

COMPTON'S CATCH!

By
CHARLES HAMILTON



"I am glad to hear it, Head-master. I am glad to hear—

CHAPTER I

CHARD was trumpeting.

Chard, a big and rather aggressive man, had a powerful voice. It was seldom subdued. When he was excited, it rose, and on such occasions it bore a distinct resemblance to the trumpeting of an elephant. At the present moment, the Fifth-Form master at High Coombe was undoubtedly excited. His voice fairly boomed. Perhaps Chard did not realize that that boom could be heard outside the Head's study where he was talking to Mr. James McCann. Or perhaps he did not care. Anyhow, he boomed and he trumpeted.

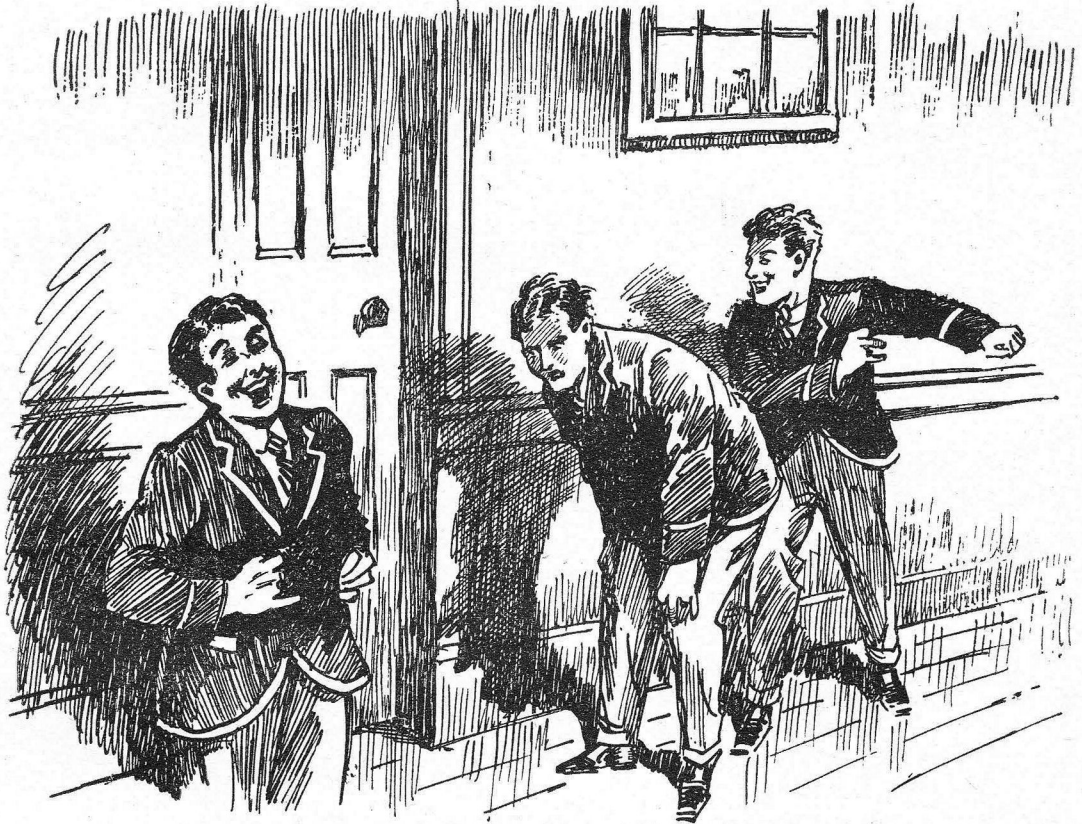
Several Fifth-form men, in the corridor, listened-in: some of them grinning. The fact that Mr. Chard was up against the new young head-master on every possible occasion, made him popular in his form: for practically everybody at

High Coombe was up against Jimmy McCann,—a much too energetic young man to be popular in the “School for Slackers”. But though the Fifth-form men approved heartily of Chard making himself a thorn in the flesh to the new head-master, they could not help regarding him, privately, as rather an old ass. So they grinned as they heard him trumpeting at McCann: only Aubrey Compton apparently failing to be amused. Aubrey had a serious and thoughtful expression on his handsome face.

“Listen to the band!” murmured Teddy Seymour.

“Old ass!” grunted Bob Darrell.

“Peter’s going it!” grinned Carter.



“Listen to the band!” murmured Teddy Seymour

“Peter” certainly was going it. Louder than ever, his deep throaty voice came booming through solid oak. He was putting on steam: and when Peter Chard put on steam, Stemtor of old had little or nothing on him.

“I protest, Head-master. I repeat that I protest!” Chard often repeated his

remarks, doubtless under the impression that they were worth hearing twice. "I trust my boys, sir! I repeat that I trust my boys."

Jimmy McCann's reply was not audible. McCann's voice was low, though very clear. It did not penetrate solid oak. But his reply was probably brief: for almost immediately the boom boomed on.

"I do not believe, I do not believe for one moment, that anything of a contraband nature is to be found in Study Three. The boys in that study, sir, Darrell and Seymour and Compton, are among the best in my Form! I am prepared to guarantee, sir, that no such thing as a packet of cigarettes, or a single cigarette, sir, can be found in that study."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Teddy Seymour.

"You ass, Aubrey!" breathed Bob Darrell.

Aubrey Compton started a little. It was one of Aubrey's ways to smoke cigarettes in Study Three: not particularly because he wanted to, but chiefly because it was against McCann's strict rule on the subject. But though he felt, with satisfaction, that his smokes were a defiance of McCann, he did not want the fact to come officially to McCann's knowledge. Jimmy McCann had a somewhat heavy hand with a cane: against which Aubrey's elegant, well-cut trousers were not much protection.

He whistled softly.

"So the Blighter's got on to that!" he murmured.

Carter chuckled.

"Better cut up to your study and make all clear, as Peter's put you wise," he suggested.

Chard was booming on.

"I repeat, sir, that I consider your doubts of that study wholly unfounded. Wholly and utterly unfounded. But if a search is to be made in that study, sir, that search should be made by the form-master concerned. By taking it into your own hands, sir, you put a slight on me, and one that the boys will assuredly notice and comment on, sir. If it is your desire, sir, to make me an object of disregard, I may say contempt, to my own boys, sir—"

There was a brief pause. Apparently Mr. McCann's reply was soothing, for the trumpeting went on in a lower key.

"I am glad to hear it, Head-master. I am glad to hear that you do not desire to lower a form-master in the estimation of his form. But I am bound to repeat, that if you take this matter into your own hands, you will be doing exactly that. Or, is it, sir, that you do not trust me to make a rigorous search of that study, and report the facts to you?"

Again the reply was unheard: but again it seemed of a soothing nature, for Chard trumpeted on:

"Thank you, Head-master. Thank you at least for assuring me that I am not actually distrusted. Nevertheless, by taking this matter into your own hands, distrust is implied, and will not escape the notice of the school. It will certainly be remarked upon in Common-Room, sir, that you, the head-master, made this investigation, and not the boys' own form-master. No doubt it is not for me to argue with you, sir! I am under your authority. I merely desire to point out, in a few words—a very few words—"

"Few!" murmured Teddy Seymour.

And there was a chuckle in the corridor. Chard's words were seldom or never few: and certainly he was uttering quite a considerable number on the present occasion.

But at that point, the Fifth-form group's entertainment came to an end. Mr. Mace came along, round the corner. Mace started a little, as he heard the boom from the Head's study, and noted the grins on the faces of the listeners-in. He coughed.

"You boys had better go," he murmured.

And they went. Chard trumpeted on in the Head's study, heard no longer by members of his form.

CHAPTER II

AUBREY COMPTON smiled.
It was a malicious smile.

Up in Study Three, Compton and Seymour and Darrell had gathered. Compton had opened the door of the study cupboard, and from an upper shelf, had removed a box of cigarettes. Having been "tipped", as it were, by the boom from Chard, the dandy of High Coombe was taking necessary precautions. That box of cigarettes was dropped into the ivy under the window, safe out of sight. Nothing of a contraband nature was to meet McCann's eyes when he came up to make that investigation, which Chard so strenuously objected to his making in person. Now that there was nothing contraband to be discovered. Aubrey at any rate did not object to McCann coming up. Indeed his malicious smile seemed to indicate that he had something agreeable in view.

"All clear now," said Teddy. "Jolly lucky we heard Chard roaring, though—McCann would have bowled you out, if we hadn't, Aubrey. Six of the best very likely, if he'd looked into that cupboard."

"Of course he would look into it," said Bob Darrell. "If McCann does anything he does it thoroughly."

"Quite!" smiled Aubrey. "The Blighter isn't the man to leave a stone unturned—what?"



Compton had opened the door of the cupboard and had removed a box of cigarettes

"Well, it's all right now," said Bob. "And if you'll take my tip, you'll chuck that rot, and not ask for trouble another time."

Teddy Seymour nodded.

"Yes, better mind your step, Aubrey, if McCann's taking to nosing in the studies," he said.

"He may get tired of nosing in the studies!" drawled Aubrey. "Quite possibly he won't be pleased by his visit here, when he comes up."

"That's rot!" said Bob. "He jolly well knows you smoke, like the silly ass you are, but he would be glad to find out that there was nothing wrong—he doesn't want to nail a fellow. If he found smokes here, you'd have to bend over in his study—but I know he'd be pleased to draw the place blank."

"He won't draw it blank."

"Eh? What the dickens does that mean?"

Aubrey laughed.

"Think a bit!" he suggested. "McCann's coming up to the study later, to search it for contraband goods. He couldn't miss that cupboard. We don't know he's coming, of course—we're as innocent as babes in the wood on that point. If we fixed up something in that cupboard to surprise him, he couldn't guess that we meant it for him—as we don't, of course, know that he's coming up at all."

"Oh!" murmured Teddy. "What a lark! What a chance! Why, the Blighter's just asking for it!"

"He's goin' to get what he's askin' for!" drawled Aubrey.

"Look here—!" began Bob.

"Shut up, old man, and watch," said Aubrey.

Bob Darrell frowned a little, as he watched. Teddy Seymour emitted a series of happy chuckles. Aubrey, apparently, had been thinking out that plan, while the Fifth-formers were listening-in to Chard's boom. He had it cut and dried now. He was quick and active, and it was a matter only of minutes.

He selected a large, flat cardboard box, turning out the shirts it had contained. He raked down soot from the study chimney till the box was nearly full: taking great care not to get a single flake on his own person. Into the soot he emptied the study inkpot, and a bottle of purple marking-ink. To a hole bored in the cardboard, he attached a length of string. Then he carefully placed the box on the top shelf of the cupboard, which was at a good height, just within reach. The string trailed out when he closed the cupboard door—within an inch or two.

"Look here—!" growled Bob Darrell.

"Shut up, old chap."

"Ha, ha, ha!" trilled Teddy.

Inserting fingers into the narrow space, Aubrey wound the string round the inner catch of the door-handle, pulling it taut. He knotted it carefully, and shut the cupboard door.

"That's that!" he drawled.

"Ha, ha, ha!" exploded Teddy, almost in ecstasies.

"You ass!" breathed Bob. "If McCann gets that—!"

"No 'if' about it," smiled Aubrey, "McCann will look into that cupboard. As soon as that door's pulled open, that box of soot will tip out—and who will get it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" from Teddy.

"You reckless fathead, what's McCann going to do, when he's smothered from head to foot by a booby-trap in this study!" exclaimed Bob.

"Will he look a picture?" chortled Teddy.

"You see, he can't do a thing!" drawled Aubrey. "Do we know he's coming up at all? Of course we don't! Did we set that booby-trap for our respected head-master? Of course we didn't! We set it for some fag who's been snooping tuck in our study. See?"

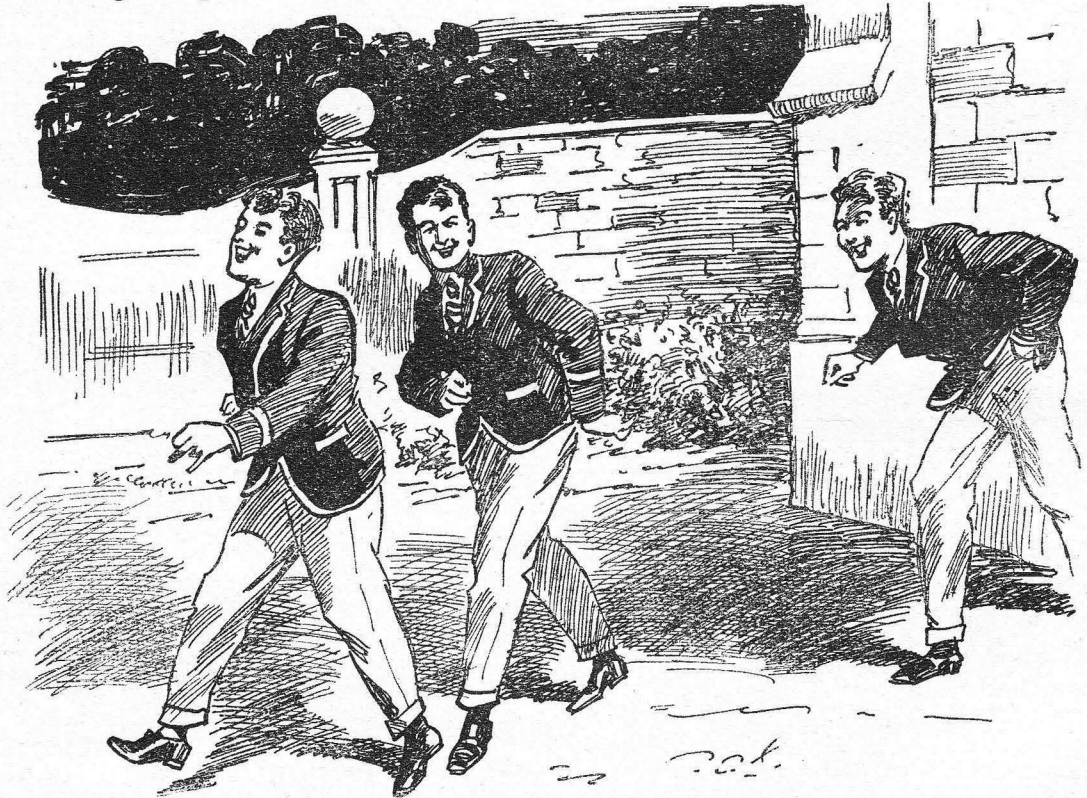
"Ha, ha, ha!" gurgled Teddy.

"How could we know that McCann was coming up?" asked Aubrey. "Of course we never knew a thing about it, when we set that booby-trap for some sneaking fag—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll bet you McCann will guess that we knew somehow—!" said Bob. "He may remember that Chard was bawling, and that fellows might hear—"

"What he may guess isn't evidence!" yawned Aubrey. "Even McCann can't come down on a fellow because he's good at guessing games. Don't you worry, you old Jonah. McCann will get the soot, and we're in the clear. But we may as well be well off the scene, like the innocent lads we are, when the balloon goes up. Come for a trot in the quad."



Teddy followed, still emitting chuckles

"But—!" said Bob, uneasily.

"Oh, come on," said Aubrey, and he linked his arm in Darrell's, and walked him out of the study: Teddy following, still emitting chuckles.

They strolled in the quadrangle: Bob rather worried, Teddy explosively joyous, Aubrey serenely anticipative. Other fellows, let into the secret, shared Teddy's mirth. Even Corkran of the Sixth, head-prefect: even old Tredegar, the captain of High Coombe, grinned: while Randal, and Carter, and Burke, and Peverill, and six or seven other seniors, chuckled with glee.

When Mr. McCann came out of the House, and passed the happy group, he glanced at them, perhaps wondering what the merriment was about. He walked on, however, without giving any special heed, and Aubrey cast a rather puzzled glance after him.

"He can't have gone up to Number Three yet," he muttered.

"He would look a bit blacker, if he had!" chuckled Teddy.

"Well, all's ready when he does!" said Aubrey. He glanced up at the window of Study Three. All was ready there, when McCann went up to make that investigation. They wished that he would get on with it. He was rather spoiling the joke of the term, by this delay. But he had walked away to the school library, so evidently they had still to wait.

But had they?

CHAPTER III

PETER CHARD did not know, for a moment, what was happening.

He was taken so completely by surprise.

It was all old Mace's fault, really. If old Mace had not turned away that group in the Heads' corridor, they might have learned, from Chard's further trumpeting, that the head-master had conceded the disputed point. Jimmy McCann really was a kind-hearted young man, and very far indeed from wishing to seem to put a slight upon a member of the Staff. Chard having taken it as a personal matter, affecting his dignity as form-master of the Fifth, McCann had, though reluctantly, left it in his hands. He was well aware that Chard often closed his eyes to delinquencies in his form. He could not help doubting whether Chard might not turn a blind eye on any discovery he might make in Study Three. Nevertheless, as Chard was so indignantly insistent, McCann gave way, and consented that that search of a Fifth-form study should be carried out by the Fifth-form master. So it came about that Jimmy McCann went to the school library, while Peter Chard went up to Study Three in the Fifth to make that investigation.

Then it happened.

Aubrey's booby-trap had been only too well and truly laid. It worked like a charm, and made its catch. Chard pulled open the cupboard door, intending to give a glance within—not a very searching glance, perhaps. But he did not glance within. Anything like glancing was barred by a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming torrent of soot mixed with ink. The cardboard box, jerked off the shelf by the string as the cupboard door opened, thudded on Chard's portly head, smothering him from head to foot with clinging, smelly soot. In a fraction of a second, Chard was a pillar of soot, and his aggressive red face as black as a Hottentot's. He staggered backwards with a suffocated howl.

"Urrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrh!"



The cardboard box thudded on Chard's portly head

Chard tottered to and fro, the most astounded man in Devonshire. He reeled, he tottered, he clawed at soot, that smothered him in clouds. He tottered

to the open window for air. He gasped and gurgled and coughed and choked there, too overwhelmed with soot to see the crowd of fellows staring up.

"Urrrrggh! Goodness gracious! What—what—ooooooooooooogh!" Chard's frantic gurgles reached many ears below.

"Oh!" gasped Aubrey Compton.

"Chard!" said Teddy Seymour, faintly.

Bob Darrell grinned. It was his turn to grin.

CHARD, who trusted his boys, swallowed that explanation of a booby-trap laid for a snooping fag. But he had also swallowed a considerable amount of soot: which did not improve his temper, and for some time afterwards, the Fifth had a very tart form-master in their form-room—in fact, for quite some time, lines fell in the Fifth-form like leaves in Vallombrosa, as a result of Compton's Catch.

THE END