

5 The big fight



It rained all through the lunch hour. The sky went grey, the windows misted over, and from overhead came the steady gunfire sound of huge raindrops pinging smartly on the skylight.

And Mrs Collins slipped into one of her dark wet-break moods.

Everyone knew the signs: the eyebrows knitting together over her nose; the lines across her forehead deepening to furrows; her lips thinning into tightened purse strings.

Everyone knew it was not the time to cause trouble.

So as the rain beat heavily against the window panes, everyone crept quietly around the classroom, trying to look as if they were up to something useful or sensible, or, at the very least, quiet.

And out of the storeroom came the old comic box.

Nobody *meant* to make a great noise and a fuss. All anyone wanted was simply to go to the box, dip in their hand, and pick out a couple of comics they liked. Nobody *meant* to end up in a scrum, pushing and shoving the others out of the way, using their elbows, desperate to get an arm in and whip out a favourite comic before someone else leaned over and snatched it.

Nobody *meant* to end up in a riot.

'SILENCE!' roared Mrs Collins. 'Go back to your places at once! I will give out the comics *myself*.'

As she came over, everyone melted away from the comic box and drifted back to their own favourite wet-break places. Talilah and Kirsty sat side by side on the fat radiator pipes. Flora perched on the window sill. Philip and Nicky sprawled on the floor beneath table five, and Bill, who probably would have joined them on any other wet day, glanced down at all the marks and smears and tears he already had on his pretty pink frock, and then at the muddy grime and footprints all over the floor where his friends were – and thought better of it.

He settled himself alone, leaning his chair back against the wall, and waited for Mrs Collins to hand round the comics.

They were a shabby and dog-eared lot. It was with a slight shudder of disgust that Mrs Collins dipped her hands in the box

to lift them out, and started round the room. Like everyone else, Bill hoped so hard that she would go round his way first, but he was out of luck.

She went the other way. It took her ages.

All of the Beanos went first, of course. Then all the Dandies. She gave out a Hotspur and a Lion, then several Bunties and some Victors.

By the time she reached Bill Simpson, there was very little left.

'Mandy?' she offered him. 'Or would you prefer a June or a Judy?'

He could tell from the look on her face that she wasn't in the mood for discussion. So he contented himself with replying coldly:

'I'll have a Thunder, please. Or a Hornet.'

'No more Hornets,' she said, leafing through the last three or four comics left in her hand. 'No Thunders, either. I thought I might still have a Valiant, but I must have given that to Rohan.'

She thrust a Bunty towards him.

'There you are,' she said. 'You'll enjoy this. There are almost no pages missing at all.'

And off she went back to her desk.

Bill glanced down at the comic in his hands. He didn't care for the look of it at all. He didn't want to read it. What use was a Bunty? He wanted a Beano or a Dandy or a Thunder, and that was that.

Melissa was sitting only a few feet away, absorbed in a Beano.

Bill leaned across.

'Hey, Melissa,' he called softly. 'Here's a Bunty with all the pages and no torn bits. Do you want to swap?'

Melissa gazed at him over her comic, her eyes widening even more as she realized he was serious.

'You must be *joking*,' she said, and went back to her Beano.

Bill tried the other side.

Flora was sitting firmly on one Dandy, and reading another.

'Flora,' called Bill. 'Would you like a Bunty?'

'No, thank you,' Flora said politely, without so much as raising her eyes from the page.

Bill Simpson decided to have a go at one of the boys.

'Rohan!' he hissed. 'Hey! Rohan! I'll swap you my practically brand-new comic here for your tatty old Valiant with hardly any pages left.'

'What's your comic?' asked Rohan. 'Is it a Hotspur?'

'No,' Bill confessed. 'No. It's a Bunty.'

Rohan just sniggered and went back to his comic. Clearly he thought it was just a good joke.

Bill tried one last time.

'Martin,' he offered. 'Will you swap with me as soon as you've finished that Victor?'

Martin said:

'Sure. What have you got there?'

Bill said as softly as he could:

'Bunty.'

'What?' Martin said. 'What?'

So Bill Simpson had to tell him all over again.

Martin snorted.

'No thanks,' he said. 'No thanks. I'll swap mine with Melissa's Beano instead.'

And he went back to his reading.

Bill blamed Mrs Collins, frankly. Though he couldn't prove it, and wouldn't dare ask, he firmly suspected that, if he had not been wearing the pretty pink frock, he would never have ended up with the Bunty. Mrs Collins could easily have arranged things some other way. She might have ordered Flora to give him the Dandy she was sitting on, to keep him going. Or she might have suggested to Rohan that Bill and he sit close together to read the Valiant at the same time.



He couldn't prove it – no, he couldn't prove it. But he felt sore about it all the same.

But clearly there was nothing to be done now. It was too late.

Everyone else was reading quietly, and Mrs Collins didn't look as if she would take at all kindly to any complaints. He could either waste the whole lunch break trying, completely in vain, to find someone who would trade their comic for his Bunty, or he could give up and just read the Bunty.

He read the Bunty.

And it wasn't that bad. He read the story about the sneaky schoolteacher who switched the examination papers around so that her own spoilt and lazy daughter would win the one and only college place. He read the story about the brave orphan gypsy girl who led her lame pony carefully at night through a dangerous war zone. He was still quite absorbed in the very funny tale of three girls who had somehow found themselves responsible for an enormous hippopotamus with an even more enormous appetite, when a shadow fell over the page.

Flora was holding out a Dandy.

'Swap?'

'In a minute. Let me finish this.'

'Now or never,' said Flora.

'All right, then,' said Bill.

A little regretfully – he wouldn't have minded finding out what the hippo ate next – Bill handed over his Bunty and took the Dandy. No sooner had he turned the first page than yet another shadow fell on him, and Rohan was standing at his side.

'Here. You take this, and I'll have that one.'

In his hand, Rohan held a copy of June.

'No, thanks,' said Bill, and he went back to his reading.

'Come on,' said Rohan. 'Don't be mean. Swap comics with

me. I don't want this one.'

'I don't want it either.'

'You haven't read it.'

'I am reading *this*.'

And Bill shook his Dandy in Rohan's face.

That was his first big mistake. His second big mistake was not moving fast enough when Rohan reached out and tried to snatch it.

Rohan's grip tightened over the top of the comic.

'Let go of my Dandy!'

'Don't be so *mean!*'

'*Mean?* Why *should* I give you my Dandy and take your rotten June?'

'Because you might *like* it,' said Rohan. 'And I definitely *won't*.'

The penny dropped. It was the frock again. Bill couldn't believe it. Hadn't the morning been agonising enough? Now was even his lunch break going to be ruined because he just happened to be wearing this stupid, silly curse of a dress? If this was the sort of thing that kept happening to you if you came to school in a frilly pink frock, no wonder all the girls wore jeans!

Bill Simpson had had quite enough.

'Let go of my comic,' he warned Rohan in a soft and dangerous voice. 'Let go of it or I shall mash you.'

In answer to this threat, Rohan tugged harder.

The Dandy began to tear.

'Let go!' repeated Bill Simpson.

Rohan pulled harder. Bill Simpson hit him. He clenched his

fist and punched Rohan on the shoulder as hard as he could.

Rohan yelped in pain, and dropped his half of the comic.

Though his heart was thumping so fiercely his eyes couldn't settle on the pictures, let alone read the print, Bill Simpson pretended he had calmly gone back to his Dandy.

Until Rohan kicked out at him.

In fact, his foot didn't touch Bill at all. It tangled instead in the folds of the pretty pink dress. But it did leave a great, black criss-cross footprint on the flimsy material, and it was a kick.

And Bill was furious. He leaped to his feet and started hitting Rohan as hard as he could. Rohan put up his own fists to defend himself. And, within seconds, they were having a fight.

The noise was tremendous. Everyone in the classroom started up at once – some asking who had started the fight, some egging on one side or another, some telling both of them to stop.



Then, as the blows rained down on either side, everyone around fell silent. For this was the first really big fight ever seen in the classroom itself, and it was shocking. No one was ever surprised to see the odd, sly kick on someone's ankle. Everyone had noticed the occasional deliberate tripping up, or hard nudge.

But nothing like this. Not a real big fight. Never.

It was Mrs Collins who put a stop to it. Striding across the room in a fury, she grasped both of them by the shoulder and hauled them apart.

Both were scarlet with rage.

'How dare you?' shouted Mrs Collins. 'How DARE you?'

She was enraged, too. No one had ever seen her looking so angry. Her dark wet-break mood had turned so fierce she looked fit to kill. Her eyes were flashing, her nose had gone pointy, and her mouth had shrunk to a lemon-sucking sliver.

'How dare you!'

Rohan and Bill stood glowering at one another.

'What is going on? Who started this fight?'

'It wasn't my fault,' snarled Rohan. 'I didn't start it.'

'You did,' snarled Bill, clenching his fists again. 'You kicked me!'

He showed the footprint on his pretty pink frock.

'You punched me first,' insisted Rohan, rubbing his shoulder hard to try to get sympathy from the bystanders.

But Mrs Collins, for one, wasn't impressed. She didn't even appear to have heard what he said. She was busy leaning over to look at the footprint on Bill Simpson's frock.

'This is shocking, Rohan,' she said. 'Shocking! To leave a footprint as clear as this on the frock, you must have lashed out really hard with your foot.'

'I was punched first!'

But Rohan's wailing did him no good. A look of scorn came over Mrs Collins' face. Though she said nothing out loud, you could almost hear her thinking: How could a little thump on the shoulder from someone in a pretty pink frock excuse a great big kick from someone wearing solid, heavy, sensible shoes?

So, thought Bill Simpson quietly to himself. There can be one advantage to wearing a frock.

It didn't last for long, though. She punished them both. She

put them at neighbouring desks, and made them write *Fighting is stupid and fighting is ugly* in their best handwriting over and over again, till the bell rang.

They sat with exactly the same sour look on their faces. Both were still furious at the unfairness of it all. To everyone else, they looked for all the world like a pair of scowling and bad-tempered twins.

And every now and again, someone would tiptoe past and whisper in Rohan's ear:

'You look so angry.'

But in Bill's they whispered:

'You look so upset.'

