

AWFUL for AUBREY

By CHARLES HAMILTON



"You may go, Compton"

CHAPTER I

AUBREY COMPTON winked at Bob Darrel and Teddy Seymour.
Teddy grinned.

Bob looked puzzled.

Those three members of the Fifth Form at High Coombe were standing in a group in the quadrangle, near the window of the Head's study. That window was wide open. James McCann, the young man who was head-master of High Coombe, was keen on fresh air, and his window was generally open wide. Voices within naturally floated out, and as the three were quite near the window, they could hardly have helped hearing.

But, so far as Bob Darrel could see, there was nothing in what they heard, to cause Aubrey to wink, or Teddy to grin.

It was Mr. McCann's voice that they heard: clear, incisive, but pleasant in its tones. It seemed that he was speaking to Chard, the master of the Fifth.

"I have prepared the paper for your form, Mr. Chard. It is almost finished."



Standing near the window of the Head's study

Then came Chard's voice: loud and booming. Chard, big, red-faced, aggressive, had a voice that was often likened, at High Coombe, to the trumpeting of an elephant.

"Really, Head-master—"

Chard hated addressing Jimmy McCann as "Head-master". Everyone at High Coombe knew that Chard had hoped to be addressed as "Head-master" himself, when Dr. Chetwode retired. Even the fags in the Third Form knew that Chard regarded Jimmy McCann as an interloper. Everyone knew, also, that Chard, so far as he could venture to do so, set himself up in opposition to the new Head. In which he had the heartiest good wishes of all the "School for Slackers". Bob Darrell, who liked and admired the new Head, was an exception.

"Yes, Mr. Chard?" McCann's voice was politely inquiring. McCann was as firm as a rock: but he was always courteous.

"Really, Head-master—!" repeated Chard. "Really—in the late head-

master's time, sir, there was no such intervention in my form. I regret, sir, that you should find it necessary to intervene."

"I regret it also, Mr. Chard. I regret it very much."

The three Fifth-formers in the quad heard a sound resembling a snort. Chard was not quite able to suppress his feelings.

"If that is all, Head-master—"

"That is all, Mr. Chard. I have a few more touches to add to the paper, but I will let you have it in time for form to-morrow."

"Very well, sir!" came in trumpet-tones from Mr. Chard. "Very well, sir! You are head-master, sir, and it is for me to carry out your instructions, sir."

That was followed by a sound resembling a bang! Chard had shut the door behind him very emphatically, leaving the head-master's study. No doubt Chard had departed in a semi-boiling state. Intervention in his form was an affront to Chard. The fact that the Fifth was the slackest form at the School for Slackers, and that some of its members had browsed for whole terms on the back benches under Chard's very easy rule, made no difference to that. Chard was popular in his form. He never made fellows work. It seemed to be Jimmy McCann's opinion that it was time for the Fifth to pull up its socks, so to speak. If they had to "do" a paper drawn up by the Head, there was no doubt that something like work was indicated.

Aubrey Compton winked again at his two friends.

Teddy Seymour grinned anticipatively. He guessed, from that wink, that old Aubrey had something working in his mind—something up against the new Head, of course. The remarks that had floated out of the window had, apparently, put that "something" into Aubrey's head. Teddy couldn't guess what it was: but so long as it was up against McCann, it was all right! Bob, puzzled, frowned.

"Look here—!" he began.

Then it occurred to him that, as voices from within the study could be heard without, voices from without could be heard within: so he paused.

Aubrey Compton smiled, and sauntered away. His two friends followed him. They guessed that Aubrey had something to say—out of hearing of the young man in the Head's study now giving the finishing touches to that paper for the Fifth Form.

CHAPTER II

"WELL?" Bob Darrell grunted that monosyllabic inquiry.

Teddy chuckled.

"Give it a name, Aubrey, old bean."



They had stopped near the Clock Tower

They had stopped by the old clock-tower: a safe distance from the Head's window. Aubrey was smiling. His friends knew that smile: and while it made Teddy grin with anticipation, it made Bob frown. Some new move in the feud with the new Head was coming: both of them knew that.

"You heard what McCann said to Chard?" drawled Aubrey.

"What about it?" muttered Bob. "I don't see anything in that. He's drawing up a paper to be put to our form, that's all. If you fancy you can make anything out of that—."

"I do fancy so."

"Well, I don't see it," said Bob, gruffly. "And I think it's just rot to be always looking out for a chance to bother McCann, anyway."

"Oh, draw it mild, Bob," said Teddy. "What does the man want to barge into our form for? Chard's our beak. Why can't he let Chard alone?"

"Chard lets us alone," said Aubrey.

"Oh, he does!" snapped Bob. "No mistake about that. Perhaps McCann

has an idea that fellows come to school to learn things. Perhaps he fancies that its time somebody in the Fifth did a spot of work. Well, when we get that paper from him, we shall have to sit up and take notice, for a charge.

"Looking forward to it?" smiled Aubrey.

"Well, perhaps not!" admitted Bob. "I can guess that it won't be an easy paper to do. But we shall have to slog at it, whether we like it or not. He isn't a man to be trifled with."

"It will be a real stinker!" sighed Teddy. "All sorts of questions that a fellow can't answer without swotting with a wet towel round his head. Chard never puts us in a spot like that."

"He ought to," grunted Bob. "Anyway, we're for it to-morrow, when Chard gets that paper from McCann. And I just can't see how you can do anything about it Aubrey, if that's what you're thinking of."

"Just that!" smiled Aubrey.

"Give it a name, old chap," urged Teddy. "You shut up, Bob, and let old Aubrey tell us what the game is."

"We mayn't get that paper to-morrow," said Aubrey.

"Rot! McCann told Chard that he'd nearly finished it. You heard him."

"Quite! I can see him gloating over it, putting in the toughest twisters he can think of, to catch fellows out," sneered Aubrey. "I expect he's put in quite a lot of his valuable time on that paper. Hard luck on him if he had to do it all over again, what?"

"Why should he?"

"Well, something might happen to that paper, now that we know about it," drawled Aubrey. "A fellow might keep an eye open for McCann and dodge into his study when he goes out—"

"Oh!" ejaculated Teddy.

"Such a fellow," continued Aubrey, "might tear that paper up into little teeny-weeny pieces—"

"Ha, ha!" from Teddy.

"And scatter them over McCann's study carpet," went on Aubrey. "Quite a pleasant surprise for him when he came back, what?"

"Ha, ha!" from Teddy again.

Snort, from Bob Darrell.

"So that's what you're thinking of?" he exclaimed.

"My dear man, it came into my head the minute I heard McCann speaking to Chard," smiled Aubrey. "Tit for tat, you know. A Roland for an Oliver. If we've got to slog over that rotten paper, McCann can slog over it too—doing it twice over. A fellow might even get a chance at the second edition!"

Anyhow, that paper's going West, and it won't worry us in form to-morrow, at any rate."

"You ass!" said Bob.

"Thanks."

"McCann will be wild if he finds his paper torn up."

"That's what I want."

"Ha, ha!" from Teddy again. "That's what we all want."

"For goodness' sake, Aubrey, don't be a mad ass!" urged Bob. "You'd get whops if McCann spotted you—."

"He won't."

"You can't cheek a head-master like that—."

"Can't I?" smiled Aubrey.

"Jolly good wheeze!" said Teddy, heartily. "You pack it up, Bob, and let old Aubrey carry on. Fancy the blighter's face when he sees his precious paper scattered all over his carpet! Ha, ha!"

"I tell you—."

"Bow-wow!" said Aubrey.

"Rats!" said Teddy.

Bob Darrell argued for a good five minutes before he gave it up. But he had to give it up. Aubrey was not losing a chance like this for giving Jimmy McCann a jolt.

CHAPTER III

"OH!" breathed Aubrey Compton. He was startled.

He ceased suddenly to tear at a sheet of paper.

It was a footstep that startled him.

Aubrey was in the Head's study. He had, as he had planned, kept an eye open for McCann. He had ascertained that McCann had left his study. He had seen him, with his own watchful eyes, go into Common-Room and close the door after him. How long he was going to remain in Common-Room Aubrey, of course, could not know: but obviously it meant a chat with the beaks there, and he was safe for ten minutes at least. Much less time than was required for what the rebel of High Coombe had to do in McCann's study. McCann had glanced back as he went into Common-Room, and perhaps had seen Aubrey in the middle distance: but there was nothing to make him suspicious, in a Fifth-form man idling in a passage. Fifth-form men idling about were a quite normal sight at High Coombe. Once the Common-Room door had closed on him, Aubrey felt that it was safe to carry on.

So here he was, in McCann's study. Shutting the door, he stepped to the



He had started to tear the paper

table—a large, long mahogany table, almost covered with books and papers. Among those books and papers he looked for a special paper—the one McCann had drawn up for the behoof of the Fifth Form. In less than a minute he spotted it—and he gazed at it with a sneering smile. It was, as Teddy had foreseen, a real “stinker”. It was a classical paper: and one glance at it revealed that it was going to test the classical knowledge in the Fifth Form to the very limit. There were fellows in the Fifth whose heads would have ached, just to look at it. Sooner or later, Chard’s form had to face up to that “stinker”: but this edition of it, at any rate, was never going to meet the eyes of the Fifth. It was going to meet James McCann’s eyes, scattered in fragments over his carpet when he came back to his study. His wrath, at such an act of defiant insolence, would be deep—there was no doubt about that. That did not worry Aubrey. It only made him smile.

But he ceased to smile, at that footstep in the corridor.

It was a quiet, but very firm, tread. He knew that tread. Contrary to all

expectation, McCann was coming back to his study. He had not, after all, lingered in Common-Room for a chat.

Aubrey felt his heart beat unpleasantly.

He had started to tear that paper. There was a gash of several inches in it. But he ceased to tear as he ceased to smile. He stared round at the door, panting.

If McCann caught him there—

If only he hadn't started tearing the paper, he might have made some excuse for his presence. But that tear did it! If McCann caught him now—! Alas! There was no "if" about that: McCann was coming, and there was no escape for him.

Everyone at High Coombe knew that McCann could whop! It did not happen often: but when it happened, it left no doubt that he could whop! Aubrey could almost feel the cane descending on his elegant trousers! At that moment he wished that he had listened to Bob. But he had not listened to Bob—and now he was listening to McCann's footsteps coming up the corridor to the study door.

He cast a desperate glance round the study. He hated the idea of hunting cover, like a scared fag. But still more he hated the idea of "six" from McCann's cane. He was going to elude that "six" if he could, at any cost to his lofty dignity. If he could keep out of sight till McCann left the study again—!

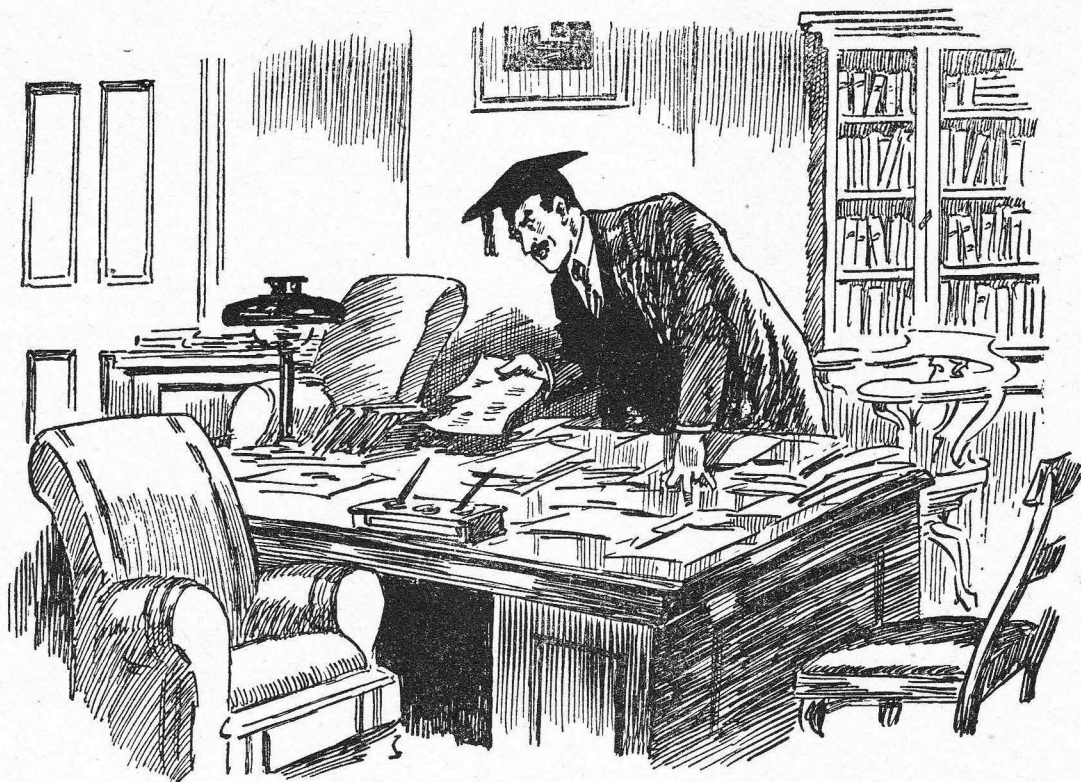
There was only one possible hide-out. Aubrey hesitated. His pride revolted at the thought of scuttling under the table and huddling there. But it was that or bending over and taking "six". Aubrey had had that experience once or twice. He did not want to repeat it. His hesitation lasted till the footsteps were almost at the door. Then he made up his mind, ducked his head, and disappeared under the table.

He was quite out of sight when the door opened.

The firm tread came in. The door closed. Then the tread crossed to the table. Aubrey suppressed his breathing. James McCann was standing by the table, looking at something on it. Aubrey could guess at what he was looking—that paper with the tear in it. He would know at once that somebody had been in the study during his brief absence. But was he likely to guess that that somebody was still there? Aubrey fervently hoped not.

"Dear me!" He heard a murmur of a voice. "The paper is torn! Upon my word!" Mr. McCann seemed to be communing with himself. "Fortunately little harm is done—a strip of stamp-edging will repair it!"

Aubrey heard a rustling on the table above him. McCann, it appeared, was repairing that gash in the paper. What was going to be his next step? He knew that some person had entered his study and torn that paper. Would he



"Dear me, the paper is torn"

guess that further tearing had been intended, and that his return had interrupted the tearer? Would he jump to it that the offender was still in the study?

Apparently no such suspicion occurred to Mr. McCann. Aubrey's dread that a head might be bent to look under the table faded out. Evidently the man did not suspect that anyone was in the study!

Mr. McCann sat down at the table.

Aubrey could have groaned, if he could have ventured to make any sound. The man had come to stay! Aubrey heard a rustling of papers, and the scratch of a pen. No doubt, later, McCann intended to inquire into the affair of the torn paper. He was not likely to allow such an incident to pass without stern inquiry. But for the present he seemed to have dismissed it from mind.

Long minutes passed.

McCann seemed to have settled down to work. He always had plenty of work to do—even if he could find time to draw up a special paper to test the knowledge of Chard's form! He might be busy on Greek for the Sixth—or on school accounts—or on correspondence with parents or with the school

governors—or even on the translation of Horace which he was going to publish some day. Anyhow, he continued sitting at the table, and the scratch of his pen came to Aubrey's ears: pausing occasionally, but always resuming. Obviously, he was not going to leave the study.

A bell rang in the distance.

Aubrey set his lips hard.

It was the bell for roll: and High Coombe fellows had to gather at that bell and answer to their names in hall. Aubrey couldn't gather with the rest, that was clear. Unless and until the Blighter left the study, Aubrey Compton couldn't.

He was glad to remember that Mr. Chard was taking roll that evening. Chard would accept any excuse for absence. Aubrey had to cut roll: but he had nothing to fear from Chard.

The bell ceased to ring. Bob Darrell and Teddy Seymour would be wondering what had become of him. They knew that he had gone to the Head's study for that rag on McCann. But they couldn't guess how he was trapped there. Even if they did, they could not help him.

How was this going to end?

Was McCann a fixture there? Wouldn't he ever step out of the study?

It looked as if he wouldn't: for the long, long minutes dragged on, and still he did not stir.

Aubrey was getting cramped. Aubrey was accustomed to stretching his elegant limbs in a very comfortable armchair in Study Three, in the Fifth. He was quite unaccustomed to huddling under a table. Pins and needles were beginning to worry him. He longed to move, to stretch out. But he knew that a movement might draw attention.

To be discovered now was worse than being caught when McCann came in. His face crimsoned at the thought of being hooked out from under that table, overwhelmed with confusion and humiliation. Pins and needles were not so bad as that. But they were very irksome.

McCann seemed a fixture. But he stirred at last, stretching out his legs under the table. A foot knocked on Aubrey's knee.

He caught his breath.

The game was up!

But was it?

He heard a mutter above:

"Dear me! Is that the waste-paper basket?"

Aubrey breathed again. McCann was apparently satisfied that it was the waste-paper basket against which his foot had knocked, for he made no further movement. The scratch of his pen resumed.

"Oh, gad!" breathed Aubrey, inaudibly.

Minutes crawled by. Then a voice floated in from the quad through the window, wide open to the balmy evening air. It was the voice of Teddy Seymour. He was calling to somebody.

"I say, seen Compton about, Corky?"

"Not since tea!" came a reply from Corkran of the Sixth.

"I can't find him anywhere!" came Teddy's voice. "It's jolly near prep. I wonder where he's got to?"

That was all. Teddy, it seemed, was looking for Aubrey. He was not likely to find him. Ten minutes later—long, long minutes to Aubrey—a bell rang. It was the bell for preparation. High Coombe seniors headed for their studies—High Coombe juniors for their form-rooms—there were no more voices or footsteps from the dusky quad. In Study Three in the Fifth, Bob Darrell and Teddy Seymour no doubt wondered why Compton did not come up to prep. Under the table in the Head's study, Compton of the Fifth huddled, and endured pins and needles, and wondered how much longer he would be able to stand it.

CHAPTER IV

TAP!

That tap at the door of the Head's study came as a relief to the harassed Fifth-former under the long mahogany table. It was someone to see the Head—and Aubrey Compton hoped, from the bottom of his heart, that the Head was wanted elsewhere, and would leave the study.

"Come in!"

It was Chard who rolled in. Aubrey, under the table, had a view of plump and ponderous legs. Mr. McCann rose politely.

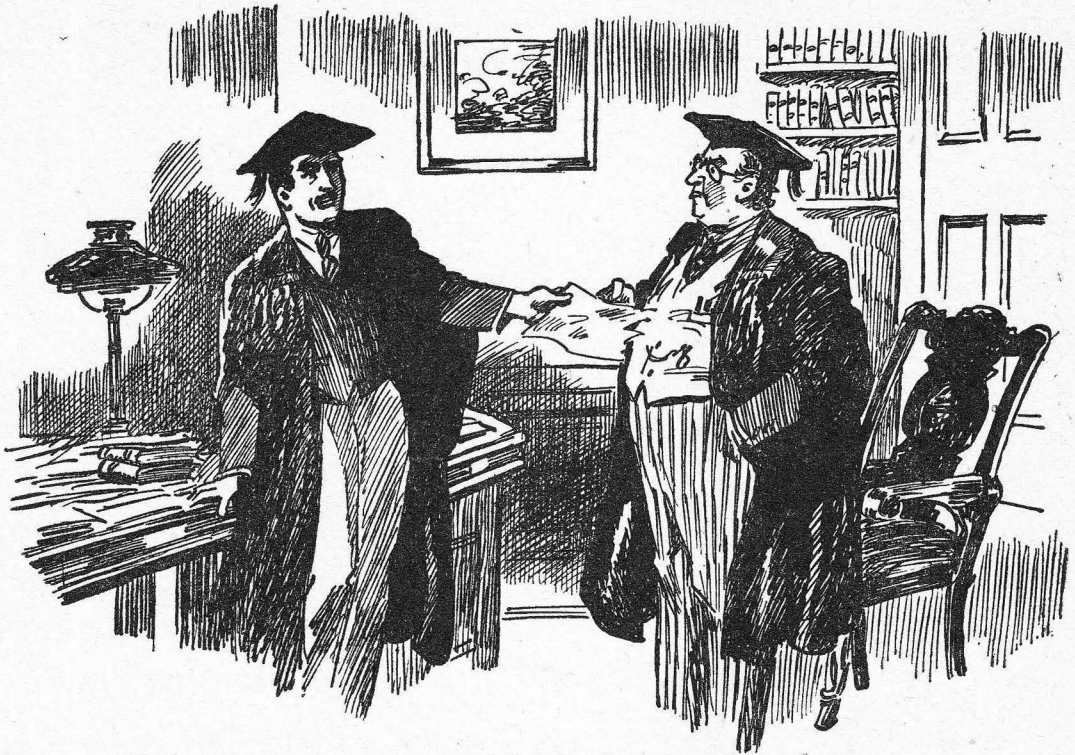
"Good evening, Mr. Chard."

"Good evening, Head-master. If that paper you mentioned is ready—!"

"Quite."

"Perhaps I may have it, then, sir. I should like to look it over," said Mr. Chard. "I should like to be acquainted with it, sir, before I deal with it in my form-room in the morning."

Aubrey, under the table, might have grinned, if he had felt like grinning—which he did not. He knew, as probably McCann knew, that Chard was a little anxious about that paper, not only on his form's account. Chard, before the new Head came, had been accustomed to taking things easily—very easily. His own knowledge was a little rusty. There were passages in Livy that Chard would pass over very lightly in form, and every man in the Fifth knew why.



He handed the paper to Chard

Chard wasn't quite sure that he could deal with the Head's new paper himself, off-hand. Poor old Chard was going to swot over that paper and make sure that he knew the answers before his form saw it. But Aubrey was too cramped and uncomfortable to grin: and not the vestige of a smile appeared on Jimmy McCann's face.

He handed the paper to Chard.

"Here it is, Mr. Chard," he said. "It has been torn, as you see—some foolish boy must have come into my study while I was absent for a few minutes and started to tear it up."

"Oh!" gasped Chard. He stared at the torn and repaired sheet. "Oh! I—I am quite sure that it was not a boy of my form, Head-master. Some foolish junior boy—"

"I hardly think so, Mr. Chard. A junior boy would scarcely concern himself about a paper for the Fifth Form."

"Really, Head-master," Chard trumpeted indignantly. "No boy in my form can have known anything about the paper. I did not know myself until you told me this afternoon, here, in this study."

"Precisely, sir," said Mr. McCann. "But three Fifth-form boys were quite near the window, which was open, and may have heard what was said."

Aubrey gave quite a jump, under the table. Never for a moment had he supposed that McCann had noticed three fellows near his window. The man had the eyes of a hawk! Nothing, it seemed, escaped him.

"Oh!" repeated Mr. Chard. He breathed heavily. "You did not find the boy concerned, in your study, sir?"

"I saw no one when I came back to my study," said Mr. McCann. "But when I went to Common-Room, I noticed a boy in the passage who seemed, I thought, somewhat interested in my movements."

Aubrey jumped again, under the table! The Blighter had noticed him then!

"If you desire me to investigate the matter, sir, among the boys of my form—!" said Mr. Chard, with dignity.

"I doubt whether you would make any discovery, Mr. Chard." Was there a sarcastic note in McCann's voice? "You may leave it in my hands."

"Very well, sir."

Chard left the study, the paper in his plump hand. The luckless Fifth were doomed to deal with that "stinker" in the morning! Aubrey Compton hardly cared about that, at this stage. All Aubrey cared about was to get out from under that table, and stretch his cramped limbs.

But there was no getting out for Aubrey. Chard was gone: but McCann remained. He sat at the table again, at work. The long, long, long minutes crawled by. McCann seemed a glutton for work. Would he never go?

Aubrey had cut roll, and cut prep. It began to look as if he would have to cut dorm also. Not only Bob and Teddy, but everybody else, would be wondering by this time what had become of him. Chard might affect not to know that he had been missing at roll: and perhaps really did not know that he had been missing at prep. But if he was missing at dorm—!

Study Three, at night, was turned into a dormitory—a three-bedder. Bob and Teddy would not only wonder, they would be alarmed, if Aubrey did not turn up for bed. Even Chard would have to take note of that. Chard let his form do very much as they liked: but there was a limit. Aubrey simply had to get out of the Head's study when the bell went for dorm. From what McCann had said to Chard, he knew that the Blighter suspected him already. It was indeed rather surprising that McCann had not sent for him. That was a spot of luck, for if he had sent for him, certainly he could not have been found. But if he did not escape in time for dorm, his number was up.

Clang!

Aubrey suppressed a groan. It was the bell.

Clang! clang! Then there was a scrape of chair-legs, as Mr. McCann pushed back his chair, and rose.

Aubrey's heart thumped. Was he going, at last? Was there still a chance? And then, to his amazement, McCann spoke.

"Compton!"

Aubrey did not answer. He could not. He was too spell-bound with amazement. For hours, endless hours, he had been huddled and cramped under that table, and McCann had given no sign. Now he spoke Compton's name as casually as if Compton had been standing before him in the study. Aubrey really wondered whether he was dreaming.

"Compton!" repeated Mr. McCann.

He was not dreaming! It was no delusion! McCann was addressing him by name.

"Compton! No doubt you have heard the bell. It is time for you to go to your dormitory! You had better go."

Aubrey gasped for breath. The Blighter knew he was there—had known he was there all the time! Aubrey realised that now. He had chosen to hide under that table, and McCann had chosen to leave him there! With a burning face, Aubrey crept out from under the table, picked himself up, and stood before his head-master.

Mr. McCann regarded him, with a faintly amused smile. Aubrey Compton stood limp, his face burning, wishing that he could sink through the floor. Six, or twice six, would have been preferable to this! Bending over under the cane would have been almost a pleasure, in comparison with feeling so utterly ridiculous. But there was no cane to bend under, at all events. Aubrey had had his punishment. McCann made a gesture towards the door.

"You may go, Compton."

Aubrey tottered to the door.

CHAPTER V

SAD to relate, the High Coombe Fifth, little as they liked McCann, and much as they liked Compton, laughed loud and long when they heard about it. Bob Darrell roared, and Teddy chuckled and chuckled: and all the Fifth, as the story spread, chortled. There was, in fact, only one fellow in the High Coombe Fifth who was not amused. That was Compton himself. It had been altogether too awful for Aubrey.

THE END