

Carcroft Chronicles VIII



A Spot of Latin

by Frank Richards

the man who invented **BILLY BUNTER**

THERE was a footstep at the door of No. 9 Study, in the Carcroft Fourth, and Dudley Vane-Carter hastily dropped the *Æneid*, and picked up a thriller. No fellow in the Carcroft Fourth would have liked to be detected in the act of reading Virgil for Virgil's own sake. He would have been dubbed a 'swot': an imputation that no fellow could tolerate. If somebody was coming into the study, V.-C. preferred to be discovered reading 'Bandog Chummond.'

The door was pitched open without a knock, and Powe of the Fifth stalked in.

Powe was a big senior—more than big enough, and old enough, to have got into the Sixth long ago. But Powe did not want to get into the Sixth. He found existence much more pleasant, browsing contentedly in the back benches of the Fifth Form room, where he was the oldest inhabitant. Except when Groom, his form-master, had a sudden access of dutiful energy—which happened about twice in a term—and rooted among the old stagers to whom the Fifth Form room was a restful haven, Powe found life calm and untroubled, the pursuit of knowledge passing him

by like the idle wind which he regarded not.

Vane-Carter of the Fourth stared at him. Seniors seldom or never came to junior studies, and he wondered why Powe had come. At the same time he closed 'Bandog Chummond,' and took a grip on the volume, for use as a weapon of defence if needed. Powe was a heavy-handed fellow, given to smacking junior heads when the spirit moved him so to do. Powe believed in smacking fags. He thought that it did them good.

'Swotting, what?' asked Powe, derisively, as he stalked in. 'I hear you bagged a Latin prize this term, Vane-Carter. Isn't that so?'

Vane-Carter grunted. It was true; but several times, since he had bagged that Latin prize, he had felt like kicking himself. V.-C. was rather a curious mixture. He was looked on as a 'bad hat': he would smoke in his study, and break bounds after lights out; and if there was an unusually wild and reckless rag in the House, it was fairly certain that V.-C. had a hand in it. At the same time, he had a taste for the classics, rare in the Fourth—or in any other form at Carcroft, for that matter. Roger Ducas, master of the Fourth, regarded him with a dubious and suspicious eye; and perhaps it was partly to disarm Roger that V.-C. had been tempted to show what he could do in the scholastic line. Anyhow, he had done it; since when he had ragged more wildly, and broken rules right

and left more recklessly, just to show his form-fellows that he was not that most obnoxious of all animals, a 'swot.'

'What about it?' he snapped. 'You couldn't bag a Latin prize, Powe, if you sat up o' nights for a couple of terms, with a wet towel round your head.'

'Right on the wicket!' agreed Powe. 'I couldn't if I wanted to, and I don't want to. Well, look here! I want you to do some verses for me. I want them by half-past five, and they've got to be good enough for Groom.'

Then V.-C. understood why Powe of the Fifth had called. It was not exactly unknown for a lazy senior to get some bright junior to do his work for him. True that the bright junior was not likely to welcome the task. But a senior—especially a senior like Powe—had very persuasive ways.

But V.-C. was about the last



fellow at Carcroft School to be bullied into doing a senior's work. His eyes glinted at Powe.

'Forget it!' he said, tersely.

'I don't want any cheek,' said Powe, staring at him. 'I smack a fag's head if he cheeks me. That's a tip! I find you swotting here on a half-holiday, and you may as well swot at my verses for Groom. It's only a spot of Latin.'

'I'm reading a thriller——!' V.-C. held up 'Bandog Chummond.'

'Well, you can chuck it! Never mind that,' said Powe. 'My beak's been getting a bit fierce lately, and he's picked on me. I've got to show up these verses by six o'clock, or get into a row with Groom.'

'It's not three yet,' said Vane-Carter. 'You've lots of time.'

'I'm going up the river,' explained Powe. 'I shall be back about half-past five, in time to put the paper into my own fist for Groom. You'll have it ready. Any subject you like—ten or twelve lines—it's a small thing really; but mind, it's got to be good. We have to give Groom his head when he has one of his fits on. You can do it as easy as falling off a form, after bagging a prize for Latin verse. If Groom isn't satisfied, look out for squalls, that's all.'

Vane-Carter glared at him. He was due for cricket a little later that afternoon, with Harry Compton and Co. That mattered nothing to Powe of the Fifth. Powe wanted his paper done: that was all that mattered to Powe.

'Well?' rapped Powe, not at all pleased by V.-C.'s glare. He had no use whatever for sulks from fags. 'Are you doing that spot of Latin?'

'Go and eat coke!' said Vane-Carter.

'What?' roared Powe.

'Coke!'

'Do you mean that you won't do that paper for me?' asked Powe.

'I mean exactly that! Now take your silly face out of my study—it gives me a pain in the neck.'

Powe did not answer that in words. He made a stride at Vane-Carter, who jumped out of his chair and brandished 'Bandog Chummond.'

'Hands off, or—— Oh, my hat! Oh, crumbs! Whoop!'

Vane-Carter got in only one with 'Bandog Chummond,' landing it on Powe's chin. Then he was whirling in the big senior's grasp. Powe proceeded to tap his head on the study table, while Vane-Carter yelled, and roared, and kicked. But Vane-Carter, great fighting-man as he was in the Lower School, was of little use in the powerful grasp of the Fifth Form man. His head tapped, and tapped, and tapped.

'Say when!' said Powe, genially. 'Will you do that paper for me?'

'Ow! No! Oh! No!'

Tap! tap! tap! tap!

'Ow! Yes!' gasped Vane-Carter. 'Leggo, you rotter! Oh, my napper! Yes!'

'Good man!' grinned Powe. 'You'll have it ready on my study table at five-thirty.'

'Ow! Yes! Wow!'

'A jolly good paper, mind?'

'Yes! Will you leggo?'

'That's all right, then,' said Powe, releasing Vane-Carter, and pitching him back into his arm-chair in a spluttering heap. 'Mind you're prompt on time. And if that paper isn't good enough to keep Groom quiet, I'm sorry for you.'

With which, Powe of the Fifth quitted the study, leaving Dudley Vane-Carter gasping for breath, rubbing his head, and looking like Roderick Dhu on the occasion when dark lightnings flashed from Roderick's eye!

READY, old bean?

Bob Drake put a cheery face into No. 9 Study. Harry Compton and Dick Lee were with him, all three in flannels. They stared at Dudley Vane-Carter. It was some time since Powe of the Fifth had called, but V.-C. was still rubbing his head.

'Anything happened?' asked Harry.

'Yes; Powe!' growled Vane-Carter.

'What on earth did that Fifth Form fathead want?' asked Lee.

'Latin verses for Groom.'

'Oh, my hat!' ejaculated Bob. 'That's what comes of bagging Latin prizes, V.-C., old scout! Look here, I jolly well wouldn't do them.'

'You couldn't!' snorted Vane-Carter.

'Admitted!' assented Bob, cheerfully. 'But I wouldn't if I could—and you shouldn't.'

'I've said I will!' snapped V.-C.

'Oh!' said Bob, slowly. 'If you've said you will, I suppose you must. But why the thump did you say you would?'

'Because Powe banged my napper on the table till I did!' growled Vane-Carter, savagely. 'So I said I would and I'm going to leave the paper in his study.'

'That washes out cricket for you, then,' said Harry Compton.

'It doesn't! I'll be ready in a quarter of an hour.'

'Eh! What? You're going to do Latin verses good enough to be shown up to the Fifth Form beak, in fifteen minutes!' exclaimed Bob.

'Why not?'

'Well, if you can do it, you're a jolly old miracle-worker, that's all. Come along when you're through.'

Harry Compton and Co. tramped away down the passage, leaving Vane-Carter to his task. The way he set about that task would have surprised Powe of the Fifth—now happily pulling up the river—could he have known.

COME in!' said Roger Ducas, master of the Fourth, as a tap came at his study door. He glanced at Dudley Vane-Carter, as the scapegrace of Carcroft entered.

'What is it, Vane-Carter?' asked Roger.

'If you please, sir, would you be kind enough to lend me Horace's Odes this afternoon?' asked Vane-Carter, meekly.

Roger's keen eyes concentrated on him. They did not, of course, do Horace in the Fourth Form;

even in the Fifth they were unacquainted with Q. Horatius Flaccus. For a junior to ask for the loan of Horace on a half-holiday was so very extraordinary that Roger Ducas could not help suspecting a leg-pull. His eyes almost bored into Vane-Carter.

'Horace?' he repeated.

'Yes, sir! I'd like to have a shot at him, if you don't mind,' said Vane-Carter, in the same meek manner.

Roger Ducas's face relaxed. He remembered the Latin prize. This boy, after all, dubious as he was in some respects, was the best worker in the form on the rare occasions when he chose to be. If he had a desire to take a 'shot' at a difficult Latin author, Roger was not the man to say him nay.

'Certainly, my boy!' said Mr. Ducas, quite graciously. He rose, and selected a well-worn volume from the bookcase. 'Keep it as long as you like, Vane-Carter.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Vane-Carter; and he departed, with Quintus Horatius Flaccus under his arm, and a glimmer in his eyes, having risen very considerably in his form-master's estimation.

Ten minutes later a Latin paper was lying on the table in Powe's study in the Fifth, and Dudley Vane-Carter, with a cheery grin on his face, was changing into flannels to join the cricketers.

POWE of the Fifth smiled genially.

He had come in, ruddy and cheery from the river, at half-past five. The first thing that

caught his eye, as he entered his study, was a Latin paper on the table. That cheeky junior, evidently, had done as he had been told; he did not want his cheeky head banged again!

Powe picked up the paper, and ran his eye over it. Vane-Carter, he knew, could turn out good Latin verse, if he liked; but as Powe looked through that paper, he whistled.

Powe was dense, as well as lazy. His howlers in form often caused merriment in the Fifth, and exasperation in the Fifth Form master. Still, even Powe could construe, after his own fashion. He found this the toughest spot of 'con' he had ever tackled. But he could see that it was good stuff—uncommonly good—not only was it remarkable for a junior, but it would have done credit, in Powe's opinion, to a Sixth Form man. It ran :

*Frustra cruento Marte carebimus
Fractisque rauci fluctibus Hadriae,
Frustra per autumnos nocentem
Corporibus metuemus Austrum;*

*Visendus ater flumine languido
Cocytos errans et Danaï genus
Infame damnatusque longi
Sisyphus Aeolides laboris.*

'By Gum!' said Powe. 'It's a bit deep for me, but it's good—I can see that—quite good. If that doesn't satisfy Groom, nothing will. Beastly little swot! I'll make him do a good many papers for me after this, by gum! Stinking little swot!'

And Powe of the Fifth sat down to copy out that paper in his own fist, and at six he took his copy along to Mr Groom's study—assured, for once in his life, of making a good impression on his form-master.

BUT what's the game?" asked Harry Compton, puzzled.

'A rag?' asked Bob.

'Something of the sort!' assented Vane-Carter, with a nod.

'We're rather late for tea,' remarked Dick Lee. 'And we've got eggs for tea.'

'This will be better than eggs for tea!' Vane-Carter glanced up at the clock-tower. 'It's just on six—and the band plays at six! Come on.'

Somewhat mystified, the Carcroft Co. accompanied Dudley Vane-Carter. He led them round the House, and stopped under one of the old Carcroft oaks, near the Fifth Form master's study window. Groom's window was wide open in the warm summer's afternoon, and they could see Groom's portly form within. Had he been speaking, they would have heard him easily. But Groom, at his study table, was busy with Form papers.

'Look here, what's on, V.-C.?' asked Harry Compton.

'Wait and see. And hear! There goes six!'

Six o'clock chimed from the clock-tower. As the last stroke died away there was a tap at Mr Groom's door. Powe of the Fifth came in, a paper in his hand.

The Fifth Form master laid down his pen, and looked at

Powe across his writing-table. He did not look pleased. Groom never was pleased with Powe.

'My verses, sir,' said Powe.

'Very good,' said Mr Groom. 'I trust, Powe, that that paper is not so thoroughly, disgracefully, and inexcusably bad as usual.'

'I—I think it's rather good, sir!' ventured Powe. 'I've taken a lot of trouble with it—swotted at it, sir, most of the afternoon.'

Mr Groom, happily unaware that a bunch of juniors near his window were interested in his proceedings, took the paper from Powe, and glanced at it.

He gave a sort of convulsive start as he read the first line.

'Bless my soul!' said Mr Groom.

He seemed dazed.

'Upon my word!' He read the first line aloud, as if to convince himself that it really was there. 'Frustra cruento Marte carebimus—Bless my soul! Do my eyes deceive me?'

He sat staring at Powe's paper, as if it fascinated him. Powe watched him rather anxiously. It was clear that Groom was astonished—amazed. But he did not look pleased. He looked anything but pleased. Astonished he undoubtedly was; but there was no sign of pleasure in his speaking countenance. On the other hand, there was gathering wrath—every sign of a thunderstorm!

'Upon my word!' gasped Mr Groom. 'This passes belief! This is beyond credence! Powe! Do you dare to tell me that you wrote these verses?'

'Certainly sir! I—I did my

very best, sir ! I—I thought them rather good, if—if I may say so, sir.'

'Good ?' repeated Mr Groom, dazedly. 'Good ? Yes, they have been considered quite good, Powe, for the last two thousand years.'

Powe almost fell down !

Mr Groom rose to his feet.

'Powe ! In all my experience as a school-master, extending over forty years, I have never known anything like this ! You bring me, as your own work, lines that I have known by heart since I was myself a school-boy——'

He paused ; but Powe could not speak.

'You have the audacity—the insolence—to attempt to impose upon me, with lines from a well-known ode of Horace. You bring me these lines as your own work. You imagine me, your form-master, so abysmally ignorant of classical literature, as not to be able to recognise lines—well-known lines—famous lines—of Quintus Horatius Flaccus ! You are so insensate as to suppose that I, a form-master of Carcroft, have never read, or remembered, the fourteenth Ode in the Second Book. Words fail me !'

Words having failed Groom, he proceeded to action.

He hurled the offending paper to the floor. He glared round for a cane. He grasped the cane, and pointed with it to a chair.

'Powe ! I am reluctant to cane a senior boy ! But you leave me no choice. I shall cane you most severely, Powe, for this attempted deceit. Bend over that chair, Powe.'

Seldom, or never, did the Fifth Form beak handle the cane. But he handled it now, with vigour and vim. Seldom, or never, did a whopping at Carcroft exceed six swipes. Now it did ! Swipe after swipe rang from the open window of Groom's study like a series of pistol-shots. Louder rang the anguished yells of Powe of the Fifth. Not till more than a dozen, all good ones, had obliterated every trace of dust from Powe's trousers, did Mr Groom cease to swipe.

'Go !' he thundered.

Powe crawled out of the study, doubled up. Under the oak by the study window a bunch of juniors were also doubled up.

IT was not till considerably later that Powe of the Fifth felt equal to dealing with the junior who had pulled his leg with that Latin paper. Then, armed with a cricket-stump, he proceeded to No. 9 study in the Fourth.

But Dudley Vane-Carter was on his guard this time. Compton, Drake, Lee, Turkey, and three or four other fellows were in No. 9 with V.-C., ready for Powe's expected call. And when Powe of the Fifth charged in, they dealt with him faithfully ; and the last state of Powe was worse than his first.

And though for weeks afterwards Vane-Carter had to keep a wary eye open for that Fifth Form man, it seemed fairly certain that Powe would never again bother him for a spot of Latin !