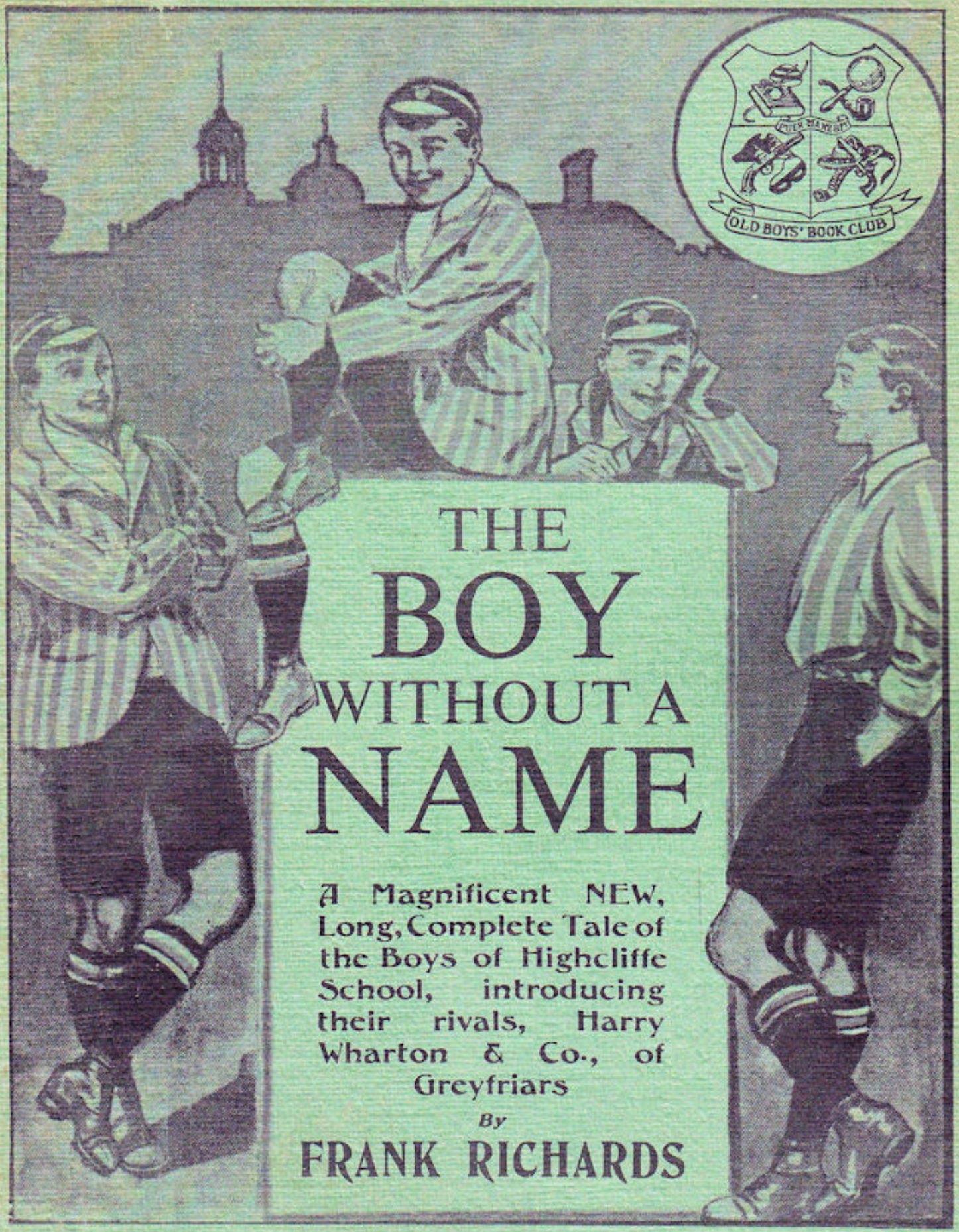

THE BOY WITHOUT A NAME

A Magnificent NEW, Long, Complete Tale of the Boys of Highcliffe School, introducing their rivals, Harry Wharton & Co., of Greyfriars

By

FRANK RICHARDS

THE BOY WITHOUT A NAME

and

RIVALS AND CHUMS

by

FRANK RICHARDS

Reprinted from the original

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PREFACE

Charles Hamilton once wrote that "The Housemaster's Homecoming" was the best story he ever did for the Gem. The two Highcliffe stories reprinted in this volume are taken from the original issues of the Boys' Friend Library which had been carefully preserved in the author's own, otherwise rather battered, collection of old numbers. It is evident from this that he included the "Boy Without a Name", and "Rivals and Chums", in the "best ever" bracket, and it can be safely assumed that few readers would disagree with his point of view. It is curious to reflect however, that these stories were all published in the year 1915, a period in which the Gem is generally considered to have been in decline and the Magnet had not, as yet, found its full measure. Of course, 1915 was "Talbot's Year" and it was fitting that the Double Summer Number should emerge as the highlight in the history of this famous character. The "Boy Without a Name" is, perhaps, a reflection of a pre-war holiday mood in some alpine magnificence, where the imagination, and genius, of its creator found a renewed stimulus. The sequel, "Rivals and Chums" was not written until after the outbreak of war. This is the more powerful story of the two and its dramatic climax in the gaming room might well contain an autobiographic note based on the author's recent, and less elevated, experiences abroad. Certainly, the accounts of the several nocturnal events undertaken by Ponsonby and Co., are written in the best tradition.

Unlike the other Hamilton schools, Highcliffe bore a distinct resemblance to Narkover and there was very little to be found here of the tough, breezy outlook of the Greyfriars boys. The snobbery, bullying and somewhat doubtful activities of juniors and seniors alike was almost entirely unrelieved, and the incredible behaviour of Mr Mobbs would have been quite unacceptable in any other environment. Of the many "nuts" who people the Highcliffe scene, the Ponsonby brand of villainy always provided good dramatic material, but it was the Caterpillar who emerged

as the most arresting character in this unsavoury collection of young gentlemen. Typically enough, all the Hamilton aristocratic schoolboys are individually drawn and the lazy, pampered De Courcy captures the attention much as Cardew did in the later years, but for very different reasons. The generous nature and keen sense of justice underlying the superficial insouciance so successsfully portrayed in the Highcliffe boy had no place in the neurotic behaviour of Ralph Reckness Cardew, and it is not without interest to ponder how the story of the Courtenay/De Courcy friendship might have developed, had Cardew played the De Courcy role. In contrast with these two quite dissimilar examples of the spoilt products of money and privilege, the weary Mauleverer seldom succeeded in coming to life at Greyfriars and, apart from an amusing trifle with the girl in the bun-shop, could do little but yawn and sleep.

The hero of these two stories, first Clare and later Courtenay is just one more amalgam of British Backbone and Stern Duty, so much in vogue in those days. Too good to be true, his presence is essential as a kind of catalyst for Ponsonby and Mobbs to sharpen their teeth on and to pluck the Caterpillar, " a brand from the burnin'." So there it is: Ponsonby the vicious, Vavasour the vapid, Gadsby the gad-fly (What's in a name!) aided and abetted in the rear by Mobbs the snob. A distinctly unpleasant collection.

The original issues are reproduced here exactly as they were published over half a century ago, except that the pages have been slightly enlarged. The photographing and printing from the faded and, at times, crotchety old type proved a lengthy and trying problem, but it was possible to read bits of the story en route and this was an enormous help.

Once more we owe the privilege of having a copy of these famous yarns on our bookshelves to the kindly goodwill of Mr Leonard Matthews, of the Fleetway Publications, who so readily gave his permission for the re-print. It should be noted, however, that these editions are always strictly limited and members and friends are reminded that stocks do eventually become exhausted.

Happy Reading,

Maidstone 1969

John Wernham

The Boy Without a Name!

A Magnificent, New, Long, Complete Story of the Boys of Highcliffe, introducing their rivals, Harry Wharton & Co., of Greyfriars School.

By FRANK RICHARDS.

CHAPTER 1.

A Disgrace to the School.

"IT'S a rotten shame!"

Thus Ponsonby, the captain of the Fourth Form at Highcliffe.

And the crowd of juniors in the common-room at Highcliffe School echoed, without a dissentient voice:

"Shame!"

It was quite an excited meeting. Ponsonby & Co., the "nuts" of Highcliffe, were there in all their glory, and most of the other members of the Fourth Form were present. They were all excited, and they were all indignant.

"But is it quite certain, Pon, dear boy?" asked Gadsby.

"It's a dead cert," said Ponsonby. "I had it from Mobby. Of course, Mobby doesn't like it any more than we do. Mobby's a bit of a worm himself, but he kicks at the idea of having an out-and-out cad like this fellow Clare in the Fourth Form at Highcliffe. It's a rotten shame!"

"Absolutely!" said Vavasour.

"Abso-blessed-lutely!" said Monson.

"The question is—are we going to stand it?" exclaimed Ponsonby heatedly.

"Ahem! Looks to me as if we've got to," said Gadsby. "The Head has forgotten to ask us our opinion on the subject. Awfully careless of the old boy, but there you are!"

Some of the Fourth-Formers laughed, and Ponsonby frowned.

"Oh, don't be funny!" he exclaimed angrily. "This isn't a time for cackling! Are we going to have that rank outsider shoved in on us like this? Why, the fellow is a nobody from nowhere! Doesn't even know his own name, so I hear!"

"My hat!"

"Pretty specimen to come here, I must say!" drawled Vavasour. "Why don't they send him to a Council school, or something? I think that's what they call 'em."

"He's been to one, Mobby says," replied Ponsonby.

"Great Scott! And now he's got the cheek to come here!"

"Yes."

"We won't stand it!"

"Never!"

"Disgrace to the school—absolutely!" said Vavasour. "Why, my dear boys, we could never hold up our heads again! Couldn't look a fellow in the face afterwards, by gad! The Head must be off his rocker!"

"It's some beastly scholarship," explained Ponsonby. "This fellow—Clare I think he's called—is a beastly swot! Grinds, you know—swots in

the evenings to get a chance of shoving himself in where he's not wanted! Some frightful rotter who drops his 'h's,' and eats with his knife, you know!"

"Horrid!"

"Rotten!"

Ponsonby jumped on a chair, and held up his hand.

"Gentlemen of the Fourth——"

"Hear, hear!"

"I put it to this meeting that the Fourth Form at Highcliffe protests against this cad Clare being admitted to the school——"

"Hear, hear!"

"And that we take measures to keep him out——"

"Oh!"

"And if we can't do that, that we make a solemn compact to make his life not worth living, so that he will be glad to get out of his own accord."

"Hear, hear!"

"Bravo, Pon!"

"That's the programme!"

"And, first of all, we'll go to Mobby in a deputation, and put it to him straight, and ask him to represent our views to the Head. As our Form-master, Mobbs can speak up for us. Dr. Voysey is bound to listen to him!"

"Phew!"

"Hands up all who are willing to come with me to Mobby!" shouted Ponsonby.

Every hand went up. The dandy of Highcliffe was the acknowledged leader of the Fourth, and all his faithful followers were willing to back him up. There was a shout of applause.

In the midst of the uproar, the door of the common-room opened, and a new-comer strolled in with his hands in his pockets. He was an extremely well-dressed fellow, with curly, flaxen hair parted in the middle and sleepy blue eyes. He glanced at the excited crowd with an air of lazy interest.

"Hallo! What's the row?" he drawled, in a lazy voice which suggested that he found it almost too much trouble to speak at all.

"Come in, Caterpillar!" called out Ponsonby. "We want you."

"Not a rag, I hope," yawned the Caterpillar. "Too much fag, my infant."

"Oh, don't be an ass! We've all got to stand together in this matter," said Ponsonby.

"Thanks! I prefer to sit down," said the Caterpillar, stretching his long limbs in an arm-chair. "Now, tell me all about it—and don't shout!"

"Look here, you lazy ass——"

"Gently, dear boy!"

Ponsonby made an angry gesture, but he contained his wrath. He wanted the assistance of the new-comer in his enterprise. For De Courcy, of the Fourth—generally called the Caterpillar—was a fellow of great wealth and tremendously high connections, and was always treated with the greatest distinction by Mr. Mobbs, the master of the Fourth Form. Indeed, De Courcy might have been the leader of the Highcliffe "nuts" if he had not been too lazy to exert himself for leadership or anything else. He generally chummed with Ponsonby & Co., but, as he had explained, with cool insolence, he was with them but not of them. But the fact that the Caterpillar had a tremendous allowance, and an uncle who was an earl, and a brother who was a baronet, made the Highcliffe "nuts" put up with a good deal of cheek from him.

"Now, tell your uncle what it's all about!" said the Caterpillar, wagging a delicately-manicured forefinger at Ponsonby.

"There's a cad coming here——" began Ponsonby.
"By Jove!"
"A rank outsider——"
"He won't be the only one!" drawled the Caterpillar cheerfully. "But what is there particularly outside about this outsider?"
"He's been to a Council school!"
"You don't say so!"
"But I do!" growled Ponsonby savagely, more than suspecting that the Caterpillar's shocked exclamation was intended humorously. "And he's some nobody who comes from nowhere—doesn't even know his own name. Was picked up somewhere by somebody, and now he's coming here on one of those outside scholarships that ought to have been abolished long ago."
"A filthy swot, you know!" said Gadsby.
"Some horrid fellow who works," said the Caterpillar, with a nod. "It makes me tired merely to think of it. I can understand your feelings, dear boys. The company of a fellow who works—it must make you feel rotten. Some fellow who drops his initial 'h's' instead of his final 'g's.' Awful!"
"Oh, don't be a silly ass!" exclaimed Ponsonby. "We've agreed that we're not going to stand him!"
"No? You won't allow the Head to let him in?"
"Fathead! We're going in a deputation to Mr. Mobbs, to ask him to put it to the Head that it's a disgrace to the School."
"Well, Mobby will agree with you," yawned the Caterpillar. "There never was a snob like Mobby—not even in the Fourth Form here!"
"Why, you ass——"
"But I don't see what Mobby can do," resumed the Caterpillar. "If the kid's coming here on a schol, the schol is his property, and can't be taken away from him."
"Oh, that can be arranged!" said Ponsonby. "Of course, a cad like that is only after money. He can be paid off easily enough."
"We'd raise the money ourselves rather than have him here," said Vavasour. "My pater would back us up. I know that. Why, what will our people think when they hear that the cad is among us?"
"What do you think of it yourself, Caterpillar, you ass?"
"I never think, deah boy; too much fag," said the Caterpillar. "Thinking is a thing that is entirely in the province of the lower classes. But I admit that it is—well, rather thick. Still, if the outsider is a pushing cad, as you seem to think, you won't be able to get rid of him. Probably he wants to get among his betters, and he will stick to that schol like—like a limpet—is it a limpet?—to a giddy rock."
"We won't stand him! If Mobby can't do anything, we'll take the matter into our own hands!" exclaimed Gadsby hotly.
"Can't you suggest something instead of sitting there like a Chinese mandarin, yawning your silly head off?" exclaimed Ponsonby in exasperation.
De Courcy nodded.
"Certainly! I'll give you a tip."
"Go ahead!"
"This awful outsider mayn't be a perfect beast, after all."
"Rot!"
"He may have his good points——"
"Rubbish!"
"And if you take him kindly in hand, you may turn him into a respectable person, worthy to appear in public with even our noble 'nuts' of the Fourth," drawled the Caterpillar. "That's my tip! Take him to your bosoms, and be good to him."

"You—you ass!"
"You silly chump!"
"You howling duffer!"
"You burblin' idiot!"
The Caterpillar yawned.
"Well, that's my tip, for what it's worth," he remarked. "But if you prefer your own way, go ahead! I'll look on."
"You'll come with us to Mobby?" demanded Ponsonby.
"Thanks! No."
"Why not?"
"Too much fag!"
"Look here, you crass idiot——"
"Oh, don't shout!" said the Caterpillar plaintively. "You make me tired. You know you make me tired when you shout, Pon. Don't do it, there's a good chap."
"Come on, you fellows!" exclaimed Ponsonby savagely. "Leave that silly idiot there to go to sleep! It's up to us to look after the honour of the Form."
"Hear, hear!"
"The honour of the Form is quite safe in your hands, Pon, I'm sure," said the Caterpillar gracefully. "I leave it to you with every confidence. You'll look after the honour of the Form rippingly, unless you get sacked some day for pub-haunting or betting on gee-gees!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Follow me!" shouted the exasperated Ponsonby. "I've a jolly good mind to punch your head, Caterpillar!"
"Oh, don't!"
"You burblin' ass!"
"Don't shout, dear boy! Can't you call a fellow names in a moderate tone?"
Ponsonby turned away with a snort of rage, and led his excited followers from the common-room. The Caterpillar looked after them with a sleepy smile.

CHAPTER 2.

Nothing Doing!

MR. MOBBS, the master of the Fourth Form at Highcliffe, was in his study.
There was a frown upon Mr. Mobbs's thin, meagre face. He was not in a good temper.
The news which had so exasperated Ponsonby & Co. had had an almost equally exasperating effect upon Mr. Mobbs.
He had never seen the boy Clare, and knew nothing whatever about him. But he had taken a dislike to him already, even before he had put in an appearance at Highcliffe.
Mr. Mobbs was a first-class tuft-hunter. He was born a toady. He toadied to Ponsonby & Co. without limit. None knew better than Mr. Mobbs the "doggishness" of the Highcliffe "nuts," who prided themselves on being "doggish." But Mr. Mobbs closed his eyes to the fact that they smoked in their studies, and played bridge there; and he more than suspected—but was careful never to discover—that they had dealing with bookmakers and other persons whose acquaintance could hardly be considered desirable for schoolboys.
Mr. Mobbs was quite a genius at keeping his eyes closed when it did not

suit him to have them open. He did not realise that, as is the case with all toadies, he was made use of and despised as a reward. Mr. Mobbs hoped great things in the future from the high connections of the fellows to whom he gave a very easy time at Highcliffe, and from the fellows themselves when they left school. And so thoroughly was he imbued with the spirit of toadying and snobbery that he shared to the full the feeling of the "nuts" against the outsider who was going to force his way into Highcliffe.

Indeed, less fortunately placed fellows in his own Form, like Smithson and Benson, whose people were poor, did not find Mr. Mobbs so accommodating as Ponsonby & Co. found him. All his harshness was reserved for those unlucky fellows. And the new boy who was coming to Highcliffe was pretty certain to find his Form-master much more prejudiced against him than were the "nuts" themselves.

Rap!

"Come in!" snapped Mr. Mobbs.

His frowning brow cleared as Ponsonby appeared in the doorway. Mr. Mobbs always had a kindly smile for Ponsonby.

"Come in, my dear Ponsonby," he said. "Dear me! What——" Mr. Mobbs could not help looking surprised as a crowd of fellows followed Ponsonby in, and a crowd more swarmed in the doorway and outside the study.

"We're a deputation, sir," said Ponsonby.

"Dear me!"

"It's about that new cad, sir."

"Ahem!"

"We've talked it over, sir," went on Ponsonby, "and the whole Fourth Form thinks that it's a shame, sir."

"Absolutely!" said Vavasour.

"A disgrace to the school, sir," said Gadsby.

"The Greyfriars fellows will chip us about it," said Monson. "Everybody will chip us. We really don't think we ought to stand it, sir."

"I am afraid I am helpless in the matter, my dear boys," said Mr. Mobbs. "I fully understand your feelings, and enter into them. You are naturally displeased, and disgusted——"

"That's it, sir."

"You dislike the idea of this wretched boy, trained in a common school, bringing with him all the offensive manners of the lower classes, coming here to mix with the sons of gentlemen. I fully understand your feelings. I may say that I share them."

"Bravo, sir!"

"But it is out of my power to interfere," said Mr. Mobbs, with a shake of the head.

"We thought you might go to the Head, sir," said Ponsonby eagerly. "Go to him and tell him what the whole School thinks on the subject. The seniors would say the same as we do. The Sixth won't like it, any more than the Fourth."

"Quite true."

"Well, sir, Dr. Voysey can't disregard the feelings of the whole School," urged Ponsonby.

"I think that Dr. Voysey sympathises with you to some extent, and understands," said Mr. Mobbs. "But it is, unfortunately, out of his power, also, to keep this boy away."

"Oh, sir! The Head——"

"You see, this Clare has won a scholarship—for which he would never have entered if he had had the slightest proper feeling, certainly—but it is now his legal right to come into the Fourth Form at Highcliffe, and stay

here for three years. These open scholarships, of course, were never intended for boys of the class of this—this Clare. At all events, of recent times they had been bestowed exclusively upon sons of gentlemen, whose presence here could not be objected to. The action of this boy Clare in entering at all for this scholarship is a sign of the times," said Mr. Mobbs sadly. "Common boy as he is, he completely outdistanced his competitors, among whom were the sons of a distinguished general and an admiral."

"But the Head, sir——"

"I may tell you that Dr. Voysey has already been in communication with the—the person, with a view to—to exchanging the scholarship for a monetary compensation," said Mr. Mobbs. "The impertinent fellow has refused to entertain the idea."

"Cheeky bounder!"

"Impudent rotter!"

"His intention is to force himself among his betters, and, as the matter stands, he cannot be prevented," said Mr. Mobbs. "But there is one resource. I think I can leave it to the boys of Highcliffe to make this wretched intruder understand his true place here. You will allow no familiarity from this person. You will treat him as his conduct deserves."

"What-ho!" said Gadsby.

"You will make him understand that, although he can force himself upon the company of gentlemen, they know how to keep him at a proper distance," suggested Mr. Mobbs.

"Of course, we shouldn't have anything to do with the cad, excepting perhaps to lick him and teach him manners," said Ponsonby. "But surely, sir, the Head could object to such a worm coming here? A scholarship kid has to be decent, at least. Well, a fellow of this character——"

"It appears that there is nothing against his personal character," said Mr. Mobbs. "The Head has inquired carefully into that matter. He is answered for by a clergyman, who is an old Highcliffe boy himself, and has, in fact, helped this—this Clare to obtain the scholarship, by giving him tuition, and so forth. He has raised his hand aganst his own alma mater!" said Mr. Mobbs solemnly.

"Shame!"

"Then—then the cad can't be kept out, sir?" said Ponsonby.

"I fear not."

"When is the beast coming, sir?"

"He arrives to-morrow."

"And we've got to stand him?"

"I am afraid so; but, as I have pointed out, you can treat him with the contempt he deserves, and keep him at a proper distance. Unfeeling as he evidently is, it is not impossible that such treatment may make him change his mind, and become willing to relieve the school of his presence."

Ponsonby gritted his teeth.

"We'll jolly well make him sorry he came, anyway!" he said.

"Ahem! Of course, I must not discuss such matters," said Mr. Mobbs. "I must treat this boy with justice—bare justice. But in meting out to him the contempt he has earned, you may be assured at least of my sympathy."

"Thank you, sir."

Ponsonby & Co. withdrew. They withdrew in a decidedly bad temper. The deputation to Mr. Mobbs had been quite unproductive. The outsider was to come.

The Caterpillar gave them an inquiring look as they came back savagely into the common-room.

"Any luck, dear boys?" he drawled.

"Mobby can't do anything," snarled Ponsonby.

De Courcy laughed.

"I could have told you that, my infants. You'd better take my tip, after all."

"Rats!"

"The fellow mayn't be such an awful rotter, you know——"

"We'll jolly well make him sorry he ever set foot in Highcliffe!" snapped Ponsonby. "He's coming to-morrow. We're up against him from the beginning. Every fellow in the Fourth has got to back up."

"Hear, hear!"

"Count me out," said the Caterpillar.

Ponsonby gave the slacker of the Fourth a furious look.

"Look here, Caterpillar, do you mean to say that you're going to side with this filthy outsider—a chap who picks his teeth with a fork?" he bawled.

De Courcy shuddered.

"My dear boy!" he protested. "Impossible! I shall be very careful indeed to keep at a distance from him! Why, he will probably smell of onions!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Then why won't you back up against the cad?"

"Too much fag."

"Oh, never mind the Caterpillar," said Gadsby. "We can handle the rotter ourselves. We'll show him that we don't want him at Highcliffe."

"Why couldn't he go to Greyfriars?" growled Monson. "They like scholarship cads there; they make a fuss of them. Why, the last time we played cricket with them they had a scholarship cad in their eleven—honour bright! He could go to Greyfriars, and find a welcome there, you know."

Ponsonby uttered a sudden ejaculation.

"My hat!"

His followers looked at him inquiringly. They could see that an idea was working in the brain of the great Ponsonby.

"I've got an idea!" said Ponsonby, his eyes gleaming. "Some of us will go to the station to-morrow—it's a half-holiday—and meet the cad——"

"What!"

"Draw it mild, Pon!"

"Rubbish!"

"I tell you it's a wheeze," said Ponsonby; and he proceeded to explain. And as he explained, there was a howl of laughter from the Fourth-Formers, and even the Caterpillar condescended to smile.

CHAPTER 3.

Ponsonby's Little Joke.

ARTHUR CLARE stepped from the train in Courtfield Station.

He was a well-built, athletic-looking lad. His face, if not exactly handsome, was honest and frank, and pleasing in expression. It had a thoughtful cast, as of one who had thought more, and perhaps suffered more, than was usual in a lad of his years. The Highcliffe "nuts" would have noticed at once that his clothes, though presentable enough, were by no means of the cut that was usual at Highcliffe. The scholarship boy had had more important matters to consider—though Ponsonby & Co. would hardly have admitted that there were more important matters than the cut of a pair of trousers.

Clare looked about him, and moved along the train, with his coat over his arm. His modest trunk had been bumped out of the guard's van. The Courtfield porter touched his cap.

"Call a cab, sir?"

"No, thank you," said Clare. "I want my trunk sent on to Highcliffe. Is it far to walk?"

"About a mile, sir. Cab's waiting outside."

"Thanks; I don't need it."

And, having arranged about his trunk, Arthur Clare quitted the station. He had his own reasons for not taking the cab—reasons which would have made Ponsonby & Co. smile. Money was not plentiful in the pockets of the new boy.

Outside the station, Clare glanced into the busy High Street of Courtfield. Three schoolboys in silk hats and Etons were lounging outside.

At the sight of Clare, they exchanged a rapid glance, and came towards him. They stood in a row and raised their silk hats.

Clare, a little puzzled, raised his cap in reply. He guessed that the fellows belonged to Highcliffe School.

"Clare, I suppose?" said Ponsonby.

"That is my name."

"The new chap for Highcliffe—what?"

"Yes."

Ponsonby, Vavasour, and Monson looked him over. Ponsonby even extracted an eyeglass from his pocket, jammed it into his eyes, and inspected Clare. They seemed to be examining him as if he were some strange animal, and they were desirous of studying his points; and they continued to do so for a full minute, without speaking. Clare began to grow red.

"You belong to Highcliffe?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"Oh, yaas!" said Monson.

"Absolutely," said Vavasour.

"Then perhaps you'll tell me the way?"

"Certainly!" said Ponsonby. "In fact, we've come down to meet you, and show you the way, in case you should go wrong."

"That's very kind of you!"

"Don't mench!" said Ponsonby airily. "We're always kind to new boys—especially scholarship boys. We dote on scholarship kids at Highcliffe!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Ponsonby turned his eyeglass severely upon his two companions.

"Shut up!" he said. "Don't make the new kid think I don't mean what I say. The fact is, Bear—I think your name is Bear——"

"My name is Clare."

"Yes, yes; my mistake," said Ponsonby blandly. "The fact is, Clare, we take this as an honour."

Clare looked at him keenly. He was no fool, and he had had some inward misgivings about his probable reception at Highcliffe. It seemed to him that these three well-dressed young fellows were bent upon pulling his leg, and that there was an under-current of hostility, barely concealed by their bland manners. Yet, if they had come to the station to meet him, they could scarcely be hostile, he reflected. At all events, he was not quarrelsome, and he did not mean to take offence until it was past doubt that offence was intended.

"Quite an honour!" said Monson. "In fact, you're the only Council school bounder that we have at Highcliffe."

"Bounder?" repeated Clare.

"That's merely an expression of mine. Don't mind me! What I mean is

that this distinction for our School is quite new, and we are justly proud of it."

"Yaas, absolutely," said Vavasour—his usual remark.

"And in case you should have any doubts on the point, we came to meet you, and take you under our wing, and look after you generally," said Ponsonby.

"You're very kind."

"Not at all! I congratulate you, Bear—I mean Clare."

"I—I don't quite see——"

"You don't smell of onions," explained Ponsonby.

"Onions!" repeated Clare, in astonishment.

"Yes. We fully expected that you would smell of onions. Are not onions the chief sustenance of persons who go to Council schools?"

Ponsonby asked this question with so much innocence that Clare could not decide whether it was prompted by cheek or sheer stupidity. He resolved to give the Highcliffe junior the benefit of the doubt.

"No," he replied; "not wholly."

"Dear me! We live and learn," said Ponsonby, in surprise. "You've bought your eau-de-Cologne for nothing, Vav. He does not smell of onions or—or bacon, or anything, in fact. You might pass him in the street without knowing that he was there."

Clare grew a little restive.

"Thank you for meeting me," he said. "I think I'll be getting on to Highcliffe. Will you tell me which is the way from here?"

"We're going to show you," said Ponsonby. "Come along with us."

"Thank you."

Clare walked down the High Street with the Highcliffe fellows. They turned into the road leading to Greyfriars School, but Clare, who was a stranger in the district, was quite unaware of that fact. He naturally assumed that they were bearing for Highcliffe, his destination. He could not but feel grateful for the kindness of the trio in meeting him and taking him along with them, and yet he felt ill at ease in their company. That they were making fun of him among themselves, he could hardly avoid observing. But he was willing to put that down to the exuberant spirits of junior schoolboys, and he knew, too, that any new kid in a school was likely to be japed a little.

Ponsonby & Co. sauntered elegantly down the lane. The great Ponsonby proceeded to draw the new boy for the benefit of his comrades.

"I hear that you've got one of the Foundation Scholarships?" he remarked.

Clare nodded.

"Rather a fag—what?" said Ponsonby.

"I had to work hard," said Clare, with a smile. "Scholarships are not picked up very easily, you know."

"I suppose not. Did you learn all the necessary things in your Board-school?"

"I went to the continuation classes," explained Clare, "and I had a lot of help from Mr. Tracy, the vicar where I lived. He used to be at Highcliffe when he was a boy. He helped me a very great deal."

"Helped you to pinch the schol—what?"

"I—I don't think it can be called pinching. I won it."

"Oh, that's merely an expression of mine!" said Ponsonby. "Of course, you know, those scholarships were really intended for gentlemen."

Clare flushed.

"But perhaps Bear—I mean Clare—looks upon himself as a gentleman now that he has come to Highcliffe," sniggered Monson.

"Oh, rats!" said Ponsonby. "Clare wouldn't be such an ass as that—would you, Clare?"

"Coming to Highcliffe makes no difference, anyway," said Clare. "Mr. Tracy has told me that any fellow is a gentleman who acts decently."

"Queer old sport he must be!" said Ponsonby, laughing.

"And I agree with him," said Clare quietly.

"Go hon!"

Clare halted in the road.

"I think you'd better go on without me," he said. "I don't want to quarrel with you—especially as you've been kind enough to come and meet me. But I can't very well let you talk to me like that!"

"Oh, keep your wool on!" said Ponsonby. "We're simply curious. We've never seen a chap of your sort before, you know, and you take us a little by surprise. But we shall get used to you in time."

"Chap can get used to anything," said Monson solemnly.

"I've heard," went on Ponsonby, "that you don't know what your name is. Mobby said so, anyway."

"Who is Mobby?"

"Mr. Mobbs, the master of the Fourth. Is it right?"

Clare bit his lip

"I am named Arthur Clare," he said quietly. "That was the name of a sea-captain who found me when I was a nipper, and took care of me. It seems to me that your Form-master talks more than he need to junior boys."

"I'll tell him your opinion of him," said Ponsonby cheerily. "Is it true that you were brought up in the workhouse, Clare?"

"No; that is not the case. But I should not be silly enough to be ashamed of it, if it were."

"My hat! Where did that estimable sea-captain pick you up?"

"In an open boat at sea."

"Not under a hedge?" grinned Monson.

"No," said Clare quietly; "not under a hedge."

"Not in a prison-yard?" chuckled Vavasour.

"No."

"Hallo! Here we are at Highcliffe," said Ponsonby, as Greyfriars School came into view. "That's the place, Clare!"

Clare looked at Greyfriars, the grey roofs and old tower showing above the trees. He liked the look of the school at once.

"We're not coming in just yet," added Ponsonby. "We'll leave you here, but we shall see you later. Au revoir!"

"Thank you for showing me the way."

"Quite an honour! 'Tisn't every day we have a chance of looking after a scholarship sneak!" said Ponsonby. "Now, run in, dear boy, and wash your neck! I'm sure it needs it."

And Ponsonby & Co. sauntered away down the road, leaving Clare alone, and with a heavy heart. In his short acquaintance with Ponsonby & Co., they had succeeded in giving him a far from pleasant impression of Highcliffe School. There was a cloud upon Clare's brow as he walked on.

CHAPTER 4.

The Wrong School.

"HALLO—hallo—hallo! New kid?"

A cheery voice greeted Arthur Clare in the Close of Greyfriars.

Clare had gone in, and was looking about him, when a sturdy junior bore down on him. Bob Cherry, of the Remove Form, had spotted

the stranger, and noted his somewhat forlorn look, and, in the kindness of his heart, he came up to speak to him. Bob Cherry's hearty manner chased away the cloud from Clare's brow at once. It was impossible not to feel cheerful in Bob's company.

"Yes," said Clare, "I've just arrived."

"Thought so!" chuckled Bob. "Knew you for a lost sheep at a glance! What's your name?"

"Arthur Clare."

"Mine's Bob Cherry. Form?"

"The Fourth."

"Upper or Lower?" asked Bob.

"I—I don't know till I've seen my Form-master or the Head."

"I'm in the Lower Fourth. We call it the Remove here," explained Bob. "It's a half to-day, and most of the masters are out. The Head's gone, and our Form-master's gone. You can see old Prout, of the Fifth, if you like. Or you can trot round with me till the Head comes in. Come and see some of the fellows!"

Clare was only too glad to accept Bob Cherry's cheery invitation. Bob led him away to the school shop, in a corner of the Close, rightly judging that the new kid would not be averse to some light refreshment after his journey. A group of juniors in the tuckshop greeted Clare with inquiring glances.

"New kid—named Clare," explained Bob Cherry. "I'm introducing him to the high society of Greyfriars at the start. Wharton—Nugent—Johnny Bull—Inky! Four of the best. That fat bounder is named Bunter, but he's nobody. Mind you don't lend him any money!"

"Oh, really, Cherry——" exclaimed the fat junior, blinking at the new boy through a big pair of spectacles.

"Glad to see you, Clare!" said Harry Wharton cordially. "I didn't know there was a new kid coming to-day."

"Ginger-pop, kid?" asked Bob hospitably. "It's our treat! The Famous Five—that's us—make a special line of looking after lost sheep and lame ducks. Mrs. Mimble, trot out your best ginger-pop—the finest vintage!"

Clare laughed. Bob Cherry's high spirits were infectious.

"I say, you fellows, I'll have some of that ginger-pop," said Billy Bunter. "If you can treat a new kid, you can look after an old pal."

"Bow-wow!" said Bob Cherry.

"Trot out the jam tarts, Mrs. Mimble, please," went on Bob. "Clare, my infant, you're our guest for this afternoon."

"You're jolly good!" said Clare, his face very bright.

After his experience of Ponsonby & Co., this reception raised his spirits wonderfully. He had not yet the slightest suspicion of the trick Ponsonby had played upon him, and he did not doubt for an instant that he was at Highcliffe School.

"Perhaps I'd better tell you at once, though," he went on, "I'm here on a scholarship."

"How did you do it?" said Bob admiringly. "I can't do those things, you know. We've got two chaps here the same—Linley and Penfold—two of the best. You'll meet them later. How did you do it?"

"I worked," said Clare, laughing.

"Ah, that's the explanation," said Bob gravely. "I knew you must have done something. Do you like the jam-tarts?"

"Ripping!" said Clare.

"I say, you fellows——"

"Oh, shut up, Bunter!"

"But I say, you fellows, hand me a jam-tart." Billy Bunter helped himself as the tarts were passed to Clare. "Thanks!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! What's the row?" exclaimed Bob, as there was a loud shout from the Close. He stepped to the door of the tuck-shop. "Coker of the Fifth, by Jove—and he's whopping Ogilvy! Back up!"

The Famous Five rushed from the tuckshop in a body, to the rescue. Clare looked after them. He could see a tremendously big fellow, evidently Coker of the Fifth, castigating a junior, probably one of the Lower Fourth. There was a terrific scramble as Harry Wharton & Co. reached the scene of action, and the big Fifth-Former disappeared under a heap of juniors.

Clare wondered whether he should join in the "scrap"; but he was so new to the place that he hesitated. As he stood looking on, Billy Bunter sidled up to him and pulled his sleeve. Clare looked down at the fat junior.

"I say, Clare," said Bunter, in a confidential tone, "you didn't see the postman as you came in, I suppose?"

"The postman? No."

"I've got a postal-order coming by the next post, and the beast is late," Bunter explained. "It's annoying, because I happen to be hard up. Could you lend me half-a-crown, and have it back out of my postal-order? Half an hour at the latest."

"Certainly," said Clare unsuspiciously.

Billy Bunter's fat fingers closed on the coin, and he darted back to the counter at once. He was anxious to exchange it for refreshments, liquid and solid, before Harry Wharton & Co. reappeared on the scene.

Clare looked from the doorway. Harry Wharton & Co. had rolled Coker on the ground, and they left him there gasping, and came back laughing towards the tuckshop. Coker sat up and panted.

"My hat!" he gasped. "I—I—I'll pulverise them! Cheeky fags! My hat!"

"I want some ginger-beer, after that!" panted Bob Cherry. "Hallo, hallo, hallo! Where did you get your funds from, Bunter?"

"Here he comes!" called out Clare, before Bunter could answer that awkward question.

"Line up!" shouted Harry Wharton.

Coker of the Fifth came charging into the tuckshop, on vengeance bent. Unfortunately, Clare was nearest the door, and Coker was in too great a rage to distinguish one junior from another. He smote Clare as he came in, and the new boy staggered back with a gasp. But only for a moment; then he straightened up and smote back, and his fist caught Horace Coker on the chest, and sent him whirling through the doorway.

Bump! Coker sat down outside the tuckshop, on the cold, unsympathetic ground, much astonished to find himself there.

"My hat!" ejaculated Bob Cherry in amazement. "Where did you learn to hit out like that, young 'un?"

Clare smiled. The juniors looked at him in surprise. Certainly Clare showed no outward sign of the unusual physical force that had been displayed in that terrific right-hander.

"Mum-mum-my hat!" gasped Coker, getting up breathlessly. "Why, I'll —I'll smash you! I'll—I'll——"

Bob Cherry seized a soda-syphon from the counter, and faced the enemy.

Squisssssssssh!

"Yarooh!" roared Coker, staggering back as he received the discharge in his face. "Groo—hooh—hooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Squizzzzzzz-squisssh!

Horace Coker fairly fled. A jam-tart caught him in the back of the neck as he departed. The Famous Five shouted with laughter.

"Poor old Coker!" said Bob Cherry. "Always running up against the Remove—and always getting squashed! Ha, ha, ha!"

And the chums of the Remove celebrated their triumph over Coker of the Fifth in flowing ginger-pop.

CHAPTER 5.

A Surprising Discovery!

CLARE'S heart was very light as he quitted the tuckshop with the chums of the Remove.

Harry Wharton & Co. had made him feel at home at once.

He glanced round in the Close, expecting to see something of the three fellows who had guided him to the school; but they were not to be seen—for excellent reasons. Ponsonby & Co., of Highcliffe, were on the worst of terms with the Greyfriars fellows, and they could not have ventured into the Close without imminent risk of being bumped or frog's-marched for their cheek. Ponsonby fully expected that the new boy would be ragged without mercy as soon as the Greyfriars fellows discovered that he was a Highcliffe boy. He had expected that the discovery would be quickly made; but it had not come about yet. Clare did not suspect for a moment that he had been taken to the wrong school, and Harry Wharton & Co., naturally, had no idea of it.

The Co. cheerfully walked the new boy about, showing him the buildings, the School House, the gym., and the rest, till the early dusk fell, and then they went into the School House. The Head had not yet returned, and the master of the Remove was still absent.

"Come up to the study," said Harry Wharton. "You can't report yourself to the Head till he comes back. We're going to have tea. If you're shoved into the Remove, you'll dig in one of these studies. Here we are."

The new boy was escorted into No. 1 Study, which belonged to Wharton and Nugent. The juniors began to prepare tea in the study, and Clare helped them with great goodwill. He hoped sincerely that he would be put in the Remove, and that he would share one of the studies occupied by some of the Famous Five. He chid himself for the misgivings he had felt on his way to his new school—misgivings which had been intensified by his encounter with Ponsonby & Co. Evidently most of the fellows were not of the same kind as those three.

"It's about time my box came, I should think," Clare remarked.

"Are they sending it from the station?" asked Wharton.

"Yes; I told them to send it on here."

"I daresay it's in the porter's lodge by this time, then. Anyway, you'll get it before the evening. You walked here?"

"Yes—some of the fellows showed me the way," said Clare. "Three of them. They met me at the station in Courtfield."

"Three of ours?" asked Bob.

"They were in the Fourth, they told me."

"Oh, some of Temple's lot," said Bob. "They must have known a new kid was expected. I hadn't heard of it. Can you poach eggs?"

"Yes, rather; I can cook," said Clare.

"Blessed Admirable Crichton!" said Bob. "Can win scholarship, knock down Fifth-Formers, and cook! Can you play footer?"

"Yes," said Clare, laughing. "I'm considered a pretty fair winger. That is, where I come from, of course; but I dare say your footer here is rather better than in Aythorpe."

"Where's that?"

"A village on the coast, where I've lived," explained Clare. "I've lived on shore for a good many years now."

"And where the dickens did you live before that?"

"At sea."

"My hat! A life on the ocean wave—what?" asked Bob. "Your father a sea-captain?"

Clare coloured. The juniors were sitting down to tea now, and Harry Wharton & Co. regarded Clare with great interest.

"Perhaps I'd better tell you chaps," said Clare awkwardly. "The fact is, I've been to a County Council school, and—and——"

"What about that?" said Bob. "You don't think anybody here would be idiot enough to think that was against a fellow, do you? We can't all be rich."

"And—and I don't even know that my name is Clare—or, rather, I know that it isn't," said Clare, his colour deepening. "I shouldn't have said anything about it, for it's nobody's business but my own; but the fellows who met me at the station know it all, somehow, so I suppose there can't be any secret about it."

"Don't tell us if you'd rather not," said Nugent. "We're not inquisitive."

"Not a bit of it," said Harry Wharton cheerily. "Pass the salt. But it's interesting, all the same."

"Oh, I'll tell you," said Clare. "I was picked up at sea, in an open boat, when I was a kid—too young to know my own name."

"My hat!"

"I've got a faint recollection of a shipwreck; it seems more like a dream than anything else," said Clare. "But I only know what happened to me, really, from what Captain Clare told me. He sighted the boat in the Indian Ocean, and it had two dead men in it, and a kid—that was me. The boat was half a wreck, and there was nothing about it to show what ship it had come from. There was nothing on me to show my name, only initials on some of my things—I've kept them, too—and there's a tattoo-mark on my arm that my parents might know, if they ever found me—not that it's likely. The captain's wife took charge of me—she was on the vessel—and as the vessel was a sailing-ship, on a round voyage to Australia and South America, I stayed on the ship a jolly long time before there was a chance to put me ashore anywhere—and then they were too kind-hearted to send me to the workhouse. I suppose that's the only place I could have been sent to."

"My hat! What a giddy romance!" said Bob Cherry. "And what did you do afterwards?"

"I grew up on the ship till I was eight," said Clare. "Then the captain's wife died, and he gave up the sea, and settled at Aythorpe. I've lived in his cottage ever since. He does boat-building, and I've helped him ever since I was old enough. I didn't want to live in idleness, even if he'd have let me. I went to the Council school, and swotted. It was Mr. Tracy, the vicar of the parish, who first put me on to working for a public school scholarship, though."

"That was jolly decent of him," said Wharton.

"It was," said Clare. "He was an old Highcliffe fellow himself, and he knew all about it."

"He had belonged to Highcliffe School?"

"Yes; a good many years ago, of course. He warned me before I came that I might have some rough times to go through here, because—well, I'm poor, you see, and most of the fellows are rich, or have rich connections. But if all the fellows are like you chaps, I don't think the times will be very rough," said Clare gratefully.

"Poof!" said Bob Cherry. "You'll find a snob or two—you'll find 'em everywhere. But most of the chaps are thoroughly decent."

"Queer, that an old Highcliff man should have sent you here," remarked Wharton. "Still, it's just as well for you he didn't think of sending you to his old school. You'll find things better here than there, considering everything."

Clare stared.

"I—I don't quite understand," he said. "This is his old school, isn't it?"

"This!" Wharton stared in his turn. "Didn't you say that he was a Highcliffe man?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, as this is Greyfriars——"

"What!"

Clare started to his feet. The chums of the Remove looked at him in astonishment.

"Greyfriars!" said Clare faintly.

"Yes, of course."

"But—but—you must be joking!" gasped Clare. "This—this is Highcliffe, isn't it?"

"Highcliffe! My hat!"

The juniors were all on their feet now in amazement.

"You—you don't mean to say that you're a Highcliffe chap, and you've come to the wrong school!" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

"If this is Greyfriars, I've come to the wrong school, right enough!" said Clare dismally.

"Great Scott!"

"It's certainly Greyfriars," said Wharton. "How on earth could you make such a mistake? Then you're for Highcliffe?"

"Yes."

"My only hat!"

"And—and—and this is Greyfriars?" stammered Clare dazedly. "I—I'd never heard of it before! Is it near Highcliffe?"

"Yes, a couple of miles," said Harry. "You took the wrong turning, I suppose, when you left Courtfield. But you said you were guided here——"

"I was. The fellows said they belonged to Highcliffe, and would show me the way here—I mean there!" stammered Clare.

"It was a rotten jape, then!"

"What were they like?" asked Wharton quietly.

Clare described the precious three. Harry Wharton & Co. had no difficulty in recognising them from his description.

"Ponsonby & Co.!" said Nugent.

"The rotten cads!" exclaimed Bob Cherry wrathfully. "What a rotten trick to play on a new kid!"

"And—and this isn't Highcliffe at all!" muttered Clare, as if he could not accustom himself to the idea.

"No jolly fear!" said Bob promptly. "We wouldn't be found dead and buried in Highcliffe—ahem!—I—I mean—ahem——" said Bob, remembering that he was speaking to a Highcliffe fellow.

"Jolly lucky you found it out before you interviewed the Head," said Frank Nugent, with a chuckle. "My hat! He would have been surprised to find a new boy here that he'd never heard of before."

Clare nodded.

"I—I'm glad I've found it out," he said unsteadily. "But it's rather

a shock. I—I'm sorry I've imposed on you fellows. I didn't mean it——"

"That's all right," said Harry Wharton. "We're jolly glad to have met you. We know a chap of the right sort when we see him."

"Yes, rather. I jolly well wish you were coming here," said Bob.

"Thank you," said Clare, with a faint smile. "I wish I were. But I'd better get off now. I shall be awfully late at Highcliffe."

"Finish your tea first."

Clare shook his head.

"No; I'll clear off at once, if you don't mind. I shall get into a row for being so late, I think. Thank you very much for looking after me like this. I only hope I shall find the fellows as decent at Highcliffe."

Harry Wharton & Co. had very strong doubts upon that point. But they did not wish to discourage the new boy by telling him so.

"Oh, you'll find all sorts—good and bad, you know," said Harry. "Well, if you will go, we'll see you down to the gates. By Jove, Gosling will be locking up soon!"

Leaving his unfinished tea, Clare hurried out of the School House with the chums of the Remove. Gosling, the porter, was about to lock the gates when they arrived there. Clare shook hands all round with his new friends, and started down the road. They had given him directions for reaching Highcliffe, and they watched him from the gates till he disappeared. Then they came in very thoughtfully across the Close.

"Jolly decent kid!" said Bob Cherry. "I'm sorry he's not coming here."

"Same here!" said Wharton. "And I'm afraid he'll have a high old time in the Fourth Form at Highcliffe. The jape they've played on him shows the kind of reception Ponsonby & Co. intend to give the poor kid!"

"He'll be able to hold his own, though," Bob remarked. "He handled old Coker in fine style. A fellow who can knock down Coker with one drive, needn't fear much from Ponsonby."

"Yes, that's one comfort. I hope we shall see him again."

And Harry Wharton & Co. went in to finish their tea.

CHAPTER 6.

The New Boy's Welcome.

CLARE tramped down the road in the darkness, heading for Highcliffe School.

There was a keen wind from the sea, and he bent his head to it, as he tramped along the shadowy road. His feelings were bitter.

The unpleasant impression Ponsonby & Co. had made upon him, had been eradicated by the hearty good-fellowship of the Greyfriars juniors. All his doubts had been set at rest—his anticipations of the future had been very bright. But those rosy anticipations were gone now. It was a cruel trick that had been played upon him. He would be late at his own school now, and that would mean trouble—and if he explained how it had happened, the practical jokers would probably be punished—which meant that he would be regarded as a sneak. He had either to let them take their deserved punishment, or take it himself undeserved. It did not take him long to decide which he would do, so far as that went.

But that unfeeling trick showed him that his first impression of Ponsonby & Co. had not been a mistaken one. It was hostility he had to expect at his new school—hostility, scorn, contumely. The pleasant

society he had just left had been left for good. He felt instinctively that he had nothing of that kind to expect at Highcliffe.

He set his lips grimly.

He had been through too many rough experiences in his young life, already, to be easily discouraged. Whatever happened, at least his courage would not fail. He had little but his courage to sustain him—he, without money, without influence, almost without friends, a schoolboy without a name.

Without a name!

The name he bore, that of his adopted father, was not his own; and he knew that that would tell against him—a nobody from nowhere. At least, that might have been kept from the knowledge of the whole School, he thought bitterly. Naturally, the Head of Highcliffe had been informed of all the circumstances—that was necessary. Doubtless he had passed on the information to Clare's future Form-master. But surely that Form-master might have had sufficient tact to keep the knowledge from the boys. But from what Ponsonby had said, Clare knew that it was all known.

He had no desire to keep secrets. That was not in his nature at all. But the matter was his own personal affair. It was not right that it should be made the chatter of the Lower School, that the scholarship boy should thus become the object of general curiosity and remark. He would have enough to do to keep his end up without that. And from the fact that Mr. Mobbs had chattered so tactlessly to the boys in his Form, Clare divined that from Mr. Mobbs he had no kindness or indulgence to expect.

He reached the gates of Highcliffe at last. They were locked, of course, at that hour, and Clare rang the bell.

A light glimmered through the bars of the gate, and the porter looked at him, and slowly opened the gate.

"Master Clare?" he asked.

"Yes," said Clare.

"Which you are to report yourself to Mr. Mobbs in his study," said the porter. "Your box 'ave come, and you'll find it in the dormitory, sir."

"Thank you."

Clare looked round him, and crossed towards the lighted facade of the School House.

Inside the house was a wide, lighted hall, with a fire burning at one side in a wide grate. Round the fire were groups of fellows, and among them Clare recognised the three who had met him at Courtfield Station.

There was a chuckle among the Highcliffe fellows at the sight of Clare.

"Here's the cad!" murmured Gadsby. "Is that the worm, Pon?"

"That's the worm!" said Ponsonby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How did they treat you at Greyfriars, my infant?" asked the Caterpillar, in his drawling voice.

Clare flushed.

"I suppose that was a joke on me," he exclaimed.

"Yaas; Pon's little joke," said the Caterpillar. "Our Pon is full of fun, ain't you, Pon?"

"Did they rag you?" asked Monson, with great interest.

Clare shook his head.

"No. Why should they?"

"Why should they? We're at daggers drawn with Greyfriars!" exclaimed Monson. "Do you mean to say they let you off?"

Clare gave a bitter smile.

"Then you thought they would rag me, when you sent me into the wrong school?"

"Naturally."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, they didn't. They treated me very well."

"Sort of fellow-feeling, I suppose," said Ponsonby. "They recognised a cad of their own kind. They're all cads there."

"They struck me as very decent fellows," said Clare.

"Quite so. Birds of a feather!" sneered Ponsonby. "They've got several of your sort there, and they make quite a fuss of them. One of them worked in a factory, and another was a cobbler. Pah!"

"Disgustin'!" said Monson.

"What a pity this fellow couldn't stay among them," said Gadsby.

"I'm sorry I couldn't," said Clare quietly. "I liked them. Will one of you tell me where Mr. Mobbs's study is? I have to report to him."

"Find it," said Ponsonby, with a shrug of the shoulders. "We're not acting as guides, philosophers, and friends to fellows of your kind."

Clare bit his lip.

"I warn you of one thing," went on Ponsonby. "You'll be scragged for being late. If you sneak about the little joke we've played on you, we'll squash you afterwards. Understand that?"

"I don't intend to do so. But your threats do not make any difference to me," said Clare. "I don't see why you fellows should receive me like this. I have given no offence that I am aware of."

"You're an offence in yourself," said Monson. "What do you mean by coming here at all? If you had any decency, you wouldn't come."

"Why not, when I have won the scholarship?"

"That wasn't intended for your sort."

"I understood that it was specially founded for poor scholars," said Clare. "I've read the deed."

"That was a jolly long time ago, then. So was all Highcliffe, if you come to that," said Ponsonby. "So were the universities; but the giddy poor scholars have been shoved off a jolly long time ago—and a good thing, too. You ought to have understood that your sort were not wanted in a school like this. If you didn't understand, we'll try to make you understand now you're here."

"Absolutely," said Vavasour.

Clare turned away without replying. In the moment of his darkest anticipations, he had never looked for anything like this. These fellows were evidently thoroughly satisfied with themselves; they scorned him as a fellow who was not of their class. In the County Council school where he had received his early training, and which these lordly youths despised so much, he had never experienced anything like this heartless, unfeeling snobbishness and deliberate rudeness. It was contempt rather than anger that he felt as he turned away.

He went down the passage, wondering where he was to look for Mr. Mobbs. A chuckle followed him.

Clare did not heed it. He went on his way, and found himself in a wide, flagged passage with numbered doors. He paused there, at a loss. There was no servant in sight, and he hesitated to ask for directions from any of the fellows sauntering along the passage. He had decided to return to the door—running the gauntlet of Ponsonby & Co.'s mocking eyes—and ring the bell, when he received a light tap on the shoulder. He looked round, and found an elegant youth looking at him.

It was the Caterpillar.

"Want Mobby, what?" asked the Caterpillar.

"Yes," said Clare.

"This way."

Ponsonby shouted down the passage.

"Caterpillar, you ass, let that rotter alone! You know what we've agreed."

The Caterpillar glanced lazily towards Ponsonby.

"I know what you've agreed, dear boy," he replied. "But I haven't agreed—I told you distinctly it was too much fag. And I must remark, my excellent Pon, that your manners leave very much to be desired."

"What!"

"Your manners are not comme il faut, my poor Pon. But how should you know any better?" said the Caterpillar commiseratingly. "With a little tact, Pon, you could mark your distance from a disagreeable person without descending to positive rudeness. You can take that as a tip from me. This way, Clare."

The Caterpillar tapped at a door, and Mr. Mobbs's thin, acid voice rapped out:

"Come in!"

The Caterpillar opened the door.

"The new boy, Mr. Mobbs," he said elegantly, ushering Clare into the study. Then he sauntered away, leaving the new boy alone with his Form-master.

CHAPTER 7.

At Highcliffe.

MR. MOBBS rose to his feet.

His cold, unpleasant glance dwelt upon Clare searchingly. He had to admit that the boy was not what he had expected to find him. He did not slouch into the study; his collar was not dirty; his hands were clean. He stood erect, respectful, but quite calm and composed. There was a hint of independence in his bearing, or Mr. Mobbs thought there was, which made the Form-master's thin lips tighten.

"So you are Clare?" he said disagreeably.

"Yes, sir."

"How comes it that you are here so late?"

"I did not know the way from the station, sir."

Mr. Mobbs raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed! What train did you arrive by?"

"The three-thirty, sir."

"Do you wish me to believe that you have been wandering about for four hours finding the way to the school?"

Clare flushed. The question was most unpleasantly put, implying that he had already prevaricated.

"I went to the wrong school, sir."

"There is no other school near Highcliffe; unless"—Mr. Mobbs's thin lip curled—"unless you refer to the County Council school in Courtfield. To that, I suppose, your steps would naturally lead you."

"I did not go there, sir," said Clare evenly. "I went to Greyfriars by mistake for Highcliffe. I was there some time before I found out the mistake, and then I came on here at once."

"You wish me to believe that you are incredibly stupid, Clare. You have, I presume, a tongue in your head. Did you not ask directions?"

"Yes, sir. I was misdirected—as a joke, I suppose, but I did not suspect it at the time."

"Indeed!" Mr. Mobbs's eyes gleamed. "If this ill-natured trick was played upon you by Greyfriars boys, I will carry a complaint to their headmaster." Clare learned later that Mr. Mobbs had an old grudge against Greyfriars. But Mr. Mobbs was not to be gratified this time.

"They were not Greyfriars boys who played the trick, sir."

Mr. Mobbs looked very sharply at him, and perhaps he guessed that by further inquiry he might elicit information which would make it necessary for him to punish his favourites. He dropped the subject.

"Very well, Clare, I accept your excuse, but I must remark that you have acted very stupidly, and that on another occasion you will be punished for coming in later than locking-up."

"Yes, sir," said Clare, relieved that the matter ended so well, though he did not understand Mr. Mobbs's motives till afterwards.

"Clare—I suppose I must call you Clare, though I understand that that is not your name. Indeed, you have no name——"

"That is so, sir," said Clare, his cheeks burning.

"However, you are entered on the school books as Clare, and you must be called something, though you are without a name at all," said Mr. Mobbs, with a sneer. "You have put me to great inconvenience, Clare, by coming so late, but I suppose I must devote the next half-hour to you, and ascertain the precise amount of information you have accumulated in the academic shades of the Board-school."

"I am at your service, sir."

Clare was tired after his journey, especially with the long walk from Greyfriars added, and he would have been glad of a rest; but Mr. Mobbs did not consider a trifle like that. He devoted a quarter of an hour to the boy, probably considering that quite enough of his valuable time to waste upon such a rank outsider. He gave a grunt when he had finished, which did not express commendation, because Mr. Mobbs would not have commended the County Council schoolboy under any circumstances whatever, but which was at least an admission that he had no fault to find. It was a trying ordeal for Clare, for he felt instinctively all the time that the small-natured man was trying to catch him, and he was glad when it was over.

"You may go," said Mr. Mobbs.

"Am I to see the Head, sir?"

"The Head has left you to me," said Mr. Mobbs coldly. "And I have finished with you. You may go."

"Very well, sir. You have nothing more to tell me?"

"Nothing."

Clare quitted the study.

He stood in the passage with a heavy heart. It was not a promising beginning. Of all the fellows he had yet seen at Highcliffe, only one had shown him the least civility or kindness—the fellow who rejoiced in the peculiar name of the Caterpillar—and he had acted in a half-patronising, half-scornful manner. Clare knew that he ought to have been looked after differently from this—that he ought to have been assigned to a study—and he realised that his Form-master was intentionally neglecting him. But, fortunately, he was used to looking after himself.

He did not know the bedtime of the juniors at Highcliffe, but he knew it could not be far distant now. He decided to go to the dormitory and get his things unpacked. Finding the dormitory was another difficulty. He did not care to ask any of the juniors. The Caterpillar was in the hall again, standing in an elegant attitude before the fire, and talking to Ponsonby &

Co., and Clare did not care to approach him. The boy had been good-natured once, but Clare was too sensitive to risk a rebuff. A big fellow—Monson major of the Fifth, as a matter of fact—came down the passage, and Clare, guessing that he was a senior, ventured to speak to him.

"Please——" he began.

Monson major stared at him and walked on. Clare turned crimson. A big, handsome fellow was leaning against the banisters, chatting with another senior, and he glanced at the flushing junior. It was Langley of the Sixth, the captain of Highcliffe.

"Come here, kid," he called out.

Clare approached him. Langley's companion whispered something to the school captain, and laughed, and Clare knew that he was explaining that this was the schoolboy without a name—the County Council bounder. Langley stared at him.

"You're the new kid?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You were asking Monson major something?"

"I was going to inquire where is the Fourth-Form dormitory," said Clare. "My box is there, and——"

"Exactly," said Langley. "Shut up, Roper; I don't care if he is." This in an aside to his companion. "Here, young Monson!"

Monson of the Fourth came up, eyeing Clare disdainfully.

"Take this new kid to the dorm.," said Langley.

Monson minor stared.

"That new kid?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, and sharp."

"But I say, Langley, that's the County Council bounder!" objected Monson.

"Do as I tell you," said Langley, frowning. "Are you in want of a hiding, Monson?"

Monson clenched his hands, but he did not dare to disobey. He turned to Clare with a bitter look.

"Follow me!" he snarled.

Clare followed him.

Monson of the Fourth led the way upstairs, Clare following in silence. He felt an impulse of gratitude towards the big senior, evidently a person in authority, who had chipped in. But Monson was fuming with rage. After all the high talk of the "nuts" of the Fourth, he had been called upon to fag at guiding the new boy about, and it made Monson feel homicidal.

They reached the dormitory, and Monson threw the door open.

"Go in there!" he said.

"Thank you," said Clare.

"Don't thank me," sneered Monson. "Do you think I'd have walked a yard with you if Langley hadn't ordered me, you filthy outsider?"

Clare stepped into the room without replying. Monson made a sudden movement towards him, shoved him violently, and then slammed the door and fled.

Clare staggered forward blindly into the unlighted room, stumbled over, and fell on his hands and knees. His head knocked against a corner of a bed in the dark, and he rolled sideways, hurt and dazed.

He jumped up, his head aching and his eyes blazing, and rushed to the door, to take instant vengeance on Monson. But Monson was gone.

Clare turned back into the dormitory, groped for the switch of the electric light, and turned it on.

Then, with a pale, set face, he proceeded to unpack his box.

CHAPTER 8.

A Dormitory Fagging.

PONSONBY & CO. came into the dormitory at bedtime, and found the new boy there. Clare had finished with his things, but he had not ventured downstairs again. Plucky as he was, he felt a deep shrinking from facing the mocking and hostile eyes of his Form-fellows. On the morrow it must come, but now he was tired and dispirited, and he wanted to see as little of Ponsonby & Co. as possible. He had taken a book from his box, and was seated on a bed, conning over Latin, when the Fourth-Formers came streaming in.

Langley of the Sixth looked in at the door.

"Five minutes," he said, and walked away.

"Blessed if that fellow isn't sitting on my bed!" exclaimed Gadsby, in tones of thrilling indignation. "You awful rotter, get off my bed! Anybody got any disinfectant?"

There was a laugh. Clare got off the bed.

"Mugging up Latin!" said Monson, with a sneering grin. "Good old swot!"

"Will someone tell me which is my bed?" said Clare.

"Your bed!" said Ponsonby. "I should think your bed's in the garret, along with the boot-boy. That's where it ought to be, at all events."

"Or in the coal-hole" said Gadsby.

The juniors proceeded to undress, chattering the while. Clare got into his pyjamas. As no one would tell him which was his bed, he decided to wait till the other were all in. He looked at De Courcy, but the Caterpillar was very busy with his finger-nails, and had no attention to bestow on the new boy. A shock-headed youngster made a sign to Clare, surreptitiously, as it were, as if afraid of attracting the attention of Ponsonby & Co. But Ponsonby's eyes were upon him instantly.

"Smithson!" he rapped out.

"What are you grimacing at that cad for?"

"I—I—I——"

"You know what we've arranged, Smithson."

"Ye-es, Pon."

"Don't call me Pon, you worm!"

"N-n-no, Ponsonby."

"Smithy is sucking up to the new cad," said Ponsonby, as Clare went towards the bed Smithson had good-naturedly indicated. "Smithy has got to have a lesson. Bring him here."

"I—I say, Pon——" pleaded Smithson. "I—I didn't tell him anything, really."

"Bring him here," said Ponsonby magisterially.

"And—I'm sorry," mumbled Smithson. "I don't meant to have anything to do with him, Pon—I don't, really. I wouldn't, you know."

But Gadsby and Drury and Vavasour seized the wretched Smithson, and marched him towards Ponsonby, who had taken up a slipper. Clare looked round. His eyes were gleaming. He could not understand Smithson taking his punishment unresistingly, but that was evidently what the wretched junior meant to do. Clare's hands clenched hard. The boy had brought upon himself a "slippering" for showing Clare good-nature for one moment, and Clare felt that it was up to him to stand by his helper.

Vavasour and Drury dragged Smithson across a bed, and Ponsonby lifted the slipper to smite, the other juniors gathering round, laughing at the scene.

Clare strode forward, pushing his way through the surprised fellows, and grasped Ponsonby's arm before the blow could fall.

"Stop that!" he said quietly.

Ponsonby spun round upon him, transfixed with surprise and rage.

"You—you put your dirty paw on me!" he gasped. "Take your hand off my arm at once, you beast!"

"Drop that slipper first!"

"Wha-a-at?"

"Drop that slipper!" said Clare.

Ponsonby did not drop the slipper. He could not use his right arm, upon which Clare had a grip like a vice; but he raised his left, and dashed his clenched fist full at the face of the new boy. But Clare's left came up in time, and knocked it away, with a rap on the wrist that made Ponsonby gasp with pain.

"By Jove!" sang out the Caterpillar, looking up from his finger-nails. "Bravo, Board School! Go it, County Council! Pon, my dear boy, you ve woke up the wrong passenger!"

Some of the juniors laughed. The Caterpillar had his following in the Fourth Form at Highcliffe as well as Ponsonby. The latter gave a yell of rage:

"Collar the cad!"

Gadsby and the rest closed in. Clare did not shrink. He looked them over with gleaming eyes.

"Keep your distance!" he said in a low, determined voice. "If you touch me I shall hit out—and I shall hit hard!"

"Blessed wild beast!" yawned Vavasour, backing away a little. "I vote that we don't soil our hands on him, by Jove."

"Collar him, you funk!"

Smithson had slid off the bed, glad enough to escape the slippering, but apparently not inclined to back up his rescuer. He slipped away to his own bed quietly, and turned in. Ponsonby & Co. were fully occupied with Clare now.

Langley looked in at the door as the Fourth-Formers were on the point of making a rush.

"Hallo! Ragging there?" he exclaimed. "Can't you keep order in this dorm?"

"It's that new cad, Langley," said Monson. "He's making the row. He fancies that he's back in Seven Dials."

"Absolutely!" chirped Vavasour.

"You'd better keep out of rows if you know what's good for you, Clare," said the captain of Highcliffe. "Tumble in, all of you, and don't let's have any more of it!"

Clare turned in without replying. He did not wish to attempt to justify himself, and he knew that Langley did not want to be bothered with the rights and wrongs of the matter, anyway. The Highcliffe captain seemed to be a good-natured fellow in his way, but as slack as the rest of the School.

Langley turned the light out, and, after admonishing the juniors to keep quiet, he quitted the dormitory and closed the door.

Clare did not think of settling down to sleep. He lay waiting for what was to follow, for he knew that there was more to come. Ponsonby & Co. were not done with him yet.

The cool cheek, as they regarded it, of the scholarship boy in intervening between Smithson and his punishment "put the lid on," so to speak. He had laid hands on the great Ponsonby himself, and the more Ponsonby

thought of it the more surprised and enraged he was. It was barely five minutes after Langley's departure that Ponsonby jumped out of bed.

"Up with you, you fellows!" he called out.

"Better draw it mild!" came the sleepy voice of the Caterpillar. "Have you forgotten what Langley said, my tulips?"

"Hang Langley!" said Ponsonby.

"That's all serene," said Vavasour. "Langley and Roper and their set are playing bridge by this time, and they wouldn't leave it unless the house was on fire."

"One of the prefects might drop in," suggested Benson.

"Blow the prefects!"

Ponsonby's word was law. The Fourth-Formers, nearly all of them, turned out, and candle-ends were lighted. They did not venture to turn on the electric light.

"Gentlemen of the Fourth," said Ponsonby, "the new cad has been planted on us, in spite of our objections. Not content with being generally objectionable, he has had the effrontery to chip in without being asked. Sending such a cad to Coventry isn't enough! He's got to have a lesson."

"Go it, Pon!"

"Yaas, go it, Pon," drawled the Caterpillar. "Let's see you give him a hiding, Pon!"

Ponsonby took no notice of that suggestion.

"The nameless cad has chipped in when we were going to slipper Smithson," he continued. "Well, we'll make him slipper Smithson himself, and then make Smithy slipper him."

"Hear, hear!"

"Get up, Smithson!"

"I—I say, Pon," muttered Smithson miserably.

"Get up!" roared Ponsonby.

Smithson crawled wretchedly out of bed.

"Clare! Get up! Do you hear? You're going to slipper Smithson."

Clare sat up in bed.

"I'm going to do nothing of the sort," he said.

"We'll see! Drag him out if he won't come!"

Half-a-dozen juniors rushed towards Clare's bed. Clare stepped quickly out. They closed round him, and hustled him towards Ponsonby.

"Take the slipper, Clare, and pay into Smithson till I give the word to stop!" said the captain of the Fourth.

"Rats!"

"What?"

"Rats!" said Clare coolly. "I shall do nothing of the kind!"

"Then you shall have your dose first. Take that slipper, Smithson!"

Smithson took the slipper.

"Get across that bed, Clare!"

"Go and eat coke!" said Clare.

"Shove him across, you fellows!"

"I shall hit out!" said Clare, clenching his hands.

There was a laugh, and the Fourth-Formers closed in upon him. Clare kept his word, and he hit out—hard! His right came full in Gadsby's face, knocking him backwards; his left hammered on Ponsonby's chin, and the captain of the Fourth flew across the bed, and dumped down on it breathlessly. Vavasour and Monson went to the floor in another couple of seconds. Then the new boy was the centre of a struggling mass of juniors.

The Caterpillar sat up in bed and clapped his hands.

"Go it, County Council! By gad, sir, that's ripping! Four down, by gad! Hurray!"

"Shut up, you silly idiot!" shouted Ponsonby. "Why don't you come and lend a hand, you cackling jackanapes?"

"Too much fag, dear boy."

"M-m-my hat, it's a strong beast!" gasped Drury, as Clare struggled hard in the grasp of a crowd of fellows. "Pile in!"

"Pile on the cad!"

"Got him!"

The odds were too great for Clare, tough as he was. He was dragged to the bed in the grasp of a dozen pairs of hands and dragged across it, face downwards. They held him there in spite of his fierce resistance. But half-a-dozen of the raggers were showing very plain signs of conflict.

"Now, then, Smithson, go it with the slipper!"

Smithson advanced, slipper in hand. Clare set his teeth to endure the ordeal that he could not escape.

"Why don't you begin, Smithy, you fool?" gasped Gadsby

"Go it, Smithson, or we'll jolly well slipper you!"

"I—I won't!" Smithson flung the slipper on the floor. "I'll be dashed if I do, and you can slipper me if you like!"

"My hat!"

"Yarooh!" roared Smithson, as Ponsonby sent him flying with a heavy back-hander.

The captain of the Fourth picked up the slipper, and sprang towards Clare. His arm swung up, and came savagely down, and the blow rang through the dormitory. Clare struggled furiously, but he was held too fast. Ponsonby's hand went up again, but at that moment a pillow whizzed through the air from the Caterpillar's bed, and smote Ponsonby fairly under the chin, and carried him off his feet.

Bump!

Ponsonby sat up dazedly.

"What—who—who threw that pillow? I—I—I'll——"

The Caterpillar strolled elegantly on to the scene, his hands negligently thrust into the pockets of his silk pyjamas.

"Sorry to interrupt," he remarked pleasantly; "but this isn't good enough. Let that kid go!"

CHAPTER 9.

The Caterpillar Has His Way.

PONSONBY sprang to his feet with a cry of rage. The juniors who were holding Clare looked dubiously from one to the other. Ponsonby was their leader, but the Caterpillar, lazy and languid as he was, had a very great influence in the Fourth. There were strength and determination behind his lazy manners when he chose to exert himself.

"De Courcy, you rotter, mind your own business!" shouted Ponsonby. "Keep out of what doesn't concern you!"

"But it does concern me, dear boy, to see blackguardly things going on in my dorm.," remonstrated the Caterpillar. "You make no allowance for my feelin's, my dear Pon. Besides, I've got a suggestion to make for settlin' the whole bizney."

"Rot!"

The Caterpillar sighed.

"There you go again, Pon—always hot-headed. What are you going to do with that slipper, Pon?" he added, as the captain of the Fourth picked up the instrument of punishment once more.

"I'm going to lick that cad," said Ponsonby, his voice thick with rage, "and if you chip in, I'll jolly well lick you, too, De Courcy!"

"You'll have a chance," yawned De Courcy, "for I warn you, Pon that, much as I shall regret having to exert myself, I shall hit you if you touch the new kid with that slipper."

"I say, don't you two fellows rag," urged Gadsby. "We're ragging the new blighter, not one another. Let the Caterpillar say his say."

"It's only some of his rot," growled Ponsonby. But he did not use the slipper. He knew that the lazy and drawling Caterpillar had plenty of muscular power, that he was a good boxer, and that he would keep his word. He did not want the ragging of the outsider to end up in a fight between himself and the Caterpillar.

"Go it, Caterpillar! What's the wheeze?" exclaimed Drury.

"Let that kid go!"

"But look here——"

"If you don't let him go," drawled De Courcy, "I shall line up on his side at once. If necessary I shall call a prefect into the dormitory, and complain that you fellows won't let me sleep with your kiddish ragging."

"Oh, draw it mild, Caterpillar!"

"Let the cad go," said Gadsby. "We can collar him again."

"Absolutely," said Vavasour.

Clare was released. He rolled off the bed, flushed and panting. He made a movement towards Ponsonby, but the Caterpillar restrained him.

"Gently, dear boy. Gently does it. Now for my suggestion. This gentleman"—nodding to Clare—"has laid his paws on Pon—our esteemed and excellent Pon. Pon very naturally resents coming into contact with the lower classes in that way; it is very painful for Pon's feelings——"

"Oh, get on, and not so much gas," growled Ponsonby.

"Pon, old man, I've asked you before not to shout. Consider my nervous system," said the Caterpillar. "Besides, I'm coming to the point. The easiest way to settle this matter is for Pon—our first-rate Pon—to give the wretched person a fearful hiding. I think the whole Form can look upon Pon as a most suitable champion to express its feeling towards the no-class intruder. That is my idea. We will stand round in an admiring circle, and cheer on our Pon. We will encourage him with applause, while he makes mincemeat of this—this person. When it is all over, we will put what is left of the person to bed, and everything in the garden will be lovely."

"I'm not goin' to fight a County Council cad, if that's what you mean," growled Ponsonby.

"Pon, dear boy, you cause a dreadful doubt to creep into my breast," said the Caterpillar, with a sad shake of the head. "Can it be that the time has come when the upper classes refuse to face the lower classes, from a want of so vulgar and commonplace a quality as courage? Pon, Pon!"

Ponsonby turned crimson, and some of the fellows chuckled. It was pretty plain that Pon's unwillingness to fight the new junior on equal terms was not wholly due to the pride of caste.

"You—you rotter, Caterpillar! If you dare to say I'm a funk——" he began.

"I fancy a good many fellows will dare to say so, my dear Pon, if you decline to meet our County Council friend on equal terms," drawled the Caterpillar. "Clare—I think your name is Clare—you have no objection to fighting Ponsonby? You have no class prejudices on the subject?"

Clare laughed, in spite of himself. Most of the juniors were laughing now. The cool and lazy Caterpillar had calmly taken the leadership out of Ponsonby's hands, and the captain of the Fourth felt himself helpless.

"No," said Clare. "I intend to fight him anyway, as a matter of fact."

"Oh do you, you hound?" hissed Ponsonby.

"Yes, you cur," said Clare. "You struck me when I was down, and I'll lick you for it, or you shall lick me till I can't stand."

"Bravo!" yawned the Caterpillar. "The member of the lower classes is full of fight. I trust that the member of the aristocracy will not be found wanting."

There was a shout from the Fourth.

"Go it, Pon!"

"You can lick him, Pon!"

"Gim him a hiding, Pon, old fellow!"

Ponsonby gave his followers a savage look. But it was easy enough to see that the Caterpillar had won the day. Ponsonby had to fight the new kid on equal terms, or confess himself afraid to do so; and such a confession would have put an end to his leadership of the Fourth Form. There was no choice left to him, and he gave a nod of sullen assent.

"I'm ready to lick the cad!" he exclaimed. "It's a disgrace to touch him—that's what I object to! But I'm ready!"

"Bravo, Pon!"

"Yaas; I thought Pon would see the justice of it," said the Caterpillar. "So much better than kid-raggings, my dear boys. Gadsby can time you—we'll have it in order, rounds and rests—and Gadsby can time you with that splendid gold watch of his."

Gadsby scowled. De Courcy, the fastidious dandy, always wore a silver watch, and he had often expressed admiration for Gaddy's big gold watch, in mock-serious tones that made Gadsby wriggle with rage.

"Now, who's your second, Pon?" asked the Caterpillar.

"Vavasour!" growled Ponsonby.

"And who's yours, Clare?"

Clare hesitated, and looked round him. There was not a fellow there he could ask to be his second, unless it was the Caterpillar himself. And the Caterpillar evidently did not intend to offer. But there came a squeak from Smithson.

"I'm the new chap's second, if he'll have me—so there!"

"Thank you!" said Clare.

"Nicely arranged," said the Caterpillar. "Have you produced your big gold watch, Gaddy? Gentlemen, you can pile in now, and when you've thanked me nicely for arranging this matter for you with such delicate tact, I'll go to bed!"

"Silly ass!" said Ponsonby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Caterpillar yawned, and went back to bed. But with all his assumed indifference, he did not go to sleep. He lay upon his elbow, to keep his eye upon the combat. There was a smile upon his lips. For the Caterpillar's genuine opinion was that Cecil Ponsonby wanted nothing so badly as a good hiding; and the Caterpillar's idea at present was that Cecil Ponsonby was going to get it.

CHAPTER 10.

The Fight.

"TIME!" said Gadsby.

Ponsonby lounged forward with a scornful smile upon his lips. Clare stepped up quietly and composedly. The two juniors were in their pyjamas, the sleeves turned back. Round them the Fourth-

Formers stood in a big ring, the candle-light glimmering and flickering on their excited faces.

They had little fear of being interrupted. Throughout Highcliffe School there was slackness from beginning to end. The Head, an old gentleman, whom the juniors sometimes disrespectfully described as "doddering," was content to leave most of his authority in the hands of the under-masters —of whom Mr. Mobbs was a good specimen. The prefects participated in the general slackness. Ponsonby & Co., of the Fourth, were not the only "dogs" in the school. The fast set in the Sixth included the captain of the school, and the Fourth-Formers knew that Langley had a bridge party in his study at that very moment, and was not likely to leave it to think about a row in a junior dormitory. As for Mr. Mobbs, he was certain to turn a deaf ear to any noise in the dormitory, for he would guess that it was a "ragging" of the obnoxious new boy that was proceeding—a step that he would be very far from disapproving of.

They were safe from interruption, and they prepared themselves for the enjoyment of seeing the outsider thoroughly hammered by the great Ponsonby.

Probably only the Caterpillar, in all the Fourth, had any doubt on that point. Cecil Ponsonby was a good boxer, and he had a determined character. And the possibility of Ponsonby being licked by a mere bounder from a Board School hardly entered the minds of the snobs of Highcliffe. They would as soon have expected the skies to fall. Pon would simply walk over the cad, and give him a dressing, and put him in his place. In fact, it was really a good idea, Monson remarked, to start with giving the cad a good hiding—quite a good wheeze of old Caterpillar's. It would put him in his place more effectively than a ragging or a slippering. It would prove to the beast that, man for man, his betters were too good for him.

"Go for him, Pon!" came a general chorus of encouragement. "Pile in!"

Only Smithson looked on anxiously, with a faint hope that his principal would come through all right. Smithson was an "outsider" himself, and had no love for Ponsonby & Co., who treated him with patronising contempt. He would have given a term's pocket-money to see Ponsonby thoroughly licked.

Ponsonby started with a fast attack, and Clare gave ground a little, and the surrounding crowd already grinned in anticipation.

But a surprise was waiting for them. Gadsby had his eye on his watch, ready to call time at the moment most suitable to Ponsonby, any idea of fair play not bothering Gaddy at all.

Clare suddenly stiffened up, and held his opponent; he had taken his measure. Not one of Pon's blows had reached him, though he had had to give ground. Now he suddenly reversed the proceedings, attacking in his turn, and driving Ponsonby back, with a rain of blows the captain found it difficult to guard. Biff, biff! came Clare's right and left, full in Pon's handsome face, and the captain of the Fourth reeled, and Clare's right was drawn back for a finishing drive, while Pon's hands sagged helplessly in the air.

"Time!" rapped out Gadsby.

Clare dropped his hands at once. Ponsonby reeled back to a bed, and sat down, gasping. Clare stepped back with a bitter smile on his lips.

"'Tain't fair play," whispered Smithson, fearful of being overheard by the nuts. "'Tain't near three minutes for the round. Gaddy is helping Pon, you know."

Clare nodded.

"I know," he said.

"Stand up to him," said Smithson. "Pon ain't really plucky—he's best at ragging a chap when they're three or four to one. Keep him going, and you may have a ghost of a chance, old man."

"I think I have more than a ghost of a chance," said Clare, with a smile.

"You stood that round well," admitted Smithson. "Have you done much slogging, then?"

"I've fought with the longshoremen at Aythorpe, fellows who would make two or three of Ponsonby."

"My hat! Oh, if you could lick him!" said Smithson breathlessly. "Of course, they'll all pile on you if you do, though."

"That won't make any difference."

"Time!" came from Gadsby.

Clare stepped up cheerfully. The second round was harder than the first. Ponsonby fought hard, and several of his blows came home, and Clare's lip was cut by Pon's knuckles, and a bruise showed on his cheek. But the punishment he gave in return made the Fourth-Formers open their eyes. Ponsonby's left eye closed up, and he could not open it again. His Grecian nose took on the form of a Roman one. A stream of red ran from the corner of his mouth. Before it was "time," Ponsonby was staggering helplessly under the blows he received, no longer able to guard them, and Gadsby dutifully rapped out:

"Time!"

"Aren't these three-minute rounds?" asked Clare quietly.

"Two-minute," said Gadsby coolly.

"Oh, very well!"

"It'll all come to the same thing," Smithson whispered joyfully to Clare. "Why, you handle him like a giddy professional pug. He hasn't a chance."

That was dawning upon Ponsonby & Co., too.

In the third round Ponsonby made desperate efforts. The disgrace of being licked by the Board School bounder was more than he could endure. He exerted himself to the uttermost. This time Clare had his hands full, and for the moment fortune seemed to smile upon the dandy of Highcliffe.

Gadsby kept an eye on his watch. Two minutes had passed, but apparently it was not to be a two-minute round this time. Ponsonby was getting the best of it.

"Two minutes up!" called out Smithson.

Gadsby was deaf.

"Fair play!" exclaimed Smithson warmly. "Call time, Gaddy!"

"I'm keeping time," said Gadsby coolly. "Shut your head, Smithy!"

"By gad!" drawled the Caterpillar from his bed. "By gad! What a giddy example of fair play to the lower classes, Gaddy."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" retorted Gadsby.

The juniors were laughing, apparently looking upon Gadsby's methods of keeping time as an excellent joke.

But Clare was not to be knocked out in that round, all the same. Ponsonby had put in a heavy right-hander, which made the scholarship junior stagger. But as he followed it up with both fists, for a knock-out, Clare side-stepped in time, and closed in, sending out his right, which caught Ponsonby on the side of the jaw, and as Pon reeled, Clare's left came on his chin with a jarring blow, and Ponsonby went to the floor with a crash.

"Time!" rapped out Gadsby.

"About time, too!" grinned the Caterpillar

Clare went back to his corner. Vavasour picked up his principal. Ponsonby put his hand to his aching jaw, and leaned heavily on his second.

"Feel bad, old man?" murmured Vavasour.

"Oh crumbs! Oh, my hat!" groaned Ponsonby.

"Buck up! You'll lick him!"

Ponsonby gasped as he sat down on the side of a bed. He had not the slightest hope now of licking his formidable adversary.

Gadsby regarded him anxiously. The minute rest elapsed, and then another minute. Still Gaddy did not call time. But even Gaddy could not prolong the rest too long.

He coughed, as a hint to Ponsonby.

"Ahem—um!—time!" he said.

Ponsonby did not rise from the bed. His head was swimming, his jaw was aching, he felt as if all his teeth had been loosened.

"Time!" repeated Gadsby anxiously.

"Buck up, Pon!"

"Go in and win!"

"Don't let that School Board cad lick you, Pon!" muttered Monson.

Ponsonby shook his head. He rose to his feet, and sank down again on the bed.

"I—I can't go on," he muttered.

"Oh, Pon! Go it!"

"I can't, hang you!" said Ponsonby savagely. "Let me alone!"

Dismay fell upon the Co. Ponsonby sat panting and holding his jaw. He was beaten—beaten to the wide. If he had stepped up to the mark again, he would have been knocked out in half a round, and he knew it. He had had enough.

Clare waited quietly.

"Licked, by thunder!" murmured Smithson ecstatically. "Licked in three rounds! Oh, my hat!"

Gadsby put away his gold watch. It was not wanted any longer. He cast a look round on his comrades.

"Now collar the cad and slipper him!" he exclaimed savagely.

"Here, fair play!" exclaimed Smithson. "It was a fair fight, and my man's won! You let him alone!"

Smithson was hustled off at once. And Gadsby & Co. closed round Clare threateningly, while Ponsonby still sat on the bed, panting, looking on with burning eyes of hatred.

CHAPTER 11.

The Caterpillar is Friendly.

"HOLD on!"

It was the voice of the Caterpillar.

He came lounging away from his bed, and he cheerfully interposed between Clare and the crowd of angry juniors. There was a shout.

"Get out of it, Caterpillar!"

"Leave us alone!"

"Clear off, you fool!"

The Caterpillar pushed Gadsby back—a light push on the chest; but there was force in it, and Gaddy staggered.

"Hands off!" said De Courcy calmly. "Fair play's a jewel, you know. You're not going to touch this—this person. Gentlemen, be sports. He's licked Pon fair and square—hasn't he, Pon?"

Ponsonby snarled.

"Fair and square on his side, I mean," continued the Caterpillar imperturbably. "The way you kept time, Gaddy, was calculated to give the lower classes a very bad impression of fair play among us superior persons."

"Oh, don't be an idiot!" growled Gadsby.

"But there's a limit," said the Caterpillar. "You have reached the limit, dear boys. I decline to allow you to rag the fellow after a fair fight. In fact, I take this unfortunate outsider under my protection."

"You needn't trouble," said Clare, nettled. "I can look after myself, thank you all the same."

"There, you hear the cad, Caterpillar!" exclaimed Vavasour.

"I hear him," said the Caterpillar, unmoved. "I should say the same in his place. But I am looking after him, nevertheless. It's a question of the honour of the Form. I can't let you disgrace yourselves—and me! Fair play, dear boys."

"Get out of the way, or we'll rag you, too!" shouted Gadsby.

De Courcy looked him up and down calmly.

"I would give you a licking, Gaddy, if it wasn't too much fag," he drawled. "As it is, I tell you you've got to chuck this. Any more ragging, and I shall call a prefect into the dorm. to keep order."

"You won't sneak, you rotter?"

The Caterpillar nodded.

"Yaas, to save trouble," he said calmly. "Now, is it all over, or am I to call in a prefect?"

"He's only gassing," howled Drury. "Rush the cad."

The "nuts" made a forward movement. De Courcy walked to the door and opened it.

"You idiot—you'll have the master here!" exclaimed Ponsonby.

"That's what I want, dear boy."

"Shut that door!"

"Bosh!" De Courcy put his head into the passage and called: "Prefect!"

"You—you ass!" gasped Vavasour. "If Langley's little game is interrupted, he'll lick us all round, and gate us for next half-holiday."

"Exactly," said De Courcy. "You know what to expect. Shall I call louder?"

"Come in, you idiot!" growled Gadsby. "We'll let him alone."

"Honour bright?"

"Yes, hang you!"

"Absolutely," said Vavasour.

De Courcy came back, closing the door behind him.

"Now turn in, dear boys," he said. "You've lost your beauty sleep already, and the rising-bell will be most unwelcome in the morning. Take my tip, and go to bed."

The baffled raggers gave De Courcy unpleasant looks. But they knew the Caterpillar; for all his drawling laziness, he had an iron determination, and he meant every word that he said. And they knew only too well what to expect from Langley, if the captain of Highcliffe should be called away from the merry little party in his study.

"Oh, go to bed," growled Ponsonby, to whom the "nuts" looked for guidance. "We can settle with that cad any time."

The Fourth-Formers turned in and the candles were blown out.

Clare settled down in bed, glad enough that it was all over. He had thanked De Courcy, the Caterpillar receiving his thanks with a cool nod.

Clare hardly knew what to make of the Caterpillar. But he had taken a liking to him, and he would have been very glad to make friends with him. But the mere thought made him sigh. De Courcy was not likely to chum up

with the rank outsider—the County Council school bounder who had "shoved" himself into Highcliffe with a scholarship.

That was hardly to be expected. And Clare was too proud to seek for friendship that was not freely offered.

He fell asleep at last.

The new boy had half expected that there would be further ragging later in the night; but his slumbers were not disturbed, and he did not wake till the dawn was creeping in at the windows, and the rising-bell clanged out.

Clare jumped out of bed at once, the first up in the Fourth-Form dormitory. The rest of the Fourth turned out more slowly. Clare proceeded to douche himself with cold water from head to foot, cold as the morning was. There were few in the Fourth who followed his example. Smithson, who was at the next washstand, was the only fellow who spoke to him. Smithson nodded agreeably.

"What the dickens is that on your arm, Clare?" he asked.

Clare smiled. On his right arm, just below the elbow, was a deep tattoo design, representing a tiger's head, in Indian ink. Smithson examined it curiously.

"Did you do it?" he asked.

"Oh, no. It's been there ever since I can remember," he said. "It must have been done in India, I think."

"In India!" exclaimed Smithson. "You've been to India?"

"I believe I came from India," said Clare quietly. "I was picked up at sea, in the Indian Ocean, when I was a kid."

"My hat!" exclaimed Smithson, in astonishment.

A scoffing laugh came from Gadsby, who overheard the remark.

"Picked up under a hedge, more likely," he sneered.

Clare looked at him steadily.

"I don't want any more of that, Gadsby," he said.

"Don't you? You may get it, all the same."

"If you can't speak civilly, don't speak to me at all," said Clare. "I warn you that I am getting fed up. I shall hit out next time."

"Why, you cheeky cad——"

"Shut up, I tell you."

"You impertinent rotter——"

Smack!

Clare's open hand came across Gadsby's face, and he staggered. With a panting cry, he hurled himself on Clare. Biff, biff!

Bump!

Gadsby lay on the floor.

He raised himself on his elbow, and yelled to his comrades.

"Lend a hand, you bounders. Rag the cad!"

Clare caught up the water-jug.

"That's enough," he said, between his teeth. "One at a time, if you please, and I'll fight the whole Form if you want me to. But no more ragging. Come more than one at a time, and you'll get hurt."

Ponsonby & Co. backed off with almost laughable suddenness.

"Oh, let the rotter alone," said Vavasour loftily. "The proper way to treat these persons is with contempt."

"Safer, too," drawled the Caterpillar.

Clare shrugged his shoulders, and finished his toilet uninterrupted. He finished dressing, and quitted the dormitory. Smithson followed him. Clare went downstairs, and out into the quadrangle. There Smithson joined him.

"I—I say," Smithson began, rather nervously, "it was decent of you to stand up for me last night in the dorm., Clare. I—I want to be friendly, you understand. But—if I don't speak to you much when the other fellows

are about, you know it ain't my fault. I can't afford to have the whole Form down on me."

"You can please yourself, of course," said Clare.

Ponsonby & Co. came out in a crowd, and Smithson gave Clare a nod and left him. The new boy remained alone. He walked down the quad. with his hands in his pockets. He had not taken particularly to Smithson, but he would have been glad of his company then. It was not pleasant to feel himself alone in a crowd. The Fourth-Formers made it very marked that they were avoiding him. Ponsonby & Co. had arranged to ignore the existence of the outsider—a more effective and less dangerous way of dealing with him than by ragging.

They looked at him from a distance, and laughed among themselves, and Clare felt his cheeks burning.

"Good-morning!"

Clare started a little as the Caterpillar greeted him.

"Good-morning," he said constrainedly.

"Feelin' fit this mornin', after your terrific fightin' last night?" asked the Caterpillar, with friendly interest.

"Yes, thanks."

"I see that the noble Smithson is keeping away from his giddy champion," went on the Caterpillar.

"I don't want the company of anybody who doesn't want mine," said Clare bluntly.

The Caterpillar laughed.

"Is that a hint to me? But suppose I want your company, my dear boy?"

"And—excuse me—I don't want to be patronised," said Clare.

"By gad, don't you?"

"No."

The Caterpillar looked at him with a lazy smile.

"Never mind; come for a little walky-walky," he said. "I'll show you round the place before brekker, you know."

"You're very good," said Clare, hesitating. It was a difficult position. Between the dislike of being patronised, and the fear of showing a rude independence, he hardly knew what to do.

"Oh, come on!" said the Caterpillar urbanely. "Don't be proud, you know."

Clare laughed involurtarily.

"I'm not likely to be proud," he remarked.

"Why not?" said the Caterpillar seriously. "I should be proud if I had half your brains. I couldn't have pinched that schol.—honest Injun! Pon couldn't, either. Times are changin', my dear boy. The brainy workin'-classes are pushin' us noble 'nuts' out of everything. The modern spirit is penetratin' even to the public schools, the last stronghold of our class. I can foresee the time when our giddy old nobility is going to be scrapped, because the brainy workin'-classes haven't any use for it. It's sad, but true. I find it interestin' to study the new phenomenon. I take an interest in you, as a specimen."

Clare hardly knew whether to laugh or to be angry. But he found himself walking along with the Caterpillar, who proceeded to expound his peculiar views in lazy tones. Ponsonby & Co. glared at them.

"Let that fellow alone, Caterpillar," called out Ponsonby. "You know what we've agreed."

"Bow-wow!" said the Caterpillar.

"Look here, if you jaw to that rotter we'll jolly well send you to Coventry along with him."

"Go ahead," said the Caterpillar. "To be relieved from the awful bore of your conversation, Pon, I should be willing to reside in Coventry, or any other place even more remote."

And he strolled on with Clare, leaving Ponsonby frowning.

"They mean that, De Courcy," said Clare abruptly. "You'd better think what you're doing. I don't want to get you on bad terms with your friends."

"Don't you worry," said the Caterpillar. "I suppose it wouldn't make the slightest difference to you if I told you that my uncle is an earl, and my brother a baronet?"

"No; why should it?"

"Yaas, why should it?" said the Caterpillar thoughtfully. "That's the giddy question—why should it? You'll never see my uncle or my brother—and they're not specially agreeable persons, if you did. Why should it make any difference? The remarkable thing is, my dear boy, that it does make a thumping big difference to most fellows. Pon and my other esteemed friends won't send me to Coventry, whatever they may say, for that excellent reason—because I have an uncle and a brother whom they will probably never see. Funny, ain't it?"

"Very funny," said Clare, laughing.

"I didn't do my prep. last evenin'," pursued the Caterpillar. "I shall make a dreadful muck of my construe this mornin'. But will Mobby be down on me, same as he would be down on you, or Smithy, or Benson?"

"I suppose so."

"Not a bit of it," said the Caterpillar cheerfully. "And I owe it to my beloved uncle, the earl. Mobby will never see my noble nunky, and nunky wouldn't touch Mobby with a barge-pole, even in the unlikely event of meeting him. But there you are—his mere existence is enough to keep Mobby from ragging me. I call it funny. No wonder the brainy workin'-classes regard us with amusement. The fellows look on you as a rank outsider, not fit to be touched. Now, I should be surprised to find that you look on them with more contempt than they feel for you—as a set of useless, silly 'nuts'? What?"

"Perhaps!" said Clare laughing.

"There you are!" said the Caterpillar. "It's a difference in the point of view. You belong to a class of people who would be ashamed to eat bread they hadn't earned?"

"Yes."

"And we should be ashamed to earn the bread we eat," said the Caterpillar. "Queer ain't it? Somethin' wrong somewhere—what?"

"You are a philosopher," said Clare.

"Yaas, I do some thinkin'," said the Caterpillar, with a yawn. "I find human nature an amusin' study. Ponsonby & Co. amuse me enormously. You amuse me, too. It's an amusin' world. Ta-ta—there's the bell."

And with a lazy nod the Caterpillar ambled away.

CHAPTER 12.

No Study!

MR. MOBBS presided at the Fourth-Form table at breakfast.

Mr. Mobbs's sharp, light eyes noted at once the signs of combat on Clare's face, and the much more prominent signs on Ponsonby's. Ponsonby's eye was assuming a dark shade, and his nose was a little out of gear, so to speak. Mr. Mobbs's thin, unpleasant voice remarked upon the subject at once.

"Clare!" he rapped out.

"Yes, sir?"

"You have been fighting?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have chosen an unfortunate way to mark your entrance into this school, Clare. I wish you to understand, once for all, that the customs of the Board-school cannot be introduced here."

The whole table grinned, as Clare's cheeks reddened.

The new boy sat silent. The snobbish dislike of his Form-master was one more thing to endure, that was all, and he had made up his mind to it.

"Fighting, and other hooliganism, is not permitted here," went on Mr. Mobbs. "You have been fighting too, Ponsonby."

"A fellow is bound to protect himself, sir," said Ponsonby.

"Quite so. However, you should rather have referred to me for protection, Ponsonby. I cannot permit this. You will take two hundred lines each."

"Very well, sir," smiled Ponsonby.

"I shall expect the lines by tea-time, Clare."

"Yes, sir."

Clare went on with his breakfast, not understanding Pon's smile—though he understood it later. It was necessary for even Mr. Mobbs to keep up some appearance of justice. But Ponsonby had no intention of doing his lines, and Mr. Mobbs had no intention of asking to see them; that was understood. The punishment fell upon the new boy alone.

In the Form-room, when Clare took his place there, there was more trouble. Clare had done no preparation the previous evening. The reason was his late arrival, owing to the trick Ponsonby had played upon him at the station. But Mr. Mobbs appeared to have forgotten all about that. He devoted special attention to Clare, "jawed" him for his remissness, and added another hundred lines to his imposition. Clare bore it quietly. But he was glad when morning lessons were over. In spite of Mr. Mobbs, he had acquitted himself pretty well, and he knew that he would be quite equal to the work of the class. The Fourth Form cleared off, leaving Clare alone in the passage. Smithson had lingered, and, seeing the passage clear, he spoke to Clare.

"Mobby was down on you," he remarked.

Clare nodded. In spite of his loneliness, he was far from pleased at Smithson's curious mode of showing friendliness. But he did not wish to rebuff the fellow, who, after all, meant kindly by him.

"What study have you been put into?" asked Smithson.

"I haven't a study—yet," said Clare. Mr. Mobbs had quite neglected to speak to him on that subject.

"We all have studies here, in the Fourth," said Smithson. "If you'd been in the Third, you have had to work in the Form-room, with a master; but we all do our prep. in our studies. We go two or three to a study, you know. There are four in mine now—Benson, and Jones minor, and Yates with me. We're a crowd, because we don't matter." Smithson sniffed. "Even Mobby can't very well make it five, thank goodness—though I'd be glad to have you, for that matter," he added hastily. "You'll have to be put in somewhere, though. There's only two in No. 3—Monson and the Caterpillar. You might be put in there. Ask Mobby."

"I suppose I'd better speak to Mr. Mobbs about the study, as he's forgotten it?" said Clare.

"Yes, you'd better—unless you're not to have a study at all, like a fag," said Smithson.

Mr. Mobbs had gone to his study. Clare followed him there, and tapped

at the door, and Mr. Mobbs told him sharply to come in. He looked irritated at the sight of the new junior.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"Excuse me, sir——"

"Come to the point at once."

"About my study, sir."

"Your study? Oh, I had forgotten. I suppose you must have a study," said Mr. Mobbs ungraciously. "Really I hardly know where to put you. Under the circumstances, you will naturally be unwelcome in any study."

Clare made no reply to that. Mr. Mobbs pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"You may go now," said Mr. Mobbs. "I will speak to you later."

"Very well, sir."

Clare went. He could not help thinking that Mr. Mobbs was going to forget the matter again, and he was in an awkward position. He wanted somewhere to put his books and his other things, and he had lines to do that afternoon, and preparation to do in the evening. So long as he had no study, he could only do his work in the Form-room; and the big, dreary Form-room was not an attractive place.

He thought with a sigh of Greyfriars School. If he could only have been there, instead of at Highcliffe! He remembered No. 1 Study, and Harry Wharton & Co. He could have been happy enough there. But it was useless to think of that.

In the afternoon he took his place quietly in class, and came through his work quite well, though Mr. Mobbs was much sharper with him than with the rest of the Fourth. When the juniors were dismissed for the day, Mr. Mobbs made no mention of a study for Clare. The new boy remained in the Form-room to do his lines. He had three hundred lines to take in by tea-time, and he had no time to lose. He remained at his desk, grinding away at his lines, alone in the big room.

He had finished the lines, and was heading for Mr. Mobbs's study with them, when he met the Caterpillar. De Courcy glanced at the sheaf of impot. paper in his hand.

"Been workin'—what?" he asked.

"Yes; I've done my lines."

"Beggar for work, ain't you?" said De Courcy admiringly. "What a ripping hand! We generally scrawl 'em."

"It isn't much more trouble to do them well," said Clare, with a smile, "and going over lines helps you memorise your Latin, you know."

"Never looked at it in that light," yawned De Courcy. "Mobby is a benefactor in disguise, then, when he gives you lines. Lucky he never asks me for mine. I never do 'em. Still, if you like doin' em, it's as good as an uncle in the peerage for you. What have you been workin' in the Form-room for? Where's your study?"

"I haven't been given a study yet."

"Oh! I'd mention it to Mobby, if I were you."

"I've mentioned it once."

"H'm! Mention it again, dear boy. Mobby has a bad memory—sometimes. He always forgets to ask Pon for his lines. He may forget all about your study."

Clare nodded, and went in to Mr. Mobbs, and handed in his lines. The master of the Fourth scrutinised them with unusual care; but he was able to find no fault, and he laid them on the table and made a sign of dismissal. Clare paused.

"My study, sir——" he began.

Mr. Mobbs made an irritable gesture.

"Really, Clare, I have had no time to think about that. I will speak to you later."

"Very well, sir," said Clare, with closed lips.

He left the study, and found the Caterpillar waiting for him outside.

"All serene?" asked De Courcy.

"Mr. Mobbs hasn't had time to think about a study for me."

De Courcy laughed.

"I fancy he never will have time," he remarked.

"I shall have to do without one, then," said Clare. "I can manage it, I suppose."

"Hard cheese!" said the Caterpillar sympathetically. "We have tea in our studies, you know, and it's much nicer than feeding in Hall, with Mobby's gargoyle face at the end of the table. And you'll have to do your prep. in the Form-room—and there's no fire there in the evening. Awful cad, Mobby, ain't he? You've brushed Mobby's aristocratic prejudices the wrong way, young 'un. Terrific old aristocrat, Mobby. My hat!"

Clare looked at him. The Caterpillar had uttered that ejaculation as if a new idea had suddenly come into his mind.

"A fellow might ask Mobby to put you into his study with him," the Caterpillar observed.

"Not likely to happen," said Clare.

"I don't know. There's two of us in No. 3," said the Caterpillar. "I stand Monson. I don't see why I couldn't stand you, at a pinch."

"Thanks; I don't want to be 'stood.'"

"Your finger-nails are quite clean," pursued the Caterpillar calmly. "Cleaner than Monson's, as a matter of fact. You don't breathe through your mouth, and you don't snore through your nose, do you?"

"No," growled Clare.

"You wash every mornin', I suppose?" said the Caterpillar anxiously. "'Twasn't merely a sort of show this mornin', was it? You do it every mornin'?"

Clare nodded. He was getting angry, but he did not want to quarrel with the Caterpillar if he could help it.

"And you don't eat with your knife," said the Caterpillar musingly. "I watched you on purpose at dinner. And you don't suck your teeth."

"Look here——"

"All serene, dear boy! Upon the whole, I sincerely believe I could stand you in my study. You can come."

"Well, I won't come," said Clare. "I won't quarrel with you, De Courcy, because I think you are a silly ass, and can't help it. But I don't want to come into your study, and you can go and eat coke."

And Clare walked away. The Caterpillar gave a low whistle.

"By gad!" he murmured. "Caterpillar, my boy, there's a facer for you! Your uncle the earl, and your brother the baronet, don't weigh an ounce with that excellent specimen of the brainy-classes. By gad!"

The Caterpillar stood for several minutes, thinking it out. Then he went into Mr. Mobbs's study.

CHAPTER 13.

Study-Mates!

CLARE came into Hall to tea. The Fourth-Form table was very sparsely attended. All the Fourth-Formers, who had funds to provide for themselves, had tea in their studies, and only the unfortunate youths who were "stony," or those whose allowances were short, came to the common

table. After tea, Mr. Mobbs condescened to notice Clare's existence as he rose from the table.

"Clare!" he rapped out. "You will share No. 3 Study. De Courcy has kindly offered to take you in."

"Thank you, sir."

Clare left the dining-room, feeling puzzled. He had not had the slightest expectation that the Caterpillar would make that offer, after the rebuff he had given him. But he was very glad to hear it. He wanted a study—it was a serious inconvenience not to have one, and it put him more than ever in the position of a pariah—an outsider. He was glad enough to take his books to Study No. 3.

He came up to the study with books under both arms. The door was ajar, and he could see De Courcy and Monson seated at the table, finishing their tea. Clare pushed open the door with his foot, and entered. Ponsonby was in the study, leaning against the mantelpiece and smoking a cigarette. He was discussing a forthcoming visit from his uncle, which was expected to materialise in a handsome tip. He broke off suddenly at the sight of Clare.

"Visitor for you, Monson," he said satirically.

Monson stared at the new-comer.

"What the deuce do you mean by coming into here?" he exclaimed.

"This is No. 3, isn't it?" said Clare.

"Yes, hang you—my study!"

"Mine, too," said Clare calmly. "Mr. Mobbs has told me that I am to come here."

Monson jumped up.

"Mobby has put you in here?" he exclaimed with angry incredulity. "I don't believe it. Mobby wouldn't be such an utter beast."

"I wouldn't stand it," said Ponsonby. "I'd like to see him shoved into my study, that's all."

"And I'm not going to stand it!" shouted Monson. "Get out, will you? Don't put your rotten books down here! Get out!"

Clare quietly placed his books on the shelf.

"Take it calmly, Monson, old man," drawled De Courcy. "It's all serene. I asked Mobby to put him in here."

"You—you—you did!" gasped Monson.

"Yaas."

"You asked Mobby to plant that rotten outsider in our study?" yelled Monson. "Why, you sily ass—you idiot——"

"Don't shout, dear boy. It gets on my nerves. Yaas, I asked him. You see, Mobby wasn't giving him a study at all, and he had nowhere to lay his weary head," explained the Caterpillar. "Pon might have rushed at the chance of takin' him in—but he didn't. It was up to somebody. As the only gentleman in the Fourth Form, I felt that it was up to me. And here he is."

"You silly rotter!" shrieked Monson. "I tell you I won't stand it! That Board School bounder in my study! I'll go to Mobby at once."

"N. G.," chuckled the Caterpillar. "I had first whack, Monny, my boy. Mobby was surprised; but I explained to him that the chap must have a study, and that it was up to somebody, and I nobly said that I could stand him. And I'm goin' to. And now Mobby's put him in the study, old chap, it's to late to raise objections."

"You rotter! You can stand him, if you like, but I won't! Didn't you think about me?" roared Monson.

The Caterpillar shook his head.

"Forgot you entirely," he confessed. "Awfully careless of me, dear boy, but I did! Forgot your very existence."

Monson panted with rage. The cool insolence of the Caterpillar enraged him almost as much as Clare's presence in the study.

"Perhaps the fellow will be willing to do the decent thing," suggested Ponsonby. "Let him change with Smithson in No. 8. He would be all right among that set, and you could put up with Smithy here, at a pinch."

"I don't want that rotter here," said Monson. "Still it would be better than having this workhouse cad. We'll fix it. You can change into No. 8, Clare. I'll fix it with Smithson."

Clare laughed.

"And I am not to be consulted in the matter at all?" he asked.

"You ought to be jolly glad to get a study, anyway," said Monson. "You can take your books into No. 8, and tell Smithson I want to speak to him."

Clare finished arranging his books on the shelf without replying. The Caterpillar smiled serenely.

"Do you hear me, Clare?" rapped out Monson.

"Yes; I'm not deaf."

"Well, why don't you go?"

"I'm staying, thanks."

"I tell you I want you to change with Smithson."

"And I tell you I don't care twopence what you want."

Monson clenched his hands and advanced upon Clare. The new boy looked him in the eyes, and Monson paused. He remembered what had happened to Ponsonby in the dormitory; and he was by no means so good a fighting-man as Cecil Ponsonby. Physical force was out of the question.

"You're staying here!" said Monson. "Haven't you any decency? I've told you that I don't want you in the study."

"I don't want you in it," said Clare.

"What!"

"You can change with Smithson," suggested Clare. "I'd rather have Smithson here than you. You get on my nerves. I'd be glad to see the back of you. Change out of my study and welcome."

"Your—your study!" gasped Monson.

"Yes; this is my study. And I warn you that if you are going to share this study with me, you've got to be civil," said Clare coolly.

"I! I—I——"

"I don't want any insults, and I won't take them. I warn you plainly that if you call me any more names, I'll take you by the neck and pitch you out of the room!"

"Out of the room!" stuttered Monson. "Me! I! Out of my study! My hat!"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, then," said Clare. "I haven't called you any names—though I know a good many that would apply to you—not complimentary names, either."

Monson glared at him. But he did not call Clare any more names. He realised—only too painfully—that it would be quite easy for the obnoxious new boy to carry out his threat, and pitch him neck-and-crop out of the study, if he chose.

Ponsonby strolled out with his hands in his pockets, whistling. Monson had no aid to expect from his leader.

The Caterpillar broke into a chuckle of great amusement.

"Take it calmly, Monson," he advised. "The chap's here. Make the best of it."

Monson ground his teeth.

"I won't share a study with him," he said. "That's too thick. If Mobby plants him in here, I shall get out. I'll ask Pon or Gadsby to take me in. You can have your precious new chum all to yourself, Caterpillar."

"Hurray!" said the Caterpillar.

Monson strode from the study and slammed the door after him. The Caterpillar looked at Clare with a beaming smile.

"I fancy he means that," he remarked. "We shall be only two in the study after all. More comfy than three—what?"

"I—I suppose so," said Clare slowly. "I wish the fellows would take this a bit more reasonably. I don't see that there's anything about me to get their backs up like this."

"You'd like to live on peaceable terms with 'em?" asked De Courcy.

"Yes, certainly."

"Like a tip how to do it?"

Clare nodded.

"Well, go and beg Ponsonby's pardon for punchin' his head," drawled the Caterpillar. "Tell him you're sorry for havin' had the cheek to come here—for havin' the nerve to exist at all, in fact. Treat 'em always with civility—let 'em rag you and cuff you—put up with everythin' they do—and soap 'em all the time. Then you'll be tolerated—like Benson."

Clare's lip curled.

"If that's the only way to keep on peaceable terms, I prefer to be at war," he replied.

"Yaas, I suppose you do."

"But I don't want to drag you into my quarrels," said Clare. "It looks to me as if you will get the Form as much up against you as they are against me."

The Caterpillar chuckled.

"You forget my uncle the earl!" he remarked. "Suppose they were all down on me. Suppose they were ragin' with hatred. Then I'd mention that my uncle had asked me to bring a couple of friends to his place next vac. And they'd all come round so quick it would make your head swim."

Clare burst into a laugh.

"Funny, ain't it?" drawled the Caterpillar. "Human nature's an interestin' study. What do you talk about?"

"What?" asked Clare, perplexed by the question.

"What are your subjects of conversation?" asked the Caterpillar. "Monson talks about horses, and cards, and the favourite for the Derby, and sweepstakes and things. He bores me to tears. It's struck me that I may find your conversation more interestin'. Do you know anythin'?"

"I could tell you how to build a boat," said Clare, much amused.

"Could you really?" exclaimed the Caterpillar, in great admiration. "You shall tell me, some time—not now—I'm afraid I should be bored. Monson bores me fearfully. So does Pon—poor old Pon! I really believe it will work."

"What will work?"

"Us—as study-mates," said the Caterpillar. "You see, I foresaw this—I rather thought Monson would get his back up and clear off, and we should have the study to ourselves. I was plannin' to change Monson for you—savvy?"

"I suppose that's a compliment to me," said Clare.

"Not exactly. I was thinkin' of myself. I think you won't be such a frightful bore as Monson," yawned the Caterpillar. "At all events, I shall find you an interestin' study. I shall watch your manners and customs, and habits, and so on—it will be as amusin' as keepin' rabbits and much

less trouble. After a term or so, I shall have a real insight into the ways and doin's of the brainy workin' classes. That's my little game."

"I don't quite know how to take you," said Clare, after a pause. "Still, you've done me a good turn, in getting me a study, and I won't quarrel with you."

"Quarrel with me!" exclaimed the Caterpillar. "For goodness' sake, my dear fellow, don't think of such a thing. I never quarrel with anybody. Too much fag. If I've said anythin' that offends you, I apologise. That's the worst fault of you brainy workin' chaps—you're so proud. I'm not proud. I apologise."

Clare laughed. Whether De Courcy was quite such an ass as he appeared to be, he could not quite make out. The Caterpillar was a new experience for him. But he could not help liking him, somehow, and he was grateful for the real kindness he had received from him. And certainly, of all the Fourth Form at Highcliffe, the Caterpillar was the study-mate he would have chosen. In spite of Mr. Mobbs, and the snobs of Highcliffe, matters were not turning out so badly after all.

CHAPTER 14.

Killing the Caterpillar.

DURING the next two or three days, Clare became gradually accustomed to his new surroundings.

Study No. 3 was a very comfortable habitation.

Ponsonby & Co. did not relax in their hostility towards the new junior. But he had no raggings to look for. They had learned that at close quarters the scholarship boy was quite able to take care of himself. And he was such an extremely hard hitter that the "nuts" wisely decided to let him alone personally.

Sneers and gibes fell harmlessly from Clare, like hail from glass. He had plenty of other matters to think about, and little attention to bestow on the absurd contempt of the Highcliffe snobs.

With the Caterpillar he got on very well.

Monson had carried out his intention of "shifting" from the study. With great ostentation he had removed his books and his other possessions, thus signifying that no sacrifice was too great to escape the contamination of the "outsider's" presence. If he expected Clare to be abashed or downcast, however, he was disappointed. Arthur Clare was only too glad to see him go. Neither was it a blow for the Caterpillar. De Courcy took it smilingly, and did not conceal his satisfaction—which was extremely irritating to Monson, who had spent a whole term in making himself agreeable to the earl's nephew.

In some ways, certainly, the hostility of Ponsonby & Co. made itself keenly felt. Clare was a footballer, and he naturally wanted to join in the games. But Ponsonby & Co. took excellent care that he had no chance of that.

Ponsonby was captain of the junior eleven. There was no chance whatever of Clare getting into that team; and even at practice the "nuts" refused to join him. If he went down to practice, he had to do it alone. The Caterpillar was not a footballer—he said that football was too much fag.

It was a disappointment for Clare, but he bore it quietly. The footer he had brought with him to Highcliffe remained almost unused. There was not much fun in punting the ball about by himself.

It was all the more "rotten," because, when he had seen Ponsonby & Co. playing, he saw that their game was by no means first-class, and he was accustomed to a good game himself. As skipper of the Highcliffe juniors, he could have pulled the team together, and made something of it, for he was really a splendid player. But he had no more chance of getting into the eleven than of becoming Head of Highcliffe.

Many times Clare's thoughts turned towards Greyfriars, and he thought of Harry Wharton & Co. They had been friendly enough to him, though he was a scholarship kid, and a schoolboy without a name. He knew that if he kept up his acquaintance with the Greyfriars fellows, it would make Ponsonby & Co. all the more down on him—for he had learned that the Highcliffe Fourth were at daggers drawn with the chums of Greyfriars. Still, he had no reason to conciliate the opinion of Ponsonby & Co., and he determined that he would not lose sight of his Greyfriars friends. As Ponsonby and his set refused to have anything to do with him, they could have no just cause for complaint if he looked for pals among their enemies.

The Caterpillar was his study-mate, but not exactly a chum. He was always urbane and polite, and sometimes Clare thought that the elegant youth regarded him as a friend; and then again some remark of the Caterpillar's made him think that he was only looked upon as an "interestin' study."

As a matter of fact, it amused the Caterpillar to exasperate Ponsonby & Co. by a show of regard for Clare.

There was a peculiar vein of sardonic mischief in the Caterpillar, which he gratified at the expense of the "nuts" of Highcliffe. Ponsonby would have been glad to get the Fourth to send him to Coventry; but that was out of the question. The Caterpillar was too big a personage to be sent to Coventry—indeed, Ponsonby knew that if he had not been so incurably lazy, if he had chosen to make the exertion, the Caterpillar could have taken the leadership of the Fourth into his own hands.

In spite of the Caterpillar's exasperating conduct with regard to Clare, his company was sought after, even by Ponsonby himself. And the cool contempt which De Courcy felt for the "nuts," and which he never troubled to conceal, somehow made him all the more sought after.

But though the two occupants of No. 3 Study were not chums, a certain amount of intimacy naturally grew up by the time Clare had been a week at Highcliffe.

The Caterpillar confessed, with amusing wonder, that Clare did not bore him, and he frequently took little walks with him. "Sunday walks" were a great institution at Highcliffe, and there was not a fellow in the Fourth who would not have been glad to be asked by De Courcy for a Sunday walk. He asked Clare, the first Sunday after the new boy's arrival, and Ponsonby & Co. saw them saunter out of the gates, and looked after them furiously.

The Caterpillar talked in his usual whimsical strain, and Clare, whose life hitherto had been passed among serious and matter-of-fact people, found him very amusing and entertaining. And the Caterpillar, on his side, found Clare an entertaining companion—he confessed that even "boat-buildin'" was more entertaining than the dreary talk about geegees, and billiards, and Bonny Boy's chances for the Thousand Guineas. De Courcy had a great admiration for anybody who could "do things," chiefly founded on the circumstance that he could do nothing himself.

But in a week's acquaintance Clare was certain that De Courcy was no fool, and that if he chose to exert himself he could make his mark. And one evening, in the study, he took him to task on the subject of his laziness.

Clare was working at his preparation, with his usual keeness. Mr. Mobbs was hard on him in class, always looking for a slip, and it was necessary

for the scholarship boy to keep up to the mark. But, besides that, Clare took a real interest in his work, and he was keen to get on.

De Courcy sat reclining elegantly in a deep armchair, smoking a cigarette, while Clare worked at the study table. He watched Clare, through the curling blue haze from the cigarette, with sleepy interest.

Clare raised his eyes, and met his glance.

"Go on!" said the Caterpillar encouragingly. "This is interestin'. I'm seein' how it's done, you know."

"Why don't you do your prep?" asked Clare.

"Too much fag."

"You hardly look at it," said Clare seriously. "I've hardly seen you work at all since I've been here, De Courcy."

"You do enough for two, my dear fellow. You'll keep up the reputation of the study."

"If Mr. Mobbs should begin on you some time, you'd be in an awful fix," said Clare. "The way you were construing this morning—it was rotten."

"I know it was."

"But look here, De Courcy," said Clare, half-laughing. "You come to school to learn, you know. Don't you want to get into the Fifth?"

"Not at all anxious."

"But if you go on like this, you'll still be in the Fourth when you go into tail-coats," urged Clare.

"Not a bit of it. I shall get my remove. They'll push me through, you know, somehow. 'Tain't as if I were a wretched outsider like Smithson, or Benson, or Jones minor," said the Caterpillar coolly. "They wangle these things, you know."

"But at any rate, you'll go right through the school, and leave not knowing much more than when you entered," exclaimed Clare.

"Does that surprise you, dear boy? Lots of fellows do."

Clare was silent.

"My dear chap," pursued the Caterpillar, blowing out a little cloud of smoke, "take my uncle! He's in the House of Lords—helps to make laws and things. He's been through a public school and through the University, of course. Take him and ask him to construe Virgil. Think he could do it?"

"I should think so."

"My dear boy, he couldn't construe Cæsar, let alone Virgil," yawned De Courcy. "I don't believe he even remembers that all Gaul was divided into four parts——"

"Three parts, you duffer!" said Clare, laughing.

"Three parts, was it? Well, three parts, then. I don't suppose nunky knows any more than I do. That's where you chaps get an advantage in your County Council schools. You learn things there, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Well, we come here chiefly to get polish," explained the Caterpillar. "It doesn't matter whether we know anythin' or not. The important thing is that we're turned out nice—like our dear Pon. That's polish. You get the Public School polish, you know, and vulgar knowledge doesn't matter. We leave that to the brainy workin' classes. Excuse me—nothin' personal, you know. We don't learn Latin—we don't even learn English—but what little English we know we speak with an accent that is all our own, and marks us off from the common herd—and that's sufficient. Savvy?"

"I suppose you're serious?" said Clare.

"Serious as a judge, dear boy."

"But what about knowledge for its own sake," said Clare. "Take Virgil. If you mugged up your Latin a bit more, you could read him, not as a beastly lesson, but as an author. You read silly novels. Virgil's better than a novel."

"Too much fag."

"Look at this bit," said Clare—"the shipwreck in the first Æneid. Shall I read it out to you?"

"Oh, don't!" groaned the Caterpillar.

"Eripiunt subito nubes cælumque diemque——" began Clare, half laughing.

The Caterpillar stopped his ears.

"Do you mean to say you like readin' that stuff?" he asked.

"Yes."

"My hat! You must be a frightful swot," said De Courcy. "Keep it to yourself, old chap. I'll watch you work."

"Put that rotten cigarette away, and pile in for once," urged Clare. "I'll help you, and you'll find it all right. Think what a surprise it will be for Mobby in the morning if you construe without a mistake."

"By gad!" said the Caterpillar, evidently taken with the idea. "By gad! What a joke on Mobby! Blessed if I don't do it!"

The Caterpillar flung his cigarette into the fire, yawned, and sat down to the table. He exerted himself, and went through his preparations, though with several deep groans. He was busily engaged when the door opened, and Ponsonby looked in.

"Caterpillar, old man, we want you in my study."

"Can't come."

"What the dickens are you doing?"

"Prep!"

"Swotting?" said Ponsonby, with a sneer.

"Yaas!"

"My only hat! Is swotting catchin' like measles?" said Ponsonby.

"Oh, don't bother!" said the Caterpillar. "I'm goin' to surprise old Mobby in the mornin'!"

"He'll only think you've been using a crib," said Ponsonby.

"Let him!"

"Chuck it!" urged Ponsonby. "We've got a little party in the study, and we want you to make a fourth."

"Sorry!"

"Look here, Caterpillar, you're not giving up bridge for swotting, I suppose?"

"My hat! No. But I'm busy now. Run away!"

Ponsonby retired from the study, and slammed the door angrily. The Caterpillar chuckled.

"Poor old Pon!" he murmured. "He's as surprised as Mobby will be in the mornin'. Don't you ever use a crib, Clare?"

"Never."

"Blessed if I should be able to make any show at all without a crib—even Mobby wouldn't stand it," said De Courcy.

"Better to have it in your head, than to have it in a crib—and easier in the long run," said Clare. "Look here, De Courcy, try it for a week, and see how it works."

"You'll kill me," sighed the Caterpillar.

"Try it" urged Clare. "Suppose Mobby left and you got a Form-master who had a proper sense of duty?"

"We'd lynch him!"

"Fathead!" said Clare, laughing. "You'd find yourself in an awful fix. Try it for a week, and see how easy it is."

The Caterpillar looked thoughtful.

"Blessed if I don't," he said, at last. "Pon will be in a fearful temper when he sees me swottin'."

Perhaps the prospect of seeing Pon in a fearful temper amused the Caterpillar, for he chuckled gleefully; and settled down to work. But he yawned dreadfully when his prep. was finished, and told Clare plaintively that he was "killin" him.

CHAPTER 15.

Ponsonby's Idea!

"SOMETHING'S got to be done!" said Ponsonby.

"Yes, rather."

"Oh, absolutely."

Ponsonby was standing in his study, before the fire, laying down the law. The chief members of the Co. were present, and they were all in earnest.

"It's disgustin'," went on Ponsonby heatedly. "The Caterpillar used to be one of us. Now he's chummin' up with that cad."

"Only pulling his leg, I fancy," said Gadsby. "He can't really like the awful outsider any more than we do."

"The beast would do anythin' to get a fellow's rag out," said Vavasour. "It amuses him to make us ratty."

"Somethin's got to be done," growled Ponsonby. "We've cut that cad—and he goes on his way smilin', as if we didn't exist. He's bagged the Caterpillar. Some of the fellows are civil to him, too, in a sneakin' way, when we're not lookin'. Young Smithson and Yates, and Jones minor, for instance. They talk to him."

"Rotten outsiders," said Gadsby.

"Yes, but look at it—he's defyin' us." said Ponsonby irritably. "We're all agreed that the cad ought to be kicked out of the school, and we can't make the least impression on him. Something ought to be done, and I think I've got a way."

"Hear, hear!" chorussed the Co.

"'Taint much use raggin' him," said Vavasour doubtfully. "One of us threw his boots out of the dorm. window, you know—and what did he do, but collect up a dozen pairs of boots and chuck em out too! You can't do anything with a beast like that."

"We might rag his study," said Gadsby; "we can rely on Mobby keepin' his eyes shut. But that would mean raggin' the Caterpillar, too."

"Serve him right!" exclaimed Monson hotly. "He got the fellow into the study and as good as turned me out."

"Absolutely," said Vavasour.

"Better than that," said Ponsonby; "my uncle's comin' this afternoon."

"Comin' at last, is he?" said Monson. "What can he do?"

"I'm thinking of putting it to him," said Ponsonby seriously. "Major Courtenay is a pretty distinguished old sport, you know—he's a governor of the School, and he's just back from India. He's done somethin' or other over there, and they made a tremendous fuss of him—made him a C.B., too. Well, I don't know what he's like—haven't seen him, as he was in India before I was born, but I think I shall be able to handle him. He's going to make me his heir, and he's got tons of tin—simply tons."

"Lucky bargee," said Gadsby.

"Well, he hasn't anybody else to leave it to," said Ponsonby. "He's a widower, you know, and has no kids—wife and kid drowned in a shipwreck when I was a nipper. My mater's his favourite sister, and he has a yearnin' after me—so the mater says in a letter, and she advises me to be very civil to him. I'm going to be, of course. Now, the old chap is supposed to be a bit of a martinet—and my idea is, that if we put it to him about that filthy outsider being here, he'll feel just as disgusted as we do."

"Sure thing," agreed Gadsby.

"And, what with being a governor of the school, and a distinguished soldier, and so forth, he'll have a lot of influence with the Head," said Ponsonby; "that stands to reason, don't it?"

"Absolutely!"

"Well, then, if we can work it, we can get him to put it to the Head, and bully him if necessary, and get that cad shifted out of the school!" exclaimed Ponsonby triumphantly. "What do you think of that for a wheeze?"

"By gad, there's somethin' in it," said Drury. "Stands to reason he will be disgusted at findin' the fellow here."

"And he will have no end of influence with the Head," said Ponsonby, "and I can appeal to his affection for me as his nephew, you know. Then I understand that he's a sour old beggar, and as hard as nails—and so, of course, he'd be down on the cheeky cad anyway. I really think we can work it, if we go the right way."

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll have him in the study, and make a fuss of him," said Pon; "all you fellows will back me up—we'll ask him to tell us jungle stories, and so on. That'll please him, and we can stand it—for once, anyway."

"We'll stand anything," said Monson manfully, "if he can get rid of that County Council cad for us."

"By Jove!" said Drury, who was lounging at the study window. "There goes the cad. The Caterpillar isn't with him for once."

Ponsonby & Co. looked out of the window. Clare was walking down to the school gates alone. It was a half-holiday, and Clare would have been very glad to spend it on the footer ground; but the footer ground was barred to him.

"Off for the afternoon, most likely," Ponsonby remarked, as the scholarship junior disappeared out of the gates. "Perhaps that's all the better. Just as well if Uncle Courtenay doesn't see him. He might think that he doesn't look such an awful cad as he really is, you know."

"Jolly thoughtful of you, Pon," said Gadsby admiringly. "If the major wants any confirmation, though, you can refer him to Mobby. Mobby will pile it on as thick as you like. He doesn't like the nameless cad any more than we do."

"You bet!" said Ponsonby.

The door of the study opened, and the Caterpillar looked in.

"All the family here?" he remarked pleasantly. "What are you doin' this afternoon, dear boys? Exertin' yourselves on the wild and woolly football field?"

"No!" growled Ponsonby.

"Good. Playin' bridge? I don't mind takin' a hand," said the Caterpillar.

"You're coming to us now that your precious slum chum has gone out, is that it?" asked Gadsby unpleasantly.

"Has he gone out?" said the Caterpillar, raising his eyebrows. "Yaas, I remember now he asked me if I knew anybody at Greyfriars, and if I'd like a walk."

"Greyfriars!"

"Yaas. I don't know anybody there, and I don't want a walk," drawled the Caterpillar. "I told him I was goin' to play bridge, and he was so shocked that I crawled away. I felt quite taken down. Makes a fellow feel so small, you know, to come bang up against the stern morality of the workin'-classes."

"I don't suppose the rotter knows how to play bridge," sneered Vavasour.

"All the better for him," said the Caterpillar. "It's a mug's game stickin' indoors gamblin' instead of goin' out."

"What do you do it for, then?"

"Because I'm a mug, I suppose," said De Courcy cheerfully. "We do it, dear boys, because we're asses and slackers, and don't know any better. That's the only excuse I can think of—we haven't the brains to make any better use of our time. Sad, but true. If you're not playin' this afternoon, I'll go and dig up some of the Fifth. Some of them are always ready."

"Oh, we've got time for a rubber, before my uncle comes," said Ponsonby. "Come in, you ass, and stick to your old pals for a bit."

"Happy, dear boy. So your uncle's comin'. The noble uncle—Sir What's-his-name?"

"No, my uncle from India."

"Uncle from India?" said the Caterpillar, in alarm. "My hat! I've got an uncle from India, and he tells jungle stories. Look here, you give me time to get out before your uncle comes. I'm not goin' to stand your uncle."

"We'll keep an eye on the window," said Ponsonby, laughing. "We mustn't let him catch us playing bridge."

"Stern old moralist?" asked the Caterpillar, with a grimace.

"Blessed if I know—I've never seen him, but I'm not taking any chances. He may be down on that kind of thing, for all I know; and I've got to brush him the right way."

"I understand—lakhs of rupees—beloved nephew—last will and testament—liver affected!" said the Caterpillar, with a nod. "Poor old Pon! Jolly glad he's your uncle and not mine."

The Caterpillar dropped into a chair at the table, and the young rascals produced cards and a box of cigarettes, and were soon "going strong." Outside, a keen breeze was blowing, and the sun was shining on the quadrangle—but the "nuts" of Highcliffe did not heed. The atmosphere of the study grew hazy with smoke—the faces of the gamblers grew harder and sharper. Only the Caterpillar retained his cool nonchalance, apparently careless whether luck was with him or against him. Ponsonby, Gadsby, and Vavasour, as they leaned over the cards, looked years older than their age—but this was "enjoyment," the kind of enjoyment to which the "nuts" of Highcliffe were addicted, and which they despised Clare for not desiring to share. As the Caterpillar often remarked, human nature was "funny."

In the keen interest of the cards—and in the fact that he was losing—Cecil Ponsonby soon forgot all about his expected uncle.

CHAPTER 16.

At the Risk of His Life!

ARTHUR CLARE'S face was bright as he strode along the lane.

It was a half-holiday, and he had the afternoon to himself, and he was going to Greyfriars. The Caterpillar did not want his company, and there was no one else at Highcliffe for him to concern himself

about. And he felt a keen desire to see something more of the chums of Greyfriars. They had given him a warm welcome, when he went to the school by mistake, and they had asked him to see them again. Considering the terms they were on with Ponsonby & Co., they were not likely to come to Highcliffe, and there was no reason why he should not visit them in their own quarters—let Ponsonby & Co. say what they would.

The Caterpillar was a pleasant companion enough, and amusing in his way, but he was not exactly a chum; and Clare felt a kind of need for the hearty, cheery companionship which he had experienced during his one afternoon at Greyfriars.

On a clear, cold afternoon like that, they would most likely be playing football, and he could watch the game, and have a chat with them afterwards, and he felt cheerful at the mere thought of it. It would be pleasant change after the sullen and contemptuous looks of his Form-fellows at Highcliffe.

Grrrrrrrrrh!

The unmusical growl of a motor-horn behind him made Clare jump out of the road. A big car was swooping along at a great speed towards Courtfield, and it left a thick cloud of dust and a smell of petrol behind as it swept past Clare. The schoolboy looked after it, coughing a little. Down the road, a trap was coming up from the direction of Courtfield, with a little old gentleman driving, and there was a sharp turn in the road. Clare's look grew anxious for a moment. The big car and the trap, approaching from opposite directions, would reach that sharp turn at the same time, and a clump of trees obscured the view there. The trap had just passed out of sight behind the trees, as the car rushed past Clare and swept on towards the corner. Clare wondered if the motorists had seen it. They swept round the corner at a terrific speed, in real road-hog style, in the middle of the road, and Clare heard a loud exclamation from behind the trees. He ran forward.

The car was gone, disappearing down the road to Courtfield in a cloud of dust. The old gentleman in the trap had just had time to turn his horse out of the way, and the trap had crashed against the hedge. The horse, frightened by the noise and the narrow escape, and blinded by the dust, was rearing wildly, and the old gentleman was dragging savagely on the reins to pull him in. As Clare came in sight of them, one of the reins broke.

The horse's head was down in a twinkling, the bit was between his teeth, and he was dashing off at top speed, the driver trying in vain to control him with the broken reins.

Clare saw the driver's face—a dark, sunburnt face, almost the hue of copper—set as hard as iron. The horse, thoroughly frightened and utterly out of control, was running away with a wild clatter of hoofs, and the light trap rocked wildly from side to side. Clare sprang into the road.

The man in the trap made a quick gesture to him to get out of the way. Clare did not move.

For he knew that unless the runaway was stopped there would be an accident in a few minutes—probably a fatal accident. And without even stopping to think, the schoolboy had made up his mind what to do.

As for the danger, he never even thought of it. And the danger was terrible; the maddened horse was rushing down upon him at top speed.

It passed like a flash. The runaway came abreast of the waiting boy—waiting with steady nerves and cool head; and, just as he was level, Clare sprang at his head, and caught hold.

In an instant he was dragged off his feet.

If he had let go his hold at that moment, he would have been trampled

under the thundering hoofs, and the trap would have passed over his body.

But he did not let go. He hung on with all his strength, and his weight dragged down the horse's head, and after a couple of minutes—during which it seemed to Clare that his arms were being torn from their sockets—the furious animal was dragged to a stop.

The pace slacked down, and ceased. The horse halted at last, and Clare stood unsteadily, covered with dust, his arms aching, his head swimming—but safe and successful.

The old gentleman leaped from the trap as it stopped. He took a turn of the broken rein round a tree by the roadside, and secured it. Then he turned to the schoolboy.

Clare touched his cap, and would have passed on, but the old gentleman made him a sign to stop, imperiously.

"Are you hurt, my boy?"

"No, sir," said Clare, gasping a little. His face had gone red, and now it had gone white; the strain had told upon him. But he smiled cheerfully.

"Do you know you might have been killed?"

"I didn't think about that, sir."

"It was a very plucky thing to do," said the old gentleman. "I should have been smashed up. The first motor along the road, for instance—here comes one." A car came rushing by, and the horse trembled in every limb.

"Do you know you have saved my life, boy?"

"I don't know, sir. I suppose you were in danger," said Clare. "I'm jolly glad I was on the spot."

"So am I," said the other grimly—"very glad. You have saved me from a broken limb, if not a broken neck—and a broken limb is serious at my time of life, begad! I am Major Courtenay, my boy. Remember that name if you ever want a friend. I shall not forget this. Here's my card—keep it. That's my address in London."

"Thank you, sir," said Clare. He slipped the card into his pocket-book.

The major was looking at him closely.

"Have I seen you before somewhere?" he asked. "I seem to know your face."

Clare shook his head.

"I don't think so, sir."

"Queer!" said the old gentleman, still regarding him curiously. "But, of course, I haven't seen you before, as I'm only a fortnight home from India, and it's twenty years since I was in this country. And you're not twenty—hey?"

"No, sir," said Clare, laughing.

He touched the broken rein.

"Can I help you with this, sir?"

The old gentleman regarded it doubtfully.

"Could you?" he asked.

"Quite easily, sir. I was taught to splice ropes when I was a little chap, and I could mend this easily enough."

"Go ahead, then; much obliged to you," said the major. Clare set to work at once with nimble fingers, the bronzed old veteran regarding him curiously the while. As Clare was in Etons, it probably struck the major as curious that he should have been taught rope-mending when he was a child; but he did not ask any questions.

"Of course, this will want seeing to afterwards, sir," said Clare, as he worked. "This is only temporary, but it will be safe enough to drive with."

"Yes; I was an ass to hire a trap to drive to the school," said the major, half to himself. "Twenty years on the Indian frontier, by Jove, and to get

one's neck broken in a quiet English lane! Do you know whether it's far to Highcliffe School?"

"About half a mile, straight on, sir."

"Thanks."

Clare had finished his repair, and the major mounted into the trap and took the reins. He thanked Clare again, and drove away towards Highcliffe. Clare dusted down his clothes—they needed it—and stood looking after him.

So the major was going to Highcliffe! A relation of one of the fellows there, most likely. Clare thought how proud he would have been of such a relation, a veteran of the Indian wars, with the bronze of tropic suns in his cheeks, and the scar of a sword-cut across his temple. He sighed a little as he resumed his walk to Greyfriars.

CHAPTER 17.

An Afternoon at Greyfriars.

"HALLO, hallo, hallo! Trot in!"

That was Bob Cherry's greeting, as he spotted Clare at the gates of Greyfriars. He shook hands warmly with the Highcliffe junior. Clare's face lighted up.

"I thought I'd give you a look-in," he said, a little shyly.

"Ripping idea!" said Bob Cherry heartily. "We're just going to play—we're playing the Shell this afternoon. Care to watch the game?"

"Just what I should like."

"You play footer—what?"

"I used to," said Clare, his brow clouding a little. "I—I haven't played since I've been at Highcliffe."

Bob Cherry understood, and he did not pursue that subject. He could guess that the scholarship boy, the boy without a name, had not found a warm welcome among Ponsonby and his set. Harry Wharton & Co. came up cheerfully to greet Clare. They were unaffectedly glad to see him.

Bob Cherry drew Wharton aside as Clare was chatting with the other fellows.

"What about giving him a chance?" he asked.

Wharton looked at him inquiringly.

"He doesn't play at Highcliffe," Bob explained. "You can catch on; we know our noble Pon. And you can see he's keen about the game. He looks as if he can play. If you think it's worth while, I'll stand out of the team and make room for him."

Wharton looked thoughtful. He glanced at Clare approvingly; certainly the Highcliffe junior looked like a player.

"I'll ask him," said Harry. "I quite understand how he's likely to get on with Ponsonby & Co., and it's rotten if he's kept out of the game, if he cares for it. Better put it rather carefully, though; don't want to give an impression of doing a favour."

Bob Cherry nodded.

"That's all right," he replied. "I'll have another engagement. Marky is going out on his bike with Russell. I'll go with them, and you can play this chap—see? I'll ask him to take my place."

"Right-ho!"

The juniors strolled down to the footer ground. The Shell team were there already. Some of the Removites went in to change, and Bob Cherry tapped Clare on the shoulder.

"Will you do me a favour?" he asked.

"Certainly," said Clare, with a smile.

"Feel up to playing this afternoon?"

Clare's eyes danced.

"Yes, rather! But——"

"Well, I'm going out biking with a chum of mine, if you'll take my place in the team," said Bob airily. "You can play half?"

"Yes," said Clare. "But—I say——"

"Done!" said Bob. "Sure you don't mind?"

Clare laughed.

"I should be jolly glad," he said "But you——"

"Then I'll get off," said Bob, without waiting for him to finish. "I shall be back by the time the match is over, and I'll join you at tea. It's a go!"

"But I haven't my things here," said Clare.

"That's all right. We're much of a size—I'll lend you mine," said Bob. "Wharton, it's all right—Clare'll take my place. Give him my clobber, will you?"

And Bob Cherry hurried away to the bike-shed, before Clare could make any further remark.

"This way," said Harry.

"I say, this is jolly decent of you," said Clare. "I'll do my best to play a good game."

"Right-ho!" said Wharton, taking him into the dressing-room. "Here are Bob's things. Get into them."

Clare's face was very bright as he changed. He could not help suspecting that Bob Cherry had invented that bicycle ride in order to give him a game, and his feelings were very kindly towards the good-natured Bob. He turned out with the Remove, in the Greyfriars colours, with a light heart.

Hobson, the captain of the Shell, looked at him as he came into the field with Harry Wharton & Co.

"Got a new man—what?" said Hobson.

"Yes—new recruit," said Wharton. "Look out for squalls, Hobby."

"Bow-wow!" said Hobby.

The teams lined up, and the kick-off fell to the Remove. The game was soon going hot and strong. The Shell were, of course, an older team than the Remove, and bigger fellows, and Harry Wharton & Co. had plenty to do to keep their end up. Wharton eyed Clare a little anxiously at first. The Highcliffe junior looked like a player, but Wharton was not reassured till he had seen him play. But after the first five minutes of the game he realised that he had a new recruit who was fully up to the value of the absent Bob.

Clare was enjoying himself thoroughly.

It was a fast game, and he was in his element. He was in perfect condition, and he had a pace that made some of the Greyfriars fellows open their eyes. At attack and defence he was equally good; he relieved the backs and "fed" the forwards in inimitable style.

Many a time he proved a thorn in the side of the Shell, as they came down in sweeping rushes for the Remove goal.

The first goal was taken by Wharton, Clare sending him the ball, and it was not till close on the interval that the Shell scored and equalised.

In the second half, Hobson and his men played up harder than ever, and the Remove were put on the defensive; and there Clare showed at his best. On the left wing the enemy were never able to get through. The new recruit was a tower of strength to his side.

But the Shell scored again, and had the consolation of being a goal ahead, and, as "time" drew nearer, prospects were darker for the Remove. The juniors fought hard, but the older team kept them penned in their own half.

Twenty minutes more to go—a quarter of an hour—ten minutes! And still the Shell were a goal up, and "paid" was put to all the Remove attempts to get through.

A desperate effort at last brought success to the Removites, and Vernon-Smith put the ball in, and the score was level. Five minutes to go.

"Looks like a draw!" gasped Nugent, as they lined up again for the final tussle.

The Shell came on again with a rush, determined that it should not be a draw. Coker of the Fifth, who was referee, looked at his watch. There was a tussle before the Remove goal, but Johnny Bull cleared, and the ball went to midfield. Clare was upon it in the twinkling of an eye.

The Shell defence had fallen back towards their own goal. Clare gave a rapid glance round, and saw Coker raising his whistle—and he saw no Remove forward in a position to take a pass. It was almost the stroke of time, and it was neck or nothing! He kicked for goal.

There was a shout from the players as the ball soared, and the Shell goal-keeper grinned. He did not believe that that long shot would come off. But it was shooting right for the corner of the net, and the goalie jumped at it to save—and to his astonishment it wisped past his finger-tips, and landed fairly in the net. There was a yell from the onlookers.

"Goal!"

"Goal, by thunder!"

Coker blew the whistle.

Harry Wharton rushed breathlessly up to Clare, and thumped him on the back.

"Bravo! Well done! The winning goal, by Jove!"

"Hurray!"

"Well kicked, sir!"

"My hat!" ejaculated Hobson of the Shell. "You've got a good man there, Wharton; born in shooting boots, I should say, by George!"

Clare smiled cheerily. It had been touch and go, but he had kicked the winning goal. The Remove players overwhelmed him with congratulations as they walked off the field. Bob Cherry, who had returned in time to watch the second half, rushed up to him and hugged him in his glee.

"What did I tell you?" chuckled Bob. "Didn't I know he was a player? Didn't I tell you so—what?"

"You did," said Harry, laughing; "and you were right. By Jove, Clare, if you belonged to us, there'd be a place in the Remove eleven for you."

"What-ho!" chuckled Bob. "It's a rotten pity! You're wasted at Highcliffe, Clare. Why didn't you get a Greyfriars' scholarship, you bounder—eh?"

"I wish I had," said Clare, with a smile.

He changed into his own clothes again, his face very bright and happy. He had enjoyed that afternoon to the full; and he enjoyed the tea afterwards in No. 1 Study. The study was crammed with most of the Remove eleven. There was very little room to move, but there was unlimited cheerfulness and good-fellowship. Clare chatted away in high spirits; the Highcliffians would have been surprised if they could have seen, at that moment, the boy whom they had always beheld quiet and reserved, sedate beyond his years. The time for parting came all too soon.

Harry Wharton & Co. walked halfway home with Clare, and left him in Courtfield, after making him promise that he would pay them another visit before long. And Clare walked home to Highcliffe as happy as it was possible to be.

CHAPTER 18.

Pon's Uncle.

"MY deal!" yawned the Caterpillar.

"Look out!" said Drury, who was watching from the study window. "I fancy that's your uncle, Pon."

Ponsonby rose from the table, cards in hand, with an irritated frown. He looked out of the study window.

A trap had driven in at the gates, and an old gentleman, with a bronzed face, had dismounted, the porter taking charge of the vehicle. The visitor started towards the School House, glancing about the quadrangle as he came.

Ponsonby grunted savagely.

"That must be the major," he said. "Get the cards out of sight, for goodness' sake. Wave something about and clear this blessed smoke off. We can't finish the rubber. Hallo! Where are you off to, Caterpillar?"

"Escapin', dear boy," said the Caterpillar. "Don't ask me to talk to your Indian uncle. I'm off Indians. Good-bye!"

And the Caterpillar beat a prompt retreat to his own study.

Ponsonby & Co. were very busy for the next few minutes. The cards were put out of sight, the bridge markers hidden, the ash-trays locked up, and cigarette-ends thrown into the fire. Gadsby waved a newspaper about to clear off the haze of smoke. Ponsonby cast an anxious glance round the study.

"All serene," he said. "I'd better rush down and greet my uncle. Lucky he doesn't know I saw him from the window."

Ponsonby ran downstairs; but the major had already gone in to see the Head, and he remained some time talking to Dr. Voysey. Ponsonby's chums joined him downstairs.

"Left the study all right?" Ponsonby asked anxiously. "You've put that blessed paper out of sight, Gaddy? It's a little too pink for uncle."

"Burnt it," said Gaddy, laughing.

"Good. Some of you cut across to the tuckshop and get in some things. I'm going to get the old boy to have tea in the study if I can. We must give him something really decent. This may mean a ten quid tip for me, if all goes well."

"Rely on us to back you up, dear boy," grinned Monson.

All the "nuts" were quite keen to back up old Pon in the noble purpose of extracting a ten quid tip from his Indian uncle. The old gentleman came along the passage at last, looking for his nephew. Mr. Mobbs met him in the passage, bowing almost to the ground before the major. Mr. Mobbs had heard of the great riches of Ponsonby's uncle, and he would have embraced his feet in the Oriental style if necessary. The old major looked at him rather grimly.

"Pray excuse me for introducing myself," purred Mr. Mobbs. "I have the honour to have your nephew in my Form, sir. I am Mr. Mobbs, the master of the Fourth Form. Master Ponsonby is my best pupil."

"Begad!" said the major. "I'm glad to hear that. Works, does he?"

"He does his class credit, sir," said Mr. Mobbs. "It will be a great blow to me when Master Ponsonby passes into the Fifth. By setting an example of excellent conduct to the other boys, Master Ponsonby makes my task lighter."

"That's good news," said the major, but his glance dwelt very coldly upon Mr. Mobbs, who was almost wriggling in his great desire to be agreeable to Major Courtenay. The major was a keen judge of men, and his judgment

did not give him a very good impression of the master of the Fourth.

"Where is my nephew?"

"Here I am, uncle!" said Ponsonby, coming forward.

The major shook hands with his nephew, looking him over with keen eyes from under his grey, heavy brows.

Ponsonby bore the scrutiny nonchalantly. The major gave a grunt, apparently of approval.

"So you're my nephew, Cecil?" he said.

"Yes, uncle. It's jolly kind of you to come down here and see me," said Ponsonby. "I've been looking forward to it ever since I heard you were home. I wanted to meet you at the station, but you didn't let me know your train. I've been waiting with my chums ever since dinner; they're all anxious to see you. I've told them all about you, of course."

"Hum! And what have you told them?" grunted the major.

"About what the papers have said of you," said Ponsonby. "'Tisn't every fellow at Highcliffe who has a distinguished soldier to show off to the other chaps, I can tell you."

The major smiled.

"Well, I'm glad to see you, Cecil," he said. "I've just heard a good account of you from your Form-master."

"Mr. Mobbs is very kind," said Ponsonby.

"Not at all, my dear Ponsonby," said Mr. Mobbs effusively. "I have assured your esteemed uncle——"

"I'm glad you've got a good character," said the major, ruthlessly interrupting the effusive Mr. Mobbs. "You're a worker, hey?"

"Well, I do my best," said Ponsonby, feeling very glad now that the cards and cigarettes were well out of sight. "I've rather a turn for study, uncle. Not what you'd call a swot, you know—must give some time to games."

"Playing something this afternoon—what?"

"No; chucked it this afternoon, as you were coming," said Ponsonby. "I've been looking over Virgil in my study while I waited for you. Will you come up and see the study, uncle? I've promised my friends that you'll have tea with us there. We rather make a point of tea in the study for visitors, you know—I mean visitors that we want to make a fuss of."

The grim, bronzed face relaxed into a smile again. Certainly Ponsonby was going the right way to work with his Indian uncle.

"Certainly I'll come!" said the major. "Be a boy again for the afternoon—what? Take me up to your quarters."

"This way, uncle!"

Ponsonby showed the major into his study with great empressment. The major glanced round the room and grunted. The appointments of the study were almost luxurious, for Ponsonby & Co. spent plenty of money in making themselves comfortable. Apparently the "soft" surroundings did not please the eye of the veteran.

"You make yourselves pretty comfy here—hey?" said the major.

"Well, yes," said Ponsonby. "No good being too Spartan, you know, uncle. A fellow has to keep up some appearances, too."

"Things have changed since my time," grunted the major. "I didn't have a silk sofa in my study when I was at Highcliffe; nor a bronze clock, by Jove!"

"Oh, that clock's Gaddy's, and the sofa belongs to Vavasour," said Ponsonby. "You see, we whack out the study—there are three of us. So far as I'm concerned, if I had a chair and a table to work at I should be satisfied."

The major gave a sniff.

"Who smokes here?" he demanded.

"S-s-smokes?" exclaimed Ponsonby, a little taken aback.

"Yes. So they allow kids to smoke at this school—what?"

"Certainly not, uncle," said Ponsonby, looking shocked.

"Then you smoke without permission—hey?"

"I, uncle? I suppose the Caterpillar has been here," said Ponsonby. "That's De Courcy, you know. He's rather a "nut," and he does those things. I don't quite like it, but a fellow doesn't want to preach at a chap; I should hate to be a prig."

Major Courtenay nodded.

"Quite right, Cecil; but I should advise you not to have too much to do with a kid of your age who smokes. It's a beastly bad habit, for one thing, and it's beastly bad form, for another, in a boy."

"I know that, uncle. You needn't be afraid I shall ever do anything of the kind. I should be afraid of being sick," added Ponsonby artlessly.

Vavasour and Gadsby and Monson appeared in the doorway with packets in their hands. Ponsonby presented his chums to the major. The old gentleman sat down in the best armchair, while the juniors prepared tea.

When Gadsby opened the table drawer, to take out the spoons, the major rapped out an exclamation.

"Give me that box!"

"That—that box, sir?" stammered Gadsby, hastily closing the drawer.

"Yes, that box in the drawer."

Gadsby cast a helpless glance at Ponsonby. It was a box of cigarettes that the major had spotted. There was no help for it, and Gaddy passed it to the major, who opened it, and frowned at the sight of the cigarettes.

"You don't smoke, but you keep cigarettes in your study for visitors, Cecil—hey?" he demanded.

Ponsonby gave Gadsby a significant look.

"They're mine, sir," said Gadsby meekly.

"Yours—hey? So you smoke?"

"Oh, no, sir. De Courcy gave them to me, and told me to try them; but I tried one, and it made me quite ill," said Gadsby innocently. "I'm jolly well going to give them back to him, too."

"I'd advise you to," said the major, throwing the box on the table. "This fellow De Courcy seems to be a pretty specimen, I must say. Huh!"

Ponsonby & Co. were in a somewhat nervous state by this time. There were a good many thing about the study which could not have been explained away so easily if they had come to light; and an accident might have brought them to light. But the "nuts" were very careful now. It was pretty evident that the major would not approve of their variety of "nuttishness," and they did not mean to let him have any suspicion of it. And with the ten quid tip, and other benefits, in prospect, they nobly made up their minds to give the old boy his head, as they expressed it to themselves, and endure him with exemplary patience so long as he stayed. And they hoped fervently that he was going to catch an early train.

CHAPTER 19.

Ponsonby Strikes While the Iron is Hot.

MAJOR COURTENAY allowed his grim, bronzed face to relax into a good-humoured expression as he sat the the tea-table, and Ponsonby & Co. vied with one another in looking after his wants.

The Highcliffe "nuts" could make themselves very agreeable when they chose, and they chose now.

Ponsonby was waiting for an opportune moment of introducing the subject of Clare. He wanted to get the major into a thoroughly good humour first. He proceeded to draw the old gentleman out on the subject of India; and the major, who never dreamed that his dutiful nephew was capable of "pulling his leg," related several jungle stories—just as the perspicacious Caterpillar had foreseen that he would. The major had a special story of a tiger-hunt, in which he had been "treed," and had narrowly escaped a mauling—and Ponsonby & Co. listened to it with wonder and delight. The major was so pleased that he told the story twice over, and Ponsonby made him show exactly how matters stood at the time—the major using the tea-things in illustration.

"That was the tree," said the major, placing the sugar-basin. "This cake was the river. The tongs show you where the tiger was, hidden in thick jungle, exactly halfway between the sugar-basin—I mean, the tree—and the river—— Begad, you've moved my river, young 'un!"

"Sorry!" murmured Gadsby, who had started on the cake.

By the time the major had finished his illustration, the juniors knew exactly how it had all happened, and the major was in high good-humour. And, as Gaddy pointed out to Ponsonby afterwards, they hadn't yawned once.

Ponsonby's moment had arrived, and some remark of the major's having given him an opening, he adverted to Clare.

"I want to ask something of you while you're here, uncle," Pon remarked.

"Huh!" said the major. "Stony—what?"

Ponsonby laughed.

"No, it isn't that, sir. I have a good allowance, and my tastes are so simple, I'm never short of tin. It's quite another matter. It really concerns you, too, as you are a governor of Highcliffe."

"Begad! And what is it?" asked the major.

"It's about a new fellow who's come here," explained Ponsonby. "Of course, as I've told you, I'm rather particular in my choice of friends, and it's a bit unpleasant to have an arrant blackguard come into the Form a fellow belongs to."

"Begad!"

"A regular rank outsider," said Gadsby. "We look on it as a disgrace to the school, sir. As an old Highcliffe man yourself, you understand how we feel."

"But that's very odd," said the major. "If the boy is such a blackguard, how is it that Dr. Voysey has let him come here?"

"It seems that he couldn't help himself," explained Ponsonby. "The fellow has sneaked in on one of those rotten scholarships. Of course, they were not intended for fellows of his class; but somehow or another he managed to hoodwink some foolish old vicar into backing him up, and he squeezed through somehow. It was a shock to us when he came—the whole Form was indignant. Our Form-master doesn't like it any more than we do."

The major looked grave.

"Do you mean to say that this boy is a person not fit for you to associate with?" he asked.

"That's it, exactly."

"Absolutely, sir."

"You see, the Head is very easy-going," said Ponsonby. "He might have done something, but he let it slide. Some fellows say that things here are pretty slack, owing to the Head being so very easy-going, you know."

The major gave a curt nod; in his interview with the Head, he had not failed to observe what the Highcliffe fellows, among themselves, called his "doddering."

"The fellow was put into Monson's study," went on Ponsonby. "Monson simply had to clear out—didn't you, Monson?"

"I did," said Monson. "It was impossible to use the same study as that fellow, sir. I can stand a good many things, but I can't stand that. Pon was good enough to take me in here, sir, or I should have to do my work in the Form-room. To stand that utter cad was simply impossible."

"What is his name?" asked the major.

"He's called Clare; but, as a matter of fact, he has no name at all."

"No name at all!" repeated the major. "How the dickens can that be?"

"He's a foundling, or something," said Ponsonby. "It's understood that he was picked up in a field, after a gang of gipsies had been there, and was brought up by an old ruffian who builds boats for a living. And he does credit to his upbringing, too. I suppose he's considered all right in the slum he comes from; but I think you'll agree with us, sir, that Highcliffe isn't the place for him."

"I should say so, if he is anything like your description," the major exclaimed warmly. "But what has he done exactly?"

"It isn't exactly what he's done, or not done," said Ponsonby. "It's the utter lowness of the beast, sir. He has low tastes, low ideas, low everything. I suppose the poor brute doesn't know any better—I don't want to be hard on him," said Ponsonby magnanimously. "I only say that he's not fit to be here, and that something ought to be done."

"And we thought you might use your influence with the Head, sir," said Vavasour. "You could speak to Mr. Mobbs on the subject first, and see what he says."

"I shall certainly do so," exclaimed the major warmly. "A boy of that description is no fit associate for my nephew. Where is he now?"

"He's gone out for the afternoon," said Gadsby. "By himself, of course—nobody here will speak to him. He has some low associates near Courtfield, and he's gone to see them, I think. Probably in a slum."

The major knitted his brows.

"But there must be something in the boy, if he has come here on a scholarship," he said. "That means hard work."

"Or trickery of some sort," said Monson. "There are all sorts of tricks in passing exams.—and a thoroughly cunning rotter like that fellow would be up to all of them."

"The fact is, we regard him as a dangerous character," said Ponsonby. "The people he has lived among are the lowest of the low, and if he should begin stealing, or anything like that, it would be a horrible disgrace for the school."

"Horrible, absolutely!" said Vavasour.

"This must be seen into," said the major abruptly. "I am very glad you have mentioned the matter to me. Certainly it must be seen into. Of course, I have not been able to attend the meetings of the governors for twenty years past, but I shall certainly attend the next meeting, and, if necessary, represent the matter to them. But while I am here, I will speak to the Head on the subject, and represent the matter to him strongly."

Ponsonby & Co. exchanged glances of satisfaction. Clare had treated their attacks with contempt; but an attack of this kind it would not be easy for him to defend himself against. Already, in their mind's eye, the "nuts" saw the nameless schoolboy turned out of Highcliffe bag and baggage.

"I will speak to Mr. Mobbs at once, and hear his opinion of the boy," said the major, rising. "You may take me to his study, Cecil. I should like to see the boy himself. Have you any idea when he will return?"

"Most likely he'll be late, uncle. He doesn't pay much regard to the

laws of the school. The very day he came here, he stayed out late in the evening, and only turned up just before bedtime."

"Disgraceful!" said the major. "I must catch my train; but I should like to see him before I go. I do not want to condemn him unseen. However, take me to Mr. Mobbs now."

Ponsonby gleefully guided the old gentleman to Mr. Mobbs's study. He knew the kind of account the mean-spirited master was likely to give of Clare. And he was not disappointed. As soon as the major asked about Clare, all the venom of Mr. Mobb's petty nature rose to the surface. The major listened to him quietly, but his keen eyes were on Mr. Mobb's meagre face all the time. He could see that the Form-master had a personal dislike for the boy he vilified. But even that was against Clare; for why should his Form-master dislike him without cause?

The keen old soldier could judge Mr. Mobbs pretty accurately; but he could not read the depth of snobbish meanness in the Form-master's nature. Mr. Mobbs was like a chameleon, that takes its colour from its surroundings—he was a snob among snobs. He disliked the scholarship boy because the other snobs disliked him, he despised him because they despised him. And lately his dislike had grown more bitter, because he fancied, sometimes, in the boy's quiet glance, he read a subdued scorn of his meanness and unfairness.

"Then it is your opinion, Mr. Mobbs, that the boy is unfit for this school, and to mix with the other boys here?" said the major.

"Undoubtedly."

"You should certainly be able to form a judgment, as his Form-master. But the Head——"

"Dr. Voysey has scarcely seen the boy—not more than twice in as many weeks," explained Mr. Mobbs. "He seldom interferes with the Form-masters."

The major mused. Grim old military martinet as he was, he had a sense of justice and fair-play. It was not fair-play to condemn a boy he had never seen, and he was anxious to see Clare before he spoke to the Head on the subject.

He looked at his watch.

"My train goes in an hour," he said, "and I have to drive to Courtfield. When is this boy likely to be here, Mr. Mobbs?"

"He should be here now," said Mr. Mobbs. "It is nearly locking-up time."

"I am given to understand that he pays little regard to the rules of the school, such as coming in by locking-up time?"

Mr. Mobbs hesitated a little. An uncomfortable feeling that he might be called upon to substantiate his statements, held him to some degree in check.

"Certainly I cannot call his conduct exemplary, Major Courtenay. The day he came here he stayed out late—his very first day at the school. However, I will send to inquire if the boy has yet returned."

Mr. Mobbs rang, and sent the page to inquire for Clare. It was time that the junior returned; and Mr. Mobbs hoped sincerely that he had not come back—it would be another count in the indictment against him. And he realised that it would better for his object, if the major did not see Clare—for the old gentleman from India was evidently desirous of being just—he did not see eye to eye with his nephew. There was little doubt that if the major exerted his influence it would be powerful enough to get Clare turned out of Highcliffe, and that—from the point of view of Mr. Mobbs, as well as Ponsonby & Co., was a consummation devoutly to be wished.

CHAPTER 20.

A Surprising Meeting.

"HAD a good time?" drawled the Caterpiller.

De Courcy was reclining in the armchair, blowing little puffs of smoke from his cigarette, as Clare came into the study.

Clare coughed a little. After the walk through the fresh, keen air, the smoke worried his lungs a little.

"Yes," he said.

"Been to Greyfriars—what?"

"Yes," said Clare cheerfully. "I've been playing footer there."

"By gad, what a fag!" said the Caterpillar, yawning. "I've been playing bridge. I've cleared Pon out of two quids. What have you got to show for the afternoon—what?"

"Well, I'm feeling as fit as a fiddle," said Clare. "That's something. And I'm as hungry as a hunter, too. Have you had tea?"

"No; I've waited for you, dear boy."

"That's awfully good of you. I'll get it ready in a jiffy," said Clare briskly.

"I—I'll help you, if you like," said the Caterpillar, without, however, making a movement from the armchair.

"Stay where you are," said Clare, laughing. "I can manage."

"I'll tell you what," said the Caterpillar. "I've been thinkin'——"

"As well as playing bridge?" asked Clare, with a smile.

"No—just now, I mean. Look here, you are pretty short of tin, I suppose?"

"Not exactly loaded with it."

"I've got lots," said the Caterpillar.

"All the better for you; it's a useful article," said Clare, as he stirred the fire together, and jammed the kettle upon it.

"That's what I've been thinkin' of, you know. Suppose we strike a bargain. You always get the tea—I never help you. Well, then, suppose we make an arrangement for me to stand the tea, and you to cook it—what? Equal division."

Clare coloured.

"That won't do," he said quietly. "I can't let you stand my tea. I don't mind doing the cooking—in fact, I'd rather. Those rashers you tried to cook the other day were a little bit awful."

"But you oughtn't to do the whole bizney," objected the Caterpillar. "I tell you I've got lots of oof, and I want to stand it."

"Can't be done."

"The horrid pride of the workin' classes again!" groaned the Caterpillar. "If I were hard up, I'd let any man-Jack stand me a feed, and be glad of it. But I stand corrected. Only, don't you see, if you stand your whack in the feeds, and you do all the cookin', and so on, you're puttin' me under an obligation."

"Well, you can lay the table and wash up the tea-cups, if you like," said Clare.

"Look here, Monson wasn't so jolly particular!" growled the Caterpillar. "You're makin' me feel like a purse-proud snob."

"I don't want to do that, De Courcy. Only I can't let you pay any of my exes—for one thing, the fellows would say I was sponging on you, and they'd be right, too. Let that drop, and if you want to do your whack, get up and lay the table."

The Caterpillar sighed, and rose to his feet. Dobbs, the page, put his head into the study, as Clare was breaking eggs into the frying-pan.

"Master Clare is wanted," he said.

Clare looked round.

"Who wants me?" he asked.

"Mr Mobbs, sir."

"Right-ho!"

"More trouble," said the Caterpillar, as Dobbs vanished. "What have you been doin' now?"

"Nothing that I know of," said Clare, with a puzzled look. "I was in before locking-up. I suppose I'd better go."

"I'll do the cookin' while you're gone," said the Caterpillar heroically.

Clare smiled, and quitted the study. As he came downstairs, he found Ponsonby & Co. in the Lower Hall, and they grinned as he came along. Clare understood from their looks that there was mischief afoot.

He hardly looked at them, however, walking on quietly to Mr. Mobbs's study.

"Now the cad is going to get it in the neck!" murmured Ponsonby; and the Co. said, "Hear, hear!" with great satisfaction.

Clare tapped at his Form-master's door, and entered.

Mr. Mobbs was not alone in the study. A stiff old gentleman, with a face as brown as a berry, and a bristling white moustache, was there. Clare started as he saw him, recognising at once his old acquaintance of the runaway trap.

Major Courtenay rose quickly at the sight of the junior, a welcoming smile on his face.

"Hallo! You here, my boy?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir," said Clare.

"What! Do you belong to Highcliffe, then?" exclaimed the major, shaking hands with Clare.

Mr. Mobbs almost fell down.

"Yes, sir," said Clare. "I'm in the Fourth."

"Begad!"

"You—you have met this—this boy before, Major Courtenay?" exclaimed Mr. Mobbs, in a gasping voice.

"Indeed I have," said the major. "I should have arrived here with a broken leg, or a broken neck, if I had not met him. He stopped my horse when it was running away, at the risk of his life, Mr. Mobbs. A very creditable member of your Form, sir."

"Oh! I—I——" Mr. Mobbs simply spluttered. This utterly untoward occurrence completely knocked his little schemes on the head.

"I am glad to see you again, my lad," said the major. "I am glad you are in the Fourth Form at this school. Are you a friend of my nephew?"

"I—I don't know your nephew's name, sir," said Clare, hesitating. He was so "frozen out" of the Fourth, that he did not even know the names of all the fellows in the Form, and he had never heard of a Courtenay in the Fourth.

"Ponsonby," said the major—"that's my nephew's name."

Clare's face fell.

"I—I have met Ponsonby," he stammered.

"Well, well," said the major, guessing from the junior's look that he was not on good terms with Ponsonby. "Never mind. Don't let me interrupt you. You came here to see Mr. Mobbs, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Mobbs sent for me," said Clare, looking inquiringly at his Form-master.

"Yes," gasped Mr. Mobbs. "I—I sent for you."

The major looked at his watch.

"I'm afraid I shall not have time to wait and see that boy, Clare, if he has not returned, Mr. Mobbs," he said.

Clare started. The major did not know his name—and he was waiting to see him! What he wanted to see him for Clare could not guess. The junior was about to speak, to inform the major that he was Clare, when Mr. Mobbs spluttered:

"That—that is the boy, Major Courtenay!"

"What!"

"That boy is Clare."

"Yes, I am Clare," said the junior, in wonder. "Did you want to see me?"

The major's face became almost purple. He looked at the frank, honest, manly face before him—the face of the boy who had saved his life—and then turned a thunderous look upon the wretched Mr. Mobbs.

"So this is Clare?" he grunted.

"Yes, certainly, major."

"This is the boy of whom you have given me so villainous a character—what?"

Clare turned crimson. He began to understand now. The major was a man of influence, and Mr. Mobbs had been prejudicing him against the scholarship boy.

"Ahem! Appearances are deceptive, major," stammered Mr. Mobbs.

It happened, unfortunately for Mr. Mobbs, that Clare was looking his very best. He had spent a happy afternoon, the flush of healthy exercise was in his cheeks, his eyes were bright. He looked what he was—an honest, frank, and manly lad. Appearances might be deceptive, but the major was quite keen enough to see that Clare's looks did not belie his character. He had had proof of that in the fact that the boy had risked his life to go to the aid of a complete stranger.

"I tell you, sir," said the major, in a voice like the rumble of distant thunder—"I tell you that this boy risked his life—his life, sir!—begad, to stop my horse, when I should have broken my neck otherwise! Do you mean to tell me that such a boy as you have described to me would do a thing like that?"

"Ahem!"

Clare set his lips a little.

"If Mr. Mobbs has any complaint to make against me," he said, "I have a right to hear it."

"Silence, boy!" snapped Mr. Mobbs.

"I have a right to defend myself, sir, if you have told this gentleman anything against my character," said Clare steadily.

"Hold your tongue!" said Mr. Mobbs furiously.

"The boy is right!" rapped out the major. "But never mind—I don't believe a word of it, my lad. I know the right sort when I see them, and I know you are as true as steel, wherever you came from, and whatever you may be, begad! I don't believe a dashed word that's been said to me!"

"Sir!" muttered Mr. Mobbs, turning pale.

"I repeat it, sir!" roared the major. "Do you take me for a dashed fool, sir? Am I to believe that a low, sneaking cad, such as you have described to me, would jump at a runaway horse, and risk his life for a stranger? I am not a child, Mr. Mobbs. Where is my nephew? Bring my nephew here. By gad, I'll talk to the young rascal!"

Mr. Mobbs, almost overcome, stepped to the door, and made a sign to

Ponsonby. In the study, the major twisted his white moustache, and fumed. Clare stood with a quiet smile on his face. It was the first hint he had had of the plot against him; but at the same moment that he learned of it, he knew that it had failed.

CHAPTER 21.

Not a Success.

PONSONBY lounged into Mr. Mobbs's study, smiling.

He was expecting a triumph.

He and his friends had "piled it on," Mr. Mobbs had "piled it on." Clare had been sent for, and everything was going well. That was how Ponsonby looked at it. A surprise was waiting for the dandy of Highcliffe.

The dark frown on the old soldier's bronzed face did not alarm Ponsonby. He supposed that the major's anger was directed against Clare. He soon discovered his mistake. The major fixed a glare upon him.

"Cecil!" he rapped out.

"Yes, uncle," said Ponsonby, beginning to feel an inward misgiving.

"This is the boy you were telling me about—this boy, Clare—eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir," rumbled the major, "this boy Clare saved my life this afternoon, at the risk of his own, sir, when my horse had bolted!"

"My hat!" ejaculated Ponsonby, in utter surprise.

"And you mean to tell me, Cecil, that he would do that if he were the kind of boy you told me about—eh?"

Ponsonby looked sullen.

"It isn't only my opinion, uncle," he said. "All my friends will tell you the same. The fellow is a rank outsider, and all the fellows say so, as well as me."

"Then all the fellows, as well as you, are silly snobs, sir!" rapped out the major.

"Uncle!"

"I'm not accustomed to measuring my words," pursued the major. "I'm a straight talker, and I say what I mean. This boy is a splendid fellow—a splendid fellow, hark ye! If you were a little more like him, and a little less like a tailor's dummy, begad, your uncle would be prouder of you!"

Ponsonby bit his lips hard. The best-laid schemes of mice and men gang aft agley, as the poet tells us. Ponsonby's carefully-laid scheme had "ganged agley" in the most thorough manner. The dandy of Highcliffe stood dumbfounded.

"I can understand it," went on the major. "I've seen that kind of thing in the Army, begad! This fellow comes from nobody knows where—he gets on by his brains instead of somebody else's money—and you are all down on him in consequence—what? I know it all from beginning to end, sir—I've seen enough of it in my time." And the major fumed angrily.

"If—if the fellow really—really was of assistance to you, sir, of—of course, that alters the case," stammered Ponsonby helplessly.

"Haven't I told you he saved my life?" thundered the major.

"In—in that case, uncle, I—I'm awfully obliged to him," said Ponsonby. "Of course, if he's done that, I'm grateful to him, and—and I shall always regard him as a friend."

The major's face cleared a little.

"That's better," he said. "I like that, Cecil."

"Perhaps—perhaps I was prejudiced, sir," said Ponsonby, feeling his way, as it were. "We—we have never had a chap like that at Highcliffe, sir, and—and—if I was in the wrong, sir, I'm willing to own up. And there's my hand, if Clare cares to take it."

Ponsonby spoke with an appearance of great frankness, and held out his hand to Clare. Clare took it at once. He was no fool, but he did not suspect the utter duplicity of the cad of the Fourth. He took Ponsonby's words at their face value, as the major did. Major Courtenay's face softened very much.

"Spoken like a man, Cecil," he said. "I'm glad to see this, begad! I want to see you two young fellows good friends."

"It won't be my fault if we're not," said Ponsonby. "If Clare saved your life, sir, I'm not likely to remember any little difference between us. If Clare cares to be my friend, I'm his friend for life."

"Good!" said the major, his face clearing now. "I'm afraid the fault was on your side, Cecil——"

"I'm willing to own it, sir," said Ponsonby meekly.

"That's all right—you can't do more than own up in a manly way," said the major. "When I come down here again, let me see you two on good terms—eh? Give me your hand, Clare, and remember that if ever you want a friend, you can depend on me."

"Thank you, sir," said Clare. And he shook hands with the major, and left the study.

Major Courtenay quitted the study with his nephew, without another word or a look at Mr. Mobbs. That unfortunate gentleman remained almost green with rage and chagrin, and feeling in an almost murderous mood towards Clare.

Ponsonby walked down to the school gates with his uncle, and saw him off in the trap. He was respectful, smiling, attentive all the time, concealing with admirable self-control the rage and hatred that was seething in his breast. The old gentleman drove away, leaving a crisp banknote in his nephew's hand. Then the captain of the Fourth walked back to the House across the dark quadrangle, grinding his teeth. He came into his study with a pale face, his eyes glittering. The Co. were waiting for him there, to learn the result.

"Well?" said Gadsby eagerly. "Your uncle didn't go in to see the Head again, after all. Is it all fixed?"

"The cad's going to get the boot?" asked Vavasour.

"What's the matter with you, Pon?" asked Monson anxiously.

Ponsonby spat out an oath, which would have astonished his uncle if he could have heard it.

"It's all up!" he snarled.

"All up?" echoed the Co., in dismay.

"Clare met the old fool as he was coming here, it seems, and stopped a runaway horse—some theatrical rot that has been imposed on the old idiot!" hissed Ponsonby. "He's turned completely round—he's jawed Mobby till Mobby's quite green and yellow."

"My hat!"

"He's made me shake hands with Clare, and swear eternal friendship," said Ponsonby between his teeth.

"By gad!"

"Oh, Pon!"

"You didn't do it?" exclaimed Drury indignantly. "You didn't shake hands with that rotten cad, Pon?"

Ponsonby snarled.

"How could I help it, fathead? I had to do it, or have the old fool down on me. And I've got to keep in his good books, haven't I? It was just as much as I could do, to get round him, as it was."

"Well, my hat!" said Monson. "This is a go, and no mistake. That rotten outsider has the deuce's own luck."

"I'll make him pay for it," said Ponsonby, gritting his teeth. "I'll jolly soon show him whether we're friends or not, the filthy cad. I don't believe he saved my uncle's life—and if he did, he's done me out of five thousand a year, hang him."

"Oh, draw it mild, Pon," murmured Gadsby; the callous words shocking even the Co., though they were not particularly sensitive.

"It was a rotten failure all through," went on Ponsonby savagely. "Luck was against us. The outcome is that that filthy outsider has a friend for life in my old fool of an uncle—I shouldn't wonder if he puts the cad down in his will for a whack in my money, dash him—for it is my money, really. But I'll make the workhouse rotter squirm for it, somehow. Anyway, I'll soon undeceive him if he thinks he's going to pal on to me because of that doddering old dummy. I'll talk to him pretty straight."

And Ponsonby flung furiously out of the study.

The Co. exchanged glances of dismay.

"What a rotten sell!"growled Monson. "It was such a splendid wheeze, too—and we thought it was a dead cert! What an utterly rotten sell!"

"Absolutely!" groaned Vavasour.

And the disconsolate Co. grumbled in chorus. There was no doubt that it was a complete "sell"; no doubt at all about that!

CHAPTER 22.

A Shock for Clare!

A SMELL of burning greeted Clare as he came back to No. 3 Study, after his interview with the major. He stepped hurriedly into the study. The atmosphere was thick, and the Caterpillar, bending over a frying-pan on the fire, was gasping. He turned a crimson face towards Clare as he came in.

"I'm doin' the cookin'!" he gasped.

"Over-doing it, I should say," said Clare laughing. "My hat! Are those the eggs?"

He looked at a leathery substance spread out on a dish on the table. The Caterpillar nodded rather complacently.

"Yaas. I've fried 'em!" he said.

"Oh, crumbs! You can use them to sole your boots with now," said Clare. "What on earth are you doing with the bacon?"

"Cookin' it!"

"Not using it as fuel?" asked Clare. "It smells as if you were. Hand it over to me."

"I think some of the rashers have got a little burnt," said the Caterpillar anxiously, as he relinquished the frying-pan to Clare. "Sort of over-done—what?"

"Did you grease the pan?" asked Clare, in dismay.

"No—I didn't think of it!"

"My hat! What a sickly mess!" said Clare, surveying the curled and scorched rashers in the frying-pan. "You weren't born for a cook, De Courcy. Better chuck this little lot into the fire, I think. Open the window,

for goodness' sake—we shall have the school fire-brigade turning out if this goes on."

"I say, you're wastin' that bacon," said the Caterpillar. "Waste not, want not, you were sayin' to me the other day."

"Can't eat cinders. Hand out the rest of the bacon."

"It's all there, dear boy."

"Oh, my hat! Are there any more eggs?"

"No; that's the lot."

"Enough to sole one boot," said Clare, with a faint grin. "Oh, Caterpillar!"

"It doesn't look very tasty, does it?" said the Caterpillar thoughtfully. "I cooked it jolly thoroughly too—ten minutes at least."

"We shall have to have bread and cheese for tea," said Clare ruefully. "Never mind. Give me the teapot—we'll have some tea, anyway."

"That's all right—I've made the tea."

"When did you make it?"

"I made that first, about a quarter of an hour ago," said the Caterpillar innocently. "It's all right—I've kept it close to the fire—it's quite hot."

Clare opened the tea-pot. The black fluid within had a strong smell, and it was bubbling. Clare burst into a helpless laugh.

"Oh, you ass!"

"What's the matter now? It looks strong enough."

"Yes, it's strong enough," gasped Clare, "a little too strong for me. Haven't you ever made tea before, you awful ass?"

The Caterpillar shook his head.

"Never! One of the fellows always did those things. I've never tried my hand. I say, Clare, you're not very encouragin' to a chap who's tryin' to learn," said the Caterpillar, in an injured tone.

"You'd better learn slowly," gasped Clare. "You'll learn in time not to let tea boil after it's made, and not to make it first of all and let it stand. Never mind; cut away to the sink and empty the tea-pot—there's some more tea."

"Sure this ain't any good?"

"Quite sure."

The Caterpillar ruefully marched off with the tea-pot, and returned with it empty. Clare made fresh tea, the Caterpillar watching him with great attention. He was evidently anxious to learn.

Then they sat down to a somewhat frugal tea. The school shop was closed, and it was too late to get fresh supplies. Clare had come in with a mighty hunger, and he made a deep inroad into the bread and cheese, of which there was fortunately plenty.

"The simple life, begad," said the Caterpillar. "I'm sorry I've mucked up the feed like that, Clare."

"Pooh—it doesn't matter."

"Queer, what a useless ass a fellow may be, and what a thumping good opinion he may have of himself all the time," said the Caterpillar, in his philosophical way. "Do you know, Clare, you've opened my eyes to a good many things since you've been here. Do you know, I've made up my mind not to be a slacker—honest Injun. For the future I'm going to take my whack in cookin' and washin' up, and so on."

"Go easy with the cooking, old chap," implored Clare. "Take that by degrees. Another cup of tea?"

"Yaas. By the way, what did Mobby want you for?"

Clare laughed, and described the scene in Mr. Mobbs's study. The Caterpillar listened with the keenest interest.

"By gad!" he said, "your luck's in, dear boy. Shows you that it may pay sometimes to play the good Samaritan—what?"

Clare nodded.

"I never expected to see Major Courtenay again," he said. "It was a surprise to me when I found him in Mobby's study, and he turned out to be Ponsonby's uncle. But it's ended all right—Ponsonby made it up with me, and we shook hands over it. It means a bit quieter life for me here in the future."

The Caterpillar raised his eyebrows comically.

"How do you make that out?" he asked.

"Well, Ponsonby was the leader of the set against me," said Clare. "Now I've made it up with him, the others are pretty certain to come round, I should think. Anyway, it's something to have done with rowing with Ponsonby, isn't it?"

"Clare, old chap, I admire you more than ever," said the Caterpillar. "The child-like innocence and trustfulness of the workin'-classes is amazin'—simply amazin'."

"I don't quite see where the trustfulness comes in," said Clare, a little nettled. "What are you driving at, Caterpillar?"

"You can beat Mobby in class—you can swot at your prep.—you read Virgil because you like him," murmured the Caterpillar dreamily; "you can cook—you can do lots of things. I was beginnin' to think, dear boy, that I was so helplessly inferior to you that it wasn't any use tryin' to pull up. You have restored my self-respect. In knowledge of human nature, my tulip, I can give you fifty in a hundred and run you out as easy as fallin' off a form. That levels us up a bit—what?"

"I don't understand you in the least," said Clare rather gruffly. "If you mean that Ponsonby was spoofing me, I don't believe it, and that's flat. He couldn't be such a rotten cad as to offer me his hand if he didn't mean it."

"Hear hear!" said the Caterpillar admiringly. "I see your point of view. Pon goes for you—lays a scheme to give you socks behind your back—suddenly discovers that you have saved his distinguished uncle's life—suffers from pangs of remorse—offers you his hand, and his giddy heart with it—what? Friends for life—all little differences forgotten—hear, hear!"

"Look here, you duffer——"

"I'll tell you how I work it out," yawned the Caterpillar. "Pon found that his little game was a frost—found his giddy uncle down on him—and took the only way of squirmin' out of a tight corner. He spoofed his uncle, and he seems to have spoofed you—with your beautiful innocence. You see, Pon can't afford to quarrel with an uncle who has come from India loaded up to the neck with rupees. He would shake hands with the boot-boy or the school porter if his uncle wanted him to. As for gratitude for saving his uncle's life, I think that must have failed completely to touch Pon's heart—considerin' that if the worthy old gentleman had broken his neck, it would have been worth five thousand a year to Pon when he comes of age."

Clare started.

"Look here, Caterpillar, that's a rotten thing to say. As if Ponsonby could be such a beast—such a vile beast—as to think of that."

"Why not?" said the Caterpillar, unmoved. "Peppery old sports from India have uncertain tempers—and Uncle Courtenay seems to be vastly different in tastes from the noble Pon. If he finds out at any time exactly what Pon's like, he may cut him off with a currency note for ten bob. From your description of the major, he and Pon are about as alike as chalk and cheese. Pon's quids would be much safer if you had let the old sport come

a cropper—a bird in the hand's worth a whole giddy covey in the bush. But I'm shockin' you—here I am up against the stern morality of the workin'-classes again," groaned the Caterpillar.

Clare laughed, in spite of himself.

"Oh, don't be an ass," he said. "I know you don't believe half you say. As for Ponsonby shaking hands with me for sheer spoof, that's all rot."

"What will you bet on it?" said the Caterpillar lazily.

"You know I don't bet," frowned Clare.

"Oh, rats! We won't bet on it—but you'll see!"

The door of the study was flung open as Clare spoke, and Ponsonby strode in. The Caterpillar burst into a chuckle.

"Yes, we'll see," he agreed. "Unless I'm mistaken, we're goin' to see now."

Clare rose to his feet, and gave his old enemy an agreeable nod and smile. He was determined that the Caterpillar's cynical views should have no effect on him.

"Come in, Ponsonby," he said cheerily.

Ponsonby fixed his eyes on him with a bitter look that undeceived Clare in spite of himself.

"You cad!" said Ponsonby, his voice husky with rage. "You rotten cad! Yes, I'll come in, and tell you what I think of you—you scheming, cunning cad."

Clare turned pale.

"What have I done now?" he asked very quietly.

"You've been fooling my uncle—you got up some theatrical foolery—precious little risk you ran, I'll be bound," sneered Ponsonby. "Did you get one of your caddish friends at Greyfriars to startle the horse, or something of the sort, so that you could play the hero—what?"

"No," said Clare, with white lips.

"Liar!"

Clare breathed hard. His hands were trembling now. The Caterpillar had been right, and he had been a fool; he knew that now. Ponsonby was showing the "inwardness" of his nature as Clare had never seen it or suspected it before.

"Liar!" repeated Ponsonby. "Do you think I believe in your heroics? That silly old fool may believe you——"

"Are you speaking of your uncle like that?"

"What business is that of yours, you cad?" snarled Ponsonby. "Do you think I don't know your motive? You know my uncle is rich, and you spotted that he was an old fool, and you think you will make something out of this. I'll take jolly good care that you don't, you scheming hound!"

"Hear, hear!" said the Caterpillar. "Pon, you are acting up to my opinion of you. I congratulate myself on my perspicacity. Hear, hear! Bravo, Caterpillar!"

Ponsonby took no heed of De Courcy. He shook his clenched fist at Clare's pale and troubled face.

"You've dished me this time, you worm. But I'll get rid of you from this school yet, somehow. I'll get you kicked out, and sent back to the slum you belong to."

"That's enough," said Clare. "Get out of this study!"

"You hound! I haven't finished yet."

Clare advanced upon him. His temper was at white heat. Had Ponsonby been cooler, he would have retreated then. But he was in too great a rage to be afraid. As Clare came at him he struck out furiously, and the scholarship junior staggered under the savage blow.

But it was only for a second.

The next, Clare was upon his enemy with the spring of a tiger, and Ponsonby was whirled off his feet in a fierce grasp. He struggled for a moment in Clare's grip, and then he went hurtling through the study door, and rolled along the passage outside.

Clare closed the door upon him. He came back to the tea-table, and sat down very quietly. The door did not reopen. Ponsonby, panting with rage, was limping away down the passage.

The Caterpillar looked curiously at Clare.

He sat at the table, with pale and downcast face, a troubled wrinkle in his brow, his expression one of deep despondency.

"Well?" said De Courcy, breaking the silence at last. "Glad you didn't take my bet—what?"

Clare did not reply.

"What's the trouble?" said the Caterpillar, in wonder. "You're not worrying about Pon, surely? Really, old chap, I don't like to call you an ass, but you might have expected that."

"I suppose I might," said Clare heavily. "You can call me an ass if you like. I suppose I am an ass. I might have expected it, but I didn't."

"But you don't care about Pon. What does it matter?"

Clare made a gesture of contempt.

"Pon—no; that doesn't matter. Only—only it's rather a shock to find that any fellow could be such a beastly blackguard. It makes me ashamed—ashamed of breathing the same air with him."

The Caterpillar whistled softly. He wondered what the dandy of Highcliffe would have thought if he could have comprehended that the "scholarship bounder" was ashamed of breathing the same air with him! It would have been a shock for the lordly Ponsonby, if he could have comprehended it.

CHAPTER 23.

Trouble in the Form-Room.

WHIZ!

Clare heard the "whiz" as he entered the Fourth-Form room for first lesson on the following morning. He looked round quickly, and as he did so a paper pellet struck upon his cheek and rolled down his jacket. It was drenched with ink, and left a black streak on his cheek and down his collar.

Clare flushed with anger. Most of the Fourth were in the Form-room, though Mr. Mobbs had not yet appeared. Mr. Mobbs was sometimes late.

"Who threw that at me?" exclaimed Clare angrily.

There was a chuckle in the Form-room. Clare had not seen who had whizzed the pellet at him, and the Fourth were not disposed to give him any information.

"Was it you, Ponsonby?"

Ponsonby shrugged his shoulders and turned his back.

Clare discerned a stain of ink upon Ponsonby's fingers, and he was making a stride towards the captain of the Fourth when Mr. Mobbs entered the Form-room. The master's cold, sharp eyes were on Clare at once.

"Quarrelling again, Clare?" he said unpleasantly. "Cannot you even keep your vulgar brawling out of the Form-room? Go to your place at once!"

Clare compressed his lips, and went quietly to his place. But Mr. Mobbs's eye was still upon him. The Form-master had not forgotten the scene with

Major Courtenay, and he was yearning for an opportunity of visiting his wrath upon Clare. The opportunity had come now.

"Clare!" he rapped out.

"Yes, sir," said Clare, who was dabbing at the ink on his face with his handkerchief.

"Have you washed yourself this morning?"

The Fourth-Formers chuckled, and Clare's face became a burning red.

"Yes, sir," he said, between his teeth.

"Then why is your face in that disgusting state? But I need not ask you—I do not expect the truth from you," said Mr. Mobbs acidly. "Go away at once, and wash yourself."

Clare rose from his desk.

"Do not return until you are clean," added Mr. Mobbs, amid chuckles from the juniors. "I beg you to remember that this is not the kind of school you have been accustomed to, and boys here are expected to keep themselves personally clean."

Clare opened his lips to reply, but the Form-master interrupted him.

"Not a word! Go! Take a hundred lines for dirtiness."

"I am not dirty!" broke out Clare fiercely. "I——"

"That will do."

"This ink on my face was thrown upon me as I came into the Form-room," exclaimed Clare.

"I have already said, Clare, that I place no reliance upon your word," said Mr. Mobbs icily. "If you have any accusation to make against any of your Form-fellows, however, I will hear you."

Clare gritted his teeth. He knew that Ponsonby had thrown the inky pellet at him, but he could not say so. He would not give the cads of Highcliffe the right to call him a sneak. They would have been only too glad to hold that advantage over him.

"You have nothing to say?" sneered Mr. Mobbs, as Clare did not reply. "I expected as much. I utterly refuse to take any notice of your excuses. I shall not cane you for coming into the Form-room in a dirty state, because I feel that, considering your upbringing, I should be lenient. You will, however, take a hundred lines, and endeavour to keep clean in the future. Now go."

Clare went, inwardly raging. The Fourth-Formers were grinning mockingly. Never had Mr. Mobbs been so popular with his Form. But there was a yawn, and the Caterpillar rose in his place.

"If you please, sir," drawled the Caterpillar, "I saw the ink chucked at Clare. His statement was perfectly veracious, sir."

"You rotten sneak!" whispered Ponsonby.

"Fair play's a jewel, dear boy," murmured the Caterpillar.

Mr. Mobbs was taken aback by the Caterpillar's remark. That noble youth, the nephew of a belted earl, was not one whom Mr. Mobbs could crush with a glance. Mr. Mobbs was as anxious to stand well with De Courcy as with Ponsonby.

"Ahem! You surprise me, De Courcy," he said. "I did not expect to hear a boy of your family, De Courcy, taking the part of a wretched intruder, of whom the whole Form is justly ashamed."

"It's a surprisin' world, sir," said the Caterpillar calmly.

If it had not been De Courcy, the junior who made that impertinent reply would probably have been caned. But Mr. Mobbs would have regarded it almost as sacrilege to cane the nephew of a member of the House of Peers.

"Come, come, De Courcy; sit down," said Mr. Mobbs. "The matter is now ended. We will now begin."

"But is Clare to do those lines, sir?" asked the Caterpillar.

"Yes," said Mr. Mobbs, frowning. "De Courcy, I do not wish to be harsh with you, but I must ask you to sit down."

The Caterpillar yawned, and sat down. Clare came back into the Form-room when the lesson had fairly started. He took his place quietly. The mocking smiles of the Fourth-Formers had no effect on him; he was getting used to that. But he was at the mercy of his Form-master, and Mr. Mobbs was in his most acid temper.

Mr. Mobbs devoted very special attention to Clare that morning. It was difficult to find fault with his work, for Clare was easily the head of the class, though he had not been given head place. But Mr. Mobbs found loop-holes for fault-finding; it was the case of the wolf and the lamb over again. It was hard work for Clare to keep his temper, and to take the mean-spirited man's taunting words in silence; but he knew that an angry reply would make matters much worse. Mr. Mobbs was only waiting for an excuse to cane him, and Clare was determined not to give him one.

Mr. Mobbs had almost given up hope of catching him out, so to speak, when in third lesson, Clare uttered a sudden sharp cry, and rose abruptly in his place. A pin had been run into his leg under the desk, and it had hurt. Mr. Mobbs's eyes glittered greenishly at him.

"You again, Clare! Cannot you exert yourself to behave decently in the Form-room?"

"Someone ran a pin into me, sir."

"You are never in want of an excuse, it appears. Whom do you accuse now?" said Mr. Mobbs sarcastically.

"I accuse nobody, sir," said Clare hotly. "But it is a fact, all the same."

"Don't raise your voice in speaking to your Form-master, Clare. You are not in a Board-school now."

"If I were, I might be treated with common justice and fair play," exclaimed Clare, his long-suppressed anger breaking out at last.

"How dare you make such a reply to me, Clare? Step out here at once!" Mr. Mobbs took a cane from his desk. Clare did not move.

"Do you hear me, Clare?" thundered Mr. Mobbs.

"I hear you, sir."

"Obey me instantly."

Clare's face set doggedly. But the Caterpillar, looking alarmed, gave him a friendly shove.

"Cut it, you ass!" he whispered. "Don't you see he's pinin' for an excuse for callin' in the Head to you? It might mean the sack! Cut it!"

Clare took the good advice. He rose and walked out before the class. Mr. Mobbs was disappointed. He had hoped for a moment that there was to be a case of rank disobedience to report to the Head.

"Hold out your hand, Clare."

Clare held out his hand, setting his teeth.

Swish! The cane came down with all the force of Mr. Mobbs's not very athletic arm. It made the junior wince, but he uttered no sound.

"Now the other hand," said Mr. Mobbs harshly.

Clare held out the other hand, and received a harder swish than before. Still he made no sound, and said no more; but the blaze in his eyes exasperated Mr. Mobbs. He felt there, in the boy's glance, all the scorn and contempt which discipline forbade his victim to express in words.

"I shall teach you obedience and respect, Clare, I trust," said Mr. Mobbs, breathing hard. "Hold out your hand again."

Swish!

"Shame!" came a voice from the back of the class.

There was a gasp from the juniors, and Mr. Mobbs swung round as if he had been given an electric shock.

"What—what—who said that?" he stuttered.

De Courcy lounged to his feet.

"I did, sir," he said, with refreshing coolness.

"De Courcy! You—you—you uttered that impertinent remark!" gasped the unhappy Mr. Mobbs, torn between his angry desire to punish the offender, and hih shrinking from any kind of difference with an earl's nephew.

"Yaas, sir. You're goin' it too strong."

Some of the Fourth-Formers laughed. It was refreshing to hear the Caterpillar talking to his Form-master.

"Clare, you may go to your place." Mr. Mobbs laid the cane on his desk. "De Courcy, you will write out five hundred lines for impertinence."

"Thank you, sir," yawned the Caterpillar, and he sat down.

Morning lessons finished in a thundery atmosphere. Clare's face was very set. His hands were aching from the cruel caning, and he had an account to settle with Gadsby, who had run that pin into his leg and caused all the trouble. And mild-tempered as he generally was, Clare did not mean to let that account remain unsettled.

CHAPTER 24.

Nuts and a Nut-Cracker!

"MOBBY was fairly on the war-path this morning," grinned Ponsonby, as the happy "nuts" streamed out into the quadrangle after lessons. "I never saw Mobby in quite such fine form."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By gad, he did make that cad sit up," said Gadsby. "What a happy thought, runnin' a pin into his hind leg—what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look out, here he comes," murmured Drury.

The "nuts" looked at Clare with mocking and insolent smiles, as he came up to them. They had scored over him that day, through their Form-master, and they rejoiced. And the black cloud on Clare's brow added to their amusement.

"Come on," said Ponsonby, as Clare came near. "I don't want to stay here seem to catch a whiff of the slums, somehow."

"Yaas, absolutely," said Vavasour. "Get a move on, dear boys."

Clare planted himself directly in the path of the "nuts."

"I want Gadsby!" he said grimly.

Gadsby stared at him, and turned his back. He turned again pretty quickly though, for Clare laid a heavy hand on his shoulder and swung him round.

"Take your paw off me," screamed Gadby furiously.

Smack!

Clare's other hand came across his face, and then he let go, and Gadsby staggered away from him, white with rage.

"Now if you like to step into the gym., I'm at your service," said Clare, his voice trembling with rage. "I can't back up against my Form-master, as you cads know—but I can deal with you, and I mean to. If you're not a rotten coward, come into the gym., and finish this with or without gloves, just as you like."

"I don't fight with workhouse cads," said Gadsby, his eyes burning.

"I suppose any excuse is better than none for a coward," Clare said, contemptuously. "Well, if you meddle with me in the Form-room again, you'll fight whether you like it or not, or take a thumping good hiding."

"You cheeky cad!" began Vavasour.

Clare turned on him.

"What have you to say?" he demanded, so fiercely that Vavasour jumped back.

"N-n-othin' to you," stuttered Vavasour, "I decline to have anythin' to do with you."

"Leave me alone, that's all I ask," said Clare, between his teeth. "Leave me in peace. I've stood a great deal, and I'm standing no more. For the future I shall hit out, without waiting to talk. Keep that in mind, all of you."

Clare strode away, his head erect, leaving Ponsonby & Co. flushed and hesitating.

Gadsby looked rather dubiously at his comrades. His cheek was red from Clare's blow, and his manner was very uncertain.

"Of—of course, I couldn't fight with that low cad," said Gadsby, dubiously.

"Of—of course not," murmured Monson. "Too disgraceful altogether."

"Too much honour for him, absolutely," said Vavasour.

Ponsonby did not speak. Gadsby's cheeks grew redder. In spite of his comrades' sympathies being with him, he could discern the mocking light in their eyes; they looked on him as a funk, and regarded his excuse as a flimsy pretext—as it in fact was.

"Look here," said Gadsby, after a long pause. "If—if you fellows think I ought to, I'll fight the cad."

"Oh, let it drop," said Ponsonby.

And Gadsby was only too willing to let it drop. He did not want to go through Pon's experiences at the hands of that extremely hard hitter.

But the cheery satisfaction of the "nuts" had departed. They had allowed the outsider to brave them, in open quad., with dozens of fellows in sight; and not one of them had dared to tackle him—one of them had taken his blow without a reply, and his cheek still bore trace of it. It was a terrible come-down for the prestige of the "nuts" of the Fourth. And they were not long in discovering that their submission to that loss of prestige would have results.

The Caterpillar was lounging on the steps of the School House, and he smiled sweetly at the "nuts" as they came along.

"Congrats!" he said lazily. "Gaddy, old man, I congratulate you. Never saw a chap keep his temper so marvellously. Heroic, I call it."

Gadsby turned crimson.

"The low cad wanted me to fight with him," he said. "I'm not doing anythin' of the sort. I don't fight with every blackguard I meet."

"Hear, hear!" said the Caterpillar. "Congrats, again! Wonderful self-control. I can just imagine how the fightin'-blood of the Gadsbys was boilin' in your veins, but a still small voice whispered, "Too much honour for the outsider!"—or did it whisper: "He's too tough, Gadsby."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Smithson, who was standing by the Caterpillar.

Gadsby turned fiercely on Smithson.

"What are you cacklin' at?" he demanded, clenching his fists.

The reply was unexpected:

"You!" said Smithson instantly. "I can cackle, if I like, I suppose, at a funk who lets a chap smack his face."

"What!" gasped Gadsby. This sudden rebellion of the humble Smihy completely took his breath away.

"You heard what I said," retorted Smithson. "You're a funk. F—U—N—K—funk! I'll shout it if you like. Funk!"

"Do you want me to wipe up the ground with you?" shouted Gadsby.

"You can try it on, if you like," said Smithson, pushing back his cuffs. "Come on, and begin!"

"I—I—I'll—I'll——"

"Well, what will you do?" jeered Smithson. "You won't fight Clare because he's a schol.-pincher. You won't fight me because my father's a solicitor, what? You won't fight anybody at all, for some jolly good reason or other—what?"

"Yah! Funk!" bawled Jones minor.

Gadsby looked desperate. This was not to be borne. The prestige of the "nuts" was trembling in the balance, when rank outsiders and nobodies like Smithson and Jones minor ventured to raise the heel against them.

"Lick him, Gaddy," said Vavasour. "Don't stand his cheek, Gaddy."

"Come on," said Smithson, dancing a sort of war-dance round the reluctant Gaddy. "I'm ready! Pile in, funk."

Gadsby rushed at him furiously. Even among his own comrades he could not have held his head up again if he had stood that. He was bigger than Smithson, too. But Clare's example had had a great effect on Smithson, and he knew now that Gadsby was a funk. He met the rush manfully, and piled in for all he was worth, and went it hammer and tongs. The half-hearted Gaddy was knocked right and left—he gave ground—and the victorious Smithson pursued him, still yelling to him to come on. The unhappy Gaddy would have had a very bad time indeed, had not Ponsonby put out his foot and tripped Smithson, who rolled over on his hands and knees. The "nuts" walked into the House, Gaddy being very glad to get off the scene.

Smithson scrambled up, a little dazed.

"Rotten trick!" he exclaimed. "Well, I've licked him."

The Caterpillar surveyed him admiringly.

"Bravo!" he said. "Never knew you were such a giddy fire-eater, Smithy."

"Well, I didn't know he was such a rotten funk before," said Smithson. "I'm not going to stand any more from Gadsby, or from Ponsonby, either. Who are they, anyway? They're down on Clare, and there's not one of them dare tackle him in a fair fight. They've bullied me no end, and now Gaddy clears off when I offer to fight him. I'm fed up with Ponsonby & Co. I'm jolly well not going to stand any more.'

"Same here," said Jones minor. "That set have had it all their own way too long, and they're all funks, every johnny of them. And I'm not going to send Clare to Coventry any more, for one. What's he done, anyway? Licked Pon—and Pon jolly well wanted a licking."

And Jones minor and Smithson walked off in a state of elation, and meeting Drury in the quad, they promptly knocked his hat off; an insult that Drury did not avenge—with further encouragement to the rebels.

The Caterpillar smiled serenely.

"Poor old Pon!" he murmured. "This is a giddy revolt—the rising of the lower classes, by gad—and I seem to see the finish of Ponsonby & Co. as cocks of the walk and giddy monarchs of all they survey. Pon will have to put up a fight if he is going to keep up the prestige of the noble and esteemed "nuts." But, by gad, they don't seem to have much fight in them. Poor old Pon!"

CHAPTER 25.
The Rebels!

PONSONBY & CO. were not long in discovering that there was a new spirit abroad in the Fourth Form. During the next day or two it was made clear to them. No. 8 Study had always been humble and subservient, but Smithson, Benson, Jones minor, and Yates had taken on new

manners and airs since that scene in the quad. Their humble following of Ponsonby & Co. had produced for them, as Smithson put it, more kicks than half-pence. Smithson, rejoicing in his newly-discovered prowess as a warrior, was the leader of the rebellion. The rebels began by "cheeking" the "nuts," and finding that their cheek passed unpunished, they proceeded to more drastic measures. Monson having passed Smithy in the passage with upturned nose, Smithson promptly gave him a "dab" on the said nose, to bring it down to a more reasonable level—and there was a scuffle, which ended in the flight of Monson to his study, with Smithson after him raging for gore, so to speak. That was a victory for the rebels, and when Ponsonby —the great Ponsonby—essayed to put them in their place, the four outsiders seized the captain of the Fourth and bumped him—actually bumped him.

Matters were certainly looking very bad for the prestige of the "nuts."

Ponsonby & Co. felt that something had to be done, if they were not to lose altogether their position as great chiefs and leaders of the Fourth. Even the fags of the Third and Second were beginning to treat them with disrespect.

It was in vain that they urged the Caterpillar to abandon his friendship for the scholarship bounder, and join them in the effort to keep up the dignity of the "nuts." The Caterpillar was immovable.

"Go in an' win, dear boys," he told them, "I'll look on—a looker-on in Vienna, as Shakespeare puts it. I wish you luck—heaps of luck. But leave me out of it. I'm not a fightin' man—too much fag."

"It isn't a question of that," said Ponsonby hotly. "A fellow ought to stand by his own class. The cads are gettin' their backs up against us. You've got a lot of influence—I don't deny that."

"Thanks!" yawned the Caterpillar.

"Look at what's happenin' now," said Gadsby. "That worm, Smithy—his father's a solicitor, and that cad, Benson, the son of a half-pay captain, and Yates—his father's a poverty-stricken doctor, and they're puttin' on airs of equality with us."

"Horrid!" said the Caterpillar, sympathetically.

"It's all due to that cad Clare. We could get him shifted out of your study if you wanted it—Mobby only wants a word from you, Caterpillar."

"But I don't want it."

"What's your little game?" demanded Ponsonby. 'You can't like the cad."

"Yaas, I rather like him," said the Caterpillar. "And he's an interestin' study, anyway."

"Look here, you ass——"

"You're borin' me now, awfully," yawned the Caterpillar. "Excuse me—I'll mooch off. Leave me out of your little plots and scraps. I'm not equal to the exertion. I'm not, really."

And De Courcy lounged away, leaving the "nuts" furious.

"Oh, never mind that silly ass!" said Monson. "We can keep our end up ourselves, if we all stick together."

Ponsonby gnawed his lip.

"He's glad to see the outsiders backin' up against us," he growled. "It amuses him. Something's got to be done, unless we're to give in, and hide our diminished heads. Half the Form are speakin' to Clare now, whatever we may say. He's not in Coventry any longer. Dash it all, if this goes on, we shall soon be in Coventry ourselves!"

"Absolutely," said Vavasour.

"It's not easy to tackle Clare," went on Ponsonby. "He's too good a fightin' man for us, and it's no use blinkin' that. As for raggin', we should

have to rag the Caterpillar, too, as he's always with him, and we don't want to turn him against us—if he joined the enemy, we should have a pretty rotten outlook. They only want a leader, and the Caterpillar has brains enough to lead if he wasn't so dashed lazy. Those outsiders in No. 8 would be jolly glad to get him on their side. Anyway, we'll soon put them in their place."

"What's the marchin' orders?" asked Drury.

"We'll start on No. 8, and rag them inside out," said Ponsonby. "And to-morrow afternoon we'll go for Clare. The Caterpillar's goin' home to-morrow afternoon, as it's a half-holiday, and the cad will be here alone. It's a chance we sha'n't get again in a hurry. We'll catch him alone in the study and mop up the floor with him."

"Ahem! I suppose Mobby——"

"Mobby won't interfere, you bet. He'll keep both eyes closed, if it's a ragging of that cad. But those beasts in No. 8 first."

"I—I say, there are four of them, and they're fairly on the war-path," said Vavasour hesitatingly. "And I have heard Smithy say that if there's any ragging in his study, and we're two to one, he'll use the poker. He's quite beast enough to do it, too."

"We're not going there," said Ponsonby. "I'm thinking of your major, Monson."

"Good egg!" said Monson. "They can't handle a Fifth-Former. My major will wire in if I ask him."

"Go and see him," said Ponsonby, "and put it to him. And ask him to a feed in our study afterwards, and tell him there will be bridge."

"Right-ho!" said Monson, and he scudded away.

The "nuts" looked more satisfied now. Monson major of the Fifth was a bully of the first water, and the terror of the fags. He was on good terms with Ponsonby & Co. of the Fourth, partly on account of his minor, and partly because the "nuts" made a point of keeping in his good graces. They had found the bully of the Fifth useful to them on more than one occasion, and so he was worth the trouble of conciliating.

Meanwhile, Smithson & Co. were not idle. While the "nuts" were holding their council of war, the four "outsiders" of No. 8 Study were paying a visit to No. 3. The Caterpillar had just come in, and Clare, who was doing lines—he had had many lines lately—looked up from his impot. with a smile.

"Go on," said the Caterpillar, throwing himself into the armchair; "I like to watch you work."

"What about your lines?" asked Clare. "Mobby gave you five hundred the other day, for speaking up for me in class?"

The Caterpillar laughed.

"Mobby hasn't asked to see them, and he doesn't mean to, my son. That's the advantage of an uncle in the peerage."

Clare was about to reply when Smithson & Co. crowded into the study. The two juniors regarded him inquiringly.

"We've come to see you, Caterpillar," said Smithson.

"Thanks!" said De Courcy lazily. "Highly honoured, I'm sure."

"We want you——" began Benson.

"Shut up, Benson! I'm leader," said Smithson loftily. "Look here, Caterpillar, we're not going to stand Ponsonby & Co. any longer."

"Go hon!"

"We've had enough of their airs and graces," said Yates warmly. "Who are they, anyway? That's what I want to know. Who are they?"

"Better go an' ask 'em, dear boy," drawled the Caterpillar. "No good comin' to me for information."

"Shut up, Yates!" said Smithson. "I'm doing the talking. As I was saying, Caterpillar, we're fed up with Ponsonby. We're going round trying to make the chaps buck up and elect a new Form-captain."

"Red-hot rebellion!" said the Caterpillar. "I wish you luck, dear boys. I've already wished Ponsonby luck. Now run away. You bore me."

"We're willing to make you leader," said Smithson impressively. "You put up for Form captain, and we'll see you through."

"Awfully honoured."

"You agree?" asked the four juniors eagerly.

"No fear!"

"Why not?" demanded Smithson.

"Too much fag."

"Now, don't be an ass, Caterpillar!"

"Can't help it, dear boy. I was born that way. You'll shut the study door after you, won't you?"

"I say, Caterpillar, think it over," urged Smithson. "We'll see you through, and more'n half the fellows will vote for you."

"You're borin' me fearfully, Smithson."

"Oh, rats!" said Smithson crossly. "Go and eat coke!" Smithson turned to Clare, who was looking on with an amused smile. "I say, Clare."

"Hallo!" said Clare.

"What do you say to putting up for Form-captain?"

"I?" exclaimed Clare, in astonishment.

"Yes, you. We'll back you up. Of course, you won't get in, but it will be a smack in the eye for Ponsonby, and it will show him that we won't stand any of his nonsense. A good many of the fellows would like to give him a fall."

Clare shook his head.

"Thanks for the offer," he said. "I've got something else to do, and I can't bother about giving Ponsonby a fall."

Smithson grunted.

"Shut the door after you!" murmured the Caterpillar.

"Well, anyway, we're up against Ponsonby," said the disappointed Smithson. "You're not in Coventry any more, so far as we're concerned, Clare."

"Thanks."

"And more than that, we're going to back you up; and we expect you to help us out if we want you," said Smithson. "Shoulder to shoulder, and down with the giddy tyrant—what?"

"All serene," said Clare, laughing.

Smithson & Co. quitted the study. They returned to their own quarters, and found Monson major of the Fifth in the study, sitting on the table. As the four fags came in, the big Fifth-Former slipped from the table, and took up a stout ashplant he had brought with him.

"I've been waiting for you," he said pleasantly.

CHAPTER 26.

Hand to Hand!

MONSON major stepped between the dismayed juniors and the door, and shut it. Smithson & Co. looked at him very doubtfully. They guessed at once that Monson of the Fourth had brought his major into the quarrel, to revive the fading prestige of the "nuts." The rebellious fags were prepared to deal with the "nuts" themselves; but a burly

Fifth-Former was quite another matter. They had not foreseen this, and they were dismayed. They eyed Monson major very uneasily.

"I—I say, what do you want?" mumbled Benson.

"I hear you've been kicking over the traces—what?" said Monson major, making the ashplant whistle through the air. "Backin' up a workhouse cad in cheeking your betters, and that kind of thing. Now you can take it from me, that rank outsider is in Coventry, and any fag who speaks to him is going to be licked. Catch on?"

"You haven't any right to interfere with the Fourth," said Yates feebly.

"Bless your little heart, I'm not bothering about the rights of the matter," said Monson major. "I haven't come here to argue that. I've come here to give you a thundering good hiding. You first, Smithson—I hear you're the ringleader. You punched my minor the other day—what?"

"Your minor s a dirty funk," said Smithson defiantly—"and you're a beastly bully!"

Monson major strode towards him and grasped him by the collar. Then the ashplant sang through the air.

"Rescue!" yelled Smithson, beginning to struggle in the grasp of the senior. Jones minor made a half-hearted move forward, and Monson sent him spinning with a savage back-hander, and Jones crashed into the fender. Benson and Yates promptly retreated. Then the ashplant played round the unfortunate Smithson like lightning, and the victim yelled dismally.

"Leggo!" roared Smithson. "Ow! ow! Oh, you beastly bully! Yarooh! Jones, cut off and call Clare! Yow-ow!"

"Stay where you are!" rapped out Monson major.

He pitched the badly-licked Smithson into a corner, and grasped Jones minor, and the ashplant started again. Jones yelled with anguish. Smithson wriggled out of the corner, tore the door open, and fled. He burst into No. 3 Study like a cyclone.

"I say, Clare——"

"By gad!" drawled the Caterpillar. "What's happening? Somethin' awfully excitin'—what?"

"They've fetched in Monson major of the Fifth," almost sobbed Smithson. "He's licked me black and blue. He's licking the other chaps now. Come and help us, Clare. It's up to you. It's because we've backed you up, you know."

Clare rose quietly to his feet.

He felt the force of Smithson's appeal. It was because they were showing him some friendship that the bully of the Fifth had been brought down on the hapless fags. He was bound to stand by them.

"Don't be an ass, Clare," drawled the Caterpillar. "'Tain't your bizney. Don't run up against the Fifth, and hunt for more trouble. It ain't business, dear boy."

"Rats!" said Clare.

The Caterpillar shrugged his shoulders, and lighted a cigarette. Clare followed the excited Smithson down the passage. There was weeping and wailing from No. 8. Smithy's hapless comrades were evidently going through it.

Smithson threw the door open.

"Ow! ow! ow! You rotter, Monson! Oh, you beast!"

"Leggo! Ow! Ow!"

Jones minor and Benson were wriggling from their castigation. Yates was in the hands of Monson major, and the ashplant was thwacking away vigorously upon the unfortunate junior.

Monson major stared at Clare as he strode in.

"Let that kid go!" exclaimed Clare.

"Eh?"

"Let him go!"

"Yes; I'll let him go, when I've finished licking him—and then I'll give you a thumping good hiding, too," said Monson of the Fifth.

And the ashplant descended again upon Yates's shoulders, with a force that made him yell. Clare did not waste any more time in words. He ran straight at Monson major, grasped his arm, and wrenched the ashplant away.

The big Fifth-Former was so surprised by the attack, that the ashplant was flung into a corner before he knew what was happening. His grasp on Yates relaxed, and the Fourth-Former wriggled away and dodged round the table. Monson major and Arthur Clare were left confronting one another.

The Fifth-Former glared, in as much surprise as anger.

"You—you cheeky cub!" he gasped. "Why, I'll skin you! I'll smash you into little pieces! I'll—— Give me that ashplant!"

"Rats!" said Clare coolly.

"Pick it up this minute!" roared Monson major.

"Go and eat coke!"

"Why, I—I——" stuttered Monson.

"If you want more trouble, you can pile in," said Clare, putting up his hands. "You won't handle that ashplant any more in this study. Use your hands."

Then it dawned upon Monson major that the sturdy Fourth-Former had come there to fight. He burst into a hoarse laugh.

"You silly little idiot! Take that!"

"That!" was a furious drive at Clare's face, which would have felled him like an ox if it had reached the mark. But it did not. Clare's left came up like lightning, and knocked the blow up, and then his right came in, full on Monson's jaw, with all the weight behind it.

It was a terrific drive.

Monson gave a gasping yell, and staggered back, and crashed against the wall of the study, and sank down on the floor.

"Hurrah!" yelled the delighted Smithson. "Pile on to him! Jump on the cad!"

Clare waved him back.

"Hands off, kid! Monson major is going to settle with me."

"But—but you can't——" gasped Smithson.

"I'm going to try!"

"My hat!"

Monson major staggered up. His face was inflamed with rage. He had been knocked down by a junior; and that junior was booked for the most terrific hiding it was possible for the Fifth-Former to give him.

There was a rush of footsteps in the passage. Ponsonby & Co. were coming to see how their champion was getting on. Clare made a sign to Smithson, who slammed the study door, and locked it promptly. There was to be no help from the "nuts" for Monson major.

"Open that door!" rapped out the Fifth-Former.

"Rats!" said Smithson defiantly.

Ponsonby kicked on the door outside.

"Make 'em open the door!" he called out.

But the bully of the Fifth had no time for that. As he made a motion towards the door, Clare stepped in his path, his hands up, his eyes gleaming.

Monson major rushed on him like a bull.

Smithson & Co. stood round, gazing on with awe and wonder at the fight which followed. They, like the bully of the Fifth, expected to see Clare knocked out in a few seconds. But it did not happen. Clare had

led a hard life, and it had made him as hard as nails. He had "scrapped" with the longshoremen at Aythorpe many a time, and held his own against bigger fellows than Monson major. And he was a splendid boxer, and he was cool as ice, and his courage was unlimited.

He could take punishment smiling—and he took it now. But he gave more than he received.

Monson major found that he could not get close to the elusive junior—his rush was too heavy to be stopped, but Clare backed round the study, keeping him off, and every now and then letting out a drive that made the senior stagger. It was several minutes before Monson major was able to get a grip on him. Then he prepared to crush the junior almost to powder. But Clare was not so easily crushed. Even as the bully grasped him, his right came up in a terrific uppercut that caught Monson major right under the chin, and the senior staggered back with a choked cry, and, as he staggered, Clare's left came on his jaw with the force of a hammer. Monson major went to the floor with a crash that shook the study.

"Oh, ripping!" gasped Smithson. "Oh, topping! Oh, crikey!"

Monson major was down for a second time; and this time he was not so quick to get up. He was dazed and dizzy. He lay on the floor gasping, and holding his hands to his damaged jaw. He felt as if every tooth in his head was loosened in the gum. He stared up almost stupidly at Clare.

"Have you had enough?" asked the scholarship junior coolly.

"Enough!" gurgled Monson. "Enough! Why, I'll smash you—I'll skin you—I'll pulverise you—I'll—— Oh, my jaw! I'll spifficate you——"

"Go ahead, then, and don't talk so much."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Smithson & Co. "Pile in, you bully, and don't talk so much. You're licked! Yah!"

Monson major scrambled up. He hurled himself on Clare like a whirlwind. Clare was punished pretty severely that time; but he hit hard and harder, and Monson major, whose wind was quite gone, and whose eyes were swimming, was knocked round the study. He retreated before Clare, defending himself feebly, under a rain of heavy blows, till a crashing drive right on the "mark," flung him on his back again. Then he lay without attempting to rise.

The bully of the Fifth was licked!

CHAPTER 27.

A Lesson for a Bully.

"HURRAY!"

"Hip-pip-pip!"

"Licked, by gum!"

The juniors chortled with triumph. Clare stood still, breathing hard. He was hurt, but he was good for another round. But there was no round, or the ghost of a round, left in Monson of the Fifth. He was beaten to the wide.

"Let those cads in now, and give 'em socks!" exclaimed Yates.

There was a sound of scurrying feet in the passage.

The "nuts" had heard, and the "nuts" were gone.

Monson major sat up.

"You young rotter! I'll make you suffer for this! Oh, my eye! Oh, my jaw! Oh, crumbs! I'll smash you! Oh!"

"Are you going on?" asked Clare quietly.

"No," snarled Monson major. "I'm chucking it, hang you! But I'll make you smart for it! I'll——"

"You are going to do the smarting at present," said Clare coolly. "You have come here, and licked these kids. You've brought an ashplant along, like a prefect, and licked them. We don't allow the Fifth to do that. You've got to learn that it can't be done. You've brought the ashplant here, and now you're going to learn what it's like to be licked with an ashplant, and perhaps you won't be so handy with it in the future."

Monson major staggered up, apprehensive now.

"If you lay a hand on me——" he began.

"You don't mind laying hands on us!" grinned Smithson. "You're going through it now, my pippin. Get that ashplant, Yates."

The grinning Yates picked up the instrument of punishment.

"Collar that cad, and put him across the table," said Clare calmly. "He's going to have a round dozen with the ashplant."

"Hurrah!"

The bully of the Fifth made a desperate rush for the door. In an instant the juniors were upon him, clinging to him like rats. Monson major was not in a condition to resist successfully. He was dragged to the table, dragged across it, and held there face downwards. He struggled and wriggled, but with Clare and Benson holding his neck, and Jones minor and Smithson holding a leg each, he was held. Then Yates made the ashplant whistle through the air.

"Ready," he chirruped.

"Ready!" said Clare. "Give him a dozen!"

"You bet!"

"And don't lay 'em on lightly, either," grinned Smithson.

"What-ho!"

The ashplant sang in the air, and came down across Monson major. The senior gave a terrific yell. He struggled furiously, but he was held, and the ashplant rose and fell with terrific vim.

It was not only the pain of the infliction—though that was bad enough—but the humiliation of being flogged by a set of fags, that made Monson major writhe. But he had to go through it.

Clare counted a dozen coolly, and the full dozen were given; and then Yates would willingly have gone on. He was just getting into his stride, as he said. But Clare made him stop.

"Enough's as good as a feast," he said, laughing. "Monson major's had his lesson. All he's got to do now is to apologise, and then you can chuck him out!"

"Hear, hear!" said Smithson, delighted at the idea of making the bully of the Fifth apologise. "My hat! The Fifth will laugh him to death over this."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Monson major, you've been a beastly bully and a cowardly hound, and you've got to apologise for it, and promise to behave yourself," said Clare. "Now!"

"Hang you!"

"Do you apologise?"

"No!" shrieked the Fifth-Former. "I'll smash you!"

"Give him another!"

Whack! Yates put his beef into it, and there was a yell of anguish from the bully of the Fifth.

"Do you apologise now, Monson?"

"Oh! Yes! Oh!"

"You are sorry?"

"Grooh! Yes!"

"Will you promise to let the Fourth alone, and keep out of our studies, and behave yourself generally?"

"Oh, you young hound——"

Whack! Yates started again without waiting for the word "Go!" Monson major uttered a fiendish yell.

"I—I promise!" he gasped. "Stop it!"

"Good! You'll be expected to keep that promise. Chuck him out!"

"Kick him out!"

"All together!"

Clare unlocked the door. Monson major was rolled off the table, and all the junior boots started on him. He squirmed out of the study, and fled.

"Our game!" grinned Smithson. "Oh, crumbs! They'll chip him over this in the Fifth! We've cut his comb this time!"

"You can chop up that ashplant, and burn it," said Clare. "I think I'll go and bathe my eye now—it needs it."

"I say, Clare, you are a brick!"

Clare quitted the study, leaving Smithson & Co. rejoicing. From that hour there were at least four devoted followers of the nameless schoolboy in the Fourth Form at Highcliffe. Ponsonby's star was on the wane.

Clare proceeded to the dormitory, where he bathed his face, and removed as far as he could the signs of the conflict. He was not able to remove them all. When he came back into No. 3 Study, the Caterpillar looked at him with a grin.

"Been through it?" he asked.

"Yes, a bit," said Clare, laughing.

"Monson major passed here, looking as if he'd been through a giddy mangle," yawned the Caterpillar. "You don't mean to say that you licked him?"

"Yes."

"By gad! I suppose you're some giddy prizefighter in disguise—what?"

Clare laughed.

"I have done a bit of scrapping," he said. "I used to be among a lot of rough fellows, and I had to learn to take care of myself. I've had scraps with the longshoremen that were more trouble than this. Don't think that I'm quarrelsome," he added quickly. "I can say that I've never entered into a quarrel willingly. But I'm not going to see those kids bullied because they are decent to me. A chap must play the game."

"Quite so!" drawled the Caterpillar. "And if you've licked Monson major, you need not be afraid of having many quarrels on your hands. A fellow who can do that is a fellow to be respected, by gad! How jolly lucky that I've palled with you."

"Ass!" said Clare. "I only want a quiet life; but if a fellow is decent to me, and wants my help, he is going to have it. Who the dickens is Monson major, to bring an ashplant into a junior study like a prefect?"

The Caterpillar nodded, and lighted a fresh cigarette. Clare looked at him seriously.

"What do you do that for, Caterpillar?" he asked.

"What?" asked De Courcy.

"Smoke. It mucks up the study, and spoils your wind. You've got sense enough not to play the giddy ox like Ponsonby & Co. What do you do it for?"

The Caterpillar looked reflective.

"Blessed if I know," he said lazily. "One does these things, you know. I notice that you never do. The stern morality of the workin' classes again! We effete and played-out members of the aristocracy can't

keep our end up with you, you know. Better leave us to extinguish ourselves in our own way."

"I wish you'd chuck it," said Clare seriously. "There's no sense in it, and you know it's bad for your health. And it's silly."

"Thanks!" yawned the Caterpillar.

Clare coloured a little.

"Of course, it's no business of mine," he added. "Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken. Only—well, I won't mention it again!"

"You won't need to," said the Caterpillar, throwing the cigarette into the fire. "I know I'm an ass, Clare, old chap. Somehow it never struck me so clearly till you came here. By gad, old man, if you keep on like this, you'll make a shining character of me!"

Clare laughed, and the subject was dropped; but the Caterpillar kept his word. He proceeded to pile his cigarettes into the fire, which was certainly the best possible thing he could have done with them, and he was not seen smoking again. Unconsciously on his own part, almost unconsciously on the part of De Courcy, Clare's frank and healthy influence was making a man of the Caterpillar.

CHAPTER 28.

Cornered!

CLARE was very busy on the following afternoon.

He was expecting visitors.

It was a half-holiday, and De Courcy was going home to see his people. A tremendous motor-car called for the Caterpillar after dinner. The fellows gathered round to look at that car, and if De Courcy had been ten times the slacker he was, with all the faults of Ponsonby and Monson major thrown in, he would still have been very popular with the "nuts" of Highcliffe. The noble crest on the car covered a multitude of sins.

De Courcy lounged into No. 3 Study, where Clare was busy. He looked in, and seemed to hesitate a little.

"Doin' anythin' this afternoon, dear boy?" he asked.

Clare looked round with a smile. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and was making the grate look a little more tidy than usual.

"Yes," he said; "I'm going to have some visitors."

"By gad!"

The surprise in the Caterpillar's ejaculation made Clare colour. The schoolboy without a name had had no visitors so far.

"Some Greyfriars fellows are coming over to see me," he explained quietly. Not my people; I haven't any people but my adopted father."

"No?" said the Caterpillar. "That must be rippin'."

"I don't think it ripping!"

"People are a bore," said the Caterpillar. "My people bore me to extinction—almost as much as our good Pon does. So you haven't any people? There was a fellow of your name came here before, but he left. I fancy he was fed up with Pon and Highcliffe generally. No relation of yours?"

"He could not have been. My name is not Clare," said the scholarship junior. "I have no name, so far as I know. I was picked up at sea, and my relations were never even heard of. But Captain Clare has been a father to me."

"In the Army?" asked the Caterpillar, with interest.

"No; the skipper of a little merchant ship. He's a boat-builder now at Aythorpe. I've told you so."

"Yaas, I remember you did," said the Caterpillar; "I always forget things. Lucky bargee not to have any people. I've got to go and see my uncle to-day!"

"The earl?" asked Clare, with a smile.

"Yaas."

"Well, a good many fellows would be glad to have an earl for an uncle, even if they had to go and see him on a half-holiday," said Clare, laughing. "Is that the earl's motor-car in the quad?"

"Yaas."

"Then you're going to have a good time, I should say."

"The fact is," said the Caterpillar slowly, "if—if you hadn't an engagement for this afternoon—you didn't mention it——"

"You told me you were going to see your people," explained Clare, "so I thought it a good idea to have the fellows here this afternoon. I want to see them, and they won't bother you."

"Couldn't put 'em off, I suppose?"

"Why?" asked Clare, in surprise.

"Well, an idea has come into my head. I don't want to run off alone in that blessed car. It's a fifty-mile run, and good weather."

"Plenty of fellows glad to go with you, if you asked them, I should think," said Clare, laughing. "What about Ponsonby? He is keen on earls."

"Oh, yaas, plenty of fellows I don't want," nodded the Caterpillar. "But I was thinkin' of you."

Clare started.

"Are you joking?" he asked.

"Never joke," said the Caterpillar. "Too much fag!"

"My dear chap," said Clare, in wonder, "you must be dreaming! You can't be serious in thinking of taking me with you—a scholarship bounder, as Ponsonby puts it. And I don't dress so well as the other fellows!"

"My uncle isn't a tailor," yawned the Caterpillar. "He wouldn't notice that."

"But—but my dear chap——"

"Oh, don't jaw, but come," said the Caterpillar persuasively. "You can send a wire or something to Greyfriars. I want you to come. You'd like it, too. 'Tain't every day you meet an earl, is it? And De Courcy Park is a rippin' old place; you'd like to see it. And you'll meet some people, too—people who are somebody, you know."

Clare looked at him oddly. He knew that any other fellow in the Fourth Form at Highcliffe—or in the Fifth, for that matter—would have given a term's pocket-money for that invitation. Mr. Mobbs, the master of the Fourth, would almost have wept with joy if De Courcy had asked him.

And De Courcy had asked Clare!

Clare felt and appreciated the honour, and certainly he would have liked to go. But even if he had not had any engagement for the afternoon he would have hesitated to accept. His position and De Courcy's were so vastly different that he could scarcely have accepted without laying himself open to the charge of being a tuft-hunter—of "sucking up" to De Courcy on account of his wealth and rank. The scholarship boy, the nameless, adopted son of the boat-builder of Aythorpe, would have been very much out of place at De Courcy Park, where everybody was "somebody."

"Well?" said the Caterpillar. "Coming?"

Clare shook his head.

"You're awfully good," he said gratefully. "But I can't come, Caterpillar. It wouldn't do you any good with your people to bring me along, for one thing."

"Oh, my uncle's a gentleman," said De Courcy. "I assure you you needn't have any fears on that score. Rather a bore, but quite well-bred."

"You duffer," said Clare, laughing. "I know I should have a jolly good time. But——"

"Oh, don't let's have any 'buts,'" said the Caterpillar. "The car's waitin'."

"I couldn't come, Caterpillar. I'm really grateful, but it wouldn't do. Besides, there are the Greyfriars fellows coming—Wharton and Nugent and Cherry. I couldn't put them off."

"And you don't want to—what?" said the Caterpillar, a little sourly.

Clare met his eyes frankly.

"Well, that's true. I don't want to put them off, Caterpillar," he said. "They've been jolly good friends to me, though I hardly know them. Don't get huffy about nothing."

"All serene," said the Caterpillar, and with a nod he left the study.

Clare made a movement to follow and speak to him again, but he paused. There was nothing to say. He expected his visitors early in the afternoon, and he could not put them off—and he did not want to. But he was sorry to "huff" the Caterpillar. It was a surprise to De Courcy. Any other fellow would have jumped at the invitation, and Ponsonby & Co. always declared that it was for the Caterpillar's worldly advantages that Clare was "sucking up" to him. Perhaps, unknown in the back of the Caterpillar's mind, there was a lurking idea that his worldly position was not without its influence upon a fellow who came from nowhere, and who was an almost penniless nobody. De Courcy's training had led him to take cynical views, almost in spite of himself and his better nature. Certainly he had expected Clare to accept his invitation gladly.

His handsome face was a little clouded as he went out to the car. Ponsonby & Co. were on the School House steps, and they were effusively gracious.

"Going off alone, Caterpillar?" asked Monson minor.

"Yaas," said the Caterpillar. "Clare won't come." He could not refrain from giving the "nuts" that dig.

"You've asked that cad!" exclaimed Ponsonby.

"I've asked Clare."

"My only hat! And he won't come?"

"No. The manly independence of the workin' classes, you know," said the Caterpillar, as he stepped into the car.

"Like his beastly cheek," said Monson.

The Caterpillar shrugged his shoulders, and the car rolled away. Ponsonby & Co. looked at one another in disgust.

"I thought he was suckin' up to the Caterpillar to get in with his people," Gadsby remarked.

"So did I," said Monson. "Why the dooce isn't he goin', if De Courcy asked him? And what did the Caterpillar ask him for, if Clare didn't dodge him into it?"

Ponsonby sneered.

"It's a show of independence to keep his value up, I suppose," he said. "Of course, we all know why he's suckin' up to De Courcy. The cheeky cad! Anyway, the Caterpillar's gone now, and Clare hasn't, and we'll give him a high old time this afternoon. Those cads in No. 8 have gone out, too. There's nobody to interfere. And Mobby's goin' out; not that he would chip in to stop us raggin' Clare. Still, we'll wait till he's gone."

Clare, in his study, was quite unconscious of the kind intentions of the "nuts." He went on making his little preparations for his visitors. The scholarship boy was not, of course, over-abundantly supplied with money; but his allowance was large enough for his needs, and he had laid in a quite

handsome supply for tea. And he was an excellent cook, too. He went on with his preparations cheerfully, thinking of anything but Ponsonby & Co.

The study was looking quite festive when he had finished. A sound of footsteps in the passage made Clare turn towards the door, expecting to see his visitors. But the door was flung open without a knock, and it was Ponsonby who came in. And after the captain of the Fourth came Vavasour and Gadsby and Monson and Drury and Pelham, and one or two others. Eight juniors in all crowded into the study, and the last comer slammed the door after him.

Clare looked at them steadily. It was an invasion in force, and he knew that it meant a ragging now that the Caterpillar was gone.

"What do you want?" said Clare quietly.

"Just a little talk with you," said Ponsonby smoothly. "I trust you have no pressing engagement for this afternoon? We shall keep you quite a little time."

"Absolutely," grinned Vavasour.

"Oh, don't jaw to the cad," said Gadsby. "Pile in!"

Clare clenched his fists.

"You are eight to one," he said steadily. "I suppose that is what you call fair play?"

"We're not particular with a workhouse cad," drawled Ponsonby.

Smack!

Ponsonby staggered back from the ringing smack on his face. He had not expected the cornered junior to open the ball. Clare looked at them with flashing eyes.

"If there is a rag here somebody will get hurt," he said. "Come on!"

"Rag the cad!"

And the "nuts" rushed at their victim in a crowd.

CHAPTER 29.

Quite an Entertainment.

CRASH! Bump! Bump!

The raggers were eight to one, but their task was not easy. Clare stood up to them like a rock, and hit out from the shoulder. Ponsonby and Gadsby were flung almost across the study by his right and left; then, as the others closed in on him, a swift upper-cut sent Vavasour staggering, and he fell.

Five of them were holding him now, piling on him, dragging him down. But Clare struggled fiercely. His elbow crashed into Monson's ribs, and Monson let go and rolled over, gasping. Then Clare was down; but he fell on Drury, who yelled with anguish as he was crushed on the floor.

Ponsonby rushed on again, and piled in. Gadsby and the rest backed him up, and Clare almost disappeared under the swarming raggers.

But he was fighting hard.

"Squash the hound!" yelled Ponsonby. "Jump on him!"

"Give him socks, begad!"

"Pile in—pile in!"

"Oh, my eye!"

"Yarooh!"

Clare fought desperately. But the odds were too great. Vavasour picked a cricket stump from the study cupboard.

"Hold him down on the rug while I lay into him," he said. "Face down!

We'll lick him till he howls for mercy; then we'll soot him all over, and rag the study till it looks as if a cyclone had called in."

"Yes, rather!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And when the Caterpillar finds his props wrecked, he'll know it doesn't pay to chum with a workhouse bounder," grinned Gadsby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

In the uproar, a knock at the door was not audible. It was repeated, and then the door opened.

Three juniors in Norfolk jackets looked into the study in astonishment.

Clare's visitors had arrived.

Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, and Bob Cherry had cycled over from Greyfriars, and they had arrived at an exciting moment.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Is this a giddy entertainment."

"My hat! Greyfriars cads!" ejaculated Vavasour.

"Get out, you rotters, you're not wanted here."

"Buzz off!"

"Rescue!" shouted Clare.

"I fancy we are wanted," chuckled Bob Cherry, not at all sorry for a reason for "going for" his old foe, Ponsonby. "Pile in, you chaps! Greyfriars to the rescue!"

"Look here——"

"Give the cads socks!"

Harry Wharton & Co. piled in with energy. There were only three of them against the crowd of raggers, but they were three of the best. And their attack was irresistible. The raggers had to leave Clare to defend themselves, and Clare jumped up at once to take part in the conflict.

It was four to eight—but the four were tremendous fighting-men, and the eight were funks, and that made all the difference.

Ponsonby & Co. were knocked right and left.

Vavasour, with his hand to his nose, raced for the door and fled down the passage. But the others were cut off from escape, and they had to fight. They piled in desperately—but the "going" was too strong for them. In five minutes Ponsonby & Co. were strewn on the floor, and as fast as they attempted to rise again, they were knocked down afresh.

Then they decided to remain where they were. Monson crawled towards the door, but Bob Cherry cheerfully kicked him back again.

"Oh, you rotter!" gasped Monson.

"Get up and go on," said Bob. "Dash it all, you're nearly two to one. Pile in! You haven't half finished yet, you awful funks!"

"Ow! Oh, crumbs!" groaned Gadsby, caressing his nose.

Ponsonby staggered up, and Harry Wharton sent him whirling with a powerful back-hander. He reeled across Gadsby and plumped on him, and Gadsby roared.

"Ow! Gerroff!"

"Oh, gad! Oh, dear! Oh!"

"Stay where you are!" said Wharton coolly. "I say, Clare, we seem to have arrived at the right moment."

Clare panted.

"The cads! They piled on me because my study-mate's gone out, and my friends are out of doors. Thank you for helping me."

"Don't mench," said Bob Cherry cheerily. "Quite a pleasure."

"Quite an entertainment," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "Jolly glad we happened in at this time. What are you going to do with those cads? We're at your orders. Shall we give them a dose of soot?"

Clare laughed breathlessly.

"No! Keep them there! Let 'em sit in a row against the wall while we have tea. They came here without being asked, and now they can stay a bit."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here!" yelled Ponsonby furiously. "If you think we're going——"

"We don't think you're going—we think you're staying," said Wharton. "Sit up against that wall out of the way."

"I won't!"

Wharton seized the captain of the Fourth, and flung him against the wall like a sack of potatoes. Ponsonby dropped there with a grunt.

"Now, the rest of you!" said Clare sharply.

The raggers looked at one another with sickly expressions. They envied Vavasour, who had run in time. But there was no escape for them. The odds were on their side—but all the fight had been taken out of them.

"Look here, I won't——" began Gadsby.

Bob Cherry grasped him, swung him off his feet struggling, and plumped him down beside the panting Ponsonby—hard!

"Ow!" groaned Gadsby. "Oh, you beast! Oh!"

"Now then——"

The rest of the raggers hastened to obey. Seven dismayed and dishevelled juniors sat in a row by the wall, blinking dazedly at their conquerors. The Greyfriars fellows roared with laughter.

"I can tell you——" began Ponsonby.

Clare raised his hand.

"Shut up!"

"Look here, you rotter—ow—ow!"

"Every time you open your mouth you'll get a lick with this cricket-stump," said Clare calmly. "This is where you shut up."

"You—you——" began Monson. "Ow—ow! Leave off!"

"Silence in court!" chortled Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Ponsonby & Co. were silent. They gave the victorious juniors fiendish looks, but they had no fight left in them, and they had to submit. They sat in a gasping and disconsolate row, rubbing their noses and dabbing away the "claret" with their handkerchiefs.

Clare dusted down his clothes, and put his collar and tie straight. He was not much hurt; the Greyfriars juniors had arrived before the raggers had fairly got to work.

The Greyfriars Removites had a keen appetite after their ride, and they were quite ready for tea. They cheerfully helped Clare to get the tea, the defeated raggers looking on with burning eyes. The sight of the seven dishevelled juniors sitting there was irresistibly comic, and it made the visitors roar.

Monson, who was nearest the door, made a sudden jump to escape—but Bob Cherry's eye was upon him, and a quick back-hander sent him whirling into his place again. The table was spread, the tea prepared. Clare and his guests sat down to a merry meal, while Ponsonby & Co. looked on with helpless rage and fury.

"Let us go, Clare," stammered Ponsonby, at last, quite humbly. "I—I want to bathe my eye."

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Getting civil, my pippin?" said Bob Cherry. "Rot! You can stay where you are."

"It's our tea-time!" whined Monson.

"Well, you can watch us having tea," said Clare.

There was a knock at the door, and Smithson looked in. He stared at the sight of the raggers, and burst into a yell of laughter.

"My hat! Ha ha, ha!"

"Come in and get a chair," said Clare. "You there, too, Yates. You know these chaps. You're just in time for the feed."

"Hear, hear!"

Smithson and Yates willingly joined the tea-party. There was a buzz of merry talk in the study, while Ponsonby & Co. looked on at the feed with growing rage and chagrin. The addition of Smithson and Yates, formerly their humble followers, to the party, was the finishing touch to their humiliation. Never had the pride of Ponsonby & Co. sustained so complete and terrible a fall. After this, the prestige of the "nuts" would be simply nowhere. Truly, Ponsonby & Co. were learning that pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall!

The "nuts" of Highcliffe were simply writhing with rage and shame.

Benson and Jones minor looked into the study, and joined the tea-party, laughing loudly at the sight of Ponsonby & Co. Those unhappy youths were still "sticking it out." The odds were against them now if it came to a tussle, and they had no idea of that. They simply had to grin and bear it—or to bear it if they could not grin. The shouts of laughter from the study drew other fellows there, as the Highcliffe juniors came in to tea—and fellows looked in at the door, and yelled with laughter, and hastened away to spread the news. Soon quite a crowd was gathered in the passage, peeping in at the merry tea-party, and the wretched row of dishevelled raggers sitting against the further wall.

"Rescue, you rotters!" howled Monson desperately.

But only laughter and jeers replied. There were followers of Cecil Ponsonby in the crowd outside, but they were not inclined to tackle a formidable band of fighting-men, to help fellows who would not help themselves.

"Rescue yourselves!" called back Jackson, of the Fourth. "What are you sitting there for like a set of moulting fowls?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By Jove, you ought to charge for admission, Clare!" said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was the death-blow to the prestige of the "nuts." From that humiliation they knew they could never recover. Fellows who had followed them, who had helped them in sending Clare to Coventry, were openly jeering at them now. Ponsonby, like Lucifer, Son of the Morning, had fallen from his high estate. His tame submission to the humiliation put upon him was the last straw. The "nuts" were done for! The glory had departed from the House of Israel!

CHAPTER 30.

Ponsonby's Plot.

HARRY WHARTON & CO. wheeled their bikes down to the gates as the winter dusk was falling. Clare and Smithson & Co. walked down to the gates with them. Ponsonby & Co. had been released from their ordeal at last. They had crawled away in a state of utter dejection, amid hoots and jeers and laughter.

The Greyfriars juniors said good-bye to Clare at the gates. They were grinning. Never had they enjoyed an entertainment so immensely. And

they looked forward to telling the story in the Remove at Greyfriars, amid yells of laughter.

"It's the giddy joke of the season," chuckled Bob Cherry, as he shook hands with Clare. "Poor old Pon is down off his high horse at last. Ha, ha, ha!"

And Harry Wharton & Co. rode away chuckling.

Clare and his friends—the nameless schoolboy had friends now—returned to the School House. Clare was smiling. He had not sought the trouble with Ponsonby & Co.; they had taken him at a cowardly disadvantage, and they had deserved their punishment. And after that scene of ridicule, he did not doubt that the "nuts" of Highcliffe would "draw in their horns." They had utterly lost the respect of the Form—even fellows who found it convenient to toady to them, would toady in a different spirit in the future. And all the fellows who had been at all restive under the sway of the "nuts" would turn against them as one man, now that they had been so thoroughly and effectually "downed."

Clare went into his study to do his preparation in a cheerful humour. He did not expect to hear anything more from the "nuts." No. 8 Study were ready to line up on his side if there was any more trouble; and Ponsonby's followers had fallen off from their allegiance, with the exceptions of his special "pals" who had been through that humiliation with him. And they were not likely to greet with enthusiasm any fresh scheme for tackling the scholarship junior.

Ponsonby knew it!

He knew it only too well! He was in his study now with Gadsby and Monson; the rest of the "nuts" had not turned up, though Ponsonby had called a meeting. They were too sore in body and spirit to rally to their leader's call. The mere fact that Ponsonby had called the meeting as a council of war was enough to keep his dispirited followers away.

Ponsonby gnawed at the cigarette between his lips. His face was pale with rage. Gadsby and Monson looked sullen and uneasy.

"Are we goin' to take this lying down?" said Ponsonby, breaking a gloomy silence.

Gadsby shrugged his shoulders.

"We've taken it sittin' down," he said flippantly, "we may as well make up our minds to take it lyin' down."

"It means that we're downed for good," said Monson glumly. "The whole Form's laughing at us. The very fags in the Second call us funks. Smithson knocked my cap off ten minutes ago—for nothing. They're all quite out of hand."

"It's only Clare," said Ponsonby, between his teeth. "If we could get rid of that low cad, it would be all serene. The other fellows would knuckle under. We should have the Caterpillar on our side, too, if that beast were gone. I can't understand it. The Caterpillar has taken to swottin', and when I offered him a fag last night he said he had given up smokin'. He's done with us. He told me last night he wasn't goin' to play bridge any more. It's all that cad's influence. Once he was gone, the Caterpillar would came round; and as for Smithson and that scrubby crew, we'd soon put them in their places. It's Clare, first and last, and all along the line."

"I know it is," growled Gadsby. "But we can't get rid of him, so what's the use of burblin'?"

"We must!"

"Oh, rot!" said Monson uneasily. "You can't handle him, Pon. Precious well your last scheme turned out, didn't it, with your blessed uncle? The fellow has Satan's own luck."

"His luck can't always hold good. Don't you see"—Ponsonby's voice was

almost hoarse with rage—"can't you see that if we don't shift him we're done? Are we going to knuckle under to that cad, and let him take the upper hand of us? Are we going to give him best?"

"Can't see anythin' else to be done."

"Better have left him alone, in the first place," said Monson.

Ponsonby gave him a bitter look.

"So you two are turnin', too, as well as the others? You won't back me up?"

"I'll back you up fast enough, if it's anythin' to get even with that cad. But I don't see what's to be done. He's beaten us all along the line. All we can do is to get Mobby to rag him in class. And he stands it like a rock."

"He's got to go!"

"Oh, that's rot! He won't go."

"He might be made to," said Ponsonby, sinking his voice. "There are ways and means. If we can't get rid of him by fair play, we can try—the other thing."

Gadsby and Monson looked startled.

"What have you got in your head now, Pon?" said Gadsby uneasily.

"He's got to go! There's only one way to make him go——"

"The sack?" said Monson.

"Yes."

"Well, the Head won't sack him because we want to get rid of him."

"The Head would sack him, and quick, if he did anythin' to deserve it," said Ponsonby.

"He won't—he's too jolly cute."

"You know he's been brought up among all sorts of rotters," said Ponsonby. "A beggar without even a name! It wouldn't be surprisin' if he should break out and steal something, for instance."

"You know he won't, Pon; you're talkin' out of the back of your neck. We know he isn't that kind of chap, anyway. What's the good of talkin' rot?"

"You don't catch on," said Ponsonby, in a low voice. "If he won't do anythin' to get the sack, he might be made to appear to. All's fair in war—and it's war to the knife between us now."

There was a dead silence in the study. Ponsonby lighted a fresh cigarette. Gadsby and Monson looked at each other with scared faces. They were prepared for almost any measure to avenge themselves on the junior they hated. But they had not been prepared for this iniquity. Ponsonby blew out little clouds of smoke, and watched their uneasy faces with a smile of bitter sarcasm.

"Surprised you—what?" he asked at length.

"Dash it all, Pon!" Gadsby's voice was a little shaken. "Dash it, old man! That's jolly serious! It might mean the sack for us if anything went wrong."

"They won't be in a hurry to sack us," said Ponsonby contemptuously. "We've got Mobby on our side, through thick and thin. And the Head wouldn't be in a hurry to quarrel with our people. An outsider like Smithson or Benson—that's different. Our people have got too much influence to be offended. It would have to be a jolly clear case against us before we were sacked. Besides, if we're careful, we sha'n't fail; we can plant it on Clare easily enough."

"But—but how?" Gadsby licked his dry lips. "Do—do you mean plantin' somethin' in his box, and sayin' he stole it? It's too thin, Pon; it would be seen through. It's too jolly risky. Why, he'd tumble to the

game at once, and accuse us of plantin' it on him, and something would come out—it would be bound to come out——"

"It's no good," said Monson. "I won't have a hand in it. The chap's got his record clean; it won't be easy to make out he's a thief. And everybody knows we hate him, and would suspect us of a plant. It's too thin."

"I wasn't suggestin' that," said Ponsonby. "I only put that as an example. It needn't be that we can think of somethin' that he couldn't wriggle out of—somethin' that would get him the sack. Fellows are sacked for all sorts of things. We might be sacked ourselves if some things were known about us."

"Oh, cheese it!"

"We can put our heads together, and think it out," said Ponsonby. "Suppose the beast turned out to be a pub-haunter——"

"But he isn't!"

"You'll never dodge him like that," said Monson, with a shake of the head. "He's too jolly careful to be tricked into any place out of bounds, and then he would have to be caught in the act, too. Our word wouldn't be enough."

"There are ways and means. The question is, are you backin' me up?"

"Yes—if it's safe."

"If it's quite safe, Pon."

Ponsonby sneered.

"If it isn't safe, I shall keep out of it myself," he said. "It's a go, then! He's got to be downed, in a way he can't recover from—he's got to be sacked. It's up to us three. No good telling Vav or Drury or Pelham—they've got no nerve. There are ways and means, and we've got to find 'em! And I tell you that I shan't rest till that cad is kicked out of Highcliffe."

And the three young rascals, in low voices, with guilty looks, proceeded to discuss the campaign—turning over scheme after scheme, rejecting one after another, till at last Ponsonby propounded a plan that made his comrades stare at first. But as he proceeded to explain it, to amplify it, they listened with gleaming eyes. And when that talk was over, the scheme was arranged, the plot completed. And Ponsonby & Co., having screwed up their courage to the sticking-point, proceeded to take the first steps to carry out their scheme, that was designed to result in Clare's downfall, and to rid them for ever of the schoolboy without a name.

CHAPTER 31.

The First Move.

DURING the next few days the "nuts" of Highcliffe understudied the celebrated Brer Fox, and "lay low."

Cheek from fags who had formerly trembled at their nod, the open derision of Smithson & Co., passed them by unheeded.

They were biding their time.

Towards Clare they seemed to have dropped their hostility. They took little notice of him, and Clare, only too glad to be left in peace, was content to take no notice of them.

His conclusion was that the Co. had found him too hard a nut to crack, and had decided to let him alone.

Nothing more was said about Clare being "in Coventry." Indeed, some of the "nuts" themselves spoke to him casually sometimes, and he answered civilly. Which gave the Fourth-Formers the impression that Ponsonby &

Co. meant to take their defeat "lying down," and as a result the prestige of the "nuts" was at its lowest ebb.

Only Pon himself, and Gadsby and Monson, knew that there was anything behind that veil of submissiveness. Vavasour and Drury and Pelham and the rest were not in the secret. They expected Pon to "do something" to restore their prestige; but Ponsonby did nothing. He simply said they might as well be civil to Clare; and that hint from their leader seemed to them so open an acknowledgment of defeat that even the "nuts" were disgusted.

The Caterpillar looked at Ponsonby sometimes with curious eyes. The Caterpillar was suspicious. With all his laziness, De Courcy was keen as a razor, and he knew Pon's nature through and through. One evening in the study he warned Clare to look out for squalls.

Since the day Clare had not accepted his invitation home, the Caterpillar had shown himself a little huffy. But he had got over it. Clare had affected to notice no change; he liked the Caterpillar, and he was slow to take offence. But his face brightened up when De Courcy spoke to him, that evening, in his old familiar manner.

The Caterpillar noticed it, and he smiled.

"Look out for squalls?" repeated Clare.

"Yaas. By the way," said the Caterpillar abruptly, "would you mind punchin' my head, Clare?"

Clare laughed.

"Yes, if you like—but why?"

"I deserve it. I'm an ass!"

"Yes?"

"And a snob," said the Caterpillar solemnly.

"Oh, rot!" said Clare.

"It's a fact—a solid fact," said the Caterpillar contritely. "I never suspected it myself, and I've despised Pon no end for bein' a snob. Now I've made the uncomfortable discovery that I'm one myself. Disgustin', ain't it?"

"What have you been doing, then?" asked Clare, smiling. He never took the Caterpillar quite seriously.

"I was huffed with you for not jumpin' at the chance of comin' to my place last Saturday," said the Caterpillar. "Any of the fellows would have jumped at it, if they'd had a dozen engagements on hand. Now, why was I huffy?"

"Give it up."

"Because I'm a snob," said the Caterpillar. "I thought you ought to want to come—as if a sensible chap like you cared a twopenny swear whether a fellow's uncle was an earl or a fishmonger! Will you punch my head?"

"No," said Clare. "I'm sorry you were huffy."

"I apologise," said the Caterpillar.

"Oh, rats!"

"But to come back to our mutton, now I've made the amende honorable," said De Courcy, "look out for squalls. Pon's got something brewing for you."

"He's been civil lately," said Clare carelessly.

"Timeo Danaos—what's the rest?" said the Caterpillar. "'I fear the Greeks when they come with gifts in their hands.' I know Pon. I've heard of the scene here that afternoon with the Greyfriars fellows." The Caterpillar burst into a laugh. "My hat! I wish I could have seen it! Why do you play these little games while I'm away? It's not fair to a pal. I should have enjoyed that, by gad! But Pon didn't enjoy it, kid."

"No; he didn't look as if he were enjoying himself."

"And he will remember it."

"Let him!"

"And he will make you squirm for it if he can, my boy."

"Poof!"

"Look out for squalls," said the Caterpillar seriously. "I warn you. I don't know what Pon's up to, but he's up to somethin'. He's taken to workin'."

"Time he did."

"Workin' in the chemistry class," said the Caterpillar. "He's half his time in the lab. Now, it's all very well for that bounder Yates to go in for stinks—it's in his line—he's going to be a sawbones. It isn't in Pon's line. Blessed if I know what he's at. But he's at something."

Clare laughed carelessly. He was not afraid of Ponsonby, and not inclined to bother about him. Since the downfall of the "nuts" his life at Highcliffe had been much pleasanter. Even Mr. Mobbs had been a little less harsh, taking his cue from the "nuts." Clare had no animosity against his old enemies.

"Well, if you won't take a warnin', you won't," said the Caterpillar, with a yawn. "I shall be an interested onlooker; I'm waiting for the denouement."

"Do your prep. while you're waiting," said Clare lightly.

"By gad, how you keep a fellow up to work—and won't let him smoke, either!" said the Caterpillar. And the slacker set to work.

After prep. was done, the two juniors were chatting, when Smithson came into the study. There was a very odd expression on Smithson's face.

"Quite sober, Clare?" he asked.

Clare stared at him

"Is that a joke?" he asked

"Don't make jokes, Smithy," implored the Caterpillar. "'Tain't in your line."

"It isn't exactly a joke," said Smithson. "I've heard a queer yarn, and I don't believe a word of it."

"Good," said the Caterpillar. "Don't tell us."

"I've come here to tell you."

"Go and tell somebody else, there's a good fellow."

"Have you fellows got a bottle of whisky in the study?" demanded Smithson, unheeding.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Clare.

"To the best of my knowledge, no," yawned the Caterpillar. "If you are in search of that kind of refreshment, Smithy, apply to Pon. He may be able to oblige you."

"The fellows are saying that Clare brought a bottle of whisky into the School to-day," said Smithson.

Clare sprang to his feet, his face flushing crimson.

"Who said that?" he exclaimed.

"I don't know who started it," said Smithson. "I know it ain't true, old chap. But you brought in something bulgin' in your coat pocket."

"Certainly I did," said Clare angrily. "It was a book I bought in Courtfield—at the second-hand stall there—a big book."

"There's a yarn that somebody saw it, and it was a bottle of whisky," said Smithson. "I knew it was a yarn, of course; but I thought I'd tell you. You see, young Lobbs of the Third says he looked into your study cupboard, to see whether there was one there or not, and saw it there."

"The little ass! He was pulling your leg!"

"I gave him a dot on the nose," said Smithson loyally. "I knew he was

rotting. All the same, it's queer. Somebody must have started the yarn. Pon, perhaps—they were discussin' it together in the passage just now—but I heard Pon say he didn't believe a word of it. But—but Langley heard 'em talking, and I think he's coming here, so I came to—to——"

Clare's lip curled. Smithson had evidently wished to do him a good turn, in case he was guilty of that offence; but Clare was not flattered by the bare supposition that he had spirits in his study.

"Let him come," he snapped. "There's nothing in my study that a prefect mayn't see."

"Here he is!" whispered Smithson, and he beat a retreat.

Langley of the Sixth came in. His face was very grave. He was captain of the school and head prefect; but he had not escaped the general influence of the School, and it was whispered that there were card-parties and "smoking-bees" in Langley's Study of an evening. But whatever relaxations Langley might allow himself, he was "down" on a scholarship kid in the Fourth imitating him.

"What's this yarn I hear about you, Clare?" he said gruffly.

"A lie," said Clare coolly.

"Yaas—a first-class whopper, dear boy," said the Caterpillar. "I can attest the perfect sobriety of my friend Clare. In fact, since I have known him, he has sometimes even bored me with the stern morality of the workin' classes. If you're after spirituous liquors, dear boy, you've come to the wrong study. Try the Sixth."

Langley laughed.

"Shut up, you cheeky young sweep," he said. "I suppose there's nothing in it, but I heard some of the juniors talking, and it seems that a fag in the Third says he actually saw a bottle of whisky in the study cupboard here. I'll look, and if there's nothing in it, I'll give the young cub a whopping."

"Look, by all means," said Clare.

Langley nodded, and threw open the door of the study cupboard. There were a good many things in it, and Langley peered among them, and moved some packages and bottles. Then he uttered a sudden exclamation.

"What's this?"

"What's what?" drawled the Caterpillar.

"This!" roared Langley, turning round from the cupboard with a bottle of whisky in his hand. "You young blackguards——"

The two juniors stared at the glimmering bottle in amazement. Even the Caterpillar was startled out of his usual nonchalance.

CHAPTER 32.

The Blow Falls!

CLARE stared fixedly at the bottle in the prefect's hand.

For the moment his breath was taken away.

There was no doubt about it—it was a bottle of whisky. Its presence in his study cupboard was astounding. A whole whisky distillery there would not have been much more surprising.

Langley looked furious. He had it a little upon his conscience that he was slack in his duties as a prefect. That vice could have gone to this extent in a junior Form, while he was devoting his attention to bridge and "gee-gees," was a shock to him. And he was proportionately exasperated.

"Which of you young rascals does this belong to?" he demanded. "One or both?"

"Neither!" said the Caterpillar.

"Neither!" repeated Clare, recovering himself. "Some rotter has put

that there—planted it on us, for a rotten joke, I suppose. I've never seen it before."

"Good old Pon!" drawled the Caterpillar. "He would make his fortune on the halls—he's such a funny man."

Langley hesitated.

"It was hidden behind some biscuit boxes at the back of the cupboard," he said.

"It would be," said Clare, contemptuously. "Whoever planted it there didn't want me to find it, and make a row about it. That would have spoiled the game."

"Yaas, it was quite clever," said De Courcy admiringly. "They plant it there—start a yarn that Clare was seen with it—an inquisitive fag noses in and sees it. Ponsonby discusses it where a prefect can overhear him—prefect comes here and finds it——"

"Do you accuse Ponsonby!" began the prefect.

"Not at all," said the Caterpillar. "I don't accuse anybody. I only point out what's as plain as the nose on your face, dear boy. Somebody's pullin' you leg. That's all."

Langley paused, with the bottle in his hand. He knew the trouble Clare had had with the "nuts," and he was rather inclined to take the Caterpillar's view himself. At all events, if the bottle belonged to the study, there was nothing to prove that it was Clare's—it was quite as likely to be De Courcy's—more likely, in fact. And Langley had a suspicion that an accusation against the earl's nephew would not sound welcome in the ears of Mr. Mobbs, his Form-master—neither was the Head likely to listen to it without the most convincing proof.

"I hardly know what to think," said Langley, at last. "Of course, I shall take this away with me."

"Better give it back to the owner," said the Caterpillar. "I dare say Pon can give you the number of the study."

"Do you two give me your word of honour that you know nothing whatever about this?" asked the prefect, searching their faces.

"Yaas."

"Certainly," said Clare.

"I shall keep an eye on this study," said Langley. "I take your word—but I shall keep an eye on you, all the same. And if I catch you——" The prefect left the rest to their imaginations, and quitted the study, with the bottle under his coat.

Clare and Caterpillar looked at one another. Clare was quivering with angry indignation; De Courcy seemed to be amused.

"Didn't I tell you to look out for squalls, dear boy?" chuckled the Caterpillar. "Of course, it was Pon. Can't be proved, but it was Pon."

"This can't end here," exclaimed Clare. "It's a deliberate trick. I'm jolly well going to the Head!" He made a stride towards the door.

"N.G." said the Caterpillar. "You can't accuse anybody. The Head would be jolly down on you if you accused anybody without proof."

"There ought to be an inquiry into it—it ought to be found out who put it there," said Clare savagely. "I'm pretty sure, but——"

"But it couldn't be found out," said the Caterpillar coolly. "Pon was careful to do it while we were at a distance, of course. Let it drop, and keep your eyes open."

"What's the good of that—locking the door after the horse is stolen," said Clare crossly. "The thing's been done now."

De Courcy smiled.

"I rather fancy that's for a start, he said. "Pon—suppose it was Pon—put it there. What did he expect to happen? He knew we'd deny knowin'

anythin' about it, of course, and our word would have to be taken. It's as much up against me as you—and the Head wouldn't condemn you without proof, and he'd take a jolly long time to condemn me at all." He chuckled. "My noble nunky would be down on him like a ton of bricks—and he's a governor of Highcliffe, like Pon's uncle, and a much bigger gun. I fancy this is the beginnin', kid, and there's somethin' more to follow. Keep an eye open for the good Pon. He's playin' his last card."

"What can he do worse than that? It's put suspicion on me."

"Which will be forgotten in a day or two if nothin' else happens, dear boy."

Clare knitted his brows.

"What else do you expect to happen?" he demanded. "Another silly bottle of whisky in the study cupboard?"

"Tosh—no! Somethin' that will pin you, and leave me out—that's the next move in the game." The Caterpillar rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "Don't ask me what it is—it's too deep for me. But keep an eye open."

In the dormitory that night Clare looked sharply at Ponsonby. He only wanted proof that Pon had played that trick on him, to give the captain of the Fourth the hammering of his life. But Ponsonby seemed quite unconscious of his presence. The taunts he had expected the "nuts" to utter were not uttered. Some of the fellows whispered and laughed, and Clare knew what they were whispering and laughing about. But Ponsonby & Co. chatted football while they were going to bed, and made no allusion whatever to the mysterious bottle of whisky.

Clare was baffled. After all, it might not have been Ponsonby—certainly his old enemy was not trying to make capital out of the incident. Who had played that trick? One of the "nuts,' doubtless, or was it Monson major? Monson major, he knew, had regarded him with undying animosity ever since that licking in Smithson's Study, though he had made no attempt to avenge his defeat—openly at all events. And he might have other enemies—there were snobs in the Shell and Fifth who shared Pon & Co.'s attitude towards the scholarship "bounder."

Clare went to bed with a heavy heart.

He had fought his way through so far: but how was he to keep his end up, if base tricks like this were to be looked for. This one had passed him by harmlessly, but the next—and the Caterpillar, whose judgment he knew was reliable, fully expected that there would be a next.

What move against him was he to look for now—what act of treachery that perhaps he could not guard against? He could cheerfully face his foes in the open—but an enemy who worked in the dark—how could he deal with him?

And yet, what could they do? Strong in innocence and unstained honour, what had he to fear?

Yet his mind was uneasy, and that night his sleep was troubled.

The next day, Clare could not help observing the whispers and sly looks of some of the juniors. More than once he was in danger of losing his temper, but the Caterpillar had given him good advice, and he followed it. He affected unconsciousness. If the matter was allowed to die out, there would be an end of it, but a series of "scraps" would only have given it long life.

The Caterpillar's advice was good; the matter died out. In a few days the juniors were tired of joking on the subject, and Ponsonby & Co. had not taken it up at all—it was a weapon ready to their hand, and they had not used it. Clare would have come to believe that he had done Pon an injustice; but at a hint of that sort, the Caterpillar smiled his cynical smile, and told him to look out for the next move in the game.

"That's only pawn to king's fourth, dear boy," said the Caterpillar, who

was a chess-player when he found energy enough. "It's the next move that will show what the game is. Keep your weather eye open."

And Clare laughed and said that he would.

But the next move, when it came, came with a suddenness that was crushing. Nearly a week had elapsed since the incident of the whisky bottle. Clare was in the common-room, in the evening, watching a game of chess between the Caterpillar and Vavasour. Vavasour had bothered the lazy Caterpillar into playing. Clare had lines to do Mr. Mobbs generally kept him well provided with lines—and after watching the game for a time, he went up to his study to write out his imposition.

As he came from the staircase into the Fourth-Form passage, he found it quite dark. It was not unusual for some humorous junior to turn the light out, however, and Clare extended his hand to the wall, and felt his way on to his study.

There was a sudden quick breathing in the passage as he reached his study. The door was open—the study was dark. As he stepped in at the doorway, after groping for the door, he heard that quick breathing, and swung round. He suspected a rag at once. But before he was fairly on his guard, he was gripped in the darkness.

He struggled to free his arms, to hit out—and he would have succeeded, but at the same moment a cloth was pressed over his face, and a strange sickly smell penetrated his nose and mouth. He struggled fiercely to tear the cloth off, but three pairs of hands were grasping him, and the cloth was pressed tightly—and his senses were swimming. He knew that it was a drug; but he could not think clearly now—his consciousness was going—his head seemed to turn in a whirl of fire—his resistance ceased, and he sank down, down, down—— With his last gleam of consciousness, it seemed to him that he was sinking into bottomless space. Then he knew no more.

CHAPTER 33.

Self-Condemned!

"BEDTIME, by gad!" yawned the Caterpillar.

"Oh, finish the game!" said Vavasour.

The Caterpillar lazily moved his knight.

"Mate!" he said calmly.

"By Jove, so it is!" said Vavasour. "You've done me, absolutely." Vavasour rose from the chess table and stretched his elegant limbs. "You fellows ready for by-by—what?"

"Yes," said Ponsonby, who was lounging in an armchair. "Wake up, Gaddy."

Gaddy was yawning over a book.

Roper of the Sixth looked in.

"Now, then, cut off," said Roper.

"Yaas, dear boy. Where's Clare?" asked the Caterpillar, looking round. "By gad, hasn't he finished his lines yet? He can't have been an hour over them. Workin', I suppose."

"Swotting as usual," sneered Ponsonby.

"Thing you'd never do, isn't it, Pon?" said the Caterpillar benignantly. "Lucky you've got relations to have you shoved into the Fifth when your time comes—what? All right, Roper, don't get into a wax. We're going."

The Fourth-Formers went up to the dormitory. De Courcy looked round for Clare, but he was not in the dorm. Roper frowned. He was anxious to get back to the usual little party in Langley's study.

"Where's that young sweep?" he growled. "Who is it—Clare? Why hasn't he come up to bed? I'll warm him."

"Must be in the study," said the Caterpillar. "In the delights of Virgil, he has forgotten bedtime. What a brain!"

"I'll remind him," said the prefect grimly.

He left the dormitory, and went down to the Fourth Form passage. The light was out there, and Roper grumbled as he groped along. He lighted the gas, and strode along to Clare's study. The door of No. 3 was closed, and Roper threw it open angrily. There was no light in the study, save a faint glow from the dying fire.

A strong smell smote upon Roper's nostrils as he looked in. He started, and sniffed.

"My only hat!" he ejaculated.

It was the smell of spirits!

"Are you here, Clare?" called out Roper.

There was no reply. The prefect stepped into the study, struck a match, and lighted the gas. Then he looked round.

He caught his breath.

Clare was stretched in the armchair, his head leaning on the arm, fast asleep, or unconscious. On the table was a whisky bottle, half full. A broken glass lay on the hearthrug close by the chair, and there was a stain of spilt liquor, as if the glass had fallen from a shaking hand there. The study was impregnated with the smell of whisky. The boy in the armchair reeked with it.

The prefect stood rooted to the carpet.

There were some "wild beggars" at Highcliffe; the taste of intoxicating liquor was not wholly unknown in some of the Sixth Form studies. But drunkenness! And a junior! And the boy was completely unconscious! Roper, recovering himself a little, seized him by the shoulder and shook him. Clare swayed with the shaking, but did not open his heavy eye. It was impossible to wake him.

"Good gad!" muttered Roper. "A kid like that—this comes of letting these filthy outsiders into the school! Well, he won't stay here long, that's one comfort. This is a job for Mobby."

Leaving Clare as he lay, the prefect hurried downstairs, and knocked at the door of Mr. Mobb's study, and entered.

Mr. Mobbs noted at once the expression in his face.

"What has happened, Roper?" he asked acidly.

"Something very serious, sir," said Roper gravely. "A junior in your Form, sir—Clare——"

Mr. Mobbs's thin lips tightened.

"What has he done now?" he asked. "Nothing he should do would surprise me. I have the lowest possible opinion of that boy. But what is it?"

"He is drunk, sir."

Mr. Mobbs jumped.

"Roper!"

"It's horrible, sir," said the prefect. "But I'm sorry to say it's true. He didn't come up to bed with the others, and went to his study—and he's simply dead drunk, sir. There's whisky on the table, and——"

Mr. Mobbs's eyes lit up with an unholy joy.

Never had he anticipated anything like this. He could rag the boy in class, but even that was limited, because Clare was too careful with his work to allow a real fault to be found. And his conduct had been so exemplary that the wretchedly snobbish master had to confess that it was irreproachable. Faults that would have been ignored in Ponsonby's case would have brought severe punishment if Clare had been guilty of them;

but he had none of the vices of the "nuts." And now. And now—a thrill of satisfaction passed through Mr. Mobbs. At last his condemnation of the scholarship boy was justified—more than justified. Mr. Mobbs felt that his judgment had been very good indeed. He had been against that intruder from the beginning—and it was clear that he had been right. Mr. Mobbs did not feel the shock, the grief, a master might have been expected to feel at the discovery of such a depth of vice in a member of his Form. Mr. Mobbs's feeling at that moment was one of intense gratification.

He hardly heard what the prefect was saying. In his mind's eye he saw the scene of the morrow—a disgraced, shame-stricken junior driven forth from the school, amid contemptuous and condemning eyes, never to re-enter its gates.

"Yes—yes, Roper!" exclaimed Mr. Mobbs, coming to himself, as it were. "Yes, this is—this is extremely serious! Much as I distrusted that boy, I never expected to find him a victim of this horrible vice of drunkenness. Doubtless he comes from a drunken home—doubtless he was taught to drink almost as soon as he could speak! That such a boy should have entered Highcliffe——" Mr. Mobbs shook his head sadly. "I will go and see him at once. Tell Langley to come, and come yourself. In his intoxication he may need firmness!"

"I'm afraid he is too far gone to move even, sir. He cannot speak."

"Good heavens! How dreadful!" exclaimed Mr. Mobbs. By the tone of his voice, Mr. Mobbs might have been saying "How delightful!"

The Form-master hurried away to Clare's study. Roper called Langley, and the two prefects followed him. The three of them stood looking down at Clare.

The unhappy boy had not moved.

He was sprawled in the chair, his eyes shut and his mouth open, his whole person reeking of whisky—and Mr. Mobbs felt a genuine disgust and contempt as he surveyed him.

"What a sight!" exclaimed the Form-master. "How revolting—how incredibly revolting! A boy of his years! What must his upbringing have been like?"

"Filthy little scoundrel!" said Langley angrily. "He took me in last time."

Mr. Mobbs turned on him quickly.

"Last time! Do you mean to say that there has been a previous instance of this, Langley, and you have not reported to the Head or to me."

Langley coloured.

"He spoofed me, sir," he confessed. "There was some talk among the juniors of Clare having whisky in his study, and I came here to look. I found a bottle in his cupboard."

"Bless my soul!"

"That was last week. He said it had been put there to get him into a row, and De Courcy said the same, and—well, I believed it, sir. I know a lot of the Fourth were very much down on him."

"And with reason!" said Mr. Mobbs sharply. "They could hardly be too down, as you call it, upon that vicious young reprobate."

"I admit it now, sir," said Langley. "I admit I was taken in. But he looked so jolly truthful—and it couldn't have been proved whether the whisky was his or De Courcy's."

"There is hardly any doubt now," said Mr. Mobbs drily. "He stands before us self-condemned—ahem!—at all events he lies before us. Roper, will you kindly acquaint the Head with this, and ask him to step here. Stay, I will go myself. Remain with this wretched boy, and see that

nothing is disturbed until Dr. Voysey has witnessed the whole with his own eyes."

And the master of the Fourth bustled out of the study.

Langley and Roper remained, looking grimly at the insensible junior. There was a step in the passage, and the Caterpillar glanced in.

"Not coming to see lights out, Roper, dear boy," he drawled. "I came down to see if Clare—— Be gad!" He caught sight of the senseless figure in the chair. "What's the matter——"

"Go back to bed!" said Langley.

The Caterpillar did not reply—he did not even hear. He pushed the captain of Highcliffe violently aside, and sprang towards Clare. His face was white as a sheet.

"Clare! Clare, old man, are you ill——" he panted.

"He's drunk," said Roper harshly.

"Lies!" shouted the Caterpillar fiercely. His eyes flamed as he turned on the two astonished prefects. "Lies! Lies!"

"Don't be a young ass," said Langley, gently enough, for the look on the boy's face went to his heart. "You can see for yourself. The poor little brute has been brought up in some drunken home. He's learned this kind of thing as a kid, and he's been keeping it dark; and now he's broken out—poor little beast!"

The Caterpillar looked at him wildly.

His first thought was that it was a trick—treachery of Clare's enemies. But he had to believe his eyes. Clare lay in sottish stupor before him—there was whisky on the table—whisky spilt on the floor round the broken glass—whisky reeking on the boy's clothes. All that might have been a trick; but the boy's heavy, brutish insensibility—that was not a trick! For no one could have forced liquor down the boy's throat against his will—that was unthinkable!

"Get back to the dorm.," said Langley kindly. "This isn't a sight for you, kid."

De Courcy did not reply.

He bent over Clare and shook him.

"Clare!" he whispered. "Wake up, old man! You're fooling me, ain't you, old chap—you're spoofing? You must be spoofing! Clare, old man, don't do it. Clare! Clare! Won't you speak to your old pal?"

But there came no answer, no movement, from the sottish figure in the chair. The Caterpillar gazed at him—he could doubt no longer.

He moved back unsteadily, and sank into a chair by the table. His face was white and drawn. And suddenly, his head dropped into his hands, and he sobbed! And two or three of the Fourth, who had come down, led by curiosity, looked into the study, with awed and terrified faces, at the grim, silent prefects—the stupified figure sprawling in the armchair—and the Caterpillar. The slacker and dandy of the Fourth, with his face buried in his hands, sobbing as if his heart would break!

CHAPTER 34.

A Night of Horror!

DR. VOYSEY rustled along the passage, and there was a sudden scampering of the juniors at the door. They hurried back to the dormitory, with the startling news that the scholarship cad was lying dead drunk in his study, and that the Caterpillar was "blubbing" like a kid. The Fourth Form was in a buzz of excitement. Ponsonby & Co. were grinning

with glee. They confidently predicted the "sack" for the "rotter." Even Smithson had nothing to say—he had been among those who had looked into the study. He was silent and troubled. It was a clear case, and there was nothing to be said for Clare. The "nuts" were triumphant.

Dr. Voysey swept into the study, his face hard as flint. Mr. Mobbs rustled in after him, composing his looks to an expression of hypocritical regret.

Langley and Roper stepped back. The Head stood before the boy stretched in the chair, and gazed at him with thunder in his brow.

"Good heavens!" he said. "Is it possible? The—the brutal, vile rascal! This is the boy I have admitted to Highcliffe—this!" He raised his voice. "Clare—boy!"

Clare lay silent in stupor.

"He is hopelessly intoxicated," said the Head, with a bitter look. "A boy of his age! Bless my soul, what must his early training have been like. He must have grossly deceived the gentleman who answered for his character when he came here—grossly! But a boy who is capable of drunkenness is capable of anything. This is no sudden fall; this must be habitual."

"There is only too much reason to suppose so, sir," said Mr. Mobbs. "It appears that spirits have been discovered in this study on a previous occasion, but the wretched boy succeeded in deceiving the prefect who found them here. It was Langley."

"I—I believed him, sir," said Langley.

The Caterpillar raised his head. His white cheeks glistened with tears. The Fourth Form of Highcliffe would hardly have recognised the slacker of the school at that moment.

"What is that boy doing here?" said the Head, frowning. "De Courcy, go to your dormitory at once!"

The Caterpillar rose unsteadily to his feet.

"I've got to speak, sir!" he said. "Langley found whisky in the study one day last week, that's true——"

"Do you know anything about the vile habits of this boy?" asked the Head.

"I know he had none, sir," said the junior fiercely. "I say Langley found the whisky here, and we knew—Clare and I—that it had been put here by some cad to get Clare into trouble. I told Langley so, and he believed it, and it was true."

"Nonsense, boy!" said the Head sharply. "Look at the wretched boy now! Can you not see with your own eyes the state he is in?"

The Caterpillar groaned.

"I'd never have believed it, and I can't understand it now," he said. "But that Clare never had any spirits in the study, I know for a fact. That he has never done anything of that sort since he's been here, I know."

"He has deceived you, my boy, as he has deceived us," said Dr. Voysey. "Go to your dormitory, De Courcy."

The Caterpillar cast a last look at Clare.

"Can't I stay with him, sir?" he muttered. "He—he wants looking after."

"De Courcy, I am shocked—disgusted!" exclaimed the Head sharply. "Is it possible that you feel any friendship for this wretched boy? I am ashamed of you!"

"He was my pal," said the Caterpillar doggedly. "A better fellow than I was, too—a better fellow than any of the cads who've been down on him."

"Go to your dormitory instantly, De Courcy. Remove him, Roper."

The Caterpillar left the study with heavy steps. All the carelessness, all the cool insouciance, was gone from the Caterpillar now. He came into the Fourth-Form dormitory with downcast face. There was a buzz of voices at

once—questions were showered upon him. He did not answer; he did not seem to hear. Without even undressing he turned into bed, and refused to speak. And the anguish they read in his face made the juniors let him alone.

Roper came in and turned the lights out.

"Isn't Clare coming up to bed, Roper?" called out Smithson.

"No!"

The prefect closed the door and retired. There was an unending buzz of voices in the dormitory; but the Caterpillar did not speak.

Roper returned to Clare's study. The Head was gazing at the insensible boy with bitter contempt and wrath.

"What is to be done with him, sir?" Mr. Mobbs asked.

Dr. Voysey made an angry gesture.

"He cannot be taken to the dormitory in this state. He shall never come into contact with any boy in this school again. In the morning he shall leave Highcliffe by the first train, and until then, Mr. Mobbs, you will take care that he does not come into contact with the boys."

"Certainly, sir."

"For the night, he must sleep somewhere. I doubt if he will recover his senses before the morning. I will instruct the housekeeper to prepare a separate room for him. Roper and Langley will take him there. You will see that he is put to bed, Mr. Mobbs, and someone should remain with him. It is not safe to leave a boy alone in this horrible condition; he is capable of anything. He may even have other supplies of spirits concealed somewhere."

Mr. Mobbs understood what was required of him.

"I will remain with him, sir," he said. "I will sleep in an armchair and see that he comes to no harm."

"Thank you, Mr. Mobbs. I leave the matter in your hands."

And Dr. Voysey, extremely irritated and angry, swept away.

Half an hour later, when the room was ready, Clare was raised from the chair by the two prefects, and they carried him away. The boy was still completely unconscious. Langley and Roper carried him helplessly out of the study, followed by Mr. Mobbs. Some of the Sixth and Fifth gathered round to look on, and there were remarks of contempt and disgust on all sides.

Taken into the room prepared for him, Clare was undressed by the prefects and put into bed.

"Pretty job for us—this!" growled Roper, in utter disgust.

Langley smiled grimly. It was the first time he had undressed and put to bed a drunkard.

"He will not disgrace the school again, Roper," said Mr. Mobbs. "Highcliffe will be rid of him to-morrow."

Clare was covered up, and he lay in the bed like a log. The two prefects retired, and Mr. Mobbs, having stirred the fire, settled down with a book in an armchair. He had the prospect of sitting in that armchair all night, for certainly it would not have done to leave the boy unwatched in his present state. But Mr. Mobbs was consoled by the prospect of what was to happen in the morning.

Langley returned to his study, and several of the Sixth came in to "jaw" over the extraordinary occurrence, which was, of course, the one topic in the whole school by this time. There came a tap at the door a little later, and Langley rapped out, "Come in!" The Caterpillar looked into the study, and Langley stared at him angrily.

"De Courcy! What are you doing out of your dormitory?" he demanded The seniors all looked curiously at the boy's haggard face.

"How is Clare?" asked the Caterpillar, unheeding the question addressed to him.

"In bed, as drunk as a fiddler," growled Langley. "Go back to bed, you young scamp."

"Hasn't he come-to yet?"

"No."

"I want to see him," said De Courcy. "Where is he?"

Langley made an angry gesture; but the misery in the boy's face touched him, in spite of himself.

"You can't see him, De Courcy. He's in the room next to Mr. Mobb's bedroom, but you can't see him. Mr. Mobbs is sitting up with him. Go back to your dormitory."

The Caterpillar nodded, and closed the door and retired. But he did not go back to the Fourth-Form dormitory. He went to the room where Clare lay unconscious, and opened the door softly.

The gas was burning in the room; the light shone on Clare's insensible face. Mr. Mobbs was snoring in his chair. He had fallen asleep over his book. The hour was late.

The Caterpillar trod softly into the room.

He bent over the still scarcely breathing form in the bed.

"Clare," he whispered. "Clare, old chap!"

But there was no reply to his affectionate whisper; the dull eyes did not open. The Caterpillar remained for some minutes looking down upon him. Never, till this terrible night, had the Caterpillar realised the depth and strength of his friendship for his new chum.

There was an uneasy movement from the snoring Mr. Mobbs. De Courcy started back, and withdrew to a dusky corner of the room. There, in the shadow, he sat down, silent. Mr. Mobbs turned in his chair, yawned, placed a cushion under his head, and settled down again, unconscious of the Caterpillar's presence in the room.

De Courcy sat motionless.

He was not conscious of fatigue, he was not sleepy; he was conscious of nothing but dull, gnawing misery. The long, long hours of the night dragged by, and still the haggard junior watched, while Clare lay like a log in the bed, and Mr. Mobbs's stertorous snore rumbled unmusically through the room.

CHAPTER 35.

A Loyal Pal.

CLARE stirred and awoke.

He awoke with a grinding headache, with dim and dizzy eyes, with swimming brain. The dawn was creeping in at the window—the grim winter dawn. Mr. Mobbs lay huddled in his chair, still snoring. In the corner of the room a sleepless junior sat—still, soundless, watching!

Clare did not see them.

He lay with aching head on the pillow, his dull eyes fixed on the ceiling above him, half conscious, aware only of dull, physical pain.

What had happened?

He strove dully to collect his thoughts. As his brain grew clearer he turned his eyes about him, still without moving, for a heavy lethargy lay upon him, and his limbs seemed like lead. Where was he? He was not in the dormitory. What had happened to him? Why was he lying here, like a log, in a strange room, pinned down, as it seemed, by a heavy weight? What horror had happened to him?

He stirred again, and moved his head. Mr. Mobbs moved in his chair, and awoke. He fixed his eyes upon the junior in the bed, and smiled grimly as he saw that Clare was awake. The Form-master rose—tired, stiff, ill-tempered, and malignant.

"So you are awake?" he said.

He had his back to the Caterpillar; he had not seen him yet. De Courcy did not move. He listened.

"Yes, sir," stammered Clare confusedly. "What—what is the matter, sir? I—I do not feel well."

Mr. Mobbs smiled sarcastically.

"It would be surprising if you felt well, after your orgy of last night," he replied.

Clare stared at him.

"My—my what?"

"Your orgy," said Mr. Mobbs, dwelling upon the word with relish. "You do not recollect, then, that you made yourself intoxicated in your study last night. Perhaps you did not intend to carry your disgusting indulgence to that extent."

"Intoxicated!" repeated Clare.

He was wide awake now; he sat up in bed. He looked at Mr. Mobbs in utter wonder.

"Yes," snapped Mr. Mobbs. "You were found in your study, with spirits on the table, a glass broken where it had fallen from your hand, reeking, sir, with spirits. You were in a state of filthy drunkenness—like the lowest public-house loafer."

Clare met his eyes steadily. His head was aching, but his brain was clearing fast.

"It is false!" he said.

"What!"

"It is false! It is a lie—a foul lie!"

Mr. Mobbs stared at him. He had not expected denial. What was the use of denial? But the Caterpillar felt his heart throbbing. Always, deep down in his heart, he had cherished a hope—a vague, intangible hope—that Clare would be able to explain somehow, that this would turn out to be, somehow, impossible as it seemed, the result of some treachery of Ponsonby & Co.

He sprang forward.

"Clare—Clare, old chap——"

"You here, De Courcy!" exclaimed Mr. Mobbs.

The Caterpillar did not heed him. He was by the bedside; he saw only his pal.

"Caterpillar," said Clare, "you don't believe it? It's a lie, old chap. I—I don't know how I came here—I—I don't feel well—but—but that's a lie, old man. I was never drunk. I've never tasted spirits in my life. It's a vile lie."

"Oh, Clare, old chap," said the Caterpillar wretchedly.

"Stand aside, De Courcy!" The skinny, meagre figure of Mr. Mobbs seemed to tower over the bed in his righteous indignation. "Clare, you have added to your wickedness by these impudent falsehoods. What do you mean? Do you expect even this boy, who had been misguided enough to make a friend of you, to believe a word you say? De Courcy saw you in your intoxication."

"Tell us how it happened, Clare," said the Caterpillar. "It's—it's true, that part! You were in your study—there was whisky there—you had it all over you, and you—you couldn't speak—you couldn't move, Clare, old man! What does it mean?"

Clare looked at him wildly.

"You—you saw me like that, Caterpillar?"

"I did, old chap."

Clare pressed his hands to his brow.

"The wretched boy does not even remember being carried into this room!" said Mr. Mobbs contemptuously. "He was too hopelessly and sottishly intoxicated to be aware even of that."

"I—I don't remember coming here!" stammered Clare. "I—I don't remember seeing you in the study, Caterpillar."

"You couldn't see me, Clare, old man!" groaned his chum.

"Good heavens!" Clare tried to remember. "I—my brain's spinning. But I don't remember anything after they collared me."

The Caterpillar started.

"They collared you? Who?" he exclaimed eagerly.

"I—I don't know. It was in the dark." Clare collected his thoughts; back into his mind came the remembrance of that cowardly attack in the dark—of the cloth that had been pressed over his face—the dreadful blank that followed. "I—I went up in the dark; they were waiting for me, and collared me as I was going into the study."

"A drunken nightmare," said Mr. Mobbs contemptuously.

"But—but Clare!" stammered the Caterpillar. "How—how did you come to take the drink, old boy? You were insensible when you were found—clean drunk!"

"I was not drunk!"

"But you couldn't speak—you couldn't see——"

"I was drugged!"

"Drugged?" gasped the Caterpillar.

"Yes." Clare's eyes were blazing now. "I remember that a cloth was put over my face; I smelt something queer—a chemical of some sort—it must have been chloroform—and then I lost my senses. I don't remember anything more."

"Clare!"

"You say I was found with whisky—smelling of it—what? They fixed up all that after they had drugged me!" shouted Clare. "It's a trick—a plot! Caterpillar, you believe me, don't you?"

The Caterpillar grasped his hand.

"Of course I believe you, Clare, old chap—of course! Fool that I was! Hadn't I been warning you myself to look out for the second move in the game?" sobbed the Caterpillar. "That was why they planted the whisky on you last week—to give colour to this vile lie when they were ready to finish. The hounds! Of course I believe you, old chap. Why, I knew it was coming. Didn't I warn you?"

"You did," said Clare. "You did, Caterpillar. But——"

"How dare you?" said Mr. Mobbs, in a tone of concentrated rage and scorn. To do him justice, Mr. Mobbs did not believe a word Clare had uttered. So astounding and iniquitous a plot might have strained the credulity of a less suspicious man than Mr. Mobbs. "How dare you, Clare, tell De Courcy these impudent and infamous falsehoods?"

"I've told him the truth, sir," said Clare stubbornly.

"You wretched, conscienceless rascal! You would attempt to cover up your vileness by slanders against others! But you will not succeed—you will not even be listened to!" shouted Mr. Mobbs. "De Courcy, leave this room instantly."

"I'm staying with my chum, sir," said De Courcy coolly.

"I order you! This boy—this criminal—is about to leave the school. He

is to be sent away by the first train. Clare, get up and dress yourself. De Courcy, I command you to go."

De Courcy did not move.

"If Clare is going to be sacked, you can sack me, too!" he said. "If Clare goes, I go! I stand by my pal."

"Are you mad? Your father will not allow——"

"My pater will allow me to do the decent thing," said the Caterpillar contemptuously. "He won't be keen on my staying at Highcliffe if I choose to tell him a few of the things that go on here."

Mr. Mobbs turned scarlet with rage. He came very near, at that moment, striking the earl's nephew. But he held his hand—partly from his ingrained servility where the peerage was concerned, partly because the Caterpillar was already clenching his hand to return the blow if it came. The Caterpillar was reckless at that moment.

"Will you go, De Courcy?" breathed Mr. Mobbs.

"No, I won't."

"Then I shall call the Head."

Mr. Mobbs flounced from the room.

Clare turned out of bed. He was keen, alert now. He understood what was at stake. He was to be expelled—expelled from the school with ignominy. He would not yield without defending himself.

The Caterpillar helped him to dress. He was still feeling shaky and sick. His body could not recover so soon from the effect of the drug, but his mind was clear, his heart was high. He was prepared to fight for his honour.

"I knew it was a trick," muttered the Caterpillar. "I knew it—at least, I felt it. I never guessed how it was done, but I knew you weren't that kind of beast, Clare. Here's your necktie, old man. Poor old chap, but you look as white as a sheet! But we'll down them yet—the cads, the rotters, the curs!"

"Caterpillar, old man, it looks bad for me," said Clare soberly. "I am innocent—you know that—but the other fellows—— Caterpillar, the Head won't believe me—not a word of it! It's the sack, Caterpillar!"

"Then it's the sack for two," said the Caterpillar quietly.

"I—I can't let you—you mustn't! Don't be an ass, Caterpillar!" Clare looked at his chum in misery. "You haven't slept?" he said.

"Slept!" The Caterpillar laughed. "I haven't closed my eyes!"

"You've been here all night?" said Clare, deeply touched. The tears came into his eyes. Was this the cool, careless, often insolent Caterpillar—this loyal pal who had watched him through the weary night, who was standing by him in his misfortune and disgrace—him the nameless schoolboy, the penniless scholarship "bounder"? Was it possible? A lump rose in Clare's throat, and he could not speak.

"I wasn't likely to leave you, if I could help it," said the Caterpillar lightly. "My hat! Your clothes smell of whisky now! They did their work thoroughly, the cads!"

"De Courcy, old chap, I—I never knew—I never guessed you cared about me so much as that," said Clare brokenly. "You—you know what I am—nobody from nowhere—and you——"

"I know you're the best chap breathing," said the Caterpillar. "I know I'm standing by you to the finish."

The door opened, and Langley looked in.

"Clare, are you ready to go to the Head?" The captain of Highcliffe's tone was icy and contemptuous

Clare flushed. Langley believed him guilty, of course; they all did.

"I'm ready," he said.

"Then go to the Head's study at once."

Langley walked away.

"I'm coming with you," said the Caterpillar. "We're seeing this through together."

Clare nodded, and they quitted the room. It was still very early; the Highcliffe fellows were not down yet; the passages were deserted. They did not pass anyone as they made their way to the Head's study. The door of that apartment was open, and Mr. Mobbs greeted them with a cold glare.

"You are not required, De Courcy," he said.

"I'm staying with my pal," said De Courcy.

"Go!" rapped out Mr. Mobbs.

De Courcy did not reply. He pushed past the Form-master, and followed Clare into the study.

CHAPTER 36.

Expelled from the School.

DR. VOYSEY greeted Clare with an icy look.

The boy stood before him, not downcast and ashamed, as the Head had expected, but steady, steadfast, collected, with flashing eyes.

But in that the Head only saw defiance and insolence—the hardihood of an utterly unscrupulous and hardened reprobate. It was natural.

"Clare," said the Head harshly, "you know the disgusting circumstances in which you were found in your study last night. The vile habits you have hitherto concealed have come to light. You know, of course, that you must leave Highcliffe at once. You must go before the boys see you again; I desire to spare them the sight of the reprobate they have unhappily had in their midst so long. Your box will be sent after you. You will go with Mr. Mobbs to the station immediately, and you can have your breakfast there while you are waiting for the train. That is all. Go!"

Clare stood firmly.

"Will you not hear my defence, sir?" he asked respectfully.

The Head made a contemptuous gesture.

"If you mean the tissue of absurd falsehoods you have already told to Mr. Mobbs, I have heard them already. You need not repeat them. If anything could add to my utter contempt for you, your vile attempt to slander your Form-fellows would do that. Go!"

"I was seized by force last night at my study door, in the dark——"

"Nonsense!"

"I was drugged——"

"I tell you, Clare, that you need not repeat these falsehoods. You cannot expect them to be believed. Why add to your wickedness, then, by repeating them? Have you no sense of shame, boy?"

"You will not listen to me——"

"I will not listen to falsehood and slander," exclaimed the Head angrily. "Go! If you do not leave my study instantly, I will call in the prefects, and you shall be removed by force."

"Langley!" called out Mr. Mobbs from the doorway.

The captain of Highcliffe stepped into the study.

"This boy is insolent to the Head, and refuses to leave the study at Dr. Voysey's order," said Mr. Mobbs.

Langley smiled grimly.

"Shall I remove him, sir?" he asked, looking at the Head.

"Please do, Langley."

Langley's hand dropped on Clare's shoulder. The Caterpillar broke out furiously.

"Hold on! Dr. Voysey, you must listen—if not to Clare, then to me! I tell you this is a plot against Clare——"

"Silence, De Courcy! What is that boy doing here?" said the Head, frowning.

"That young reprobate seems to exercise a dangerous influence over him, sir," said Mr. Mobbs. "Until Clare came here, De Courcy never gave the slightest cause of complaint. Under that boy's influence, however——"

"I understand," said the Head. "We have nourished a viper in our midst. Fortunately, his true character has been revealed. De Courcy, you have been grossly deceived by this wretched boy. I excuse you—but go."

"I tell you, sir, it was Ponsonby——"

"Leave my study, De Courcy!"

"And I'll leave the school, too!" shouted De Courcy, beside himself with rage. "You can deal with a poor scholarship kid as you like—he hasn't any people to back him up and make you do him justice. I'll make my people take it up——"

The Head turned quite pale.

"De Courcy! This language——"

"Give him justice, then! Let there be an inquiry——"

"An inquiry is useless, when the boy was found in a state of disgusting intoxication," said Dr. Voysey. "De Courcy, for the sake of your family, I desire to deal easily with you. Any other boy who had used such language I would have sent away from this school."

"You can send me away, too. If Clare goes, I go."

"Caterpillar!" exclaimed Clare. "Don't, old chap! It will do me no good——" Langley was forcing him to the door, but he tore himself away. "Caterpillar, clear off, there's a good chap! Don't, old man——"

"Even that wretched boy is giving you good advice, De Courcy," said the Head severely. "Let us have no more of this. Take that boy away, Langley."

Clare, with Langley's grip on his shoulder, stumbled to the door. The Caterpillar clenched his hands, his eyes blazing.

"You are sacking him, then—without an inquiry? It is infamous!"

"De Courcy!"

"It's a shame—a shame—a rotten shame!" The Caterpillar was almost sobbing with rage. "Then I'll go, too—I won't stay in this den of blackguards, where the only decent fellow in the Fourth is sacked for nothing. It's a vile shame! I won't stay!"

The Head rose, towering in wrath.

"You assuredly will not stay, after those words, De Courcy!" he thundered. "You will pack your box this morning, and leave Highcliffe today! Go!"

"I'm going with Clare!"

"You will not go with Clare!" thundered the Head. "It is my duty to keep you apart from that reprobate. Mr. Mobbs, see that if De Courcy attempts to leave the school with Clare, he is restrained by force."

"Certainly, sir."

Langley marched Clare into the Hall. Two or three other prefects were there, buzzing with excitement at the row from the Head's study. Clare's coat and cap were brought to him, and Mr. Mobbs donned his overcoat. He was to take the expelled junior to the station before the boys came down from their dormitories.

Mr. Mobbs murmured something to the prefects, and Langley and Roper, and another Sixth-Former drew round the Caterpillar.

"Come, Clare!" said Mr. Mobbs.

Clare gave his chum a haggard look.

"Good-bye, Caterpillar! God bless you, old man! Good-bye!"

"I'm coming!"

"Stay where you are, you young fool!" growled Langley. "We don't want to hurt you."

The Caterpillar made a rush after Clare. The prefects seized him instantly, and he struggled and fought like a tiger. Clare turned back, his face almost wild. He could not leave his chum like that. He ran back, but a couple of the Sixth-Formers grasped him, and he was swung from the doorway, and pitched bodily into the quadrangle.

The big door slammed heavily after him.

Clare picked himself up dazedly. He heard still the voice of the Caterpillar, sobbing with rage. But the heavy door was between.

"Come!" repeated Mr. Mobbs.

"Not with you!" said Clare fiercely. "I'm going. Don't come with me, Mr. Mobbs, or I shall do you a mischief."

Mr. Mobbs shrank back from the clenched fists and the blazing eyes. He was never nearer at that moment to going through what Monson major had gone through.

"I shall see you out of Highcliffe," he said.

He followed the boy to the gates. They were not yet open. The porter came out of his lodge at Mr. Mobbs's call. The big iron gates swung back, and Clare stepped into the road.

With a heavy clang the gates shut behind him. And Clare, with despair in his heart, misery in his face, tramped along down the road, alone, expelled, disgraced for ever. Truly, Ponsonby & Co. had triumphed at last!

CHAPTER 37.

Loyal to the Last.

"WHAT shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?"

That was the miserable question that was buzzing in the brain of the unhappy boy, as he sat on a stile in the long lane, under the leafless trees.. What was he to do? He had not gone to the station.

To take the long, weary journey home—to tell the old boat-builder that he had been expelled in disgrace from the school to which he had obtained an entrance by years of study and hard work! The kind old man would believe him when he said that he was innocent—he was sure of that—almost sure! But it would be a terrible blow to him. His pride was great in his adopted son, and he had made many little sacrifices to enable the boy to enter at Highcliffe. It would be an end of all his high hopes, as of Clare's.

Go home; submit to disgrace and injustice! Leave his treacherous foes to rejoice in his downfall! His blood boiled at the thought!

Yet what could he do? What resistance could he make? The old boat-builder could not help him. He had no friends—no friends whose influence would be of any use. The kind and honest people he knew at home—they might believe in him, but they could not help him. In that hour of need there was no one—no one! If he had had powerful relations like De Courcy, something might have been done! But he was nobody—without even a name!

There was no help!

Suddenly, into the boy's dazed and weary mind, came a thought. There was one, a friend—at least, one who had said he would be a friend if ever he needed one—Ponsonby's uncle, Major Courtenay!

Ponsonby's uncle!

It was Ponsonby—he was well assured of that—who had bought about his downfall, who was now rejoicing in his treacherous success. He seemed to see the "nuts" of Highcliffe at that moment, grinning, gloating!

To ask help of a relation of his enemy—never!

Yet he remembered the kind face of the major—a true old soldier and a gentleman. He had saved his life; and, if the major could help him now, he had a right to ask! But would he?

He would not ask! Then he remembered the old sea-captain at Aythorpe—the crushing blow to all his hopes that he was about to receive. If there was any means of averting that, surely he should not shrink from them? But the major—would the major help him? Had he spoken carelessly, and forgotten his careless promise? No; he was sure of that. The old soldier was not a man to forget his word. Would the major believe him? He had believed him before when Ponsonby & Co. had slandered him!

It was like a ray of hope in the darkness.

Clare jumped from the stile; his mind was made up. He hurried on to Courtfield, to the post-office. It was just opening. In the post-office he wrote a letter—a short letter, telling of his trouble, asking the major if he remembered his promise, if he could and would help him, saying that he would wait at the post-office for an answer. He paid for the letter to be expressed, and left the place.

His heart was lighter now.

It was a chance—a bare chance! If the major chose to take up his cause, the Head would have to listen to him—a distinguished soldier, a governor of Highcliffe. It was a chance.

But the weary hours of waiting for a reply! The major might not even be at home; he might not get the letter that day. Certainly an express letter would be sent on to him immediately, wherever he was. But he might not get it that day—or the next! The junior's heart sank at the thought. He must wait in Courtfield. Afer all, there was no hurry to go home. Ill news could wait; while there was a bare chance, he would not tell the old captain what had happened. Nothing would be written from Highcliffe, probably. The Head would not trouble to write to the old boat-builder—probably would not reply to a letter if Captain Clare wrote for an explanation. He must wait in Courtfield.

He had not breakfasted, but he did not feel hungry. He felt sick and miserable. What was the Caterpillar doing now?

Leaving Highcliffe? Would he see him again? At the thought, Clare walked back to the lane which led to the school. If the Caterpillar left, he would see him. During long hours that winter morning Clare tramped to and fro, or rested on the stile, only praying for the time to pass. He knew that De Courcy had been prevented from leaving; but he was to be sent away that day—unless the Head changed his mind. Would he come?

A trap came dashing down the road from the school early in the grey afternoon. Clare's heart bounded as he saw the Caterpillar seated in the trap, his face gloomy and dark. He waved his hand. De Courcy's eyes met his, and the junior's face brightened wonderfully. He jerked at the school-porter's arm, and the trap stopped, and De Courcy jumped out. He grasped Clare's hand without a word, his heart full.

"I—I thought I might see you," stammered Clare.

"Clare, old chap!"

"Sacked?" muttered Clare.

The Caterpillar smiled in something like his old way.

"Not exactly. Sent away," he said. "The Head sent for me—offered to let me stay if I apologised."

"And you didn't?"

"By gad!" said the Caterpillar. "I gave him my opinion of Ponsonby & Co., Mobby, and Highcliffe generally. So I'm going home."

"Master De Courcy——" said the porter, with a cough.

De Courcy slipped a sovereign into his hand.

"Take my box to the station," he said. "Then get back, and don't mention that you've seen Clare with me. Savvy?"

The man touched his hat and drove on.

"What are you doing, Clare?" asked De Courcy.

"Waiting."

"For what?"

Clare explained, and the Caterpillar looked very thoughtful.

"It's a chance," he said. "I'm going to try to get my people to take it up; but—but they don't know you. But the major knows you; it's a chance. He knows my uncle, too; and if he takes it up for you, he'll help me bring my uncle into line. But—but will he back you up, Clare? You saved his life, I know. He may."

"It's a chance," said Clare quietly—"the last chance. You're going home, Caterpillar?"

"I'm staying with you—if you'll have me," said the Caterpillar. "I can send a letter to my people. The Head's writing to them. I'm staying with you, Clare. Have you fed?"

Clare shook his head.

"Then come along to the bun shop, and feed," said the Caterpillar. "You'll get awfully down if you miss your grub. It's the worst way."

"I'm hungry," confessed Clare.

They walked into Courtfield together, Clare's face brighter now. Even his misfortunes did not weigh so heavily, now that he had a chum to help him bear them—and such a chum!

"Ponsonby & Co. are gloatin'," said the Caterpillar savagely. "It's a regular song of triumph. Most of the fellows say they thought it all along. Cads! Little Smithson is backin' you up. Never thought he had so much grit. I've told 'em the truth about it. They laughed at it—especially Ponsonby! Pon won't laugh much more to-day, though. He was nursin' his nose when I left, and Gaddy was nursin' his eye." The Caterpillar's eyes gleamed. "I wish you could have seen me, Clare. You wouldn't have thought me a slacker just then."

Clare laughed. The Caterpillar's presence cheered him wonderfully. They made a good dinner at the bun-shop, and it bucked Clare up. Then they walked to the post-office to inquire for a letter for Clare. Clare had little hope that there was a reply yet; but, to his surprise, a telegram was handed to him. He opened it with trembling fingers, and he and the Caterpillar read it together.

"Coming by 2.25 Courtfield. Meet me at station.—COURTENAY."

"By gad!" said the Caterpillar. "And it's two now. Clare, old man, your giddy major has turned up trumps!"

"What a brick!" said Clare, his eyes glistening. "What a real brick! Let's get to the station."

The two juniors were on the platform when the express came in. A

man with a tanned face and a white moustache stepped from a first-class carriage. It was the major. He gave a glance along the platform, and came with his military stride towards the juniors. He held out a brown hand at once, and Clare shook it. His heart was almost too full for words. This man, who hardly knew him, had confidence in him. De Courcy raised his hat. The major glanced at him.

"My friend, sir," said Clare—"De Courcy——"

"I know De Courcy," said the major. "At all events, I know his family." He shook hands with De Courcy. "You are here, then—— You are this unfortunate lad's friend?"

"Stickin' to him like glue, sir," said the Caterpillar, in quite his old way. "Clare won't get rid of me easily. They've sacked him for nothin', and I told the Head to sack me, too. And the old sport did it, by gum!"

"Bless my soul!" said the major. "Good for you, my boy. That is something like friendship; though I fancy your people will have something to say about it, begad, unless we can set the matter right!"

"You think that's possible, sir?" said Clare.

"You must tell me everything first; your letter was too short," said the major.

"But—but you believe in me, sir?"

"I should not be here if I did not," said the major drily. "I flatter myself I am a judge of character; and I know you risked your life to save mine. I shall not easily believe that you have been guilty of blackguardly conduct. I know you have enemies in the school. I saw that pretty plainly, begad, when I was there—and my own nephew among them—but luckily that was all over." He caught the expression on Clare's face, and changed his tone. "You are friendly with my nephew, Clare?"

"I'm scrry—no, sir," said Clare, in a low voice. It was impossible to disguise that fact, willingly as he would have done so.

The major looked at him keenly.

"Well, well! Come with me—we cannot talk here! You must tell me your story, from start to finish—and then we will see about going to Highcliffe."

And the two juniors followed him from the station.

CHAPTER 38.

The Nameless Schoolboy Finds His Father!

MAJOR COURTENAY did not utter a word while Clare was telling his story. They had left the town, and the major seated himself on a bench under the trees beside the Highcliffe road. Clare stood before him—telling his story quietly, succintly, without excitement. The Caterpillar sat on the bench nursing his knee, and every now and then putting in an interjection.

There was silence for some minutes when Clare had finished. The major pursed his lips. There was a grim look on his bronzed old face.

"You believe me, sir?" faltered Clare. "I know it sounds—unusual. I should never have suspected they could do such a dirty trick—it's almost unbelievable—but——"

"I believe you," said the major quietly. "I know the truth when I hear it. If you had been a stranger to me—I don't say—but you are not—I had formed my opinion of your character—and I do not change my opinions in a hurry. Now—whom do you suspect of having played this devilish trick?"

Clare was silent.

"Some of the cads in the Fourth, sir," said the Caterpillar.

The major fixed his eyes on De Courcy.

"You mean my nephew and his friends?" he demanded, abruptly.

It was De Courcy's turn to be silent.

"I hope it will prove to be otherwise," said the major. "But for the sake of my own peace, I will know the truth. I can hardly believe Cecil guilty of such villainy—though his action when I was at Highcliffe lends some colour to it. If he is guilty, he shall suffer! If he is innocent, he shall be cleared of suspicion. The truth shall be established in any case." The major's face twitched for a moment. "Cecil, whom I would have regarded as a son—who was to take the place of my own poor lost boy——" He checked himself abruptly. "But the truth comes first—truth and justice. You did right to send for me, Clare. You shall see that I meant the promise I made to you, and that I will keep it."

"Thank you, sir," said Clare.

The major's eyes dwelt on his face, with that peculiar expression Clare had noticed, when the major scanned him at their first meeting.

"It is strange," he said. "May I ask you, my boy, if you have any relations of the name of Lovelace?"

"I do not know, sir," said Clare.

"You are strangely like one I knew of that name—a blessed woman, sir, now in Heaven," said the major, with a catch in his voice. "Your face reminded me—when I first saw you——" He broke off. "She was my wife!" he said quietly. "Yours is the only face I have ever seen that recalls hers. She had relations—I thought perhaps——"

Clare shook his head.

"But to business," said the major. "Your case must be put to the Head of Highcliffe, and he must be asked to institute a strict inquiry—without respect to persons. As a governor of the school, I can demand that—and will! You were chloroformed—we will discover who had chloroform in his possession—where it was obtained——"

"From the school laboratory, sir," said the Caterpillar coolly.

"Ah—possible!"

"And last week, a fellow who had never taken up stinks before, had a sudden fancy for the lab!" added the Caterpillar. "I noticed it at the time."

"His name?"

The Caterpillar hesitated.

"My nephew!" growled the major. "We shall see! Justice shall be done, if he were my own son—but no one is guilty till his guilt is proved. Now, Clare, I am going to demand an inquiry of the Head, as a governor of Highcliffe. But your people must act also. Your father—or guardian—they must appear——"

Clare's lips trembled.

"I have none, sir."

"You are an orphan?" asked the major.

"I—I do not know, sir."

The major regarded him with astonishment.

"You do not know? What are you saying? I remember, now, my nephew said—something——"

"It is no secret, sir," said Clare, raising his head proudly. "I am not ashamed of it. I have no father—I have no name. Clare is not my name—it is the name of the sea-captain who picked me up at sea, and adopted me—like the kind and generous man he was. But—but he could do nothing here.

He is a boat-builder now—he could not face the Head of Highcliffe. He has been a father to me, sir, since he picked me up at sea, thirteen years ago."

"Thirteen years ago," said the major. "How old were you then?"

"A little kid, sir—two years old, Captain Clare thought," said Clare. "There were dead seamen in the boat—no one alive but me. I came from some wreck——"

"Where?" said the major, in so strange a voice that Clare and the Caterpillar started.

"In the Indian Ocean, sir."

"Good heavens! Thirteen years ago—in the Indian Ocean! Boy!"—the major grasped his arm so forcefully that Clare almost uttered a cry of pain—"was there nothing—nothing to tell of your name—your identity?"

Clare looked at him in wonder.

"Only the initials on my linen, sir."

"And the initials?"

"F. C." said Clare.

"You—you are certain of that, boy?" said the major, his voice shaking.

"The things are still in existence, sir, at my home," said Clare; "everything that was found with me was carefully kept, in case some day it might help me——"

"And the month—the month of the year when you were found? Has the man told you that—was it in May?"

"Yes, sir," said Clare, in amazement. "The end of May, 1902. How could you know?"

The major did not reply to the question. The emotion in his tanned old face was almost uncontrollable. The two juniors gazed at him almost in alarm.

A sudden thought darted into Clare's mind, and his eyes shone.

"Major Courtenay, is it possible—you may help me find my people—you have some idea—some suspicion——"

"Boy! Listen to me! Was there any mark upon you—upon your arm, for instance? Answer me carefully!"

"There is a mark on my arm now, sir," said Clare. "It is a tattoo mark in Indian ink—I shall have it all my life."

"The mark of a tiger's head?" said the major.

"Yes," said Clare, in amazement. "How——"

"Show it to me!"

Clare rolled back his sleeve, and showed the bluish mark on the clear white skin. The major looked at it long and hard.

"That will do, my boy," he said. "Heaven has been merciful to me—very merciful!"

He fumbled in his pocket, and drew out a leather pocket-book, and opened it. The two juniors stood silent. The matter that had brought the major there seemed to be forgotten, and the boys did not venture to speak. Major Courtenay was turning over papers in his pocket-book. He took out a newspaper-cutting—old and faded with time—and handed it to Clare.

"Read it, my boy," he said.

And Clare read:

"No hope is now entertained of any news of the s.s. Rohilcund, which is believed to have foundered in the late storm in the Indian Ocean. Fortunately there were few passengers on board, but among those unhappily lost were the wife and infant son of Lieutenant Courtenay, of the garrison

here. Mrs. Courtenay's health had suffered from the Indian climate, and she was going home in the Rohilcund. General sympathy is felt for Lieutenant Courtenay in his terrible loss."

It was evidently a cutting from an Indian newspaper. The date "June, 1902," was written upon it in ink.

Clare read the lines, and looked at the major. His brain was in a whirl. The Caterpillar gave a soft whistle.

"By gad!" he murmured. "By gad!"

"You understand?" said the major, in a trembling voice. "You understand? My poor Clarice was going home—my child with her—and they were lost—the steamer disappeared—not a man even of her crew was saved. Thirteen years ago! My boy!"

"But—but what—you cannot think——"

"I do not think—I know!" said the major softly. "When you were a little fellow, playing about the bungalow, that tiger's head was tattooed on your arm by an old khitmutghar who served me—and soundly I rated him, too, for the trick—he was devoted to his sahib's son, the good old fellow. You do not remember that, boy? You do not remember the bungalow—the blazing sun—the palm trees——"

Clare pressed his hand to his brow.

"I don't know," he said confusedly. "There's something in my mind—I don't quite grasp it—it's like a picture I've seen a long time ago and nearly forgotten—I seem to recall it; a white house with palm-trees near the sea—and soldiers marching—little dark men in turbans—but it seems like a dream."

"You were a child—but the picture is true," said Major Courtenay. "And after that?"

Clare shivered.

"After that—it's like the memory of a nightmare—a storm and shipwreck at sea—yet if I did not know from Captain Clare that it had happened, I should think it was only a dream. Someone, too, who wrapped me and placed me in a sailor's arms—a woman—and a rough man in a boat who gave me water to drink, when I was parched—but it is like a dream. Nothing is clear."

"My boy,"—the major rose to his feet, his eyes were shining—"Heaven has been merciful. When I first saw your face I saw the likeness to your mother. If you had told me your story then—but, of course, how could you have done so? My little boy Frankie—whom I believed drowned thirteen years ago in the Indian Ocean—alive—alive and well! Heaven has been merciful!"

The tears were running down the bronzed old cheeks.

The Caterpillar turned his face away. He sauntered up and down by the road, while Clare and his father talked in low tones—for the moment forgetting him. But the Caterpillar did not mind. He was smiling—and he hummed a merry tune. For he saw now the end of the trials of the boy without a name!

CHAPTER 30.

Cleared at Last.

DR. VOYSEY rose to greet the distinguished visitor who was shown into his study at Highcliffe. Major Courtenay was a great gun, and was to be received with respect. But the Head started as he saw who followed the major into his study—the boy he had expelled from Highcliffe that morning!

"I—I—what is this?" stammered the Head, quite taken aback; and Mr. Mobbs, who was in the study, stared blankly. "I—did you not send in a message, Major Courtenay—that—that Major Courtenay and his son——"

"Exactly!" said the major. "This boy is my son."

"Wha-a-at!"

"That—that boy!" ejaculated Mr. Mobbs. "My dear sir—that boy is an outcast—an unknown nobody who was picked up at sea—not knowing his own name——"

"He has discovered his name now," said the major grimly. "His name is Frank Courtenay."

"My dear sir—that boy—you have been deceived!"

"I am not so easily deceived, sir," roared the major; and Mr. Mobbs jumped back. "I have investigated the matter, sir, and the proof is complete. This boy is my son, and I acknowledge him before the world. And I am proud of him, sir—proud of him as any father could be of his son. He saved my life, sir—his father's life, when he believed him a stranger. And my son, sir, has been cruelly wronged, and justice is going to be done, if I have any influence on the Governing Board of this school!"

The Head sank limply into his chair.

"If—if this is certain, major——"

"There is no doubt about it, sir!"

"Then—then perhaps it may be possible to take a more merciful view of Clare's—I mean, Master Courtenay's—conduct. Yet——"

"Mercy is not asked, sir! What is demanded is justice!" said the major. "Give my boy a hearing, and make a strict inquiry into the truth——"

"I have every desire to do justice, Major Courtenay," said the Head, recovering his dignity a little. "If you, a governor of Highcliffe, take up the cause of this boy——"

"My son, sir!"

"Your—your son, then certainly there shall be an inquiry. But the story told by Clare was so extraordinary——"

"My son declares that he was seized in the dark last night, at the door of his study, and chloroformed," said the major. "After that, it was easy for his enemies to place him unconscious in his study, to arrange bottle and glasses, to spill spirits over him to drown the smell of the chloroform—in short, sir, to manufacture the scene which was discovered later, and which led fools, sir—dashed fools!—to conclude that my son was in a state of intoxication, when he was unconscious from drugging, sir."

"But—but this is a dreadfully serious accusation against some boy—or boys!" said the Head, aghast.

"I know it is serious—so serious that the good name of my son is at stake. I leave it to you, sir, as a man of honour, to see justice done," added the major, more calmly. "That is all that is asked."

"Yaas, by gad!" said De Courcy, who had followed Clare and the major in, squeezing his chum's arm ecstatically.

"De Courcy! You have been sent away from this school——"

"I'm seein' Clare through this, sir, and then you can sack me over again," said the Caterpillar. "If Clare goes, I go. If he don't go, I apologise most humbly, sir, and I hope you will let me stay."

"If Clare should prove to be innocent, De Courcy, I shall overlook your conduct, in view of your loyalty to your friend," said the Head. "But I cannot think—but there shall certainly be inquiry—strict inquiry! Clare—I mean Courtenay—you assert that certain boys seized you by force, and administered chloroform?"

"Yes, sir."

"Whom do you accuse?"

"I could not see them in the dark, sir," said Clare—still to give him his old name. "But there were three of them. One, I feel sure, was Ponsonby."

"Major Courtenay's nephew—impossible!"

"My nephew or not, justice is to be done," said the major. "If my son were guilty, sir, I would say the same. But he is not guilty. Let my nephew be sent for and questioned. And his friends—those who maligned the boy to me, and sought to make me use my influence to get him removed from the school—Gadsby, Monson, Vavasour. Let them be sent for at once."

"Let 'em all come!" chuckled the Caterpillar.

"Mr. Mobbs, will you kindly——"

"I'll fetch 'em, sir," said the Caterpillar. "They ought not to be told what to expect."

The Head frowned. But he made a sign to Mr. Mobbs to remain, and rang a bell, and sent the page to tell the four juniors they were wanted.

Ponsonby & Co. came to the study a few minutes later, looking surprised. They had been at tea in their study, a merry celebration of their victory. The outsider was "booted" out at last, and Ponsonby & Co. were duly rejoicing. Their rejoicing was a little marred by Pon's swollen nose, and Gaddy's black eye—souvenirs of the Caterpillar. Still, the "nuts" had been in high feather. They had triumphed, and they were rid of their rival for good and all; and already the rebels in the Fourth had shown signs of coming to heel once more. The future was bright and smiling for the "nuts"—and when they saw Clare, and Ponsonby's uncle, and the Caterpillar, in the Head's study, they jumped.

"Uncle!" exclaimed Ponsonby, in amazement.

"Yes, I am here," said the major grimly. "First, let me present you to your cousin."

"My—my cousin!" stammered Ponsonby.

"The boy you have known as Clare—the boy without a name—who has found a name, and a father—my son Frank!"

Ponsonby staggered.

"It—it's not true!" he cried. "It can't be true! The villain! He's taken you in! It's a lie!"

The major's brow grew as black as thunder.

"Silence, you insolent boy! That lad, whom you slandered to me, is your cousin——"

"Uncle!"

"My hat!" murmured Gadsby. "But what are we wanted for? He ain't our cousin, I suppose."

"Ponsonby," said the Head.

"Ye-e-es, sir!" stammered Ponsonby, trying to recover his wits. "Yes, sir."

"Will you question him, major?"

"I will," said the major. "Cecil, last night, my son, as he went up to his study, was seized by force by three boys in the dark. They placed a chloroformed cloth over his face, rendered him insensible, and then fixed up a scene in his study, in order to make it appear that he was intoxicated."

The "nuts" exchanged sickly looks. The major made that statement, as a matter of fact, and the three plotters asked themselves uneasily whether a discovery could have been made.

"I know he says so, uncle," said Ponsonby. "But it's not true. It's a lie, in fact."

"You deny having a hand in it?"

"I! Does he accuse me?"

"Never mind that. You deny being concerned in it?"

"Yes, I do."

"You have, and had, no chloroform in your possession?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then why," said the major grimly—"why did you take up laboratory work last week—a matter you have never shown the slightest interest in before?"

Ponsonby changed colour a little.

"I—I——" he muttered. "I——"

"Was it in order to obtain access to the drug you needed for a rascally plot?" the major thundered.

"Uncle, I—I——"

"And why," drawled the Caterpillar—"why did Vavasour keep me playin' chess last night right up to bedtime? Why did he bother me into playin', when I was too fagged, and didn't want to—and make me play a second game, right up to bedtime? Wasn't it to keep me from goin' up to my study, Vavasour—what?"

Vavasour turned pale. Ponsonby gave him a quick warning look; the weak-kneed Vavasour was not in the secret, and he understood now for the first time how he had been used by his associates. But the major caught the look at once.

"Don't make signs to the boy, Cecil!" he rapped out. "Answer up, Vavasour! Tell the truth! Did my nephew arrange with you to keep De Courcy from going up to his study before bedtime? The truth!"

"I—I——" stammered Vavasour. "Really, sir—absolutely—I—I knew nothing of any game against Clare! I give you my word, sir, I——"

"Did Ponsonby ask you to keep me away from my study?" demanded the Caterpillar.

"I—I didn't know! I—I thought—— Pon only said he wanted you to be kept in the common-room for a bit," stuttered Vavasour. "There was no harm in that, was there? I—I did it to oblige Pon. I didn't see any harm——"

"That will do," said the major. "Cecil, you arranged with Vavasour to keep my son's study-mate downstairs last evening—why?"

"I didn't!" howled Ponsonby desperately.

"Vavasour says you did."

"He's mistaken. He——"

"You deny Vavasour's statement?"

"Yes," said Ponsonby, between his teeth. He was ready to brazen it out; but Gadsby and Monson felt their knees knocking together.

"Vavasour, have you told the truth?"

"Absolutely!" gasped Vavasour. "Pon, old man, you know you asked me—you remember I said it was too much trouble to get that lazy slacker to play chess; and you said it was important. You'd got something on. You remember——"

"Pon remembers all right," said the Caterpillar cheerfully. "You're an ass, Vav, but you are a useful ass. They left you out of this, I see. May I suggest that the lab. should be searched, to see whether a bottle of chloroform is missing—and also Pon's study—to see whether anything—a duster, for instance—smells of chloroform?"

Ponsonby gave the Caterpillar a furious look. The Caterpillar smiled back serenely. He was quite the old Caterpillar now.

Dr. Voysey rang again, and sent for the science-master; and after a few words that gentleman hurried away to the laboratory. And he came back to report, with a curious expression on his face, that a bottle containing

chloroform was missing from its place. The Head's face became very grim, and even Mr. Mobbs frowned. There was no further doubt now; and even Mr. Mobbs did not like the thought that his leg had been pulled, and his dislike of the scholarship boy brought into play to help in a dastardly plot.

"I think we have heard enough," said the Head coldly. "Ponsonby, you lately obtained the run of the laboratory. A bottle of chloroform is missing. It must have been taken for some purpose—and Clare asserts that chloroform was used on him last night. It bears out his statement. Clare is exonerated. Last evening, you requested Vavasour to keep De Courcy from going upstairs to his study, and while he was detained in the common-room, this attack was made on Clare—I mean, Courtenay. If De Courcy had been with him, it could not have happened. Your motive is clear, I am afraid. And these boys—were they your accomplices?"

Ponsonby would have brazened it out further. But Gadsby and Monson were at the end of their tether. They saw expulsion looming up before them; and they were furious with Pon for getting them into this fearful scrape. The words almost tumbled over one another out of their mouths, in their hurry to exculpate themselves.

"It was only a lark, sir," panted Monson.

"Only a—a—a joke on Clare, sir!" stuttered Gadsby. "We're sorry, sir! Ponsonby led us into it. He planned the whole thing!"

"We were going to let Clare alone, sir—I swear it!" groaned Monson, taking up the tale again. "And—and Pon simply made us go for him. Pon knows it. He can't deny it! And—and the chloroform bottle is hidden up the chimney in the common-room, sir, and—and Pon burnt the duster in the study this morning. It was all Pon!"

Ponsonby burst into a bitter laugh.

"Go it, you cowards!" he said. "Put it all on me!"

"Well, you know you did! You wouldn't let us leave him alone! We told you——"

"Silence!" said the Head. "Gadsby and Monson, you will be publicly flogged to-morrow morning. Ponsonby, you will be expelled from Highcliffe."

Ponsonby turned white.

Clare stepped forward.

"May I speak, sir?"

"Certainly, my boy," said the Head kindly. "I am sorry—deeply sorry—that this injustice has been done you. How could I believe that these boys were capable of such baseness? I cannot blame myself. But I regret it sincerely; and so I am sure does Mr. Mobbs."

"From my very heart," said Mr. Mobbs, whose feelings towards the "scholarship bounder" changed very considerably towards the son of a rich and famous officer. "I even ask Master Courtenay's forgiveness, and trust he will forget any little unpleasantness there may have been——"

Clare did not look at Mr. Mobbs, or listen to him.

"If I may speak, sir," he said, addressing the Head, "I—I should like to ask you to—to go easy with Ponsonby. If—if you'd give him another chance, sir?"

Ponsonby stared at him, stupified.

"By Gad!" murmured the Caterpillar, shrugging his shoulders. "Oh, Clare, old chap, you'll be the death of me!"

The Head hesitated. He did not want, in his heart, to expel Major Courtenay's nephew, and the connection of half a dozen rich and influential families. Clare knew that, and he had given the Head an opening, hoping he would take it. And he did.

"You hear this, Ponsonby?" said the Head severely. "Master Courtenay, whom you have so grossly injured, asks me to be lenient towards you. I shall not, therefore, expel you; you will be flogged to-morrow morning, with your confederates, and I trust that this boy's example, Ponsonby, may have the effect of influencing your character for good."

Ponsonby caught his breath. For once in his life, even his hard heart was touched. He held out his hand to Clare.

"I'm sorry!" he said. "You're a brick, Clare—a real brick. I've been a beast—a rotten beast; but I never knew what a decent chap you were. I'm sorry!"

And Clare took his hand frankly enough. In the happiness that had come into his life now, he could afford to be generous.

. . . . . .

Major Courtenay had found his son; and the nameless schoolboy had found his father. Clare—now Frank Courtenay—took his old place in the Fourth Form at Highcliffe. And if Ponsonby's repentance did not last—such a nature did not change in a day—at least his enmity was kept in check now, and Clare had nothing further to fear from him.

Smithson & Co. rejoiced with a tremendous rejoicing; and all Highcliffe congratulated Clare. On the next half-holiday there was a huge celebration in No. 3 Study, to which an army came—including Harry Wharton & Co., of Greyfriars—and most of the "nuts" joined the party. And there were two guests of honour—a bronzed old major, and a rugged, good-tempered, tanned old boat-builder, for Frank Courtenay did not forget the man who had been a father to him, and for the old sea-captain he had an affection as strong as he had for his own father. Friends without number gathered now round the boy who had once been friendless; but chief among them he ranked the Famous Five of Greyfriars, and, above all, the Caterpillar, who had stood by him through thick and thin when he was a Boy Without a Name.

THE END.