was bent upon vengeance.

That was why he had watched Mr. Gilmore walk away to tea with Mr. Quelch, and slipped into his study after he was gone. The 'beast' was safe for half an hour; more than time for Richard Nugent to fill his slippers with gum, and his inkpot with bicycle oil, and pour cinders into his clock.

And now—

Dicky jumped as he heard the well-known voice. The inkpot on the table was already full of oil; one slipper reeked with gum—the other was in Dicky's hand, ready to be operated on. It dropped from the terrified fag's hand to the floor.

He was fairly caught.

He gave one wild glance at the window—it was a casement window, and had it been open, Dicky would have taken the risk of a leap into the quad. But it was shut—and there was no time to open it and jump—he knew that. The voice he heard was almost at the door—the Beast was coming to his study with somebody else.

Richard Nugent shivered with dread.

Caught there, with the oily inkpot and the gummy slipper as incontrovertible evidence against him—he shuddered at the prospect. And the Beast was already in a bad temper!

A hand was on the door-handle when Dicky Nugent woke to sudden action. Hardly thinking of what he was going to do, he dived under the table.

Palpitating, he crouched under the big table as the study door opened.

He had a view of two pairs of boots in the doorway. 'Please enter, Mr. Grimes,' said the voice of Eric Gilmore, pleasant as ever, but extremely cold this time.

Dicky Nugent almost ceased to breathe as the ponderous tread of Inspector Grimes, of Courtfield, came into the study.

Mr. Gilmore followed him in, and closed the door.

'Pray be seated, sir,' he said formally.

The portly inspector sat down.

Richard Nugent suppressed a groan. It was just his luck, he reflected bitterly, for these two beasts to come to the study to jaw when he happened to be there. Why couldn't they talk in Masters' Common-room, or somewhere?

'You must excuse this—ahem—intrusion, Mr. Gilmore,' the inspector said, with a cough. 'Duty, sir—duty.'

'If your official duty has called you here, sir, I have no objection to make,' said Mr. Gilmore. 'But you will very easily understand that any reference to the matter discussed yesterday in Dr. Locke's study is very disagreeable to me.'

'Quite so, sir, quite so,' said the inspector.

Mr. Gilmore looked at him hard.

'I presume you are satisfied, Mr. Grimes, that I am not the man whom that absurd boy Bunter took me to be. If you require further proof, every facility will be given you to investigate my antecedents.'

'I am satisfied that you are not George Waring, sir,' answered Mr. Grimes. 'I was staggered, sir—fairly staggered by your resemblance to the convict missing from Blackmoor, and I scarcely think that the boy Bunter is to be blamed for his mistake, if he has seen your half-brother. He does not, of course, know that you have a half-brother who so closely resembles you, and that this half-brother is a convict?'

'Certainly not; and you surely do not intend to make known the circumstances, Mr. Grimes?'

There was a shade of anxiety in the young master's tone.

Mr. Grimes waved a plump hand.

‘Certainly not, Mr. Gilmore. On such a subject the least said the soonest mended, in my opinion.’

‘I am glad to hear you say so. It would be extremely disagreeable for me if the circumstances became known at this school.’

‘I quite understand that.’

Dicky Nugent was feeling his brain in a whirl. He hardly dared to breathe as he crouched under the table.

Not for an instant had the hapless fag supposed that he would be forced to listen to anything of any consequence, when he concealed himself under Mr. Gilmore’s table. He had not thought anything about that aspect of the matter at all. Now he almost wished that he had remained where he was, and allowed his Form-master to catch him ragging the study. Almost—but not quite. He had had an experience that day of how Mr. Gilmore could lay on the cane when he was angry, and he did not want to repeat that experience if he could help it.

‘With regard to you, personally, Mr. Gilmore, I am bound to be satisfied,’ the inspector went on slowly. ‘I have—hem— already made a few inquiries. I have no doubt whatever that you are, as your headmaster states, an honourable young gentleman, in spite of your unfortunate connection with a member of the criminal classes. I believe your statement that you had not seen your half-brother, Waring, for many years when you came to take up a position here, and that you did not even know that he had been sent to prison.’

‘I was absolutely ignorant of it, Mr. Grimes.’

‘Perfectly so. But—’

‘If there is any doubt in your mind, sir, kindly put it into plain English!’ said Mr. Gilmore sharply. ‘I repeat that I am prepared to satisfy you in every way. Your mistake was a natural one, and I do not resent it, in the circumstances. But the whole subject is inexpressibly painful to me. I may add that my colleagues here are expecting me to tea in Common-room.’

‘I shall not delay you long, sir,’ said the inspector calmly. ‘I regret having to refer to a painful subject; but I have my duty to do, and it is my duty to ask you whether you know anything of the present whereabouts of George Waring, convict No. 19, of Blackmoor Prison?’

‘Nothing!’

The inspector’s keen eyes were searching the young man’s face. ‘I have a reason for asking, of course,’ he said. ‘Waring has been missing for several weeks now. The probability is that he has received help in making good his evasion of the police. Some of his relatives are known, and there exists the possibility, at least, that the fugitive has received help from them.’

‘He has received none from me, if that is your meaning!’

Mr. Gilmore’s voice was very sharp.

‘Am I to take it that you suspect me of helping an escaped convict to elude the police?’ he demanded.

‘Hem!’ The inspector coughed. ‘The claims of blood might lead even an upright man to disregard the law of the land to that extent, Mr. Gilmore. Such instances have been known. It is a very common error for a convict’s relatives to regard him as more sinned against than sinning.’

‘No doubt,’ assented Mr. Gilmore. ‘But such is not the case with me. My half-brother George was always what we called at school a bad hat, and though I know nothing of his crime or his conviction, I have no doubt whatever that he received no more than

justice—probably rather less.’

Mr. Grimes smiled faintly.

‘I take it that you are not deeply attached to him, then?’

‘Certainly not. I should not have lost sight of him for nearly a decade had I been attached to him.’

‘And if he applied to you for help in his present circumstances—’

‘I should refuse it.’

‘That is your duty, of course; but it has been my experience that such a painful duty is sometimes left undone,’ said Mr. Grimes. ‘To be plain, Mr. Gilmore, have you seen or heard anything of George Waring since you came to Greyfriars School as a Form-master?’

‘Nothing whatever, except the news of his escape from prison, as I have already told you.’

‘You have had no communication with him?’

‘None.’

‘Then he can scarcely be aware that you are here at all?’

‘I do not see how he can be aware of it. I have not the slightest reason to suppose that he is aware of it.’

Inspector Grimes bent forward a little in his chair, his eyes glued on the handsome, troubled face of the young master.

‘Then how,’ he said quietly, ‘do you account for the fact that his flight led him in this direction?’

Mr. Gilmore started.

‘In this direction?’ he repeated.

‘Certainly. He has been seen several times, and on each occasion nearer and nearer to this part of Kent.’

‘I was unaware of the circumstance, and I do not undertake to account for it, Mr. Grimes.’

‘It would appear, at least, that your half-brother is aware that you are here, and that he entertains some hope of getting in touch with you to obtain help.’

‘That does not follow,’ said Mr. Gilmore. ‘His flight was bound to take him in some direction, I presume—and this was as likely as any other. I conclude that it is sheer chance.’

‘Possibly—possibly.’ Inspector Grimes rose to his feet. ‘I need detain you no longer, Mr. Gilmore. I am sorry that I have had to trouble you at all. In the event of Waring making himself known to you, I trust you can be depended upon to hand him over to the authorities.’

There was a long pause.

‘I can hardly reply to that question off-hand, sir,’ said Mr. Gilmore at last. ‘Most decidedly I shall never, in any circumstances, break the law by helping a convicted criminal to escape. Help from me he assuredly never will receive so long as he is wanted by the police. But if it should be a question of taking active measures against him, I cannot forget that he is my mother’s son, though he and I have never been friends. I cannot say that I should act against him, though I can say, without hesitation, that I should refuse absolutely to help him in evading the law.’

‘You are frank, at least, Mr. Gilmore,’ said the inspector, with a smile. ‘I repeat that I’m sorry to have troubled you in the matter at all. Good-afternoon, sir.’

Mr. Gilmore stood by his table after the door had closed on the Courtfield inspector, in deep thought.

Under the table, Dicky Nugent suppressed his terrified breathing.

Not for worlds would he have allowed Eric Gilmore to discover him then. What Mr. Gilmore would have said, and done, had he learned that a Greyfriars fag was in possession of his miserable secret, Dicky could not imagine. But he knew that it behoved him not to let Mr. Gilmore learn that much, if he could help it.

He heard a deep sigh suddenly. It was a sigh that came from the very depths of the young man's troubled heart. It touched the thoughtless fag strangely as he heard it. Then Mr. Gilmore's steps crossed the room to the door. The door opened and shut, and he was gone.

Not till six or seven minutes had elapsed did Nugent minor venture to crawl out from under the table. With a white, frightened face, he tiptoed to the door, and listened there, with beating heart, before opening it. But he quitted the study at last, and hurried away.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! What's up, kid?'

At the end of the passage Dicky Nugent broke into a run, and almost ran into a group of Removites as he rounded the corner. Bob Cherry caught him by the shoulder.

The fag's face was as white as chalk.

'Dicky, what's the matter?' exclaimed Frank Nugent.

'Nothing!' muttered Dicky.

'Look here, kid, something's the matter!' said Harry Wharton, with a curious look at the fag's colourless face. 'Better tell your major.'

'Rats! It's nothing, I tell you!' panted Nugent minor.

He jerked himself away from Bob Cherry and ran on, leaving the Famous Five staring after him.

CHAPTER XXII

Face to Face!

MIDNIGHT!

Greyfriars was silent and still.

From only one window a light still burned, streaming out into the wintry mists of the quadrangle, glimmering on the frosty trunks of leafless trees.

Mr. Gilmore was up late that night.

The master of the Second was generally early to bed and early to rise. But he was not in his usual mood that night.

He was pacing in his study, and he had been pacing tirelessly for a long time, thinking black and troubled thoughts.

His position at Greyfriars was becoming painful, and he felt that it was growing intolerable.

He was under suspicion.

Mr. Grimes was satisfied that he was not the man the police wanted. That had been made clear. But the Courtfield inspector suspected him of aiding and abetting the escaped convict.

Indeed, it would have been surprising had not the inspector felt such a suspicion. The fugitive, for some mysterious reason, was making in the direction of Greyfriars, where his half-brother was a master. It was natural for Mr. Grimes to think that the hunted man, in desperate need of help, should be seeking to get into touch with his relative. And now that Eric Gilmore had thought the matter over carefully, he realised that Mr. Grimes was probably right to that extent.

He knew nothing of Waring's movements, but other relatives might have seen or heard from the man. From them Waring might have learned that Eric Gilmore was at

Greyfriars. He might have learned it from some other source. Greyfriars was on the coast, and no doubt Waring's object was to get out of the country. It was more than likely that he was seeking to get in touch with the Greyfriars master, who, had he chosen, could have helped him to escape across the sea.

The more Eric Gilmore pondered upon it, the more likely it seemed. He knew that suspicion was in Mr. Grimes's mind, and he felt that Mr. Grimes was right. It followed that, in all probability, a watch would be kept on the vicinity of the school. If Waring came, he would be seen and seized—perhaps within the precincts of the school itself.

The possibility made the young master shiver.

Long after the rest of Greyfriars had gone to bed, his light still streamed out into the misty night, and the young man restlessly paced the study, his shadow incessantly crossing and recrossing the lighted window.

It was a sound at the window that made him stop at last, suddenly. The casement was partly open, letting in the cold air. Outside all was dark and misty. At the opening of the casement Eric Gilmore's startled eyes fixed on a human face, looking in from the night.

He stood transfixed.

Every vestige of colour drained from his face as he looked at that sudden, startling apparition.

The face—a face that was strangely like his own, apart from its hard, gaunt look—remained immovable for some moments, staring in. Then a hand drew the casement wider open, and the man outside clambered in at the window.

Still Eric Gilmore stood motionless, as if rooted to the floor.

The worst had happened. What he had feared might come to pass had come to pass—suddenly, like a stunning blow. George Waring, Convict No. 19, of Blackmoor Prison, dropped into the room and closed the casement after him. Under the fixed, haggard stare of the Second Form-master, he drew the dark hangings across the window, shutting off the study from any eye that might have been watching without. Then, panting, the convict faced Eric Gilmore.

Still the Form-master did not speak. He stood like a man in a trance, his face white, his gaze fixed.

The convict looked at him keenly, searchingly, and then, with a stealthy tread, crossed to the door and turned the key in the lock.

Then he faced Mr. Gilmore again.

'Well?' he said quietly.

'George Waring!' muttered Mr. Gilmore at last.

'Your brother,' smiled Waring.

'Good heavens!'

'I did not expect you to be glad to see me,' said Convict No. 19, of Blackmoor. 'But blood is thicker than water, Brother Eric. I have come to you for help. You know I need it.'

He glanced round the study.

'Have you any food here? I am famished.'

'You came here to see me,' muttered the Second Form-master.

'You found out that I had an appointment here?'

'I found it out,' assented Convict No. 19. 'Other relatives who wanted only to get rid of an escaped convict thought you might help. You are well placed here to help me—a fine night and a boat, and a lent passport, and I can get to France from here. Your photograph on your passport will pass for mine. I'm willing to take risks. You'll be

glad to see me clear of the country. Once the sea is between me and England you will never see me again—as is your brotherly wish.’

‘I cannot help you!’

‘You must!’

‘Listen to me,’ said Mr. Gilmore quietly. ‘You have come here for safety, and you have stepped into your greatest danger. Your presence is known. It is suspected that you will come here, and the school is undoubtedly watched for you. I cannot help you if I would, and I would not if I could. You have broken the law, and you must pay the penalty.’

‘Not if I can help it!’ said Convict No. 19.

‘I understand now,’ went on Mr. Gilmore. ‘You have been hanging about the school in hiding. I understand now why some juniors, the other day, fancied that they had seen me in the Cloisters. It was you.’

‘No doubt.’

‘You have been seen, and yet you lingered here?’

‘Where should I go? I tell you this is my last chance. I’m at the end of my tether. You must help me!’

‘I cannot!’

‘A suit of your clothes—your passport—some money! I will take my chance of getting hold of a boat.’

‘I cannot!’

The convict’s eyes burned at him.

‘You are afraid of the risk. But there is risk in refusing. What is your position here worth if I am arrested in the school where you are a master?’

‘Nothing!’ said Mr. Gilmore, in a low voice. ‘I should have to go. My appointment here, which means everything to me, would have to be sacrificed.’

‘Help me, then!’

‘I cannot help you,’ said Mr. Gilmore. ‘It is my duty to detain you now and hand you over to the police. That I cannot do; but to help a convicted felon to escape his just punishment is what an honest man cannot and will not do. You have nothing to expect from me!’

‘So that is your answer?’ said Convict No. 19 between his teeth.

‘That is my answer.’

Eric Gilmore stepped to the window and threw back the hangings which the convict had so carefully drawn.

‘Go!’ he said quietly.

‘You will not help me?’

‘I will not!’

‘Then I stay here, and when I go back to Blackmoor, at least I will leave you a ruined man!’ said George Waring between his teeth.

Mr. Gilmore’s face set hard.

‘As you choose,’ he said, and he picked up the receiver of the telephone.

The convict watched him breathlessly. In a quiet, steady voice Mr. Gilmore gave a number to the exchange.

The convict panted.

‘What is that number?’

‘Courtfield Police Station,’ answered Eric Gilmore coldly. ‘You—you——’ Waring made a fierce stride towards him, his eyes blazing. ‘You will not dare——’

‘You have a few moments before my call is answered,’ said the master of the Greyfriars Second. ‘Take your choice.’

'Put back the receiver!' said the convict in a choking voice.

'You are not gone.'

'I am going! A thousand curses—' He broke off as he heard, from the telephone, the murmur of the answering voice from the police station.

The convict made a spring to the window. The casement was torn open, there was a light thud as the man from Blackmoor dropped to the earth outside. With a deep, deep breath, Eric Gilmore replaced the receiver on the telephone.

He stepped to the window and closed it, and drew the hangings. Outside, the wild night had swallowed Convict No. 19.

CHAPTER XXIII

Bunter, of Course!

'BUNTER, of course!'

'Oh, of course!'

'That's a cert!'

There was only one opinion on the subject in the Greyfriars Remove.

Bunter had done it!

'Couldn't have been anybody else!' remarked Bob Cherry. 'Who else would have thought of such a stunt?'

'Nobody!' agreed Harry Wharton.

'But what a nerve!' added Bob.

'What a neck!' said Johnny Bull.

'The neckfulness,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, 'was terrific. The lickfulness will be still morefully terrific.'

'No doubt about that,' said Peter Todd. 'A Head's flogging, at least.'

'Yes, rather!'

'Poor old Bunter! Well, he's asked for it.'

'He has, and no mistake.'

That Bunter had done it, nobody in the Remove doubted for a moment. That his delinquency would be discovered, and condignly punished, was not to be doubted, either. Bunter, in the opinion of the Remove, was 'for it'!

It was early morning at Greyfriars. Outside Mrs. Mible's little tuckshop, in the corner behind the elms, quite a crowd of fellows had gathered. The news of what had happened had greeted the juniors as soon as they came down from their dormitories, and they had crowded to the spot, deeply interested.

Fellows of other Forms were debating who might have done it! But there was no debate in the Remove. They knew—at least, they were certain that they knew. For they knew their Bunter! If any fellow at Greyfriars had sneaked down from his dormitory in the middle of the night and purloined tuck from the school shop, that fellow was Bunter. The matter did not admit of argument. It was Billy Bunter, and there was an end!

'Where is the fat duffer?' asked Harry Wharton, looking round.

'Not down yet,' said Skinner, with a grin. 'I dare say he needs a little extra sleep after going burgling in the night.'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here he comes!' exclaimed Bob Cherry, as a fat figure rolled into view from the direction of the House.

It was not uncommon for William George Bunter, of the Remove, to be last fellow down. Generally he contrived to snatch a little extra nap after rising-bell; and if pressed for time, he could always take it out of ablutions, which he sometimes cut

down almost to vanishing point. His tardiness on this particular morning, however, was generally set down as the result of his nocturnal exploits. If Bunter had been abroad in the night, it was natural for him to want a little extra sleep in the morning. Billy Bunter rolled up to the crowd outside the tuckshop, his little round eyes blinking inquisitively behind his big glasses.

‘I say, you fellows, what’s up?’ he asked.

‘You don’t know, of course,’ grinned Bob Cherry.

‘Eh? No!’

‘You’d better tell Quelchy that when he asks you,’ chuckled Skinner. ‘He may believe it!’

Bunter blinked round the crowd of grinning faces. Certainly he did not look as if he knew what had happened; and if he was playing a part, he was playing it well. But nobody, of course, expected Bunter to own up to what he had done.

‘I say, you fellows! Has anything happened?’

‘Oh, draw it mild, Bunter,’ said Frank Nugent. ‘We’re not going to give you away; but, of course, we know you did it.’

‘The knowfulness is terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter,’ chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

‘What have you done with the tuck?’ asked Squiff.

Bunter blinked at him.

‘Tuck! What tuck?’

‘The tuck you looted overnight.’

‘Oh, really, Squiff—’

‘You can’t have bolted it all, Bunter,’ said Peter Todd. ‘According to what Mrs. Mible was saying, there’s a whole stack of grub gone. Even you couldn’t hold the lot!’

‘He’s hidden it somewhere, like a dog burying a bone, you know,’ remarked Skinner. ‘He will dig it up when he’s hungry again—which will be about ten minutes after brekker.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

Billy Bunter’s eyes grew wider and rounder behind his spectacles.



‘What have you done with the tuck?’ asked Squiff

‘I say, you fellows, has anything been pinched from the tuck- shop?’ he asked.

‘Has it?’ chuckled Johnny Bull. ‘Yes, old fat man, it has! And if we had an X-ray apparatus here, we could see where it’s hidden—under his waistcoat.’

‘Oh, really, Bull—’

‘You must have been a frabjous ass, Bunter,’ said Harry Wharton. ‘You’re bound to be found out. The Head will inquire into this.’

‘I haven’t done anything, you ass!’ hooted Bunter. ‘Think I’ve been here raiding the tuckshop?’

‘Well, haven’t you?’ demanded Hazeldene.

‘No, you chump!’

‘Keep it up,’ grinned Hazel. ‘Nobody will believe you; but, of course, you wouldn’t expect that.’

Bunter blinked at the juniors, and blinked at the open doorway of the tuckshop. Inside the shop, Mrs. Mimble could be seen—and the usually ruddy and kindly face of that good dame was now extremely disturbed and cross in expression. What had happened had naturally annoyed Mrs. Mimble very much indeed, and her temper had naturally suffered in consequence. Mr. Mimble was there, and Mrs. Mimble was speaking to him. By the wildest stretch of the imagination it could not have been supposed to be Mr. Mimble’s fault that the tuckshop had been raided in the night; but to judge by the acerbity of Mrs. Mimble’s voice she seemed to think that Mr. Mimble was to blame somehow.

The culprit being as yet undiscovered, there was no one else upon whom the vials of wrath could be poured. Mr. Mimble was not to blame; but he was at hand! Mrs. Mimble, in the present disturbed state of her nerves and temper, simply had to snap at somebody. It was one of those occasions when, as the song says, it happens that a victim must be found.

So Mr. Mimble was getting the benefit of it. Like a good husband, he bore it patiently; only looking a little as if he wondered, rather late in life, whether marriage was, after all, a mistake.

‘I say, you fellows, she’s going it!’ said Billy Bunter, with a grin. ‘I say, does anybody know who did it?’

‘Everybody here knows,’ chuckled Tom Brown. ‘You did it, you fat spoofer!’

‘Oh, really, Brown—’

‘You can own up to us, fathead!’ said Vernon-Smith. ‘We’re not going to give you away.’

‘Oh, really, Smithy—’

‘You must have been an ass, Bunter,’ said Tom Redwing. ‘The stuff will have to be paid for, and there will be a flogging into the bargain.’

But fortunately for Bunter there was no flogging forthcoming when the Head made his official investigation of the mystery. All lines of inquiry drew blank, and although popular choice of the culprit, so to speak, fell upon Billy Bunter, he was given the benefit of the doubt. The mystery of the raided tuckshop remained a mystery!

CHAPTER XXIV

What Nugent Minor Knew!

‘TROT in, kid!’

Harry Wharton spoke with a smile as the cheeky face of Frank Nugent’s younger brother looked in at the doorway of Study No. 1.

Dicky Nugent trotted in, with a book under his arm. The captain of the Remove was not, perhaps, specially pleased and gratified by the frequent visits of Nugent minor to the study.

‘How have you got on with Gilmore to-day, kid?’ asked the captain of the Remove.

‘I can tell you, I’m not standing much more from Gilmore. He oughtn’t to be here,

really.'

'Because he makes you learn things?' asked Wharton.

'Not only that,' answered Dick. 'If you fellows knew what I know about him, you'd think the same. I've never told anybody; but I can jolly well tell you that if Gilmore keeps on like this—' Nugent minor paused.

'What do you know about him, you young ass?' asked the captain of the Remove, staring at Nugent minor. 'I suppose you're not duffer enough to believe Billy Bunter's idiotic yarn about him being the escaped convict.'

'I know he isn't,' said Dick. 'But he knows more about that giddy convict than you fellows might think.'

'You young ass!' said Frank sharply. 'How could he know anything about the escaped convict. Bunter, of our Form, has been licked for talking rot like that.'

'It isn't rot,' said Dicky sulkily. 'I know a jolly lot about that man Gilmore, I can tell you. I haven't told anybody, because it doesn't seem like playing the game. And I might get licked for having been in his study, if it came out. But—'

The two Removites looked very curiously at Dicky. More than once, in speaking of the Beast, Dicky had hinted that he knew what he knew, so to speak. He seemed to be under the extraordinary impression that he was, somehow, doing Mr. Gilmore a very great favour; and that the Beast was ungrateful.

'What is it you've got in your silly head, Dicky?' asked Frank Nugent, very quietly.

'Well, when a fellow's ragged and licked by a man who's got jolly shady connections—' said Dicky.

'Mr. Gilmore has nothing of the kind!'

'That's all you know!'

'And all you know, too!' said Frank sharply. 'I'm surprised at you, Dicky! it's rotten to hint such things.'

Nugent minor flushed.

'I know he's got a brother a convict, and chance it!' he exclaimed hotly.

'You awful young ass!' exclaimed Frank, in dismay. 'You'll get flogged if you're heard saying such a thing!'

'It's true, and Inspector Grimes, of Courtfield, knows it, and so does the Head!' retorted Dicky.

Frank Nugent hurriedly closed the door of Study No. 1. He did not want any chance passer-by to hear statements like these.

'Now, tell me what you've got in your silly noddle, Dicky,' he said almost sternly.

'Out with it!'

'I don't mind telling you, but you'd better keep it dark,' said the fag. 'I'm not going to spread tales about Gilmore, like Bunter. I suppose he can't help his brother being a rascal, any more than I can help my brother being a silly ass!'

'That escaped convict is named Waring—George Waring,' said Frank. 'Your Form-master's name is Gilmore. How could they be brothers?'

'Half-brothers,' explained Dicky.

'What utter rot! You've got that nonsense into your head, because a blind owl like Bunter thinks Mr. Gilmore looks like the escaped convict he saw in the vacation.'

'Old Grimes has got it into his head, too, then,' jeered Dicky, 'and so has the Beast, for that matter. I know that the convict Waring is his half-brother, because—'

'Because what?'

'Because I heard him say so.'

And Dicky Nugent explained what he had overheard in the Beast's study when he had hidden under the table.

‘Of course, I’m not going to talk about this,’ said Nugent minor hastily. ‘Gilmore’s a beast, but I’m not going to hit a man below the belt, beast or not. Still, I think he ought to go.’

‘For goodness’ sake, don’t say a word about it, kid!’ exclaimed Frank Nugent, aghast. ‘It would be frightfully rotten for Mr. Gilmore if it came out.’

‘He makes things rotten enough for us in the Second,’ said Dicky. ‘Still, I’m not going to say anything. It wouldn’t be cricket!’

‘Anyhow, Mr. Gilmore is only here till old Twigg comes back,’ said Harry. ‘He’s a good chap, Dicky, whatever you may think of him in the Second.’

‘He’s a beast!’

‘Anyhow, you’re going to keep this quiet.’

‘I’ve said so,’ grunted Dicky. ‘Only I jolly well think he ought to go easier with a chap who knows what I know.’

‘Well, he doesn’t know you know, and you’d better not tell him,’ said Wharton.

‘You’ve no right to know anything about him; you ought not to have been in his study at all when he was talking to Mr. Grimes.’

‘Oh, rats!’

‘Let’s get going with the Latin,’ said Frank Nugent hastily; and Dicky grunted assent. Harry Wharton left the study, a cloud of dark thought on his brow.

Dicky Nugent’s tale had enlightened him to a greater extent than the fag dreamed.

The escaped convict, Waring, was Mr. Gilmore’s half-brother. Inspector Grimes believed that the hunted man was making for Greyfriars to seek help from his relative. A flood of light came into Wharton’s mind now. For he knew, in a flash of illumination, that the Courtfield inspector’s suspicion was well-founded. Back into his mind came the incident of Skinner and Snoop in the Cloisters a few days before—the two young rascals smoking and card-playing, had been spotted, as they believed, by Mr. Gilmore, and had been terrified almost out of their wits.

Yet when Skinner had spoken to Mr. Gilmore on the subject, to beg him not to report them to Mr. Quelch, the Second Form-master had disclaimed any knowledge of the matter, and even said that he had not been in the Cloisters at all.

All the Remove had heard of that incident, and wondered why the Form-master had let Skinner off—and Skinner wondered most of all.

It seemed to Wharton that he knew the reason now.

He had wondered—but he wondered no longer. For the whole thing was explained, if it had not been Mr. Gilmore, but a man closely resembling Mr. Gilmore, who had fallen in with Skinner and Snoop in the Cloisters.

Wharton felt a conviction that that was the explanation. He had seen Mr. Gilmore in the Cloisters on that occasion, only a short time before the spotting of Skinner and Snoop. At least, he had believed so, and he had been simply amazed when Skinner told him of Mr. Gilmore’s saying that he had not been there.

Now he knew who it was that he must have seen and taken for the Second Form-master.

Wharton whistled softly.

The escaped convict, still at large after his escape from Blackmoor Prison, had reached Greyfriars, and hung about the place, in hiding, in the hope of seeing his half-brother.

No doubt he was gone again now; it was several days since that incident in the Cloisters. Had he seen Mr. Gilmore? Had Mr. Gilmore seen him? Wharton could not help wondering.

‘Gilmore!’

Wharton started as he caught the name of the man of whom he was thinking as he came downstairs.

A number of fellows were gathered before the board where the school notices were posted. Wingate of the Sixth had lately placed there the list for the First Eleven match on the morrow— Greyfriars v. Redclyffe.

‘Hallo, hallo, hallo!’ called out Bob Cherry. ‘Gilmore’s playing with the First Eleven to-morrow, Harry. His name’s down here.’

‘He’s a good man,’ said Wharton.

‘It will be worth watching,’ said Bob. ‘I’m going to turn up on Big Side to-morrow and see him give Redclyffe the kybosh.’

‘Same here!’

‘The samefulness is terrific,’ remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

CHAPTER XXV

The Ringed Stone!

THE following day most of the Greyfriars fellows were thinking of the First Eleven match that was to be played in the afternoon. Eric Gilmore, who was extremely hot stuff at the great game of Soccer, was to play for the school, and Wingate had been very glad to get him into the eleven.

Harry Wharton & Co. were not the only members of the Lower School who had decided to put aside other occupations and watch the senior match on Big Side. As a rule the heroes of the Remove were more interested in junior than in senior games, but the Redclyffe fixture was something very special. Even a crowd of the Second had determined to turn up and watch their Form-master play for Greyfriars. ‘Beast’ as he was in the Form-room, the Second were rather proud of him on the playing fields. After morning classes that Wednesday the captain of the Remove walked across to the Cloisters.

The old Cloisters were the most ancient part of Greyfriars, a pleasant, shady place in the summer, but not inviting in the winter, with the keen wind from the sea whistling among the old stone pillars and arches. Mr. Gilmore liked walking there, but there were few others who shared his taste on the cold, windy days.

Wharton’s face was very thoughtful.

He was already convinced that the escaped convict, George Waring, had been at Greyfriars, as Inspector Grimes suspected. The man he had seen in the Cloisters—the man Skinner and Snoop had seen—was not the master of the Second, as they had supposed. Wharton was sure of that, but a man so like the Second Form-master as to be taken for him, could only be the convict who resembled him; who was, according to Dicky Nugent’s story, the young master’s half-brother.

The man had been there, Wharton was convinced, and the suspicion had come into his mind that the man might still be there, hiding in some nook or corner. For that would account for the mysterious pilfering in the tuckshop on Monday night. If the fugitive was hiding in some secluded recess, he must have been in bitter need of food, and it was food that had been taken from Mrs. Mible’s shop.

The idea seemed rather a wild one, and Wharton did not speak of it to his friends. He went into the Cloisters with the intention of looking round, to see whether there was any sign of any stranger lurking there. He gave a start as he heard a footstep. The next moment he saw Mr. Gilmore.

Mr. Gilmore glanced at him.

A bitter wind was sweeping through the Cloisters, and perhaps the Second Form-

master wondered why the junior was there.

‘An interesting old place this, Wharton,’ Mr. Gilmore remarked, in his pleasant manner.

‘Oh, yes, sir!’ answered Harry, rather disconcerted by the meeting. He could not help wondering whether Mr. Gilmore’s errand there was the same as his own.

‘A boy in my Form found a bag of biscuits here yesterday,’ remarked Mr. Gilmore. ‘It appears to have been a part of what was taken from Mrs. Mible’s shop. That boy, Bunter minor, told me that he picked up the bag near what he called the ringed flagstone. You probably know where that is, Wharton?’

‘Quite well, sir.’

‘I am new here,’ said the Form-master, with a smile. ‘I have not yet seen all the sights of Greyfriars. I should like you to show me this ringed flagstone, whatever it is.’

‘Certainly, sir. This way,’ answered Harry.

The Second Form-master followed him almost to the end of the Cloisters. Under an old arch, deep in shadow, one of the ancient flagstones had a rusty iron ring sunk in a grooved circle on the surface. On one side of the iron ring it was clamped down in the stone, and evidently it had been used for lifting the flag.

Mr. Gilmore gazed at it with keen interest.

‘The ring in the stone must have been used in old days for lifting the flag,’ he remarked. ‘Have you ever seen it open, Wharton?’

‘Yes, sir,’ answered Harry. ‘It’s against the rules to open it, as there’s a deep cell underneath, where a fellow might fall and break a leg. But I remember seeing it open once.’

‘A cell underneath?’

‘Yes, sir; where monks used to be shut up, they say, when they broke the rules,’ said Wharton, with a smile. ‘That was long ago, of course, when Greyfriars was a monastery.’

Mr. Gilmore nodded.

‘I’ll help you lift it, if you like, sir,’ added Wharton. ‘The rule about not opening it doesn’t apply to masters, of course.’

‘Still, a rule is a rule,’ said Mr. Gilmore. ‘I will not trouble you, Wharton. No doubt you would like to rejoin your friends, too.’

Mr. Gilmore turned away as he spoke.

Wharton smiled faintly. He was well aware that Mr. Gilmore wanted to be left alone, and he walked back to the quadrangle, wondering whether Mr. Gilmore intended to explore the old punishment cell, and wondering, too, what the young master would have thought had he known what was in the junior’s mind. It was, however, no business of the captain of the Remove, and he joined his chums in punting about a footer till dinner, and soon forgot about the matter.

CHAPTER XXVI

Struck Down!

ERIC GILMORE waited till the junior’s footsteps had died away.

The Second Form-master’s face was a little pale, and tense in expression.

He looked to and fro and round about almost stealthily before he approached the ringed stone again.

He approached it at last, and, bending down, lifted the rusty iron ring from the groove cut in the stone where it lay flat.

His eyes gleamed.

On the thickly-rusted surface of the metal there were plain signs, now that he examined it closely, where the rust had been rubbed by a recent grasp.

Quite recently the stone had been raised from its place.

‘The villain!’ breathed Eric Gilmore.

After another uneasy glance up and down the deserted Cloisters he stooped and grasped the iron ring again.

Strong as he was, it required a good deal of exertion to lift the heavy flagstone. But it rolled aside at last, revealing a square opening in the stone floor of the Cloisters.

Dimly Mr. Gilmore made out stone steps in the gloom below.

No sound came from the old cell.

The young master peered down into the opening, with a shiver. Surely a convict prison was better than such a hiding-place—lonely, desolate, dark, bitterly cold. He bent over the opening.

‘I know you are there!’ he said in a low voice. ‘You may as well show yourself, George Waring!’

There was no answer.

Something like hope came into Eric Gilmore’s face. Was he, after all, mistaken—was the old stone cell untenanted?

Mr. Gilmore would have been very glad to find it so. It would have been an immense relief to him.

He stepped into the opening, and descended the narrow stone stair. Blackness lay before him as he reached the bottom.

From the shadowy archway over the opening little light came. The cell was like pitch. But his nostrils detected the smell of oil, of a lamp recently extinguished. His brief hope died down. Someone was there, and it could only have been Convict No. 19.

‘I know you are here, Waring,’ said Mr. Gilmore, in a low, steady voice. ‘You may relight your lamp.’

He heard a hurried breath, and a match was struck. In its flickering light he saw his half-brother.

The man—strangely like Eric Gilmore in build and features, his very counterpart save that his hair was dark—put the match to the lamp. It was a little tin-backed lamp, with a smoky glass, probably purloined from one of the outbuildings of the school.

The lamp burned and filled the cell with a dim light.

‘So you’ve found me, Gilmore!’

The convict spoke in a husky, savage voice, his eyes gleaming at the master of the Second.

‘As you see.’

‘Then it is known—about the food being taken—’

‘Only to me. The school believes that some schoolboy took the things from the shop,’ answered Mr. Gilmore coldly.

‘Then no one knows that I am here?’

‘Only myself.’

‘And you have found me out, and come to help me?’ said the convict, in a bitterly gibing voice.

‘I have found you out, but I have not come to help you, as you know quite well,’ answered Mr. Gilmore sternly. ‘I have come to give you a last chance to go, before you are taken by the police.’

‘Go?’ repeated Convict No. 19. ‘Go where? I told you that I had found my last and only refuge here—even here I could not have remained had I not discovered this cell,

while hiding in the Cloisters, and looking for a safer hiding-place. Go? I will go gladly, if you give me help. Your passport, a suit of clothes, a little money, and I will go, and take my chance of getting out of the country.'

'I cannot break the law to help you,' answered Mr. Gilmore icily. 'I have told you so before, and we need not go into that again. Listen to me. It is my duty to hand you over to the police, and I am guilty of wrongdoing in holding my hand. You know it. But I will leave you here, and in one hour I will return. If you are gone, I shall say nothing. If you are still here, I shall telephone to Inspector Grimes at Courtfield.'

'And that is all you have to say?'

'That is all. I think you should count yourself lucky that I am going to do as much for you as that,' said the master of the Second Form, 'instead of doing my duty—of handing you over at once!'

The convict's eyes glittered at him.

'Go, then, and leave me,' he muttered.

'I am going, and I warn you to escape while you may. I shall keep my word,' said Mr. Gilmore.

And he turned to ascend the stone steps again.

As he turned his back the convict was upon him with a leap like a tiger. His right hand had been held behind him—it grasped a heavy stone. Mr. Gilmore half turned, and as he did so the stone crashed on the side of his head with fearful force.

One faint cry the master of the Second gave, and then he slipped down inert, and lay stunned and senseless at the feet of Convict No. 19.

CHAPTER XX VII A Change of Identity!

THE convict stared down at him in the light of the smoky lamp, with a savage grin.

'My turn now!' he muttered.

The next proceedings of the hidden man were peculiar. He stripped off the master's gown and removed his clothes; discarded his own attire, and dressed himself quickly in Mr. Gilmore's clothes. His own dusty, muddy garments he placed on the unconscious master.

Even to the cap and gown, he adopted Mr. Gilmore's attire, and his resemblance to the Second Form-master, which had before been striking, was now almost exact. Save for the dark colour of his hair, no one in Greyfriars could have said that the man standing there was not Eric Gilmore.

In the old monk's cell Eric Gilmore lay bound and helpless, gagged and silent, now attired in the clothes of his convict half-brother.

The convict placed his shoulder to the ringed flag and lifted it.

He stepped out into the wintry wind.

He cast a quick, stealthy glance round him. No one was in sight. The dim, windy Cloisters were deserted.

Quietly the convict replaced the ringed stone.

Then he moved along the Cloisters slowly.

Desperate as he was, with the nerve of a desperate man, his heart was beating fast and painfully, and there was as much fear as determination in his breast.

His scheme had long been formed, waiting only for an opportunity to carry it out; and the opportunity had come unexpectedly.

But he shrank from the ordeal before him.

He was tempted to go now—to leave by the wall at the end of the Cloisters, to flee as

he was. But he did not yield to that temptation. To leave the school in a master's cap and gown was easy, but it was certain to be fatal to his hopes. On the roads and in the streets he would have attracted less attention in his old brown jacket, and the change of clothes would have been a change for the worse. He screwed up his nerve for what lay before him.

Dressed as he was, resembling his half-brother as he did, it needed only nerve to enter the school as the Second Form-master. Once installed in Eric Gilmore's quarters, it was only a matter of time—a short time—before he rifled the Form-master's desk and boxes, and obtained all he needed for his flight—money, clothes, papers, and, above all, the Form-master's passport, with which he could cross the sea. On that passport the photograph of Eric Gilmore was a replica of his own, and the detailed description fitted him as well as it fitted Mr. Gilmore, with the exception of the colour of his hair, and that was an alteration it was easy for him to make; it was for forgery that he had been sent to Blackmoor.

The ordeal before him was terrible, yet he told himself that it required only nerve; and nerve he had never lacked from the days when he had been the scapegrace of Wodehouse, all through the downward career which had landed him finally in a convict prison.

He left the Cloisters at last, taking his courage in both hands, as it were. With beating heart, but with a calm face, he walked up to the House.

Wingate of the Sixth was in the doorway, and he spoke as the convict entered.

'Looks like a fine afternoon for the game, Mr. Gilmore.'

The convict caught his breath for a moment. But his nerve was equal to the test. Even the fact that Wingate addressed him as Mr. Gilmore gave him confidence.

'Oh, quite!' he said.

Wingate looked at him rather more attentively.

He could not help noting that the man's face had a thin, drawn look; and, still more, he could not help noting that he was in need of a wash. His attentive glance made the convict tremble.

'You are fit to-day, Mr. Gilmore?' asked the Greyfriars captain.

'Fit?' muttered the convict.

He had no idea who Wingate was—no idea that he was the captain of the school; no idea that Mr. Gilmore was booked to play for the First Eleven that afternoon. He wondered savagely who this fellow was, and what he was driving at.

'Yes; we should miss you if you weren't able to play, sir,' said the Greyfriars captain.

'Redclyffe are playing a master, too, and we want to beat them.'

'Oh!' breathed Convict No. 19, with a dawning comprehension.

'Excuse me, sir, but you do not look as well as usual,' said the Sixth Former. 'I hope you are fit, sir?'

'Oh, quite—quite!' said Convict No. 19.

And he passed on into the House, leaving Wingate looking a little perplexed.

Somehow or other, it seemed to Wingate that Mr. Gilmore was changed, oddly changed, from his usual self. But it did not occur to the Greyfriars captain how very completely changed Mr. Gilmore was.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Playing a Part!

'YOU!'

Involuntarily, taken utterly by surprise, Convict No. 19 uttered that startled

ejaculation.

It was the sight of Billy Bunter that called it forth.

Within the house, the convict had to hesitate. He knew the window of Mr. Gilmore's study from the quad; but he could not, of course, enter the room by the window.

Within the House he had but a vague idea where to look for the Second Form-master's study, and he was hesitating, baffled for the moment by that difficulty, when William George Bunter of the Remove came rolling along.

The fat junior blinked at him and backed away across the passage.

Not that the Owl of the Remove saw any change in Mr. Gilmore. But Bunter was still in the belief that Eric Gilmore was the convict he had seen hiding in the woodcutter's hut near Wharton Lodge, in the holidays, and he was never able to conceal his uneasiness when he came near the Second Form-master. There was always a suspicion in Bunter's fat, obtuse mind that Eric Gilmore might suddenly 'chuck' playing Form-master, and spring at him as the convict had done on that occasion. The sight of Bunter astounded and alarmed the convict, and the sudden surprise caused his nerve to fail him completely for the moment.

He knew Bunter instantly. Bunter, with his podgy face, his big glasses, and his unusual circumference, was a fellow not easily forgotten. Convict No. 19 knew that this was the schoolboy whom he had robbed of a coat and half-a-crown weeks before in the woodcutter's hut in Surrey. He had almost forgotten the incident, but it was recalled with terrifying clearness to his mind as he came face to face with Bunter at Greyfriars!

Bunter's involuntary backing away added to his terror. In his mind's eye the convict saw himself recognised—known—on the verge of being denounced! This fat schoolboy, whom he had never expected to see again, whose existence he had forgotten, was here—at Greyfriars—in the very House where he had taken refuge! The wretched man's brain whirled as he stared at Bunter.

'You!' he breathed huskily.

Into the desperate man's eyes came such a glare of rage and terror that Bunter fairly jumped back in fear. For once his uneasiness at the sight of the Second Form-master was not without grounds.

'What are you doing here?' hissed the convict, for the moment purely the desperate convict again, forgetful that he was playing the part of a Form-master of Greyfriars.

'I—I—I——' stuttered Bunter.

He jumped farther back, utterly scared by the look on the face that he supposed to be Mr. Gilmore's.

'I—I'm going to dinner, sir,' he stuttered. 'I—I—— We're allowed to walk through this passage, sir.'

Bunter supposed that the Second Form-master was calling him to account for being in Masters' passage—a quarter through which juniors were allowed to walk, but in which they were forbidden to loiter.

The convict stared at him.

His nerve, for the moment, had been utterly lost; he had betrayed himself, and had Bunter been less obtuse he could possibly have suspected what had taken place in the Cloisters.

But Waring quickly regained his nerve. Bunter's answer showed him that the fat junior took him for the master of the Second Form.

With an effort, the convict composed his face and stilled the twitching of his hands, which itched to be at the throat of the schoolboy who knew Convict No. 19 by sight.

'Oh, yes! You—you startled me,' he muttered. 'You need not go, my boy—stay.'

Bunter unwillingly stayed.

That glare of ferocity in the convict's face had utterly scared him and convinced him, if he had needed convincing, that his suspicion that Eric Gilmore was the escaped convict was well-founded. But the man's face was quite composed now, and even smiling. Only for a few seconds had the desperate man's nerve failed him at the unexpected encounter.

'I have forgotten your name, my boy,' he said smoothly.

'Bunter, sir,' mumbled the fat junior.

'Oh, yes, Bunter! Quite so.'

'M-m-may I go now, sir?'

The pseudo Form-master smiled.

'I need your assistance, my boy. I have slipped in the quadrangle and hurt my ankle.

Please give me your arm to my study.'

'Oh, yes, sir!' gasped Bunter nervously.

He was extremely unwilling to come within reach of Mr. Gilmore, master of the Second. But it was impossible to refuse.

The convict leaned on Bunter's shoulder, and the fat junior led him to Mr. Gilmore's study. The convict's hand rested on Bunter's fat shoulder, and almost unconsciously he gripped hard. The grip made Bunter shudder with apprehension. He had nothing to fear, but he gasped with relief when he reached the door of Mr. Gilmore's study and the grip released.

'Thank you, Bunter,' said the convict.

'N-n-not at all, sir!' stuttered Bunter.

'You may go.'

Bunter went—promptly.

The convict opened the door to which Bunter had led him. Once inside the study he recognised the room in which he had spoken to his half-brother late on a dark night. He closed the door and sank into a chair, breathing hard with relief.

The first part of his task was over.

He was in Mr. Gilmore's room, and he had spoken with two Greyfriars fellows, one a senior, and the other a junior, and neither suspected that he was not the master of the Second Form.

He was not aware that it was a half-holiday at Greyfriars that day, and he supposed that Mr. Gilmore would be wanted for classes in the afternoon. But before that time he intended to be far from Greyfriars.

He rose from the chair after a few minutes, and looked into the glass.

He smiled grimly at his reflection.

The glass had often reflected Mr. Gilmore, and now it reflected his half-brother; but the image in the mirror was the same.

In the monk's cell under the Cloisters, where he had hidden for days, the convict had suffered, and he had roughed it. So far as he had been able to wash at all, it had been in the fountain at night. But the relative who had supplied him with clothes had supplied him with many necessities that could be carried in the pockets—among other things, a safety-razor and shaving necessities. The handsome face—handsome in spite of its gauntness—was clean-shaven. But it was decidedly grubby, and his hands were dirty. He realised now why the senior fellow had looked at him so attentively in the doorway.

Tap!

The convict spun round from the glass. In a moment he had dropped into the chair at Mr. Gilmore's table, his face turned from the light.

‘Come in!’ he said steadily.

Trotter, the page, opened the door.

George Waring had never seen Trotter before, but he could understand that he was the House page. He glanced at him carelessly.

‘Well?’ he said curtly.

‘Dinner, sir,’ said Trotter.

The convict felt a beating at his heart. He realised that Mr. Gilmore took his lunch when the schoolboys took their dinner; that the meal was now ready, and that the page had come to remind him, thinking that he had forgotten. Not for worlds would the impostor have faced the sea of eyes in the dining-hall of Greyfriars.

‘I shall not come in to dinner,’ he said. ‘I am feeling a little unwell, and shall require no dinner.’

‘Yessir,’ said Trotter indifferently. ‘Mr. Quelch told me to call you, sir.’

‘Quite so,’ said Convict No. 19. ‘Shut the door.’ Trotter retired and shut the door.

He repaired to the dining-hall, where he reported to Mr. Quelch, at the head of the Remove table. The Remove master, under the impression that Mr. Gilmore had forgotten the mealtime, had sent the page to the Second Form-master’s study. He raised his eyebrows as Trotter gave him Mr. Gilmore’s answer.

‘Very well!’ he said.

And Mr. Quelch requested a Sixth Form prefect to take Mr. Gilmore’s place at the head of the Second Form table.

‘Gilmore seedy!’ murmured Bob Cherry, in surprise. ‘He looked as fit as a fiddle this morning.’

‘And he’s down to play in the First Eleven match!’ said Frank Nugent. ‘Looks as if Wingate will lose him.’

‘I saw him hardly more than an hour ago, and he looked all right,’ said Harry Wharton, very much puzzled.

‘I say, you fellows, he’s hurt his ankle,’ said Billy Bunter. ‘He’s crocked!’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because he told me so,’ said Bunter. ‘He made me help him to his study when he came in. Frightful temper he was in, too— glared at me like a tiger.’

‘Fathead!’

‘Oh, really, Wharton—’

‘There is too much chattering at this table!’ said Mr. Quelch severely, and the Removites were silent and devoted themselves to their dinner.

CHAPTER XXIX

Escape!

CONVICT 19 opened the door of Mr. Gilmore’s study.

That study, and all it contained, was at the mercy of the fugitive from Blackmoor.

But, apart from one or two articles hanging on pegs, there was nothing there in the way of the change of clothing that the convict required. He had to find Mr. Gilmore’s room; and while the school were assembled at dinner was his opportunity.

His manner was quite casual as he passed up the staircase. That Mr. Gilmore’s bedroom would be somewhere upstairs, he knew; but where to look for it, in the almost endless number of rooms in the great building, he did not know. While the school was at dinner there was not likely to be any Greyfriars man about; but he knew that at every step he might run into some servants on household duties; and he was well aware of the surprise and comment that would be caused if he was seen entering

the wrong room. He had no choice but to take his chance, and he was as wary as a cat. Fortune favoured the desperate man. He opened door after door, taking the risk of the rooms being occupied; a slight risk at that hour of the day. And the sight of a travelling-bag, with the initials 'E.G.' in white letters on the brown leather, told him when he had reached the room he sought.

He shut the door after him, breathing quickly.

It was possible, for all he knew, that there might be some other master at Greyfriars with the same initials as Eric Gilmore; but a few minutes' examination of the room placed the matter beyond doubt.

He was in Mr. Gilmore's room; and Mr. Gilmore's belongings were at his disposal. He lost no time.

Having locked the door, his first proceeding was to take the wash he needed so badly, and which made him look even more exactly like the always cleanly and well-groomed Form-master.

The leather suitcase was locked; but Mr. Gilmore's bunch of keys was in his possession. He unlocked the bag, and, selecting the articles that he wanted, packed it for a journey.

From Mr. Gilmore's wardrobe he picked a roomy travelling-coat, a muffler, and a loose-fitting travelling-cap and donned them.

He surveyed the result in a mirror, and nodded with satisfaction.

The cold, windy day was a sufficient reason for turning up the thick collar of the coat, and placing the muffler under it. With the coat-collar and the muffler, and the loose cap pulled well down, his dark hair was wholly concealed from view. That was the one point upon which he had to be extremely careful in his impersonation of the Second Form-master.

Any Greyfriars man who had seen him at that moment could not have doubted that he was Eric Gilmore, dressed for a journey—though certainly any Greyfriars man would have been surprised at seeing him preparing for a journey at that particular time—Wingate most of all, as the Greyfriars captain was counting upon Mr. Gilmore for the First Eleven match.

The convict's plans were fully thought out. In Mr. Gilmore's desk, in the study, a brief search had discovered the Form-master's passport, and other private papers, as well as a sum of money—not a large sum, but sufficient for immediate needs, at least. All that the convict had now to do was to walk out of Grey-friars, and get to the railway station; then take the train for Dover.

He hoped to get clear while the school was at dinner.

No doubt the sudden departure of Mr. Gilmore without a word of warning, even to the headmaster, would cause great surprise.

That he could not help.

He quitted the room at last, and went down the stairs with his bag in his hand.

Fortune was still his friend. Dinner was not yet over; he had not wasted a second. He met no one but Trotter on his way, and Trotter gave him a second glance. Trotter, no doubt, was surprised to see a master who was too unwell to come in to dinner, going out dressed evidently for a journey. Convict No. 19 caught his glance. He stopped.

'Kindly take my bag to the porter's lodge, my boy,' he said.

'Yessir!'

Trotter took the suitcase.

He left the House with Convict No. 19, and in a few minutes they reached Gosling's lodge.

William Gosling blinked from his doorway at the man he supposed to be Mr.

Gilmore, and touched his ancient hat.

Trotter put down the bag.

Convict No. 19 tipped the page half-a-crown that belonged to Mr. Gilmore, and

Trotter went back to the House, utterly unsuspecting.

'I am called away very suddenly,' said Convict No. 19. 'A relative is dangerously ill, and I have to catch the first train. Please hand this note to the headmaster.'

'Yessir!' said Gosling.

He eyed Convict No. 19 rather curiously. Waring's voice was very like his half-brother's, but there was a slight difference. The difference struck Gosling, but nothing like the reason for it occurred to his mind.

'Please deliver the note as soon as you can,' added Waring.

'Certainly, sir!'

The convict picked up the bag.

'Excuse me, sir!'

'Well?'

'If you're in a hurry, sir, p'r'aps you'd like me to ring for a taxi, sir,' suggested Gosling.

Convict No. 19 would have liked it, but he did not want to remain a moment longer within the precincts of Greyfriars than he could help.

'Thank you; I shall not need it,' he said. 'I have time to catch my train.'

And he walked away, suitcase in hand.

Gosling stared after him.

A man who was in such a hurry to leave that he wrote a note for the Head instead of expending a few minutes in seeing that gentleman, and yet who had time to walk to the station instead of taking a taxi, rather perplexed William Gosling.

The escaping man stepped out of the old gateway, his eyes sparkling, his heart beating, as he breathed the air of freedom. The way was clear now; the way to Dover, and the Channel boat, and freedom in a foreign land.

Twenty minutes later he was taking his ticket for Dover. The express was due in five minutes more.

Convict No. 19 walked on the platform.

A train had come in from Redclyffe and a crowd of fellows—senior schoolboys—had alighted from it. Convict No. 19 was unaware that they were the footballers from Redclyffe, who were to play Greyfriars First that afternoon—the match in which Eric Gilmore was to have figured. He glanced carelessly at the cheery crowd, bought a paper at a bookstall, and sat down, with the paper held up to screen his face while he waited for the express.

The train thundered in.

Carelessly the convict strolled across the platform and took his seat in a first-class carriage.

Doors slammed along the train, the engine screamed, the express rolled out of the station. Behind his newspaper, in a corner seat, Convict No. 19 smiled.

CHAPTER XXX

A Mysterious Disappearance!

HARRY WHARTON & Co. came out cheerily into the frosty air of the quad. The chums of the Remove were in cheery spirits that afternoon. It was a half-holiday. They had nothing to worry about till evening prep, and they were going to see a first-class football match—which was the next best thing to playing footer themselves.

Only, it was doubtful now whether they would see Mr. Gilmore playing for the First Eleven, as they had expected. If he was too unwell to appear at dinner he was not likely to be well enough to play football that afternoon. The same thought had evidently occurred to Wingate of the Sixth, for the juniors saw him in consultation with Gwynne and some other seniors, with a rather perturbed expression on his face. The Greyfriars captain went into the House at last, from which it was easy to guess that he was going to ask Mr. Gilmore whether his name was to be taken off the list. 'Old Wingate's a bit worried,' Bob Cherry remarked. 'He's going to lose his best man for the match.'

'Gilmore's name is still in the list,' said Frank Nugent. 'I looked. If he's not fit it's rather odd that he hasn't told Wingate to look for a new man. It's being left rather late.'

'Well, he can't be fit if he's hurt his ankle, as Bunter said,' remarked Harry Wharton, 'and he certainly didn't come in to tiffin. Quelchy asked Wingate to take his place to watch the Second feed.'

'He ought to have told Wingate before this,' grunted Johnny Bull.

'The oughtfulness is terrific,' observed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'But perhaps the esteemed Gilmore is growing absentminded, like the excellent and ridiculous Mr. Wiggins.'

'I fancy he may be thinking about something else,' said Wharton, in a low voice. 'He was fit enough this morning when I saw him in the Cloisters, just before tiffin. Something may have happened—'

He broke off.

'What?' asked Bob, with a stare.

Wharton did not answer.

What Dicky Nugent had told in Study No. 1 had not been repeated by Wharton and Nugent even to the Co. The fact that Mr. Gilmore's half-brother was a convict was no business of theirs, and they had said nothing. It was a topic upon which too little could not be said.

But it was in Wharton's mind that Mr. Gilmore had been in the Cloisters after classes that morning for the same reason that the captain of the Remove himself had gone there—with a suspicion that the raid on the tuckshop was the work of a desperate fugitive hiding in some nook of the old school.

Wharton had no doubt whatever that Mr. Gilmore had intended to explore the monk's cell under the ringed stone. He had felt quite certain on that point.

Had the Second Form-master found the convict, his half-brother, hidden there, such a discovery might have had a very disturbing effect on him. And if he had, as Bunter stated, hurt his ankle, it was likely enough that he had received that hurt in exploring the recesses under the Cloisters.

Wharton could not help wondering whether Mr. Gilmore had, in fact, found the hunted man hiding in the precincts of Grey-friars, and what he had done if he had made such a discovery. Wingate of the Sixth came out of the House with a perplexed expression on his face, and called to the group of juniors.

'You kids seen Mr. Gilmore?'

'Not since tiffin, Wingate,' answered the captain of the Remove. 'He was in his study when Trotter went there.'

'It's a giddy mystery!' said the Greyfriars captain. 'I can't understand Mr. Gilmore acting in this fashion! And I've looked all over the school for him. I thought he was keen on the match.'

‘He was keen on it,’ said Gwynne. ‘If he’s changed his mind, he ought jolly well to have said so!’

‘It’s not like him to leave us in the lurch like this!’ said the worried captain of Greyfriars. ‘I can’t make it out! Still, it seems to be clear that he’s not fit, as he couldn’t come in to tiffin. We shall have to play without him.’

That was the only possible decision, as it was close on time for the game now.

Blundell of the Fifth was put on in Mr. Gilmore’s place—so there was one Greyfriars man, at least, who was not disappointed by the strange absence of Eric Gilmore. The Redclyffe men arrived, and the First Eleven went down to the field; and even at the last moment Wingate cast a hopeful glance round in the hope of seeing the tall figure of Eric Gilmore. But he saw nothing of him, and the footballers went onto the field.

CHAPTER XXXI

What Wharton Suspected!

HARRY WHARTON watched the ball kicked off, with a thoughtful frown on his brow. The captain of the Remove was thinking hard.

He was thinking of Mr. Gilmore.

The game was beginning now, and the Second Form-master was not in the ranks of the First Eleven. That Mr. Gilmore was keen on football, that he was glad to play for the Sixth, all Grey-friars knew. His absence, after arranging to play in the match, was mysterious and inexplicable, and all the more so because it was unexplained. That he had forgotten the match and gone out was impossible; that he had gone without taking the trouble to tell Wingate not to count on him was extremely unlikely.

Most of the fellows, puzzled as they were, simply gave the matter up. No doubt Mr. Gilmore would have some explanation to give when he did turn up again; and that he would not turn up again at all was an idea not likely to cross any mind.

But Wharton was thinking—anxiously. His comrades, though disappointed so far as watching Mr. Gilmore’s play was concerned, had settled down to see the match through; with or without Eric Gilmore, it was a game well worth watching. The problem of Eric Gilmore’s inexplicable conduct they dismissed from their minds as an insoluble problem which, after all, did not concern them personally. But Harry Wharton could not dismiss it from his mind, knowing as he did more than the other fellows knew.

‘You men keen on seeing this through?’ the captain of the Remove asked abruptly.

‘Yes, rather!’ said Bob Cherry. ‘It’s a good game! Look at old Wingate making the fur fly!’

‘I’d rather you chaps came with me,’ said Wharton.

‘Eh—lost your interest in Soccer all of a sudden?’ asked Johnny Bull. ‘Why not see it out?’

‘I’m thinking of something else. Look here, you fellows, come along!’ said Harry.

‘It’s about Gilmore!’

‘Blow Gilmore!’ said Johnny Bull, rather crossly. ‘I’ve always thought well of the man, but he’s done a dirty trick in letting Wingate down like this!’

‘He may not have been able to help it,’ said Wharton, in a low voice.

‘What rot!’

Frank Nugent looked curiously at his chum.

‘What have you got in your noddle now, Harry?’ he asked.

‘I’ll tell you if you’ll come out of the crowd.’

‘Right-ho!’ said Frank at once.

'Blest if I can make you out, Wharton!' said Johnny Bull. 'No good looking for Gilmore now; it's too late for him to play, even if you found him. And he's not to be found!'

'He must be somewhere.'

'Well, let him stay somewhere if he chooses! What does it matter to us? He could show up if he liked, I suppose!'

'Possibly not.'

'Let's get out of this!' said Bob Cherry. 'Wharton's got something in his little brain-box, though I'm blest if I know what! You don't think the man may have had an accident, Harry?'

'I think it's possible.'

'Oh, my hat! Let's go!'

The Famous Five pushed a way out of the thick throng gathered round Big Side.

Almost all Greyfriars had turned up there to see the Redclyffe match.

The quadrangle was almost deserted, and the Cloisters, whither the captain of the Remove led his chums, totally deserted. In blank wonder the Co. followed him there.

'Look here, what's this game?' demanded Johnny Bull. 'You're jolly mysterious, Wharton, and I can't make head or tail of it!'

'The head or tailfulness is not terrific!' remarked Hurree Singh.

'I'm going to tell you fellows something I haven't mentioned so far,' said Harry.

'Nugent knows, but it was not our business to repeat it. It's a rather beastly thing about Mr. Gilmore.'

'The mystery deepens!' grinned Bob Cherry. 'Go it!'

Wharton quietly related, in a few words, the strange tale Dicky Nugent had told in Study No. 1. Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh listened in amazement.

Bob Cherry gave an expressive whistle when the captain of the Remove had finished.

'This beats it!' he said. 'I—I suppose that cheeky fag wasn't pulling your leg, was he?'

'I'm sure not,' said Harry.

'Quite sure!' added Nugent, with emphasis.

'That would account for the likeness,' said Bob. 'We knew from the convict's description that there was a likeness, though I never believed it was so close as Bunter fancied. I put it down to the fat duffer being as blind as an owl.'

'His half-brother!' said Johnny Bull. 'A convict! Pretty rotten for a Greyfriars master!'

'Of course, it's to be kept dark,' said Wharton hastily. 'Even Dicky has sense enough not to talk about it. He only told his brother and me.'

'Mum's the word, of course,' said Bob. 'I wouldn't like to say anything to hurt Mr. Gilmore; he's a decent sort, though he has let Wingate down to-day.'

'I shouldn't have told even you fellows,' went on Wharton, 'only for a good reason. Mr. Grimes believes that the escaped convict headed for Greyfriars to get help from Mr. Gilmore. I'm absolutely certain that the man has been here. As soon as I knew that he was Mr. Gilmore's half-brother, that was certain. It was not Mr. Gilmore that I saw in the Cloisters that time, when I was puzzled by his dodging away and that Skinner and Snoop saw. That's why Mr. Gilmore never reported them for gambling.'

'Phew!'

'I came along here this morning to look round,' went on Wharton. 'I found Mr. Gilmore here. He asked me about the ringed stone. He made it plain that he wanted me to go, and I went—and I was quite sure that he meant to look into the old monk's cell after I was gone.'

‘Why on earth?’ asked Bob.

‘Because I think he suspected what I suspected—that Convict No. 19 was hiding somewhere about the school, and had raided the tuckshop on Monday night for food.’ Wharton’s chums stared at him.

‘You think that Gilmore suspected that?’ ejaculated Johnny Bull.

‘I do. I think that’s the only reason why he believed Sammy Bunter’s story that he picked up the biscuits in the Cloisters. All the Second thought him a fool for believing it.’

‘I rather agree with the Second.’

‘Well, I think he’s no fool; but he had a reason the Second knew nothing of, and I’ve told you the reason.’

‘Hem! But if Gilmore went down into the monk’s cell after you left him here, he got out again. He was in his study when he sent that message by Trotter.’

‘I know! But did he go down again after tiffin?’ asked Harry. ‘That’s what’s been worrying me!’

‘Why should he? If he found the place empty, he wouldn’t want to go down again. If he found the convict there—it’s not likely, but if he did—’ Bob Cherry paused.

‘The man’s his half-brother,’ said Wharton. ‘According to Dicky, he told Inspector Grimes that he never would help a convict to escape. But—but the man’s his own blood—he may have changed his mind. He may have taken him food—or clothes—or—or simply gone to urge him to clear off.’

‘No bizney of ours,’ said Johnny Bull. ‘That’s a matter for Gilmore to settle with his own conscience.’

‘Yes, yes; only he’s got to be found!’ said Harry impatiently. ‘Suppose something’s happened to him—suppose that desperate villain may have turned on him—suppose——’

‘You’re doing a lot of supposing,’ said Johnny Bull drily. ‘Mean to say that you think Gilmore may be in that cell now, with the giddy convict standing guard over him?’

‘That’s what I fear.’

‘Let’s jolly well peep into the place, anyhow,’ said Bob Cherry.

‘The peepfulness is the proper caper,’ agreed Hurree Singh.

And, that point being settled—though undoubtedly the Co. were in an extremely sceptical mood—the juniors prepared for the investigation of the ancient cell under the Cloisters.

CHAPTER XXXII

Failed at the Finish!

THE Famous Five lost no time.

Wharton was anxious to verify—or otherwise—his suspicion that some harm had befallen Mr. Gilmore in exploring the monk’s cell, which, to his mind, was the only explanation of the Second Form-master’s strange disappearance. The other fellows were anxious to get back to the football match. So all the five were keen to get the matter over.

Lifting the stone was a heavy task for a strong man, and quite beyond the powers of the most hefty junior at Greyfriars. Two juniors, in fact, would have found it a hard job. But the five of them found it fairly easy. Bob Cherry fetched a rope from the wood-shed, and it was knotted to the iron ring, and the chums of the Remove grasped it together and pulled. The broad flag rolled on its side.

‘The darkfulness is terrific!’ remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, staring into the

black opening.

‘And those old steps look a bit rocky,’ observed Nugent.

‘No need to go down,’ said Johnny Bull. ‘If Mr. Gilmore’s there he can say so.’ And Johnny shouted down into the opening:

‘Hallo! Anybody at home?’

The rumbling echo of his voice answered from the dark depths, but there was no other answer.

‘Nobody at home!’ grinned Johnny Bull.

‘I’m going to see,’ said Harry quietly. ‘I’ve got a box of matches here. I’ll go first. In fact, no need for more than one to go.’

‘Unless the jolly old convict’s there,’ grinned Bob Cherry. ‘If he’s there, and he’s knocked a Form-master on the head, he may not stand on ceremony about a Remove man’s napper. We’ll all come down.’

‘And if the convict’s there, I’ll eat him,’ remarked Johnny Bull.

Evidently Johnny Bull doubted whether Convict No. 19 of Blackmoor had ever been anywhere near Greyfriars at all.

‘Fathead!’ answered Wharton.

Harry Wharton stepped carefully into the opening. He struck a match, and peered before him as he went. The old stone steps—many centuries old—were far from safe; broken away in places, and decidedly uneasy to the tread. The captain of the Remove did not relish his task, but he did not hesitate.

Feeling his way cautiously, testing each step with his foot before he trusted his weight to it, he descended the ancient steps, striking matches as he went. The air below was heavy, after the keen wind of the Cloisters, but it was fairly fresh. The place was ventilated. Black darkness greeted Wharton’s eyes, the matches flickering eerily in the dense gloom. He reached the stone floor of the cell at last, and behind him his comrades came down, one after another, treading softly and carefully. The five juniors gathered in the cell at last, staring about them in the gloom.

‘Nobody at home,’ said Johnny Bull. ‘And I think— Oh, my hat! Wha-a-at’s that?’

Johnny Bull broke off with a startled exclamation.

‘Great Scott!’

‘The convict— Great pip! It’s Mr. Gilmore!’



‘The convict— Great pip! It’s Mr. Gilmore!’

Harry Wharton & Co. gathered round the figure on the floor. A man, bound hand and foot and gagged, lay there, his staring eyes looking up wildly at them in the flicker of the matches.

For a moment they had supposed it was the convict. Wharton recognised the thick brown jacket he had seen on the man who resembled Mr. Gilmore, on the occasion when the fugitive had dodged him in the Cloisters. But the next moment he knew that it was the Second Form-master. The man's head was bare, and his flaxen hair glimmered in the flickering light.

'Mr. Gilmore!' breathed Nugent.

Johnny Bull stared at the bound man in stupefaction. Not for a moment had the hard-headed Johnny believed that there was anything in Wharton's suspicion that Mr. Gilmore had fallen foul of the convict, hidden in that remote recess. He was quite staggered by the overwhelming proof that Wharton had hit on the exact truth.

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'It's Mr. Gilmore, tied up! Oh, my hat!

The—the convict must have been here, then.'

'And may be here now!' ejaculated Nugent. 'Look out!'

'Oh, crumbs! Look out, you fellows!'

The possibility that the desperate man was lurking in the shadows about them made the juniors draw together very quickly. But there was no sound or movement in the cell. Striking matches, they hurriedly explored the cell, and found that it was vacant, except for themselves and the bound man. The convict, if he had been there—as was certain now—was gone.

Bob Cherry opened his pocket-knife and cut Mr. Gilmore loose, while Wharton removed the gag from the young master's mouth.

They raised him to a sitting posture. He was almost blue with cold, and his teeth chattered.

'We've got to get him out of this,' said Harry. 'He's nearly frozen. Thank goodness we came!'

'Yes, rather,' muttered Johnny Bull. 'Thank goodness we did! You were right, after all, old chap.' Johnny shivered. 'Why, he must have heard me shout, and couldn't answer with his mouth stuffed up.'

'My boys!' stammered Mr. Gilmore through his numbed lips. 'My boys! Heaven bless you for coming!'

'It was Wharton, sir,' said Johnny Bull. 'I thought it was all rot, but as it turns out—'

'Was it the convict, sir?' asked Nugent.

Mr. Gilmore nodded.

'I—I shall be able to move in a few minutes,' he said thickly. 'Wait till then. Thank Heaven you came!'

He was breathing hard, and chafing his frozen hands for some minutes, the juniors watching him in silence. The colour came back into his cheeks and the light into his eyes. He had been through a terrible ordeal. In the old stone cell, the lurking convict had been able to move, to keep himself warm; but the young master had laid bound, unable to stir, on the cold stone floor, and he was almost frozen. There was little doubt that the Famous Five had saved his life. It was not likely that he would have survived the terrible cold, had he remained for days in the cold cell.

'How did you know I was here, Wharton?' asked Mr. Gilmore very quietly at last. Wharton coloured. He had not wished to let Eric Gilmore know, or suspect, that he and his friends knew anything of the young master's convict relative. But there was no help for it now.

He explained, without mentioning Dicky Nugent's name. Mr. Gilmore listened without interrupting him.

'I understand,' he said. 'I desired nothing to be known in the school of my connection with that miscreant; but I should be very ungrateful to complain of that now, as,

owing to your knowledge, you have certainly saved my life.'

'We shall say nothing, sir,' exclaimed Wharton hastily. 'Nugent and I have known for some time, and never mentioned it, and the fag I spoke of has said nothing. Nothing will be said, sir, if you do not wish it.'

'Only that convict will have to be nailed,' said Johnny Bull.

Mr. Gilmore breathed hard.

'The matter of the convict you may leave in my hands,' he said. 'I shall take care that he does not escape, after what he has done. For the rest, I hope you boys will say nothing.'

'Not a word, sir.'

'I think I can walk now,' said Mr. Gilmore; and the juniors helped him to rise.

'Have you seen anything of the man since he left me here, my boys?' asked the Second Form-master. 'As you see, he took my clothes, and his intention was to steal my passport and other things he needed, and to leave Greyfriars in my name—as me. I have been here since the time you saw me in the Cloisters after morning class, Wharton. Has the man—in my clothes and my name—been seen since?'

'Oh, my hat!' gasped Wharton. 'You've been here since before dinner, sir?'

'Yes, yes.'

'Then it was that man in your study who sent a message that he was unwell, and could not come to dinner!'

Mr. Gilmore gritted his teeth.

'No doubt it was he, taking advantage of his resemblance to me. Is he still in the school?'

'I think he must have cleared, sir. It was because you couldn't be found for the First Eleven match that we looked for you. I suppose he must have cleared off while all the fellows were at dinner, as he hasn't been seen since, and can't be found.'

'Fortunately, I know where he has gone, and a telephone message to the Dover police will stop him,' said Mr. Gilmore grimly. 'He will not find my passport so useful as he supposed. Any man attempting to cross the Channel in the name of Eric Gilmore will be stopped and arrested. There is ample time, thanks to you, my boys. He cannot have reached Dover yet.'

Mr. Gilmore ascended the stone steps, and the juniors followed him out of the monk's cell. The Form-master hurried away at once to the House, while Harry Wharton & Co. closed the ringed stone.

'May as well see the finish of the match,' said Bob Cherry.

Meanwhile, a pale and untidy Form-master in a brown jacket was interviewing an astonished headmaster in Dr. Locke's study. Gosling had recently delivered the note left with him; which added to Dr. Locke's amazement when the Second Form-master almost burst in upon him. But a few hurried words from Mr. Gilmore apprised the Head of what had happened, and the telephone was quickly at work—conveying information to Inspector Grimes at Courtfield, which set him to work in hot haste. While the First Eleven match was still being fought out on Big Side at Greyfriars, Inspector Grimes was having the busiest time of his life: telephoning, telegraphing, and finally tearing across country Doverwards in a fast car.

Harry Wharton & Co., and a crowd of other Greyfriars fellows, were cheering a Greyfriars victory on Big Side in the very moments when a well-dressed traveller, waiting for the Channel boat at Dover, was being requested to show his passport. That traveller showed his passport with confidence—and was undoubtedly surprised when, having shown it, he was immediately collared, and found the handcuffs locked on his wrists. And a little later, still with the steel bracelets on, and fury in his face, Convict

No. 19 had the pleasure—or otherwise—of finding himself in the cheery company of Inspector Grimes, whose cheery company was bestowed upon him till the gates of Blackmoor closed on him once again.

Why Eric Gilmore had missed the First Eleven match was never precisely known at Greyfriars, excepting to the headmaster and certain members of the Remove. He explained to Wingate that he had been unavoidably prevented from joining up, without going into details.

Neither was the mystery of the raid on the tuckshop ever elucidated—in public. Most of the Remove remained convinced that it was Billy Bunter—all the Second were certain that it was Sammy. But all inquiry into the matter was suddenly dropped. Last—but not least—Billy Bunter had to give up his weird belief that Mr. Gilmore, the master of the Second, was no other than the escaped convict from Blackmoor. Even Bunter could not, with all his wonderful intellectual powers, continue to believe so, when he saw the report in the Daily Sketch of the apprehension of the escaped convict, in the attempt to cross the Channel with a stolen passport. Convict No. 19 being safe again at Blackmoor, it was clear, even to William George Bunter, that the master of the Greyfriars Second was not he—that young man being still at the school in charge of the Second Form—where he remained for several weeks longer, till, to the intense joy of Dicky Nugent & Co., Mr. Twigg recovered sufficiently to return to his duties, and Eric Gilmore departed to take up an appointment in a distant country.

THE END