

## BUNTER'S BANK

The 1920s were a curious decade. This may be so because they were the first ten-year period actually thought of as 'a decade', with identifiable characteristics and a distinctive spirit of. It's true that we speak of the 'Edwardian' decade, a time of straw boaters and picnics now considered foolish because of the tragic and inexplicable war that followed, but Queen Victoria died a year later than she should have done, and what can we do with 1910 to 1914 but stick them on to 1901 to 1909?

The twenties, however, start conveniently with the conclusion of the Versailles Peace Settlement, end with the Great Crash in the last months of 1929 and appear, from our present perspective, to exhibit trends and novelties peculiar to that time. Perhaps the only genuine rival to the Twinkling Twenties are the Swinging Sixties, which set off brightly with the appearance of the contraceptive pill and ended with a man on the moon. Yet they might more properly have begun with Kennedy's death in '63 and ended with the '73 oil price crisis, when the western world woke up to the fact that zooming around in ever smarter automobiles depended on the tempers of a handful of sheikhs in the Middle East.

The films and newsreels of the twenties give us a picture largely American – saucy hats worn by bright young things dancing the night away (one or two of whom also flew aeroplanes), the bootleggers warring noisily with the Untouchables in black-and-white Chicago, the Charleston and the Jazz Singer, Chaplin's tramp, the Hoover Dam and people flinging themselves from high windows in Wall Street. For Britain, the images are grainier and murkier. The faces of a younger Churchill and the Welsh wizard Lloyd-George are distinct, but who remembers for sure the features of Baldwin or Macdonald? There was no Scarface Capone, no Stoneface Stack, and instead of the appealing Lindbergh, we had Allcock and Brown, faceless military men. The Great Crash hit London as it did New York, but there no bodies fell in ghostly silence from the windows of Threadneedle Street. The hats, too, were more conventional, toppers, bowlers and boaters that still looked Edwardian.

But, like the Americans, the British of the twenties discovered money. Not money meaning currency or money translated swiftly into large properties, but cash, spending money, fat bank accounts and what was later called conspicuous consumption. The cars were shorter and the party dresses longer than in the States, but the tiaras and bangles glittered in the same fashion, the musicians played till morning and holidays were taken in Monte Carlo rather than Southend.

Historians have seized on this mood of contagious gaiety and explained it as an knee-jerk reaction to the horrors of the Great War, a reckless urge to 'have a good time' (an

expression unknown to the Victorians), despite – and somehow because of – the Lost Generation and the Somme cemeteries. There must be some truth in this, but the politically, culturally and commercially active generation of the Twenties had been born in the nineteenth century and had lost brothers or fathers in the Great War. Although the spending of money was the conspicuous feature of the times, the accumulation and investment of it was what mattered and this, as always, was carried out by ambitious, hardworking, seriously grasping individuals who were far from being ‘young things’ and didn’t give a damn for the Charleston.

Our story centres on one such seriously grasping individual by the name of William Bunter, and we need to go back a decade or so to pick up the beginnings of his ambition, for it was in 1910 that William Bunter emerged from Greyfriars School and experienced a life-changing revelation. The most important thing in life, he suddenly realized, was not cakes, cream slices or toffee apples. It was not muffins richly spread with honey or crumpets loaded with butter and jam, it was money. The spending of money was delightful, and the confections it could buy were hard to beat for momentary pleasure, but it was the getting of money that was the real satisfaction.

William Bunter at 16 was grossly overweight, short-sighted, badly dressed and bone idle. He left school, as far as he or his father could see, without any useful knowledge or skill. He had learnt little and remembered less. Writing bored and bothered him, the facts of geography and history befuddled him, scripture was nonsensical and the purpose of Latin grammar unimaginable. Algebra (Oh!), logarithms (Ow!) and calculus (Ouch!) were incomprehensible and inapplicable. Yet Bunter seemed to recall a time when arithmetic had been easy and enjoyable. Like other boys who were generally duds in class, he had a knack for sums. Additions, subtractions, long divisions and large multiplications held no terrors for him. Fractions were no hardship, decimal points failed to trip him up and percentages posed no problems. What had happened to simple arithmetic, he wondered glumly, when it became, between one year and the next, Mathematics, dense and intractable?

For Bunter’s eighteenth birthday, his father gave him a book. The pater was on the whole a remote, unlovable and irritable figure. Presents, beyond the odd five pound note reluctantly parted with, were rare. A gift was a surprise, the gift of a book unheard of. Yet Mr Bunter’s choice turned out to be inspired.

The book was *Banking for Beginners* by Christopher William Moss, designed as a handbook for young bank clerks who aspired to rise in their profession. Sums of money appeared on almost every page and a knowledge of arithmetic was required. The £ signs exerted a powerful attraction on the young Bunter. As he turned to a fresh page, his eye sought their comforting, promising presence. The sums, to his surprise, were easy. It is true

that the numbers were sometimes large, containing as many as six noughts, but these were inert when multiplied, producing only more of themselves. They were a fat growth on the lean body of the figure but they were only fat zeros.

Chapter Two held an unwelcome item of news: the main business of banks was to lend. This came as a shock to Bunter, who had assumed that their business was to acquire and accumulate. The thought of lending money was foreign and disturbing to him. But lo, the sugar coating for the pill came on the next page. Banks did not lend their own monies but the monies of other people. 'The Bank borrows cheaply and lends profitably,' he read. This made perfect sense to a person of Bunter's disposition. At Greyfriars, he had been forced to read the episode of Jesus and the moneylenders, but the Fat Owl of the Remove – as he was cruelly known to his fellows – had taken the story to be about clearing furniture from the entrance to the temple. He had nothing against lending other people's money. It struck him as an ingenious idea.

He devoured Chapters Two and Three. He discovered the significance of interest rates. These had cropped up in annoying textbook problems at school, but he had ignored them as irrelevant. Now he saw what he had missed. The rate of interest when borrowing must be low and the rate of interest when lending must be high and in the difference lay the profit, which belonged neither to the lender nor to the borrower but to oneself! This was exciting and gave him the courage to understand compound interest, which at school had marked the moment when arithmetic was no longer simple but as tedious and irritating as every other kind of learning. Once he had understood the notion of profit, he proceeded happily from compound interest to such items as securities and mortgages and defaults, notional capital and liquid assets.

One result of William Bunter's revelation was a rapid diminution of his waistline which astounded the pater and worried the mater. There was still the odd paternal fiver, reluctant as usual to change hands, but it no longer went on cakes and sweets. It was transferred to a piggy bank, a gift from the ancient past, hitherto unused. This piggy bank was given a privileged position above Bunter's desk. The plug at its base was sealed with wax, to reduce temptation. It was referred to by its owner and manager as The Bank, in the manner of the Bank of England in London, the HSBC in Shanghai and other fortresses of global finance. The monies therein were destined not to be spent but to be lent, with interest.

Before the lending, Bunter realized, must come the saving. The fivers were a good start but they were not enough. The first prong of his financial strategy was to impress the pater, in which he was quickly successful. He took Banking for Beginners to his father's study and returned it, saying that he had read it carefully and that it was the best book he had ever opened.

The pater was taken aback.

'You have read all of it?'

'Yes.'

'You have understood it?'

'Yes.'

'Then why are you returning it?'

'I assumed that it was a loan.'

The pater frowned, then laughed happily, a rare event indeed.

'A loan! Why, my boy, you have a mischievous sense of humour.'

Bunter was serious. 'I have read the book twice. I wondered if on your shelves, there was something ... more advanced. I intend to make a career in banking.'

Now the pater was astonished. He studied his son's face to see if this were an elaborate joke. He could detect no sign of it. His eye moved his son's girth. There was still a bulge, but the main bulk had gone, disappeared. The ample waistband was crumpled and drawn in. The trousers flapped where they had previously squeezed.

'Then you need new clothes.' The pater reached for his purse and the son's eyes gleamed. 'Here are ten pounds.' But the pater's hand halted in mid-air. 'I trust ... I believe ...' the hand advanced, the notes were released, 'that they will not be squandered on buns and sweetmeats.'

William straightened his back. 'A banker does not squander banknotes,' he said stiffly.

'Of course not,' said Mr Bunter brightly. 'A new leaf and a new career, eh? I shall talk to Swithin. He will find you a place.'

This was too fast for William. 'I should read more first, Pater, don't you think? Prepare myself. The matter of variable interest mortgages is not yet quite clear to me.'

Mr Bunter again suspected some form of trick, but the young Bunter's face was anxious, solemn.

'Nonsense, my boy. You will learn on the job. I am gratified that my birthday gift has proved so useful. However ...' he turned and scanned the shelves behind him, 'I fancy that this may prove even more interesting to you.' He pulled a large volume from the shelves. 'It is *The Origins and Practice of Banking*, by Sir Benet Bennett, a worthy and informative tome.'

William Bunter decided to let alone the ominous matter of the talk to Swithin, leaving swiftly with the two fivers in his pocket and the worthy tome in his hand.

He was tempted at first to deliver the fivers at once to The Bank. But the pater was right about the trousers. They were abysmal and recalled humiliations. He went out and bought a new pair, tight at the waist because he intended getting slimmer still and too expensive at

£4.16.3d, but there remained £5.3.9d for The Bank. This purchase was a milestone in his financial career. He had realized the need sometimes to make an investment without an immediate return, promising himself that he would not often do so.

He opened the worthy tome and found it disheartening. It was too large, the text was dense, and the language unfamiliar. So he learned a second lesson. A large book with a daunting appearance required a selective approach. Part I was entitled 'History'. He ignored it. History meant what was done and finished with. Other people had gleaned from it whatever was important to know. Part II had a lengthy introduction which he also skipped. C.W. Moss was enough of introduction. Then he sweated over a chapter called Assets and Liabilities and found to his surprise that it was no more than an extended version of what Moss had dealt with in half-a-dozen pages. There were new complexities but he had the feeling that the author was busily inventing problems that might or not occur in fact. Each transaction, he thought, each deal or loan or investment, would have its particular difficulties and there was little point in generalisation.

He was still Bunter, and still Bunterish. He was greedy and obsessed, only his greed and obsession had found a new, and much more rewarding, outlet. He was still at heart lazy, which meant avoiding whatever was not directly concerned with his obsession. In reading Origin and Practice, he paused at sums and figures, not troubling to rework them, simply making certain that the mechanics of the calculation were not beyond him. It was simple arithmetic. Numbers were not squared or cubed. Algebra did not come into it. Logarithms were, as he had thought, irrelevant.

It might be said that Bunter read a quite different book to the one the writer had written, less prolix, less protracted and more pointed, less high-flown and more practical. Through repetition, he mastered unfamiliar words and new terms, consulting the dictionary in his father's study when their meaning remained obscure – making sure to do so when his father was at his desk and would be duly impressed. It was another sound banking practice: to take care over what the customer saw of the business.

The Pater, for now, was the customer, the provider of funds and the focus of operations. But another figure was more often in the young banker's mind. Borrowers who needed fleecing, brokers who needed outwitting, senior staff who needed taking down a peg – all of these bore in his imagination the face of Harry Wharton, his handsome, athletic and popular classmate at Greyfriars, object of envy and chief persecutor. Getting the better of Wharton became a daily sport. Sometimes even the author of Origins and Practice was Wharton. 'Come on Wharton, you pompous fool, get on with it,' Bunter would say as he skipped another passage or jumped a chapter. Wharton was the foe, always well-beaten and occasionally reduced to tears.

The new trousers were no longer tight. The sum in the Bank amounted (the astonished pater became increasingly open-handed) to £101.11.2d. Over-eating was no longer a temptation. William Bunter had developed the habit of nibbling his food like a rabbit, an unappealing sight but effective in reducing the intake. A smart pinstripe jacket hung next to the four-quid trousers in the wardrobe.

Meanwhile Swithin had failed to find him a place, and the one after him also failed. This was no doubt because Mr Bunter's son had a reputation for grossness and idleness among Mr Bunter's friends and none of them had met the slim and serious version. William had worked that out for himself and was careful to avoid the face-to-face interviews that his father proposed, claiming that he was too shy, would not do himself justice, had been frightened off by monstrous schoolmasters. The Pater, delighted with his new son, was easily convinced.

With over a hundred pounds in The Bank, William felt ready to lend and opened the precious Piggy to count the contents. He counted twice and found that there was one shilling less than what appeared in his notebook. One shilling had gone missing. He hunted for it at the back of the shelf and in the cracks of the floorboards. He was ready to accuse the housemaid, thinking that a shilling coin might be small enough to shake from the slot. Then he found it, wedged as a bookmark between the pages of the Benet Bennett.

He cursed his carelessness. He gave himself a lecture. A man should respect any sum of money, no matter how small. All millionaires have learned this. If a man can lose a shilling, he can lose a million. A shilling in 1912 bought a loaf of bread. A loaf of bread was a meal... Bunter suddenly felt tremendously hungry. Not peckish, but ravenous in the old way. He went out, came to Lyons Corner House, bought two cream-filled, jammy, flaky confections with his shilling and ate them one after the other on a bench in the park. They were very good but soon gone, leaving no memory behind. The shilling was once more lost but Bunter had learned another lesson.

The third man whom Mr Bunter talked to came up with a place and William became an assistant cashier at the Midland and Providential, working hours 8 to 5, lunch break half an hour, weekly salary, five pounds. The slim trousers and smart jacket now had a daily outing.

The work was of unequalled tedium, the colleagues of little interest. Bunter filled in columns of figures and added them up, checked other columns filled and added by somebody else, completed forms daily, weekly and monthly, fetched and carried for the cashier and sometimes sat by his side to learn the job. Bunter compared what he did for five pounds at the M&P with what he did for five pounds from the Pater and drew his conclusions. He gritted his teeth, emptied his mind and learned to read the newspapers

which, like most things, takes practice. He daydreamed about Wharton and he daydreamed about wealth.

At the end of two years, he qualified as a cashier and had to keep his mind more on the job. He won respect for never losing a penny or misplacing a form. For the customers – the cattle as he thought of them – he cultivated a supercilious smile that he found did for most circumstances. He saved most of his earnings and by the summer of 1914, The Bank, now in a metal box with a stout lock, had capital of £517.14.3d and the wardrobe had a couple more suits, but Bunter was becoming restless and had started to eat more.

The newspapers began sniffing war. Bunter read the Daily Express, not every word but every page, and like other diligent newspaper readers could see what was coming. He had no feelings about politicians, but the Daily Express favoured Lloyd George and Churchill above the old guard of Asquith and Grey, a view that Bunter unconsciously adopted. The Express was violently anti-German, which Bunter also absorbed, without realizing that there were alternatives. There was the odd hint in the Express that war might not be a bad thing. Swift defeat of the German menace, a shot in the arm for industry, a reshuffle of the pack of politicians and new opportunities of one kind or another. One article mentioned that if there should be a war, Austrian and German companies in London would be closed or taken over, causing Bunter to consider the implications of this.

It had been on his mind that his only hope of escaping his present drudgery was to persuade the old man (no longer called the Pater) to cough up some real money and set him up in business. There were two objections. One was that the old man was of the steady-as-she-goes persuasion and hoped for nothing better for his son than the usual promotions up through the ranks of a solid bank, ending eventually as a branch manager or Head of Section or perhaps something more exalted if he were lucky. The second objection was that the only business that interested William was banking and a bank could not be set up or bought except by the deployment of very substantial sums.

War was declared. Enthusiastic crowds formed on the streets of London. Young men of Bunter's age raced to the Recruiting Offices. Bunter did not join them or give the idea a moment's thought. When the war was two weeks old, he read in the Express that a London company owned by a German – a reinsurance business described as 'modest' – had been bought by a British entrepreneur for £50,000, which the paper thought was about half what it was worth. Bunter cut out the article and took it home. It was a Friday and the weekend lay ahead.

The old man was not keen. £50,000 was a great deal of money, and what was reinsurance anyway?. His son explained. It was a straightforward operation, he said, easily mastered by

someone with a head for figures. It required little initial capital. What exactly had been bought with the fifty thousand, the old man wanted to know.

‘The name, the list of clients, the operating capital, the premises, furniture and equipment.’

‘I am impressed by your enterprise, William, but even by selling all my stocks and mortgaging my property, I could barely raise half that sum.’

‘We will need a partner then,’ said Bunter leaving, with the instinct that at that moment he had what was not a ‘no’ and might be treated as a conditional ‘yes’.

He spent the weekend in the library of the British Museum, consulting books and pamphlets on Insurance, Reinsurance, Company Purchase and Partnerships. There were not many but there were enough. He avoided seeing his father. On Monday morning he rang the Midland & Providential to say that he was sick. It was the first time in three years and no eyebrows were raised. He spent an hour with newspapers at the local library where he found several companies for sale at low prices. A few phone calls narrowed these down to two, both of which he visited. The first was hopeless, the second consisted of a small office in Acton, also selling reinsurance and manned only by a clerk who announced that the Austrian owner had departed leaving him to sell the business. The clerk was happy to be in charge, disturbed at the prospect of losing his job and clueless when it came to anything more complicated than his daily routine. Bunter examined the books, made calculations, asked questions that were mostly not answered, tried out the manager’s chair, inspected the fixtures and fittings and went down the road to talk to a local property dealer to check the value of the premises. In the evening he avoided meeting his father and the following morning phoned in sick again.

The problem was the partner. He knew that his father would pronounce it impossible for one to be found. Bunter had no contacts, no friends to speak of and only one idea, an idea so bizarre that he nearly threw it out and decided to go back to M&P. Instead, he put on his best suit and travelled to Wimbledon to find Harry Wharton. He couldn’t remember the address – perhaps he had never known it – but how many Whartons could there be in Wimbledon? The post office found four and one of these was the bullseye: Sir Evelyn Wharton. Yes, Sir Evelyn. It all came back.

He found Harry Wharton at home, tall, relaxed, confident and handsomer than ever. He was wearing slacks and a sport shirt and looked as if he had come in from the tennis court. He did not recognise the Fat Owl of the Remove and can hardly be blamed for that.

‘I’m Bunter,’ Bunter said.

'No you're not... My word, you are. What happened to you, Bunter? Are you the older brother? I didn't know there was one. Good lord, Bunter, you're a different man. Have you signed up? Everyone has. How did you find me? Why are you here?'

'Have you signed up, Wharton?'

'I've tried of course. They turned me down because of something that showed up in the medical. It's nothing of course. I expect my father put them up to it. He doesn't want me going off to the war. What about you? Eyesight, I suppose.'

Bunter nodded.

'Bad luck,' said Harry Wharton. 'Well, what are you doing with yourself? To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from the new, lean and utterly different Billy Bunter?'

'William. It's William. I'm a banker.'

'My word, are you really? Another surprise. I thought you had trouble adding up.'

It was said in jest but Bunter appeared not to notice. 'I don't,' he said. 'I'm under-manager at the Midland and Providential. I'm about to buy a Reinsurance Company in Acton and I need a partner. Are you interested?'

'No, I'm not. I'll be at another recruiting office this week and if they turn me down too I'll try another one. But thanks for asking, old chap.'

That would have been the end of it, if Sir Evelyn hadn't arrived home, been introduced to William Bunter, banker, and heard the reason for his visit.

'This is very interesting, William. Harry, you should treat this offer with the seriousness it deserves.'

'I shall soon be in the army, Father.'

'Perhaps you will and perhaps you won't. This heart business will need to be looked at. It may take time. You can't just ignore the doctors, you know. Tell me more, William.'

Bunter had his chance to make what later became called a pitch. He managed very well, displaying his knowledge of banking and insurance without boasting, concisely summing up the potential of the Acton business and arguing that the asking price of £50,000 represented around 40 percent of the company's actual value.'

'I don't know anything about banking or insurance, Father,' Harry Wharton protested.

'You don't know much about anything but cricket and tennis, Harry.'

Bunter explained how he envisaged the division of labour. Harry would meet the customers, canvass for new business, receive visitors and so on while he, Bunter, took care of the sums, finances and ledgers.

'We would split the profits 50-50, Sir Evelyn. We'd need one accounts and telephone clerk and some new equipment, nothing expensive.'

'Why is this business so cheap? What's wrong with it?'

Bunter explained.

‘Everything above board, I suppose?’ There seemed something vaguely unsportsmanlike about getting an Austrian’s business on the cheap.

‘My father will put up the money on our side. My father would not be involved in anything that was not above board.’

‘Quite right. Of course. Harry, you should jump at it. Give you something to do apart from this infernal pit-pat with the girls on the tennis court. You can help get the business started while you’re waiting for the army and if the army doesn’t work, you’ve found yourself a proper start, boy.’

This was said with a certain sternness that had an immediate effect. Harry was confident, debonair and favoured by the Gods, but he knew who was the boss in his family and he knew the rules.

By the time Bunter left, the matter was as good as settled. Harry saw him out and in the porch he prodded him in the chest. ‘I shall be in the army in a couple of weeks, Billy Bunter,’ he said, ‘and then you’ll be on your own with your little moneymaking scheme.’

‘My name’s William,’ Bunter said.

The name of Sir Evelyn Wharton acted as a charm on Mr Bunter’s sceptical ear. He moaned exchanging his solid investments for a precarious enterprise, but every now and then he murmured to himself the magic formula ‘Sir Evelyn’, as if it were Sir Evelyn Baring himself who would be his partner. At William’s suggestion an offer of £42,000 was made for the premises, business, goodwill, stock and effects, the clerk made a telephone call to Vienna and a deal was done at £45,000.

‘You will find twenty thousand, Father, and Sir Evelyn twenty-five, which is what he is expecting.’

This five thousand was Bunter’s first unofficial commission. If questioned, he would have said that the price of the company did not include working capital, which was true. He would have argued that the extra five thousand paid in by Sir Evelyn was matched on their side by legal expenses, deed registration and his own professional expertise, including research and negotiation. Since none of these were billed, it would not have added up, legally speaking, but it might have been enough. As things turned out, the matter was never raised.

From the beginning, Harry took no interest in the business, never looked at the documents, sometimes came to the office for an hour or two and joined the army a month later. Sir Evelyn did not interfere, content for Mr Bunter to draw up the articles of partnership and whatever else was necessary. A few weeks after going to France, Harry Wharton was killed by an enemy shell. After the death of his son, Sir Evelyn withdrew from all engagements and by the time he emerged from his seclusion, the Bunter and Wharton

Reinsurance Company was showing a healthy profit, half of which was promptly paid to Sir Evelyn Wharton's account.

When Bunter had managed to put together £25,000 he bought out the Wharton share, by which time Sir Evelyn had made money out of the business. They parted amicably and Bunter never forgot to send a bottle of champagne on Sir Evelyn's birthday. After Harry's death, he had replaced him in the office, daringly, with a woman. This person, Angelica, had been the cleverest as well as the prettiest of the female clerks at M&P. Bunter recruited her by offering her twice the money she was getting at the M&P, shorter hours and a more attractive title. From Junior Bank Clerk she became Deputy Manager of Personnel and Public Relations, which meant that she answered the phone, supervised the clerk, dealt with clients and ran the office. All of this she did with more enthusiasm and aplomb than Harry ever could have done, at a fraction of the price.

Later, Bunter bought out his own father. By this time, Bunter's Bank, as it was now called was making loans, investing in steel, rubber and silk, and advising well-heeled persons on their financial affairs. The staff grew from three to six to twenty. Bunter employed a General Manager, re-named and re-financed the company and pursued his original ambition to own a proper commercial bank by buying out an existing bank and endowing it with his name. By the end of the war, William Bunter had made his first million.

It was not hard work and long hours that was behind Bunter's success. After the first year or so of Bunter and Wharton, he made it a point not to take office work home in the evenings or at the weekends. He read newspapers and books and kept tropical fish, spending many hours watching the little creatures glide and dart. It was a large seawater tank with healthy plantlife, glass kept clean and water oxygenated. It contained fish rarely seen outside their native waters in Indonesia or the Great Barrier Reef. From time to time he would put in an aggressive flesheater and watch to see what else survived. Sometimes not much did. He would take out the flesheater, sell it and start again, which he enjoyed. Later he had a tank for flesheaters only, where some memorable battles took place under his watchful eye.

No, he was not an inveterate worker. As he grew richer, he worked less, knowing by then the crucial stages of a deal or development which he must personally oversee. But he remained single-minded about his original ambition, to make money. He continued to live at home (not such a strange thing in those days), did not drink and had no interest in women, except as creatures to be observed. He liked women who were quiet and efficient and unafraid and avoided the chattering, flattering ones, some of whom made a play for him on account of his riches. To one of these, a Mrs Cockpurse, he gave five hundred pounds on condition that she never bother him again. He had his second million by then and the sum was trifling to him. He likened it to the shilling he once spent on two cream slices.

He continued to take an interest in the theory and practice of banking and much of his reading was devoted to that. He also interested himself in the economics of government. His political views did not change. He disliked the Germans, ignored the French and felt a certain sympathy with the Russians. Russia held some romantic or mythical appeal for him and he thought the Russians had shot themselves in the foot with their revolution. He had no objection to socialism but for the fact that socialists made it difficult for people to make real money and societies where nobody made real money ended up poor.

In British politics, he faithfully followed Churchill, whom he considered a natural outcast, like himself. When Churchill switched back to the Conservative Party in 1925, Bunter voted Tory for the first time. Then Churchill was appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer and returned Britain to the Gold Standard.

The return to the Gold Standard was little understood at the time and is little understood today. Yes, it fixed the currency exchange rates to the value of gold, but the significance of this eludes most of us and eluded even Churchill at the time. He admitted that he was no economist, consulted the experts at the Treasury and did as they suggested, which sounds eminently sensible for an inexperienced Chancellor. But what the Treasury experts said disagreed fundamentally with the doctrines of John Maynard Keynes.

Keynes was the only economist of the twentieth century whose name everyone knows. He was at the Peace of Versailles and wrote a book about it called *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. He strongly opposed Churchill over the Gold Standard and wrote a book about that, called *The Economic Consequences of Mr Churchill*. William Bunter read both. He understood the essence of the Keynes creed to be that in times of economic difficulty – falling production, rising unemployment, multiplying bankruptcies, labour unrest – the government should spend their way out of trouble. They should create employment, build roads, electrify rural areas – it didn't matter too much what because the point was to get people back to work, instil confidence, create business opportunities, right the ship and pay the price. The price was inflation. How could the government of a depressed economy pay for large increases in public expenditure? By printing money.

The treasury experts did not at all like this. Their watchword was and had always been, sound financial management, in other words balancing the books. Their creed was: collect taxes and spend what's in the kitty. Do not – it was a favourite motto – mortgage the future by increasing the public debt.

Almost immediately after the return to the Gold Standard, the British economy headed downwards. Factories closed, the mines were on the point of collapse, unemployment increased, workers protested. In 1926 came the General Strike, which stopped the country in its tracks and frightened the hell out of Liberals and Conservative alike.

Bunter saw his profits begin to fall away. What had seemed easy during and after the war began to seem very difficult. He cut his workforce by a third and reduced his liabilities. Deposits in the Bunter Bank shrank. Commodity prices fell. The return on investments dwindled. Bunter began to have doubts about Churchill and went back to his books.

What the Gold Standard meant was that the currency rates were tied to the value of something not subject to the usual ups-and-downs of the market. When times were hard, people bought gold, causing it to maintaining its value. When the good times came back and commodity prices started to rise, people sold their gold and put their money into something else. Thus gold was immunised from the general movement of markets. So too were the currency rates. This in turn meant that currencies were overvalued in hard times and undervalued when the economy boomed. To a banker, this seemed perverse and wrong and most of the bankers, sooner or later, became Keynesians. Bunter was one of them.

Some argued that the rise of Keynesian economics saved the US from the Depression, obviated repeated slumps, kept unemployment at reasonable levels and so on. But ... there were buts. Inflation became endemic in many economies, including the British. The rise in Public Debt in major economies did indeed mortgage the future. There would be, argued the pessimists, a price to pay in the end. When debt reached a point where there was no hope of it ever being repaid, lenders would lend no more, creditors would call in their debt, governments would default and countries would go bankrupt.

What Keynes did in effect, was to create the credit mentality. Keep buying and if the money runs out borrow more, and if the lenders want repayment, borrow from elsewhere. If you're a government, print money.

In the mid-twenties, Bunter was an economist of a rare breed. He had never been near a university and would not have dreamed of doing so. He had no intention of writing articles, let alone books. Yet he had read a great deal and absorbed more than most. He had made two millions and knew about Stock Exchanges, money markets and commodity markets from practical experience, as well as mergers and hedge funds. Yes, there were hedge funds in the Twenties only not under that name. Bunter managed one.

He saw that Keynes was right if you were a banker or a venture capitalist or one of the ten or twenty percent of workers liable to lose their jobs in a slump. He saw that Churchill and the Treasury Experts were right if you valued long-term financial stability, thrift and prudence in the average citizen and caution when paying on what in the 1950s was called the never-never, and is now called the credit card.

Reluctantly, for he still admired him, Bunter abandoned Churchill, abandoned the concept of balancing your books and eagerly embraced the culture of credit, which was a banker's dream. His first move, in 1926, was to cut lending rates at the Bunter Bank. His

next was to employ full-time credit salesmen to peddle loans from town to town and house to house. These attractive loans, on easy terms, easily found takers. Collateral for the loans was generally the family home, but this was not emphasised in the loan documents. It was often scarcely mentioned. 'But you did agree to it, Mrs A. We talked of it, Mr Brodie. Yes, Mr C, it is clearly stated in our agreement, here in the small print.' Loans went out and if they were not repaid, houses came in. Bunter became a major owner of house property in the London area. If he could afford to, he kept the forfeited house until prices went up, if not he sold it for what he could get, which was invariably more than the unpaid loan. William Bunter became a loan shark, an aggressive flesheating creature in a tank of weedsuckers.

He observed the plight of householders thrown out by bailiffs and he did not cry for them. He had spent too many years as the Fat Owl, the butt of cruel jokes, the target of harsh words. Once he was with the bailiffs at a house repossession and the man of the house, an ample person, fell and wept on his shoulder, repeating 'But what shall we do, what shall we do?'

'Get thin', Bunter said. 'Cut out all luxuries, expect little, focus your mind and do not deviate from your purpose.' It must have sounded like a foreign language or a speech escaped from the self-help lecture hall.

Thanks to the cheap loans, William Bunter's business began to expand again. To protect himself from future downturns, he diversified his business, reducing his dependence on standard bank operations in favour of property speculation (of which he now knew a great deal), and what is now called the futures market, or gambling on the movements of commodity prices. (There was a futures market too in the Twenties. The Twenties, as we recall, was the decade when money was discovered).

By 1929, Bunter had his third million and there were not many richer men in England. He was confident again, riding the crest of a wave. The opportunities seemed endless. He acquired crippled firms on the cheap, sold what was worth selling, demolished the old plant and sold off the property for building or development. When a firm is crippled, it becomes unable even to calculate the value of its own assets, like a very old man starving in his own house.

In the summer of 1929, there was a big London retail company, with a name widely known, being run by a man incapable of managing a stall on the beach. The profits disappeared, the machinery was run down, the order book empty, the managers had their hands in the tills, everything that could be wrong was wrong. What it had was a name. It possessed property in rich places, its owners had parleyed with kings and princes. It was to be the jewel in Bunter's crown. But he could not afford it. When it knew itself bankrupt, it

would be worthless and could be had for a song, but by that time the glitter of the name would be gone. Besides, when would that time come? These big old firms can keep going by an inertia of decay, by the glamour of their past and the impossibility of their collapse. Such was Bunter's Golden Goose, or as we shall call it for convenience, the BGG.

Under the present management, it would fall, that was sure. But under a new, vigorous, canny hand, it could become great again, perhaps greater than before. Purge the corrupt managers, come up with some new products, change the packaging (although not its colour, as well-known as Harrods green), lower some prices and inflate others. Re-brand it, as they would say today, and it would surely thrive, and Bunter with it. He decided to pay the price. It meant liquidation of many limbs of his empire, including the original Reinsurance operation in Acton Town, for which he retained some affection. But it was a seller's market in the summer of 1929 and Bunter sold well. The asking price was colossal but by early August the BGG was his. Within two months, he had sacked twenty managers and recruited new ones. Old walls were re-faced, old doors freshly painted, new product lines were set up and marketed. On October 29, Wall Street crashed followed swiftly by the London Stock Exchange, the price of key commodities and the rest of the shebang.

Churchill lost a hundred thousand overnight and Richard Hannay lost his house in Rutland, moving to a much less desirable residence in Surrey and being obliged to return to gainful employment.

The new Bunter-owned BGG never had a chance. By Christmas Billy Bunter was bankrupt. It seems cruel to trace the man's fate thereafter and the trail is inconclusive. According to one version, he started eating again and regained his former shape. No smart suits would fit and the old broadcheck trousers came out again. Another story has it that he gathered the crumbs left of his fortune and bought a very small house, almost a shed, in Ealing. He gave up reading economics and turned to metaphysics.

Certain it is that his big Mayfair house, with an entire floor occupied by exotic fish tanks, was sold. During the subsequent removals, the flesheaters got in amongst the weedsuckers and devoured them.