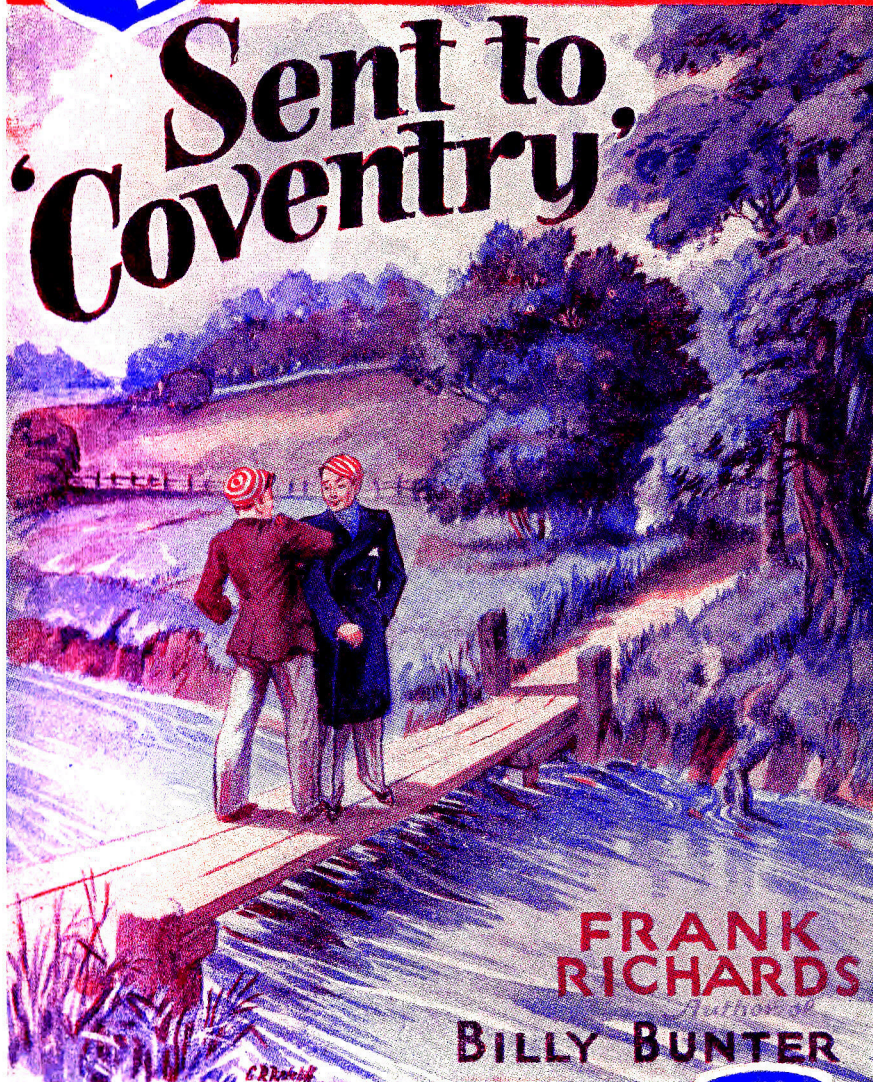


Mascot

SCHOOLBOY SERIES No. 4

'Sent to Coventry'



FRANK
RICHARDS

Author of

BILLY BUNTER

G. R. R. R.

A COMPLETE 'BOB HOOD & CO.' STORY

4^D/₂

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CHAPTER I

A ONE-SIDED CONVERSATION!

"HE, HE, HE!"

It sounded as if an alarm-clock had got into action in Top Study at Topham. But it was only Bunny Binks expressing merriment. Bunny's unmusical cachinnation showed that Bunny was amused.

Bunny was standing in the doorway of Number Eight—Top Study in the Remove. His ample form almost filled the doorway. His eyes were fixed on a Remove fellow coming up the passage.

There was nothing, as a rule, to cause Bunny, or any other fellow to cackle, at the sight of Randolph Picton-Brown, the Dandy of Topham, coming up the Remove passage from No. 3 to No. 8. "Dandy Randy," the best-dressed fellow in the Remove, presented an elegant figure to the view. He moved with rather a lounge: but it was a graceful and elegant lounge: the Dandy had a way of lounging with his hands in his trousers pockets that sometimes excited the envy of less elegant fellows. But Randy was not only elegant, and handsome, and wealthy: he was strong and sturdy, and a good footballer, and as good a man with his hands as any fellow in the form, with the exception perhaps of Bob Hood. Yet the fat Bunny, grinning from the doorway of Top Study, cackled explosively as he watched him.

For things were not quite as usual in Fourth A. It was rather curious to watch the Dandy's progress up the passage. He came out of No. 3 Study, and passed Flynn and Didcot. Both of them carefully avoided seeing him as he passed. Pink and Jones were looking out of the doorway of Number Five. The Dandy glanced at them—and their faces were quite wooden in expression—they did not seem to know that he was there! A faint flush came into Picton-Brown's handsome face as he passed them: and he almost ran into Smithson, coming out of No. 6.

"Loo! where you're goin'!" snapped Picton-Brown.

Smithson of the Remove was about to answer, but checked himself, and passed on without a word or a look.

The Dandy came on: past the door of Number Seven, where King was in the doorway. Tom King, goal-keeper of the Remove eleven, stared at him, or rather through him, without seeming to see him. Picton-Brown paused.

"Look here, King——!" he began.

Without any change of expression, still apparently unconscious of the Dandy's existence, Tom King turned back into his study.

The Dandy's colour deepened. Then, as Bunny's unmusical cackle fell on his ears, he started, and his dark eyes glinted. He came quickly on to the open doorway of Top Study, adorned by Bunny's fat person.

"Feelin' amused, what?" he asked.

Bunny opened a large mouth to reply. But he closed it again, grinning. The next moment he ceased to grin, as Picton-Brown grabbed him by a fat neck, and swung him out of the doorway.

"Ocooh!" spluttered Bunny, as he spun.

There was a bump in the passage as Talbot Howard Bunks landed there. Bunny rolled and spluttered.

"Ooogh!" spluttered Bunny, "Ow! Keep your paws to yourself, you swob—tain't my fault that you're sent to Coventry, is it. Ooooh!"

Randolph Picton-Brown did not deign to answer, or to look at him. He lounged into the Top Study.

Two voices had been audible there—those of Bob Hood, captain of the Remove, and Harry Vane, the new junior. But the conversation in Top Study ceased at once as Randolph Picton-Brown appeared.

Bob Hood stared at him, a frown coming over his rugged good-natured face. Harry Vane carefully avoided looking at him. Neither spoke: and for a moment or two, the silence in the study was broken only by the splutterings of Bunny Binks outside. It was Picton-Brown who spoke, at last.

"Look here, Hood, how long do you think you're goin' to keep up this rot?"

No reply.

"Do you hear me?" snarled Picton-Brown.

Bob Hood could scarcely have failed to hear, unless he had become suddenly very deaf. But he did not answer. He only stared at Picton-Brown, as if unseeing. The Dandy's colour deepened to crimson.

"Will you answer me, you foo!?"

Silence.

Randolph Picton-Brown breathed hard and deep. He looked, for a moment, as if he would spring like a tiger at the captain of the Remove. But he checked his passionate temper. He stared at Bob: and then his glance turned to the good-looking face of the new junior. Good-looking as it was, that face did not seem to please Picton-Brown. He scowled at it savagely.

"You're at the bottom of this, you new scum!" he snapped.

Harry Vane did not answer. A faint smile came on his face, but that was all. Picton-Brown turned back to Bob.

"You've let that new smug pull your leg, Hood," he said. "You're a fool, and he's a rotter."

Bob Hood did not speak. But he picked up a pencil from the table, and scrawled a word on a sheet of impot paper. Picton-Brown stared at it. The word was "Thanks."

"You dummy!" he exclaimed. "You fool! You idiot! You fathead! You footling ass! Look here, you've got to chuck it, see?"

Bob Hood seemed to reflect for a moment. Still he did not utter a word: but he scrawled on the paper again.

"You're in Coventry for the term. Get out."

"All through that smudge Vane!" snarled the Dandy.

Bob shook his head, and scrawled on the paper again.

"All your own fault. You played a dirty trick—keeping a man away from a football match! You're not fit to speak to. Get out."

"Do you think you're goin' to keep up this rot for the whole term!" roared Picton-Brown.

"Yes!" wrote Bob on the paper.

"I'm not standin' it, I warn you," hissed Picton-Brown. "It's gone on for a week now, and I'm fed up. See? Are you goin' to speak or not?"

"Not!" wrote Bob on the paper.

"You won't speak?"

"No!" scribbled the pencil.

"Then I'll make you!" shouted the Dandy of Topham, and with that, he came round the table with a rush, grasped the captain of the Remove

by the shoulders, and wrenched him out of his chair. "Now, you cheeky rotter——!"

Still Bob Hood did not speak. Neither of the juniors in Top Study spoke—but they both went into action, promptly and effectively. Bob Hood and Harry Vane grasped the Dandy of Topham together, and swung him to the door. With a savage face and flashing eyes, Randolph Picton-Brown struggled in their grasp—but either of them was a match, or more than a match, for the Dandy: and in the grasp of both, he swung out of the doorway like a sack of coke.

Bump!

"He, he, he!" cachinnated Bunny, as Dandy Randy landed in the passage. Then, as Randy staggered to his feet, the fat Bunny dodged quickly into Top Study. With that look on Dandy Randy's face, Bunny felt safer behind the sturdy rampart of Bob Hood and Harry Vane.

Picton-Brown stood panting. His eyes fairly burned at the two juniors facing him from the doorway of Top Study. It seemed, for a moment, that he would come back, in a raging rush. Hood and Vane stood ready to collar him, and pitch him out again, if he did. No doubt Dandy realised it was futile. He gave them a long, black, bitter look, turned, and tramped away down the passage.

CHAPTER II

CAUGHT IN THE ACT!

"COMING out, old chap?"

Bunny Binks asked that question, on Wednesday afternoon, in friendly, indeed, quite affectionate tones. He addressed Harry Vane, who was lounging rather aimlessly on the Fourth A landing.

It was a half-holiday, and Vane was a little undecided what to do with his time till tea. Bob Hood was in detention that afternoon, with other unlucky fellows, under charge of Monsieur Le Bon, the French master. Bob had a detention for sliding down the banisters—which was a thoughtless proceeding and severely forbidden. If Bob was in a hurry, he was likely to forget that that rapid but rather dangerous method of descending a staircase was frowned upon by authority. And that long curving banister descending the lower staircase was really a temptation. However, Bob had been spotted by Hedley of the Sixth, and two hours in Mossoo's detention class was the result. Which was all the more unwelcome, because he had been going out with Vane that afternoon on a bike spin.

But Harry Vane, if he did not quite know what to do with his time till Bob came out of Mossoo's detention-room, did not yearn for the company of Bunny Binks to fill the blank. He was thinking of going for a walk till Bob was free—but had no desire to accommodate his pace to Bunny's—which was that of a snail—a very fat and slow snail.

"I say, do come!" urged Bunny. "Nice walk down to Combe, and they've got first-class prog at Aunt Miggs'."

Harry Vane laughed. Evidently the fat Bunny had an axe to grind. When Bunny rolled into Aunt Miggs' little shop in Combe, he liked to have a friend with him. At such times Bunny would have made a friend of the bitterest enemy. Somebody had to settle the bill.

"You haven't sampled Aunt Miggs' jam rolls," urged Bunny. "Do come! Mind, I'm not thinking of the prog—I just want your company, because—because I like you so much, you know. My treat, of course."

"Oh, good," said Vane. "As I happen to be stony this afternoon——."

"Eh! Oh! I—I mean—I—I think that's Didders calling me." Bunny rolled across the landing, and went down the stairs, rather hurriedly, leaving Vane laughing. Bunny wanted a friend that afternoon: but a "stony" friend apparently was of no use to Bunny!

Picton-Brown came out of No. 3 Study, and his brow darkened at the sight of Vane on the landing. It was for an attempt to keep the new junior out of a football match, by trapping him and locking him in a shed, that the Dandy had been sentenced to "Coventry" for the rest of the term by the Remove. There was no doubt that the Dandy of Topham felt the sentence severely.

Several days had passed since that one-sided conversation in Top Study: and Randy was still in the cold and dismal shades of Coventry. Even his pal and study-mate, Caffew, never spoke to him outside the study: not wishing to be barred by the form along with him. Dandy Randy had been quite a great man in the Topham Remove: now he was nobody, or rather less than nobody. He had fallen from his high estate, and great was the fall thereof! Not very reasonably, he attributed his reverse of fortune wholly to the new junior, instead of laying the blame on his own lawless and arrogant temper.

"You rotter!" he muttered, as he passed Vane on the landing.

Harry Vane did not seem to hear.

"I owe all this to you, you smug!" went on Picton-Brown. "I'll make you sorry for it—I'll make you sorry you ever came to Topham."

Vane moved away, apparently deaf. Dandy Randy gave him a bitter look, and went on to the staircase. Apparently he was going out, on his own—rather a new thing for the Dandy, who had generally been able to pick his company in his form. Picton-Brown loafed out into the quad, his hands in his pockets, his handsome face dark and sullen.

Harry Vane, giving him no further thought, looked down from the landing window into the quad. There he had a view of his form-master, Mr. Carfax, coming out of the House, with Spood, master of the Upper Fourth. The two masters walked away majestically, heading for the gate of the Head's private garden, where beaks often walked in fine weather, and where the boys were barred. Then he sighted Picton-Brown again, lounging by the wall of the Head's garden, idly glancing at the two masters as they went in by the little gate. The Dandy was at a loose end that afternoon: nobody wanted him: nobody had a word to say to him: and he could not speak even to Bunny Binks without getting a rebuff. It was hard: but no harder than he deserved, though he did not realise it, or choose to realise it. The look on his face showed how bitterly he resented his new and uncomfortable position in the Topham Remove.

A scurry of feet on the landing caused Harry to look round from the window. Didcot, Flynn and King came along from No. 7 Study. Terence Flynn glanced down over the landing balustrade.

"All clear!" he said. "Follow your leader! You on, Vane?" The Irish junior put his hands on the banisters.

"Hold on," said Harry. "Hood's got a detention for that, Flynn. If a pre. should spot you——."

"Nobody about," answered Flynn. "I'm going. If you're afraid of pre's., stick where you are, and be a good little boy."

Didcot and King laughed, and Vane coloured. He was not "afraid of pre's." if it came to that: but he was rather more thoughtful than Terence Flynn. But he was too much of a schoolboy to be willing to appear to funk

that the others did: and he joined the little crowd at the top of the banisters.

Flynn threw a leg over the smooth shining banister, and went sailing down. It was rather a dangerous game, and the "beaks" had good reason for forbidding it, for a fall would have had very painful results. But Flynn sailed down successfully, threw his leg over the newel-post at the foot, and jumped off, landing lightly on his feet. Didcot went next, shooting down as successfully as Flynn, and Tom King followed, also landing on his feet. The three juniors stood in a group below, looking up for Vane to follow. And Harry Vane, in his turn, sat astride the long curving banister and went shooting down.

As he did so, there was a startled exclamation from Flynn below.

"Howly smoke! The Head!"

The coast was not so clear as Flynn had supposed. A majestic figure loomed up—nothing less than that of Dr. Chetwynd, the head-master of Topham. He was just too late to see the performance of Flynn and Co. But he had a full view of Harry Vane sailing merrily down the long banister: and he stopped, and fixed his eyes on the whizzing junior, with a grim stare.

Flynn, Didcot and King looked at one another. They had not been caught in the act—but Vane was, and evidently he was "for it." Vane, as he whizzed down, saw the Head, and the sudden sight startled him. Instead of flinging his leg over the newel-post and jumping clear, that sudden shock caused him to catch his ankle on it, and he rolled instead of jumping off the banister. There was a bump on the old oak floor as Vane landed, and he rolled over, and sat up, right at the feet of the majestic figure of the Head.

"Oh!" gasped Vane.

Dr. Chetwynd stared down at him.

"Upon my word!" he said. "Boy! Are you hurt?"

"Oh! No, sir!" gasped Harry, scrambling to his feet, crimson with confusion. "Not—not at all, sir!" Which was rather an exaggeration, for he had had a most unpleasant bump on hard oak.

"Name," rapped the Head.

"Vane, sir!" stammered Harry.

"You are one of Mr. Carfax's boys, I think?"

"Yes, sir: Fourth A."

"Are you not aware that sliding down the banisters is strictly forbidden?" rapped Dr. Chetwynd.

"Hem! Yes, sir!"

"Follow me!" said the Head.

Harry Vane, in silence, followed him, receiving sympathetic looks from Flynn and Co., which were perhaps comforting, but not much practical use. Dr. Chetwynd rustled on, followed by the dismayed junior, and stopped at the door of the detention-room, which he opened.

Monsieur Le Bon stopped in the full flow of irregular verbs, and looked round, bowing to his Chief. A dozen fellows under detention looked round also: and Bob Hood gave his friend a rueful grin. Dr. Chetwynd signed to Harry to walk in.

"This junior will remain in your detention class until it is dismissed, Monsieur Le Bon!" said the Head.

"Mais oui—yes, sair!" said the French master.

Dr. Chetwynd drew the door shut, and rustled away. Harry Vane dropped into a seat beside the captain of the Remove.

"You too!" said Bob. "What's your jolly old crime? You haven't been sliding down the banisters, I suppose."

"Just that!" answered Harry. "We're a pair of asses."

"Taisez-vous—silence in ze class!" rapped Monsieur Le Bon: and the detention class went on its weary way through the intricacies of French irregular verbs.

CHAPTER III

MYSTERIOUS!

RANDOLPH PICTON-BROWN came up the stairs, and lounged across the landing, his hands in his pockets. His manner was careless and casual: but there was a glitter in his dark eyes, as he glanced about him. Nobody was to be seen—every fellow seemed to be out of doors on that fine half holiday. The Dandy of Topham strolled up the passage to Top Study, at the upper end, and glanced in. The room was empty. Hood, he knew, was in detention: Bunny Binks he had seen start for Combe in company with Pink of the Remove: and Harry Vane, he concluded, had gone out, as he was not to be seen about. He had already glanced into the Jungle, downstairs, but nobody was there. But the Dandy, for reasons of his own, wanted to be sure—and he walked down the passage again to No. 3, the study he shared with Cyril Caffew, and threw open the door.

Caffew was seated in the armchair, smoking a cigarette—that was one of the manners and customs in the Dandy's study. He gave a little jump, and put the cigarette out of sight, as the door opened. Then, seeing that it was Picton-Brown, he nodded, and replaced it in his mouth.

"Seen anythin' of that new scum Vane?" asked Randy.

Caffew hesitated a moment. He was the Dandy's pal: and he found it quite a useful thing to be pally with the richest fellow at Topham. It was one of the Dandy's expensive cigarettes that he was smoking at that moment. But he did not want to carry friendship to the length of sharing the Dandy's exclusion: and the captain of the Remove had laid it down immutably that any fellow speaking to the ostracised junior would be sent to Coventry along with him. So Caffew, after a moment's hesitation, shook his head, without answering in words.

"You smudge," said Picton-Brown, in low bitter tones. "There's nobody in the passage—you can speak, you measly smear."

"Well, the fellows have got their backs up, Randy," muttered Caffew. "They can't get over you tying that new man up in the shed, and——"

"You helped me, and they've got over that," sneered the Dandy. "You got off with a swiping from a fives bat. But they're right," he added, contemptuously. "You don't count, Caffew. They know you only did as you were told. Well, do as you're told now, you funky smudge, and tell me if you've seen Vane about."

"No! I expect he got tired of waiting for Hood, and went out," answered Caffew. "You don't want to find him, do you?"

"No. I only want to know whether he's gone out O.K.," answered Picton-Brown, and he slammed the door, and walked up the passage again.

He entered Top Study: and this time he shut the door after him. The coast was clear there: with Hood in detention, Bunny on his way to Combe, and Vane apparently gone out on his own. Of the banister-sliding and what had resulted from it, the Dandy naturally knew nothing. Vane was not to be seen, and the natural conclusion was that he had gone out instead of

waiting indoors for his friend, as indeed he would have done but for the banister incident.

Dandy Randy stood looking about Top Study, with glinting eyes. He seemed to be in search of something. He uttered a muttered exclamation, as his eyes fell on a silver-handled penknife lying on the table. He had seen that penknife before, in Harry Vane's hand. He picked it up, and examined it. There was no doubt about the ownership, for the owner's initials were engraved on the silver handle, H.V. It was Harry Vane's.

"Just the thing!" muttered Picton-Brown. He slipped the penknife into his pocket, and turned to the door.

Then he paused. What was in his mind, it would have been hard to guess—but he seemed to hesitate. He stood irresolute; and it was not like the cool, determined Dandy to hesitate for one moment, whatever it was that he had made up his mind to do.

But his hesitation was brief. His face set savagely, and he opened the door and left Top Study, with Vane's penknife in his pocket. There was no one in the passage: all the fellows were out of the studies excepting Caffew. But as he was passing the door of Number Three, he saw that that door was open, and a startled face looking out at him.

"Randy!" muttered Caffew.

"Spyin', you smudge!" sneered Picton-Brown.

"Look here, what have you been up to in that study!" muttered Caffew, uneasily. "I don't like the look in your eye, Randy. I saw you go into Top Study——"

"Did you?" drawled Picton-Brown. "Then you'd better forget that you saw anythin' of the kind, Cyril." And he sauntered on, cool and indifferent.

Caffew stared after him, suspiciously and uneasily, but finally he shut the door of No. 3. What the Dandy's passionate temper, and his bitter enmity towards the new junior might have led him into, Caffew could not surmise: but he did not, as he had said, like the look in Randy's eye. Randy was "up" to something—what it was, Caffew could not guess: but that look in Randy's eye haunted him, as he smoked Randy's expensive cigarettes in No. 3.

CHAPTER IV

AN AMAZING ATTACK!

"OH!" exclaimed Mr. Carfax.

The master of Fourth A jumped almost clear of the ground. Mr. Spood turned towards him, staring.

The two masters were walking in the Head's garden, under shady branches. They were chatting on a subject of great interest to both—the Odes of Horace. It was quiet and peaceful in that quiet old-world garden, with its shady trees and thick shrubberies: and they paced to and fro in happy discussion. But all of a sudden Mr. Carfax forgot Quintus Horatius Flaccus and all his works, as something crashed on his ear. It was a chunk of turf: and the crash was so sudden, and so utterly unexpected, that it caused the master of the Remove to stagger, almost to fall.

"Goodness gracious!" ejaculated Mr. Spood, staring at him in astonishment. "What—what—who—how——" Spood fairly stuttered. For a chunk of turf to be hurled at a form-master's head was unknown, unthinkable, unimaginable—he could hardly believe that it had happened, as he gazed in horror at his staggering colleague.

But it had! Mr. Carfax had had quite an unpleasant knock—dusty earth was scattered over his gown, and trickling down his neck—his mortar-board had gone sideways. The turf rolled down him and landed at his feet, as he righted himself.

Mr. Carfax stared at that turf. He passed his hand over his ear, and it came away dusty. His ear was full of dust from the dry turf. For a moment or two it was hard for Joseph Carfax to realise what had happened—but, as he did realise it, the look that came over his face might have made a stout heart tremble.

“Upon my word!” said Mr. Carfax. He stared round him. Someone, unseen, had deliberately flung that chunk of turf at his head, landing it on his left ear. At a little distance on the left of the path was an extensive shrubbery of rhododendrons. It was from that direction that the missile had whizzed. The perpetrator of that unexampled outrage was not to be seen—but evidently he had been in cover in the shrubbery, watching the two masters as they paced, and taking aim at Mr. Carfax.

Leaving his colleague, the master of Fourth A darted into the shrubbery. In his amazement at the extraordinary attack, he had lost a minute or so: but now that he moved, he moved swiftly. Mr. Spood, still staring with astonishment, followed him less swiftly. He overtook Mr. Carfax, who had come to a halt in the middle of the thick shrubbery, and was staring furiously round him.

“You have seen——” began Spood.

“He was gone—but he was here!” said Mr. Carfax, in a low voice of intense anger. “Whoever it was, was here—you can see where shrubs have been broken where he crouched among them. But—he is gone!”

“No doubt he fled the instant he had thrown the turf,” said Mr. Spood.

“I imagine so,” said Mr. Carfax, grimly. “It must have been a Topham boy—and he will be expelled for this. He must be found—he shall be found. No doubt he has escaped out of the garden before this—but——”

The master of Fourth A set his lips hard. He was deeply, intensely angry: and the bare thought of the assailant escaping was bitterly exasperating. Obviously he was gone—he had not lost a second, while the form-master was staggering under the sudden shock. There were plain traces where he had crouched in the shrubbery: and Mr. Carfax proceeded to examine the spot with glinting eyes, hoping to discover some clue to the offender. He uttered a sudden exclamation as a gleam of silver on the trampled ground caught his eye.

In a moment, he had snatched up a silver-handled penknife. He looked at it, almost gloating over it. Obviously, he assailant had used that penknife in cutting out the turf he had flung at Mr. Carfax’s head. The longest blade was open, and the knife was clogged with earth—the blade a little bent. It was an infallible clue to the perpetrator. It was easy to guess that the boy, whoever he was, had been in a state of excitement, crouching in ambush, for an act that meant instant expulsion from the school if he was discovered—and he had laid down the knife after cutting the turf, and in his excitement and haste overlooked it as he fled. It was all clear to Mr. Carfax, and to Mr. Spood.

“A clue to the young rascal, Carfax,” said the master of Fourth B. “You have only to trace the owner of that penknife——”

“That will not be difficult,” said Mr. Carfax. “His initials are engraved on the handle. Look!”

“H.V.” read out Mr. Spood, as he looked. “Some boy whose initials are H.V. Is there a boy in your form with such initials?”

"There is!" said Mr. Carfax, through his closed lips. "A new boy—named Henry Vane. This penknife belongs to him.

"Vane!" repeated Mr. Spood. "I think I have noticed the boy—rather a pleasant-looking lad, I thought. Not the revengeful type."

"I have had occasion to punish him," said Mr. Carfax. "I remember that I had to cane him on his first day here. This is an act of revenge—of disrespect—upon my word! I hardly know how to describe such an act. The boy will be expelled from Topham this very day—Dr. Chetwynd will not allow so ruffianly a young rascal to remain another night in the school. I must find Vane at once."

Mr. Carfax hurried away, leaving the master of Fourth B shaking his head solemnly over this unprecedented occurrence. Shocked as he was, Mr. Spood told himself complacently that this kind of thing could not have happened in his Form, Fourth B. Fourth A was rather an unruly form!

The master of that unruly form, Fourth A, hurried out of the Head's garden by the gate on the quadrangle. A good many fellows were in sight—the nearest was a boy of his own form: Randolph Picton-Brown of the Remove. He called to him at once.

"Picton-Brown!"

The Dandy, who was sauntering with his hands in his pockets, looked round. A faint glimmer came into his eyes as he looked at Mr. Carfax's flushed face, and the very visible traces of dusty earth on his left ear and cheek. But his manner was very respectful as he answered:

"Yes, sir!"

"Have you seen Vane?"

"Vane, sir?" Picton-Brown seemed to think for a moment or two. "I think he's gone out, sir. I believe he went out of gates."

"Do you know if he went out alone?"

"He was alone when I last saw him, sir."

Mr. Carfax compressed his lips hard. He had no doubt that Vane had gone out alone—with such a purpose in his mind.

"Have you seen anyone leave the Head's garden, Picton-Brown?"

"No, sir."

Mr. Carfax hardly expected an answer in the affirmative. He had no doubt that the young rascal had entered the Head's garden, and left it, by the wall on Meadow Lane, which was thickly bordered and shaded by trees. It was easy enough—and now, of course, he was out of gates—and would come in for roll-call, as if from a walk—unsuspected, but for the discovery of the penknife he had left behind him. Mr. Carfax walked on to the House—the Dandy looking after him with a curious smile on his handsome face.

Mr. Carfax spent a few minutes in making sure that Vane of the Remove was absent. He looked into the Jungle, and he went up to the Remove passage and looked into Top Study: he asked two or three prefects, and they had seen nothing of Vane. The matter had to stand over till four o'clock, when there was a calling-over before tea: and Mr. Carfax waited for four to strike, his feelings growing deeper and deeper and deeper as he waited!

CHAPTER V

ACCUSED!

BOB HOOD slipped his arm through Harry Vane's, as they came out of the French detention-room at 3.55, with the rest of the detention-class. They were glad to be done with Monsieur Le Bon and French irregular verbs.

The lure of the banisters had cost both of them half a half-holiday: which would no doubt be a lesson to them—so long as it lasted.

"We'll get that spin after roll," said Bob. "They call the names in hall at four, after that we're free till six. A run up into the Chilterns, old scout, and tea at a little place there, what?"

"Good egg!" agreed Vane.

"Oh, here you are, old beans." Bunny Binks rolled up to them, as they came into hall. "I say, have you heard?" Bunny's fat face was full of excitement.

"Anything happened?" yawned Bob.

"Prog all right at Aunt Miggs'?" asked Vane, laughing.

"Eh! Oh! Yes! But about Carfax——!" spluttered Bunny.

"Carfax?" repeated Bob and Harry together. "What's up with Carfax?"

"He's been bashed——!" gasped Bunny.

"Wha-a-t?" ejaculated the two.

"Bashed on the napper," gasped Bunny. "I heard when I came in—there's an awful row about it. From what I heard, Carfax was walking in the Beak's garden with Spood, and somebody heaved a brick at his head——"

"Gammon!"

"Fact!" gasped Bunny. "Carfax came in streaming with blood—his nose was practically knocked off—hanging by a single hair——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you'll hear it all soon," said Bunny, warmly. "Everybody knows—you fellows never get the news——"

"They don't bring the latest news into the detention-room," said Vane. "Has anything really happened to Carfax?"

"I tell you somebody got him with a brick," howled Bunny. "He was stunned, I think—jaw broken—Jones says it was a turf, but I think it was a brick—or at least a half-brick——"

"Or a Sten gun?" suggested Vane. "Sure it wasn't a Sten gun, Bunny?"

"Yah!" retorted Bunny.

"But who did it—if anybody did?" asked Bod Hood.

"Carfax knows," said Bunny. "They haven't said who it was yet, but everybody knows that Carfax knows. I say, I heard Hedley say to Markham that a man in the Remove was going to be sacked."

"Rot!" said Bob. "Here, Didders, has anything happened to Carfax?"

"Yes, rather," answered Didcot. "Some mad ass got him with a turf in the Beak's garden. Wasn't you, was it, Vane?"

"Hardly," answered Harry, staring. "What the dickens do you mean?"

"Well, I've heard that Carfax was inquiring after you. He came in looking jolly dusty, and as fierce as a tiger. He's taking the names this afternoon—you'll see whether he looks fierce!"

Vane went into hall with Bob Hood, mildly curious. Evidently something had happened to Mr. Carfax that afternoon. They found the Remove buzzing with it in hall, and the news had evidently spread to other Forms. Vane heard the loud voice of Brimble of the Fifth.

"Some young rotter in the Remove! They're a cheeky lot! Got him right in the ear—the Remove beak, you know! Cheek, if you like! He will be sacked."

"But who the dooce was it?" asked Sutcliffe of the Shell. "Nobody seems to know—unless Carfax does."

In the ranks for Fourth A, only one fellow was silent: the Dandy, who was in "Coventry." Picton-Brown's face was expressionless: but his

eyes glinted as Vane came up with Bob Hood. He listened with cool indifference to the buzz of excited voices round him. But as Mr. Carfax entered by the upper door, the prefects called for silence, and the buzz died away.

Vane looked at his form-master, as he stood on the dais, to call the names. To his surprise, Mr. Carfax shot a sudden glance at him: a glance that startled the new junior. Bob noticed it, and pressed his arm.

"Carfax has got his rag out with you, Vane. What's the trouble?"

"Goodness knows!" answered Harry.

"Silence there!" called out Hedley of the Sixth.

After that one glinting glance, Mr. Carfax gave the new junior in his form no further heed. He proceeded to call the roll. Vane answered "adsum" to his name when his turn came, and then once more Mr. Carfax gave him a look. What the trouble was, Vane could not guess, but he realised that he was somehow in his form-master's black books, and that trouble was coming.

It came, when roll had been called. The word to dismiss was not given as usual. There was a moment of tense silence, and every fellow in hall knew that something was coming. Then Mr. Carfax's voice, very deep and distinct in the dead silence, came:

"Vane! You will come here."

There was a gasp of excitement in the Remove. All eyes were on Harry Vane, as he left his form, and walked up the hall.

His face was a little flushed. It was rather a trying experience, to march up the crowded hall, with more than two hundred pairs of eyes fixed on him. But he was cool and quiet. Why he was called, he did not know: it seemed impossible to him that he was suspected of what had happened in the Head's garden. But to other fellows it did not seem impossible—it seemed clear. There could be only one reason for calling up Vane of the Remove.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunny Binks. "It was Vane—Vane all the time! I say, it was that new chap got Carfax with a brick——"

"Shut up, you fat ass!" growled Bob Hood.

"By gum, it looks like it," muttered Caffew. "Vane was out——"

"Silence!" shouted Hedley.

Harry Vane stepped on the dais, and stood before his form-master. His heart was beating a little painfully. Carfax did not show any of the signs of damage described by the imaginative Bunny: but his look was hard, grim, bitter—few Remove fellows had ever seen him look so grim. Anger, contempt, and relentless purpose, were in the look he fixed on the new boy in his form.

"Vane! I think this is yours."

Harry started, in astonishment, as Mr. Carfax held out a silver-handled penknife. Heads were craned up and down hall to see what it was. Vane stared at it.

"Yes, sir, that's mine!" he said.

"You had not missed it, apparently," said Mr. Carfax, grimly.

"No, sir!" Vane looked at him, in sheer wonder. So far as he remembered, he had left the penknife on his study table, after using it to sharpen a pencil. Why Mr. Carfax produced it in hall he could not begin to guess.

"This penknife," said Mr. Carfax, in a voice that was heard in every corner of hall, "was found on the spot where some boy hid himself in the shrubbery, in the head-master's garden, to hurl a missile at me. The missile was a turf, cut from the earth on the spot, and this knife was used for the

cutting. Its earthy state, and bent blade, show that very clearly. In your haste to escape after committing that outrageous act, Vane, you overlooked this penknife."

Harry Vane almost staggered.

"I—I—I did?" he gasped. "I—I——"

"You did!" said Mr. Carfax. "It was you, Vane, you who carried out that lawless and ruffianly attack on your form-master. As you had not missed the knife, no doubt you fancied that your guilt was undiscovered."

"But I—I did not—I——!" stammered the bewildered junior.

"That is enough, Vane. Prevarication will not serve you," said Mr. Carfax, sternly. "As you chose to remain out of gates after your act, I have had to wait for you to come in for calling-over. I shall now take you to your head-master, and you need not have the slightest doubt that Dr. Chetwynd will immediately expel you from Topham. The school will dismiss—Vane, come with me."

CHAPTER VI

SOMETHING LIKE AN ALIBI!

HARRY VANE stood rooted.

In his utter amazement and bewilderment, he could not speak. He could only stare helplessly at his form-master.

There was a dead silence in hall. But in the ranks of Fourth A, Caffew gave Randolph Picton-Brown a sidelong frightened look. To most of the fellows in hall, the discovery of Vane's penknife, used to cut the turf, on the spot where the turf had been cut, settled the matter beyond doubt. But Cyril Caffew had not forgotten the look in Randy's eye, or Randy's surreptitious visit to Top Study. His sallow face was scared, as he realised what it was that Randy had done in that study! Picton-Brown caught his frightened look: and his face set, his eyes glinted. He knew what was in Caffew's mind: and he gave him one fierce look of menace, and then turned his head away—cool and indifferent. Caffew was silent. Mr. Carfax's voice was heard again.

"Come!" he snapped.

"I—I—I——!" Harry Vane tried to speak. "I did not—I was never in the Head's garden at all—I—I——"

"I have said that prevarication will not serve you, Vane," said Mr. Carfax, in a grinding voice. "Come with me to the Head."

"But—you must let me speak!" panted Harry. "I—I don't know how that penknife got where you found it—someone must have borrowed it from my study——"

"That will do! Come!"

"I will speak!" Vane almost shouted, his eyes flashing. "I will speak, and you shall hear me, Mr. Carfax. I can prove that I never did it."

"Boy!"

"I tell you I can prove it! You must hear me. I was never in the Head's garden this afternoon, and a dozen fellows are witnesses!" panted Vane.

"Nonsense!"

"I can prove it!" shouted Vane. "I have been in detention——"

"What! What? I gave you no detention to-day, Vane."

"No, sir! But the head-master did——"

"The head-master!"

"Yes, sir. Dr. Chetwynd saw me sliding down the banisters, and gave

me detention in Monsieur Le Bon's class. That was just after I saw you from the landing window, going across to the Head's garden with Mr. Spood. I was in the French detention class while you were in the Head's garden!" panted Vane.

Bod Hood stepped out from the Remove.

"That's true, sir!" called out Bob.

Mr. Carfax did not heed him. He was staring blankly at Harry Vane. For the first time, a doubt came into his mind. The evidence had seemed unquestionable: yet if what the boy said was true, it could not have been Vane who threw the turf from the shrubbery. And that was a matter easily put to the test. There was a brief silence: and then the master of Fourth A spoke, in a much gentler voice.

"I must inquire into this. You say that you were sent into detention by the head-master this afternoon, Vane?"

"Dr. Chetwynd took me there, sir, and spoke to Monsieur Le Bon."

"At what time was this?"

"I don't know exactly—but the Head will know, sir. It was a few minutes after I saw you in the quad with Mr. Spood."

Mr. Carfax drew a deep breath.

"The attack on me occurred more than half-an-hour later than that, Vane. It was about half-past three when the turf was flung at me. Where were you at half-past three?"

Vane almost smiled. All was clear now.

"I was in the French detention-class, sir, with a dozen other fellows and Monsieur Le Bon. I had been there at least half-an-hour by then, and I stayed there till Mossoo dismissed his class at five minutes to four."

Mr. Carfax glanced round. All the masters, excepting the Head, were present at roll: among them, Monsieur Le Bon. The French master stepped forward, without waiting for Carfax to speak.

"Vat ze garçon say is true, Monsieur Carfax," he said. "He sall be brought to my class by ze head-master, and he stay till ze end."

"Dr. Chetwynd brought him to your class-room personally, Monsieur Le Bon?"

"Mais oui! yes, sair."

"At what time was that?"

"Zat would be about zree o'clock, sair," said the French master. "Ze class come to me at two-zirty, and une demi-heure—about half one hour—later, ze Head bring zat garçon to me——"

"It was past half-past three when I was—was attacked!" said Mr. Carfax, slowly. "This boy was in your class-room at the time, Monsieur Le Bon?"

"Mais certainement."

"Thank you," said Mr. Carfax.

There was a deep silence in hall. Harry Vane breathed hard and deep. He had had a narrow escape—he realised that. Whoever it was that had flung the turf at the Remove master's head, had evidently borrowed his pen-knife, and left it on the spot—more than that, he did not suspect. That evidence would have condemned him—but for his unquestionable alibi: no fellow could be in two places at once, and it was proved, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he had been in the detention-room when the turf whizzed at his form-master's head! From the bottom of his heart, he was thankful that the Head had spotted him sliding down the banisters. But for that——!

Mr. Carfax spoke at last.

"Vane! I am sorry that circumstantial evidence placed you under suspicion." His usually sharp voice was very kind. "You are, of course, completely exonerated by what Monsieur Le Bon has told me. You may go, my boy."

And Harry Vane rejoined the Remove, and went out of hall with them: Bob Hood linking arms with him, and other fellows pressing round him, Bunny Binks digging him in the ribs with a fat thumb.

"I say, it wasn't you after all, old chap!" said Bunny. "I say, who was it, though? Must have been a Remove man—nobody else would want to get Carfax. I say, was it you, Didders—Ow! Leave off kicking me, you swob."

Randolph Picton-Brown came slowly out of hall. His face was indifferent, as usual: but there were strange feelings in his breast. Caffew followed him up to No. 3 study.

"You mad ass!" breathed Caffew, when the door was shut. "So that was it. That was what you wanted in Top Study! Are you mad, Dandy? If it comes out, it's you that will be bunked——! Thank goodness you never got by with it! I don't like the fellow any more than you do—but a foul game like that——. You ought to be jolly glad it was a fizzle. You mad fool!"

Picton-Brown did not answer. He had failed—his intended revenge had been as Caffew said, a "fizzle." Now there would be inquiry—rigid inquiry—which meant danger for the plotter. Yet, somehow, the Dandy of Topham was not sure that he was sorry he had failed.

CHAPTER VII

ASKING FOR IT!

"STOP!"

Harry Vane was not disposed to stop at the order of a fellow he disliked and barred. But there was no help for it. He had started to cross the plank bridge over the stream in Topham Wood, taking the short cut back from Combe after going down to the village after class. And as he moved along the single rough plank that formed the bridge, an elegant lounging figure appeared at the other end, coming from the opposite direction. Randolph Picton-Brown, stepping on the plank, met the new junior face to face.

Both stopped, for there was no room to pass. The plank was hardly a foot wide: and the woodland stream, swollen by late rains, lapped over the edge, making it slippery. In the summer the stream was shallow: but in the autumn and winter it was filled to the brim by rain rivulets that trickled down the slopes of the Chilterns. A fellow had to be careful in crossing—which did not prevent the Dandy of Topham from lounging carelessly on the plank with both hands in his pockets. Still with his hands in his pockets, he stood there, facing the new junior, with a mocking smile on his face.

"Go back!" he said.

Harry Vane did not speak. The Dandy of Topham was still in "Coventry," and Vane had no intention of speaking to him. Neither did he feel disposed to go back at the Dandy's order. He had been first on the plank, and it was for Picton-Brown to wait till he had finished crossing, before stepping on it. Obviously the Dandy had done so for the express purpose of blocking his way and forcing him to back off. Vane's eyes glinted, and he stood where he was.

It was several days since the affair of the Head's garden. That affair had not been forgotten—for investigation was still going on. Mr. Carfax was not likely to let the culprit escape, if he could help it: and all the prefects were "on the prowl," as the juniors described it. No discovery had been made—Vane had been proved innocent, but who was guilty was anybody's guess. Only Caffew knew, and Cyril Caffew was silent on the subject. Picton-Brown had little fear of the facts coming to light: but he was not wholly easy in his mind: and that, perhaps, intensified his bitterness towards the fellow he chose to regard as his enemy. And "Coventry" irked him more and more as the days passed. One look at his face now showed that he was in the mood for trouble.

"I've told you to go back, you smudge," he said, in his drawling voice. "Are you goin' back, or do you want me to shift you?"

Vane was driven to speech at last: which no doubt was the Dandy's intention.

"It's for you to go back," he said. "I was first on the plank."

Picton-Brown laughed.

"I've made you talk, at any rate!" he said, tauntingly. "Now I'll make you go back, you rat."

"Get on with it!" said Harry. "If you're fool enough to start a scrap here, we shall both go into the water. If that's what you want, carry on. It will rather spoil your nobby clobber," he added, with a laugh. "Look here, Picton-Brown, don't be a fool—get out of the way. Isn't that overcoat too nobby for a drenching?"

"Will you go back?"

"No, I won't!" said Vane, tersely.

"Then I'll make you."

And, with his usual utter recklessness, the Dandy of Topham pushed on, to drive Vane off the plank bridge.

The new junior, breathing hard, backed away a pace or two. It went against the grain to yield to overbearing insolence, but a struggle on the narrow plank over deep water spelled danger—not so much to Vane, as to the reckless Dandy, who was wearing an overcoat, which Vane was not: and to fall into deep swift water in a thick overcoat was asking for serious trouble. A fellow who went into that swollen stream needed all his freedom of movement, and all his activity, to get out again. Sorely against the grain, Vane backed: and he was rewarded with a sneering laugh from Picton-Brown.

"I fancied I'd make you move, you rotten funk!" he said. "Afraid of a duckin', what? Keep movin', you rat!"

That did it! Harry Vane halted again, his eyes gleaming. Not to save his life would he have taken another backward step.

"You bullying fool, chuck it!" he said. "If you come on another step, we shall both be in danger——"

"Well, get out of danger, you frightened rat!" jeered the Dandy. "I'm comin' on, and you're goin' back!"

And the Dandy tramped right on: and as Vane did not stir a step, he crashed into him. The next second they were both staggering on the plank, their feet slipping on the wet wood, plunging helplessly over.

Splash! splash! Two splashes sounded almost as one.

There were seven or eight feet of water under the plank bridge, and it was running hard, down to the river Luce. Harry Vane went in deep, and came up, panting as his head emerged from the water. His hand, flung out, caught at the plank, and he hung on, the hard current tearing at his legs.

Another moment, and he grasped the plank with both hands, to clamber out. But as he did so, a choked cry reached him, and he turned his head, staring over the turbid foaming surface of the stream.

"Oh!" gasped Vane.

Already six or seven yards from him, swept away on the current, a white face showed above the water—for a moment. Then Picton-Brown was under again—his soaked overcoat dragging him down in spite of all his efforts: the fast current sweeping him away towards the wide river in the distance.

For a second Harry Vane looked at him, in horror. The Dandy could swim—but he could not swim in his overcoat in that wild rush of water. And as it was borne in upon Vane's mind that the hapless junior was being swept away to his death in the river, he let go the plank, and struck out for Picton-Brown. Enmity, bitter hostility, were forgotten in that terrible moment: his only thought was to save his school-fellow—if he could!

But could he? Picton-Brown was still yards away, when his face showed over the water again. He was struggling gamely, his face white and set, but with no sign of fear in it. His struggles would not have saved him: but they kept him afloat for a minute, and in that minute Harry Vane, with a desperate spurt, reached him.

Dandy Randy was going under again, when the new junior's grasp caught him, and dragged him up. He came up choking and panting.

"Hold on to me!" breathed Vane.

The Dandy's eyes burned. Even in that fearful moment, he could not forget that Vane was his enemy.

"Let me go!" he choked.

"Hold on, I tell you!" hissed Vane. "Hold on, and let me use my hands. Picton-Brown, are you mad. Hold on—ooh!" Both heads went under, and the water choked Vane's voice.

He came up again, half-suffocated, but still holding on to the Dandy. The woodland stream was sweeping them helplessly on—already the wide river was in sight ahead, into which the stream was sweeping them. Once swept out into those wide deep waters, it was the end. But even as Vane's head came up, something lashed across his face—it was the trailing branch of a willow on the bank. Instinctively he caught at it with his free hand, and held.

The branch sagged under his weight, to the water. But he got his arm over it, and his other hand, gripping Picton-Brown's collar, kept the Dandy's head above the stream. Picton-Brown's face was white as chalk now: he breathed in spasmodic gasps. Vane could not speak—but he dragged the Dandy closer to the trailing branch, and Randy understood, and clutched at it. The relief from his weight was great: Vane was almost exhausted. But now they were both clinging to the willow, holding on, while the current tore at them and tossed them to and fro. To Vane's astonishment, the Dandy's colourless face broke into a grin.

"O.K. now." His voice came faint, but with its usual mocking tone. "I can manage! Get out, and I'll follow."

Harry Vane worked his way along the trailing branch. It swayed in the water under the weight of the two schoolboys, and he dreaded that it might snap—which would have meant death in the deep river to both of them. But it stood the strain, and Vane reached a stronger branch, grasped it, and dragged himself out of the water.

More slowly, the Dandy worked his way along, and Vane, standing drenched and dripping, watched him anxiously. As Picton-Brown came within reach, he grasped his collar again, and pulled him ashore. The

Dandy sank down in the reeds, utterly spent, in a pool of water. Vane stood panting. Both exhausted, both fully conscious of their fearfully narrow escape, they looked at one another—in silence.

CHAPTER VIII

DANDY RANDY IS SORRY!

“YOU ass!”

The Dandy was the first to speak: and that was what he said. He got on his feet, and stood panting and dripping.

“You ass!” he repeated.

“Thanks!” said Harry, with a faint smile.

“Think I’d have done that for you?” sneered Picton-Brown.

“Yes!”

Dandy Randy gave him a curious look. Then he burst into a laugh.

“Well, perhaps I would!” he said. “Our little rows at Topham don’t amount to much, compared with—that! But—if you knew——” He paused, and then went on, deliberately. “Did you ever guess how your penknife came to be found where that johnny chucked the turf at Carfax?”

“No. The fellow borrowed it, I suppose. What about it?”

“I left it there.”

“You did!” exclaimed Vane, blankly.

“Yes—on purpose.”

Harry Vane stared at him. For a moment or two he did not quite take in the full import of the Dandy’s cool, deliberate words. Then he understood.

“You—you did that—!” Vane stammered. He could hardly believe it. “You—and why?”

“To get you bunked.”

“Good heavens!” breathed Vane.

“Makes you feel a bit sick, what?” sneered Picton-Brown. “It makes me a bit sick myself, if that’s any comfort to you.”

“I’m glad of that, anyway,” said Harry, quietly.

“I’ve told you now,” said the Dandy. “Would you have done what you just did, if you’d known?”

“Yes, of course.”

Picton-Brown laughed again.

“Yes, I suppose you would!” he said. “Well, I’m sorry. That’s all. You can tell the whole form if you like—and Carfax.”

“I shall not say a single word about it,” said Harry.

“I was rather glad it turned out a fizzle,” said the Dandy, in quite a casual tone. “Queer, ain’t it? I don’t like you any more than I did—we’ll never be friends. But there won’t be anythin’ like that—again! I’ve got a limit, though I forgot it for just once. Now this jolly old interestin’ chat will have to stop, if we’re not both goin’ to catch our death of cold. I’m goin’ all out for Topham.”

“Race you!” said Harry, with a smile.

They arrived at the school in a warm glow.

BOB HOOD threw open the door of No. 3 Study in the Remove. Dandy Randy, stretched comfortably in his armchair, was still looking a little pale. He had changed, and looked otherwise his usual natty self: and as Bob looked

in, he lighted a cigarette—perhaps to show that there was nothing the matter with him.

“Unexpected pleasure!” he drawled. Trot in!”

“What on earth’s happened,” asked Bob. “I hear that you and Vane came in drenched to the skin—Vane says you both tumbled into the water in Topham Wood—but Didders says you told him that Vane got you out——”

“Aren’t you rather forgettin’ that I’m in Coventry?” asked the Dandy. “Hadn’t you better cut back to your study for pencil and paper?”

“Oh, don’t be an ass, if you can help it,” growled the captain of the Remove. “What’s happened? Have you been rowing with Vane, or what?”

“Quite! Pickin’ trouble on the plank bridge, and we both went in,” drawled Picton-Brown. “I should still be there if Vane hadn’t fished me out. I should be gettin’ fearfully wet by this time, so I’m rather glad he did. My clobber will never be the same again, even after being cleaned and pressed——”

“Bother your silly clobber! You might both have been drowned——”

“Yes, it was touch and go—especially for me. Next time I pick a row with a fellow, it won’t be in the middle of a plank bridge. Too jolly risky—and a fellow must think of his clothes——”

“You silly ass——”

“Carry on,” said the Dandy, amiably. “It’s a pleasure to hear you, after you’ve been dumb so long, especially when you’re payin’ compliments. Are you goin’ to send yourself to Coventry?”

“What?”

“Didn’t you lay it down that any fellow speakin’ to me would be sent to Coventry along with me? You’ve been speakin’ quite a lot.”

Bob stared at him, and then laughed.

“That’s over—after this!” he said.

“Thank you for nothin’!” drawled Picton-Brown.

Bob Hood tramped out of the study, and closed the door with a bang.

THE END