

The Rookwood Secret Society!



By
Owen
Conquest.

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The Rookwood Secret Society!

By Owen Conquest



Meet the DICTATOR of ROOKWOOD and his Fascist Band! Who is this mysterious figure—the terror of the bullies of the School? Read this thrilling long complete yarn—and find out!

CHAPTER I.

Unpleasant for Captain Punter!

"TEN pounds!"

Arthur Edward Lovell of the Fourth Form at Rookwood put a world of indignation into the words.

His chums, Jimmy Silver, Raby and Newcome, seemed inclined to agree with him for once—an unusual state of affairs in the end study.

"Rotten sharper!" remarked Raby.

"Swindling cad!" concurred Newcome.

"The kid can't pay it, anyhow," said Jimmy Silver.

"Ten pounds, you know!"

Arthur Edward Lovell fixed his eyes grimly on the fifth occupant of the study—Lovell minor of the Third.

The fag did not speak. His face was white and strained, and it needed but

very little observation to perceive that he was worried—desperately so. Indeed, it was not like the independent minor that Lovell knew to come to the end study for help and advice, ready as Arthur Edward always was to give it.

Lovell minor was evidently in a serious scrape, and, judging by the terrific indignation expressed by his major, it was not a scrape of the kind that Rookwood fags were constantly getting into.

"You owe this—this Punter fellow ten quids?" asked Lovell, apparently uncertain if he had heard aright.

"Yes," muttered the fag.

"Gambling!" said Lovell. "You know I warned you never to have anything to do with that gang at the Bird-in-Hand—you got into trouble with them once before."

"Oh, I know all that! If that's all you can say, I'll go and ask Peele."

"You won't get any chance out of Peele, and you know it, you young jackanapes!" snapped Lovell. "And, what's more, I don't want this talked up and down the school—my minor—into debt to a rascally card-sharper to the tune of ten quids! It's got to be kept dark."

"It has!" agreed Jimmy Silver. "Look here, kid. Cough it up, and we'll do our best for you. I expect there's some way out when we've thought it over. Take a pew, and tell us the giddy worst."

"Yes, take a pew—and let's have it plain!" assented Lovell major grimly. "You've been playing cards with the man—this Captain Panter!"

"Yes."
"At the Bird-in-Hand, I suppose. And Joey Hook and that crowd helped to fleece you. How much have you lost exactly?"

"I—I don't know! I lost count! Panter says ten pounds."

"You young ass!"
"You—you see, he gave me odds at first as I was new to the game, and—and I lost——"

"We know that. Get on."
"And then we tossed—double or—or quits," confessed Lovell minor, his face crimson. "I—I lost again, and made him toss double or quits again. That's all."

"Of course you lost each time!" ejaculated Lovell, in disgust. "He used a double-headed penny, you young ass! He simply swindled you!"

"But I've got to pay up," insisted Lovell minor desperately. "He threatened to come straight up to the school if he didn't get the money this afternoon. I'm to meet him at the old stile. I simply must have the cash—can't you understand? I wouldn't have come to you if I hadn't been in a corner—you know that!"

"You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself!" said Lovell coolly. "But I can't stand by and see you hoofed

out of the school. We've got to settle with the man, you chaps!"

"How about a whip-round?" suggested Jimmy Silver.

"Oh, my hat! I've got a sixpence," remarked Raby dismally.

"Four-and-eleven!" said Newcome, laying that amount on the study table. "You're welcome to it, but it isn't much use by itself."

"Luckily I'm flush," said Jimmy Silver complacently.

"Hold on!" snapped Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Eh?"

"We're not paying a penny to this howling cad of a sharper," announced Lovell coolly. "He's got my minor into a hole through rotten trickery—and he's going to be punished. What do you think will happen if we square up? He'll be asking for more in a week or two."

Jimmy Silver, Raby and Newcome looked thoughtful.

"Something in that," agreed Raby.

"Exactly," said Lovell grimly. "I believe I've pointed out before that in this study I'm the man with the brains. I'm grateful to you fellows, of course—it's jolly decent of you to weigh in with your spare cash for this young rascal of a kid——"

"Here, I say——" began Lovell minor. "Carry on!" grinned Jimmy Silver gracefully.

"But paying up would be a sign of surrender—and the man would bleed us dry before he let up," continued Lovell calmly. "Now, my way of dealing with him won't leave any room for argument—and I don't think he'll come back for a second instalment, either!"

"What's your method?" asked Raby.

"I say, you know, there's no time for silly rot," remarked Lovell minor, in alarm. "It's got to be paid this afternoon, or——"

"You shut up!" snapped Lovell major dictatorially. "You've put the matter in my hands, and there's no need to worry. When we've dealt with

Captain Punter we'll give you a stumping—"

"You'll do what, you idiot?"

"Give you a stumping," repeated Lovell calmly. "As a warning to keep out of trouble in future. But just at the moment dealing with Punter is the job in hand. We're doing nothing special this afternoon, Jimmy—"

"We were playing cricket," remarked Jimmy Silver casually.

"Cricket can wait!" snapped Lovell. "You fellows remember I was talking about the Italian Prime Minister this morning—that Johnny Mussolini?"

"I say, we've had enough Mussolini for the present," urged Newcome. "Leave him out of it. This is a committee of ways and means. You can't deal with Captain Punter-like Mussolini would, you know."

"Oh, can't I!" ejaculated Lovell excitedly. "That's just what I intend to do."

"Oh!"

Lovell's chums were silent. There were moments when it was difficult to know just how to take Arthur Edward Lovell. The silence was broken by a gasp from Lovell minor.

"You awful fathead! I want you to lend me the money—I'll pay it back somehow. For goodness' sake don't start any tricks on the man—he's a dangerous customer!"

"So am I!" remarked Lovell coolly. "I think that settles it. You men ready to interview Captain Punter?"

"I—I suppose so."

"Come on, then. He'll be waiting at the old stile—and I think he's going to get a surprise packet!"

"After all, he can't collect the debt legally," said Jimmy Silver thoughtfully. "He deserves to lose the money, if you come to that. And a thundering ragging might persuade him that this district isn't exactly healthy for sharpers and swindlers. It's worth trying."

"Especially when we haven't the cash, in any case," agreed Raby.

The Fistical Four rose to their feet,

and Lovell threw open the study door. His minor gave a gasp of dismay.

"I—I say, you're not going to try ragging the man? Oh, you fatheads, you idiots! He'll come straight up here and tell the Head everything! I shall be expelled—and it will be all your fault, Arthur!"

"Shut up! I'm handling this!" snapped Lovell major.

"I wanted you to help me—I know I oughtn't to have been such a silly, weak fool!" gasped the fag miserably. "But—but you'll only make it worse for me by acting the goat!"

"Keep cool, kid!" said Jimmy Silver quietly. "If we squared, the man would come again. Cut off, and leave him to us, there's a good chap!"

"Come on!" said Lovell.

His minor started after the four juniors, not very hopefully. He had been a fool—a silly fool—and he reproached himself bitterly with the reflection. But, so far as he could see, his major's intervention was only going to make matters worse. Still, the die was cast now.

Jimmy Silver & Co., meanwhile, made their way out of gates and along the narrow lane. Conversation lagged, for there was really nothing to be said. The man Punter was to be met by the stile—and after that the affair was in Lovell's hands. His chums were prepared to back him up in ragging the rascal bald-headed, and they hoped charitably that it would do him good.

There was no doubt that Lovell intended to scare the man off with a ragging of a record kind.

"That's the man!"

Some hundred yards along the lane a tall, dandified figure was leaning against a stile. The Fistical Four did not need telling that it was Captain Punter. The captain was smoking a cheroot and swinging a malacca cane as he waited. He appeared quite pleased at the prospect of an interview with Lovell minor.

"Some captain!" remarked Jimmy Silver, as they approached him. "They

wouldn't have that weed in the Army at any price. I hear he's only a visitor to this district—putting up at the Bird-in-Hand. He probably finds most places too hot to hold him after a while."

The man glanced up as the four juniors halted. He raised his eyebrows a little and continued to swing his malacca cane negligently. His look showed plainly that the presence of the Pistical Four did not alarm, or even interest him.

"Are you Captain Punter?"

The man gave Lovell a glance and nodded. His glance lingered on Lovell's rugged features. Perhaps he recognised a likeness to his latest victim.

"Then you're the man I want to speak to," said Lovell, with satisfaction. "You've been gambling with my minor, and he says he owes you ten pounds. Is that so?"

"You have the facts, young gentleman," agreed the captain, with a little more keenness. "You have come to square the account, I take it?"

"In a way," admitted Lovell grimly. "Not in your way, though. You've got my brother into a mess by rascally trickery, and he doesn't owe you anything like ten pounds. You're not going to be paid a penny, and you're clearing out of this locality by the first train to-morrow morning. Do you hear me?"

"My hat!" murmured Jimmy Silver. "That's putting it plain!"

There was a gleam in the captain's eyes, but he still retained his urbanity.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, young gentleman. But unless the money is paid up to-day I shall be under the painful necessity of calling upon your headmaster and explaining the whole matter."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" snapped Lovell. "Have you got the IOU with you now?"

"The price of the IOU is ten pounds—not a halfpenny less," remarked Captain Punter coolly.

"He's got it on him, Jimmy," said Lovell, breathing hard. "Is that good enough? We'll teach him a lesson, what?"

"I'm with you," agreed Jimmy Silver at once.

"Same here!" concurred Raby and Newcome, with alacrity.

For the first time the captain began to look slightly alarmed. His grasp closed tightly on his malacca cane, not that that would be much protection against four sturdy juniors.

"For the last time," began Lovell, "are you handing over that—Yarooooop!"

He did not finish the sentence as he had intended. A savage slash from Captain Punter's cane took him across the shoulders, and Lovell gave a wild roar.

"Rush him!"

"Smash him!"

"Give him a taste of his own medicine!"

Captain Punter had lost his temper—never of the most equable variety. He was following up the first slash with another and another—and each left its mark on the juniors. But four pairs of hands were laid on the sharper's anatomy at the same moment, and he was lifted almost off his feet and rolled in the narrow lane, with the Pistical Four clinging to him like monkeys.

Really what happened next was never a clear memory to Captain Punter. His cane was wrenched from his grasp, and he was rolled and bumped and pitched hither and thither like a sack of coals. For several minutes it seemed to the captain that a series of earthquakes were occurring round about him. He sat up at last, gasping and spluttering, almost incoherent with rage, while four grim faces met his gaze.

"Are you handing over that IOU?" demanded Lovell curtly.

"Or do you want some more?" asked Jimmy Silver.

Captain Punter spluttered and spat.

"Hang you! Hang you! I'll ruin

your brother for this, you young ruffian! I'll——"

"Turn him over!" rapped Jimmy Silver.

The captain was seized, and before he had realised what was toward he was lying face downward, Jimmy Silver sitting on his head, and Raby and Newcome trampling recklessly on his legs. Lovell, his face set and grim, took the malacca cane in his grasp and swished it through the air.

"Let me gerrup!" came in muffled tones from the dust of the lane. "I'll have the law on you! I'll cut you in ribbons——"

Whack!

Lovell wasted no time in words. He brought the cane down across the captain's elegant trousers with all the force he could muster. A smothered howl from beneath Jimmy Silver was the response.

"Say when!" remarked Jimmy Silver cheerfully. "Three grunts means yes!"

Whack, whack, whack!

Whack, whack, whack, whack, whack!

Lovell was warming to his work, and terrific gasps and groans from the captain showed that the energy was not being wasted.

"Gerrruuuugh! Lemme gerrup! Anything——"

Whack, whack, whack!

"Say when!" remarked Jimmy Silver serenely.

An agonised grunt from the captain was taken to signify assent.

"Chuck it, Lovell!" said Raby.

Lovell, gasping with exertion, "chucked it," and the captain was permitted to regain his feet.

There was no doubt that he had received a terrific licking. He swayed as he stood up, and his eyes glittered at Arthur Edward wolfishly. Lovell met his glances coolly enough.

"Hand it over!" he snapped. "Unless you want another dose! I'm game if you are!"

With four threatening juniors round him, the man had no choice. He drew a pocket-book and handed Lovell a slip.

"It's all right," said Lovell, examining it closely. "And, remember, you clear out of this district to-morrow morning! Let me catch you about here again, and I'll give you something that will make this seem like a joke!"

Captain Punter opened his mouth to speak, but the words refused to come. With a crimson face he turned on his heel and strode rather unsteadily towards the village.

CHAPTER 2.

The Fistical Four's Enemy!

CARTHEW of the Sixth frowned. He was not in a pleasant mood that sunny afternoon. Something was disturbing the prefect's mind.

He had spent the interval since dinner in his study; but he did not go there to work, as "swots" sometimes did on a half-holiday. He had put in some hard thinking, and it had not made him happy.

Often and often there were troubles on Carthew's mind, troubles which did not usually afflict the seniors at Rookwood. It was Carthew's cheery custom to risk his cash on horses, and more than once he had made the painful discovery that the way of the transgressor is hard. What had happened before had come to pass again, and Carthew just at present was in dire need of money.

Lovell minor was not the only victim of the astute Captain Punter. The captain's airs and graces gave confidence where Joey Hook might not, and Carthew had backed heavily on Blue Diamond, a horse which had come in twelfth in a field of thirteen. In consequence he found himself owing Captain Punter the really terrifying sum of twenty pounds—and his prospects of acquiring twenty pounds were remote.

Hence the frown of rage which over-

spread Carthew's face as a yell came to his ears from the direction of the cricket field. Carthew was just going out, but he turned aside to investigate the commotion. He needed somebody to wreak his temper on just then.

As he strode towards Little Side he caught sight of Lovell of the Fourth, his grasp on Peele's collar. Lovell was dragging Peele towards the wicket, and Peele was protesting loudly.

"Cave!"

Lovell's grasp relaxed as he looked round to behold Carthew striding after him to the wicket, ashplant in hand.

"What do you think you're doing with Peele?" asked Carthew.

"Taking him along to practice," said Lovell.

"And since when," inquired Carthew, with heavy sarcasm, "have you been appointed junior captain, Lovell?"

"Go easy, old man!" breathed Jimmy Silver.

Lovell was beginning to look grim.

He had no high opinion of Mark Carthew, and he was not a fellow to hide his feelings successfully. If he despised Carthew for a smoky cad, he showed it. And it was evident to the rest of the juniors, if not to Lovell, that Carthew was in a temper—looking for a victim, as it were.

"Let Peele go!" rapped Carthew. "Now, then! What do you mean by taking the high hand in this manner, Lovell?"

"Because it's jolly well time something was done!" began Lovell hotly. "Peele was frowsting in his study when I routed him out. I'm starting a campaign, if you want to know. In the style of Mussolini, you know. Efficiency from the word go—and no slacking. When I've got Peele batting I'm going to fetch Smythe to bowl to him—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And Tracy and Howard and Lattrey and Gower and the rest to field," continued Lovell, with the utmost calm. "They all need exercise—you can't deny that. In a short time I shall turn

these weedy slackers into first-class cricketers!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!"

The chuckling died away as Carthew rapped out the command. Nobody wanted to be the recipient of that ashplant, and it was only too plain that somebody was "for it."

"You see—" recommenced Lovell.

"I see a cheeky young rascal," said Carthew, unmoved. "What you need, Lovell, is a dose of this. Hold out your hand."

"Wha-a-at!" gasped Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Hold out your hand," repeated Carthew, with enjoyment.

"What on earth for?"

"Insolence!" explained Carthew grimly. "And as you're so keen on efficiency, I think I may as well make it five. Bend over."

"Wha-a-at?" shrieked Lovell. "Me—bend over?"

"And quick!" snapped Carthew. "I've no time to waste. Bend over and take your five unless you want me to lay it across your shoulders!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Hard luck, Lovell!"

"Better knuckle under, old man," whispered Jimmy Silver. "You'll only get it worse if you don't."

"But—but I haven't done anything!" hooted Lovell indignantly.

"You've usurped authority, and added insolence to a prefect!" rapped Carthew. "Now, bend over before I lose my temper!"

For a moment Lovell hesitated, and his chums wondered anxiously if he were going to add defiance to the list of crimes Carthew had outlined. Undoubtedly Carthew was "going it" steeply, but there were occasions when discretion was the better part of valour.

"I give you two seconds!"

Carthew swished his ashplant suggestively.

Lovell set his lips, and bent over.

Swish!

With keen satisfaction Carthew laid

on the strokes. In his state of worry it was some consolation to take it out of Lovell. He would rather have given Captain Punter "five," but that was hardly feasible. So he laid on the strokes with great vim.

Swish, swish, swish, swish, swish!

Lovell was a little pale after that infliction, but it was more the paleness of anger than of pain. It was only with difficulty that the junior kept himself in hand as Carthew smiled mockingly at him.

"Let that be a lesson to you, and remember, there's plenty more where that came from!"

And, with a grin on his face, Carthew headed for the gates. That he left Lovell in a state of seething rebellion did not occur to him. It would have been dismissed from his mind even if it had. He had an appointment with Captain Punter for three-thirty by the old stile. Of the appointment with Lovell minor at three precisely Carthew knew nothing. As he strode up the lane he had no inkling that the Fiscal Four had not long returned from giving the captain the thrashing of his life—a thrashing ten times as severe as Carthew had given Lovell.

The birds were twittering in the trees overhanging the lane, and it was warm and shadowy, and the hum of the bees filled the air. But Carthew neither heard nor saw any of these things; his thoughts were concerned solely with the debt which he had contracted with the captain over Blue Diamond.

A figure was lounging over the stile as Carthew came up, and the prefect steeled himself for the interview. He stared a little as he drew closer, and then he gasped.

"It is I, Carthew. Don't stand there staring like a fool!"

"My only hat! What on earth's happened to you, Punter?"

"I want to speak to you about it. Hang it, do I look as bad as all that?"

Carthew grinned. He could not help it.

The Captain Punter of his acquaint-

ance was a debonair, pale-faced gentleman, nattily attired, and to the last degree aloof. It was partly the captain's aristocratic manner that had induced the prefect to trust him. He knew now how much that manner was worth.

But the man presented a changed appearance—a sadly changed appearance—as he lounged on the stile. His face was no longer pale. It was marked in several places, and it was red and swollen. His natty suit was covered with dust, and torn. His patent shoes were scratched, and his malacca cane was gone. His velvet hat had collected a good deal of mud from the ditch whence he had been rescued. Altogether, he looked a wreck, and there was little sympathy in Carthew's breast.

"You look as if a cyclone had struck you," he remarked. "Apart from that, there isn't much wrong. However did it happen?"

"I've been through it!" said Captain Punter, with a glint in his beady eyes. "And I'm going to make them pay for it dearly, too! But that isn't the point. How much have you brought me?"

"You see——" began Carthew. He coloured up as the other's lip curled.

"Same old story, I suppose. Hard up—what? No remittances? Pay in a week or two at the outside? Well, I'm telling you flat—it won't do!"

"Look here! You must give me time!" protested Carthew, in alarm. "I can't pay now. But you won't get anything out of splitting. Don't be a fool, Punter!"

"I tell you I'm fed-up!" snapped the captain savagely. "You owe me twenty pounds! I don't suppose you'll be able to pay for weeks."

"I'll—I'll manage somehow," promised Carthew. "Your money's safe enough. Only I must have a little time."

"Always the same old tale!" sneered the captain derisively. "But the time never comes! You've had a fortnight already, and I haven't seen a shilling."

Look here! Are you willing to do a little job for me and call the debt settled?"

Carthew's eyes narrowed at the suggestion. But he felt a tinge of fear. He could not imagine anything he could do to wipe out a debt of twenty pounds. But it was an avenue of escape, and he could not afford to throw away the chance.

"What do you want done?"

"It isn't very hard," said Captain Punter quietly. "Do you know a fag at the school—a kid named Lovell?"

Carthew nodded.

"I've been doing business with him, and he owes me ten pounds."

"What! A fag owing ten quid!" ejaculated Carthew.

"Mind, this is strictly confidential. I'd have got it out of the kid, but his elder brother and three other young ruffians—"

"Silver, Raby, and Newcome," remarked Carthew.

"They came to see me at three here," continued the captain reminiscently, "instead of the kid. If I'd had any warning I'd have smashed them; but—"

"Great Scott! They handled you?" gasped Carthew.

"And took the kid's I O U!" snapped the captain grimly. "I shall be sore for weeks. They thrashed me with my own cane!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" breathed Carthew.

"I've lost my proof—and my money! But the matter doesn't end there!"

"I gave Lovell major a licking just before I came out, if that's any comfort to you!" grinned Carthew.

Captain Punter nodded appreciatively.

"That's not enough—not by a long chalk!" he snapped. "No man handles Gerald Punter without regretting it! I'm going to make those young hooligans wish they'd never been born, I tell you!"

"Yes. But how?" asked Carthew uneasily.

"With your help, if you know what's good for you!" said the captain. "You haven't any chance of paying off what you owe, and I'm offering you an easy way out. You'll be a fool not to take it."

"I dare say," agreed Carthew. "But what have I got to do? I'm jolly well not getting mixed up in any villainy, that's flat!"

"If you ached all over like I do, you wouldn't worry about that!" retorted the captain. "I've been tanned like a dog, and they're going to pay for it! By gosh, I winged a man once for less! See here!"

"I—I say, I'm not standing for anything shady—"

"You'll do as you're told!" rapped the captain, his eyes glinting dangerously. "I've got friends at the Bird-in-Hand. I can get them to help me deal with the youngsters. All four are going to get the lambasting of their livs, you can take it from me! I look to you to lure them into a convenient place—that barn over there, say."

"Look here! This is rank hooliganism!" snapped Carthew, his temper beginning to rise. "You can count me out of your rotten schemes, Punter! I'll pay up in a week or two. I'm expecting a lot of cash for my birthday. How does that suit you?"

Captain Punter eyed the prefect grimly for a few moments. But he could see that for once Carthew was firm. Deliberately handing over four Rookwood juniors to the gentle mercies of an out-and-out ruffian and his friends was an action from which even Carthew, rascal and bully as he was, shrank in disgust.

And the captain knew enough to press his suit at once.

"A fortnight," he agreed coolly. "Not a day longer. If you don't pay up then the offer will still be open. If you refuse it, your headmaster will learn something he doesn't know about you. Think it over."

And with a curt nod, Captain Punter hastened along the lane. Carthew

turned back towards Rookwood with mixed feelings.

He had a breathing-space, but he had little hope of raising the money. The birthday was pure fiction, and before he reached the school Carthew found himself half-regretting that he had been so quick to refuse the loophole that was offered him.

It was with a preoccupied mind that Carthew called his fag and partook of tea.

CHAPTER 3.

Up Against Carthew!

"TUBBY!"

Tubby Muffin glanced round rather apprehensively.

It was Arthur Edward Lovell who had called him, and the sight of Lovell did not appear to be reassuring.

Prep was in full swing, or should have been. But neither Lovell nor Muffin was thinking of prep. And Tubby had a feeling that he knew why the former was not.

"It wasn't me, you know. I never took 'em!"

"Eh? Took what?"

"The—the tarts. I mean, there weren't any tarts. That's what I really meant. You—you see?"

Lovell stared, and then burst into a laugh.

"Oh, the tarts! Jimmy was saying somebody had bagged them. Never mind the tarts now, Tubby. I want to speak to you."

It was Tubby's turn to stare at that.

Fascinating fellow though he was, fellows did not usually seek him out solely for the joy of his conversation. And Tubby was not to know yet that Lovell was being diplomatic.

So he stared rather suspiciously at Lovell.

"You know everything, old man," went on Lovell indulgently. "Not much that goes on at Rookwood without your knowledge, Tubby—what?"

"Well, that's so," assented Muffin. He chose to take the remarks as a com-

pliment. "I keep my eyes peeled, you know."

"Just so," agreed Lovell. "I dare say you know that Carthew is going on the randan to-night—what?"

Lovell eyed Tubby very closely as he said that. He did not know that Carthew was going on the randan that evening. It was a shaft at venture—part of his exceedingly diplomatic proceedings.

"Eh? How did you know?" demanded Muffin, in surprise.

"Isn't he?"

"I happened to hear Catesby and Frampton discussing a little party in Knowles' study to-night," admitted the fat junior. "Not that I should call that going on the randan. I believe Carthew's hard up, as a matter of fact."

Lovell nodded, his eyes gleaming. He knew what he wanted to know now.

"Thanks, old fat man!" he remarked carelessly. "About those tarts—"

"I say, you know! I never touched 'em!" ejaculated Tubby, in alarm.

"I was going to kick you for wolfing them," said Lovell coolly. "Now I won't. Think yourself lucky."

And Lovell strolled along the Fourth Form corridor to the end study, leaving Tubby Muffin slightly mystified.

Jimmy Silver glanced up unhappily as Lovell entered the study. Three juniors were dutifully doing their prep. Only Lovell was scorning the reckoning with Mr. Dalton in the morning. And when Lovell chose not to work it was difficult to carry on in the same room with him.

"Sit down and tackle this giddy exercise," advised Jimmy, shoving a chair forward. "It's a corker! You'll wish you'd given it a look-over to-morrow with Dicky."

Lovell sat down, but he did not start on the exercise. More important matters than Latin exercises were occupying the mind of Arthur Edward Lovell at that moment.

"Better get on with it," remarked Raby.

"Plenty of time to settle with Carthew to-morrow," said Newcome.

"Here's a pen," said Jimmy Silver kindly.

Lovell gave his chums a glance.

"You fellows weren't told to bend over in front of half the school, were you?"

"No, old chap. Carthew's a Prussian, a Hun, a vandal—or anything you like to call him. But Dicky will expect this exercise done in the morning."

"Let him expect, then!" said Lovell charitably. "I've found what I wanted to know—from Muffin."

The scratching of pens was the only response.

"Carthew is going across the quad for a little party in Knowles' study to-night," continued Lovell thoughtfully.

Scratch, scratch, scratch!

"And that's when I'm going to settle with him," observed Lovell grimly. "Fancy making me bend over before all the fellows—just because I was helping a slacking duffer to keep himself fit! Huh!"

"Oh, give your jaw a rest, and get on with this!" grunted Raby. "How's a fellow to work with you mumbling all the time!"

Lovell breathed hard.

"If I could have just two minutes with the Johnny that invented the ablative absolute——" remarked Newcome contemplatively.

"Silence all round!" rapped Jimmy Silver. "We shall never get done to-night; and there's a meeting to pick the team against Bagshot afterwards. Get on!"

And for half an hour there was silence in the end study while the Fistical Four—Lovell at last deigning to take up a pen—ploughed unhappily through the exercise that Mr. Dalton had set them.

Jimmy Silver was the first to finish, and Raby and Newcome threw down their pens a moment later. Lovell was still lost in the intricacies of the ablative absolute—and likely to remain

so. Lovell's thoughts were much more on Carthew than on Latin just then.

"Meeting in ten minutes," warned Jimmy Silver, turning to the door. "If you've got anything to say, better be there, Lovell. Come on, you men!"

Jimmy and Raby and Newcome left the study and descended to the Common-room, where a crowd of fellows awaited them. The ten minutes elapsed, and Lovell had not turned up. The door was closed, and the cricket meeting progressed, not without argument.

An end was put to it by Bulkely rapping on the door.

"Bed-time, kids! Chuck that row and come out!"

"Right-ho, Bulkely!"

The meeting broke up—a number of fellows still trying to force their claims to inclusion in the team on Jimmy Silver. Uncle James of Rookwood turned a deaf ear to them, and ran up to the end study.

As he expected, Lovell was still there, reading.

"Bed-time, old chap! Done your prep?"

"Is it? Oh, good!"

Arthur Edward Lovell seemed quite pleased at the prospect of bed. He accompanied his chums to the dormitory in a very cheery mood.

"Decided to give Carthew a rest, what?" asked Raby.

"No."

"Oh! I thought you seemed more cheerful, old man."

"Little boys shouldn't ask questions if they don't want to be told stories," said Lovell, grinning.

The subject of Carthew was dropped among the Fistical Four after that. Evidently Lovell still nursed his grievance, in spite of his improved spirits. Jimmy Silver slipped into bed, hoping that by the morning some of his chum's wrath would have evaporated.

"Good-night, Lovell old man!"

"Good-night, Jimmy! Yaw-aw! I'm tired."

Which remark was exceedingly diplomatic of Arthur Edward Lovell.

Deep and regular breathing soon told him that his chums were slipping into the arms of Morpheus, unsuspecting of any intentions he might have. And sleep was not the next item on Lovell's programme.

Alone in the end study he had thought it out. Carthew had taken an unwarrantable liberty with him; had made him a laughing-stock before a crowd of fellows on the cricket-field. The actual physical hurt of that "five" did not sting Lovell half so much as the hurt to his pride. For that he had to be avenged—and it was for revenge that he lay awake in the darkness, listening to the quarters as they chimed from the ivied clock-tower.

Carthew would be thinking of slipping across the quad for his party with Knowles and Catesby and Frampton—probably via the passage connecting the Classical and Modern sides of Rookwood. It would not be difficult for a prefect to secure the key of the dividing door.

Lovell gave Carthew plenty of time. His programme depended on that. But he rose at last and dressed swiftly. Wearing rubber-soled shoes, he slipped out of the dormitory and headed for the Sixth-Form corridor.

He approached Carthew's study with great caution. The Sixth-Form corridor was silent and shadowy, and Carthew was evidently gone, or was not going. Lovell's fingers closed on the door-handle, and he turned it. The door remained fast.

"My hat! He's locked it and taken the key!" he muttered.

Lovell bent down and applied his eye to the keyhole. Through it he could see the moonlight streaming in at the window opposite. There was no key. That pointed plainly enough to the fact that Carthew was already gone to the Modern side.

For a moment Lovell hesitated. Then he crept along the corridor to the end, where he knew there was a study empty

—a senior who had left only a few weeks before. The door gave to his touch, and he slipped to the window. The Sixth-Form studies were all on the ground-floor, and it was the work of a few moments only for Lovell to push up the sash and drop into the quad.

Approached from the outside, Carthew's window was shut and the catch fastened. But Lovell had come prepared. He drew a Scout's knife, and, using the thinnest blade, worked it against the sash. It gave, and the window slid up silently. A second or two later and Lovell stood in the prefect's study.

He did not waste time once he had arrived there.

The light of the moon was sufficient to make out the furniture, and that was all Lovell needed. He was handicapped by the fact that he could not make a noise, for the seniors sleeping on either side would have heard it immediately. But a lot could be done in silence, or nearly so, and Lovell set about accomplishing it.

The contents of the study cupboard—jam and condensed milk and butter and cakes—were distributed liberally round the room, on walls, pictures, carpet—everywhere they would stick.

By this time the study had taken on a most remarkable appearance—enough to startle Carthew violently when he arrived home and caught sight of it. But Lovell had not finished yet. With a happy inspiration, he took down the pictures, and removed the glass from each. With the aid of his knife, he ripped each picture from its frame and made them all into a roll. This he stuffed into a crevice up the chimney.

"My hat! It's beginning to look something like!" grinned Lovell, surveying his handiwork.

He had almost a mind to go, but a last thought occurred to him. A few shovelfuls of soot from the chimney, scattered around the study in generous sweeps, added to the chaos which was to greet Carthew's eye on his return.

The Fourth-Former took a last look before leaving via the window.

The denuded walls, the jam, and the soot combined in an effect that defied description. It was doubtful if even Carthew would be able to find words to express himself when he saw it.

Lovell burst into a chuckle.

He was tempted to leave a card on the table, or inscribe a farewell message on the looking-glass, but he realized that that would not do. Carthew might suspect, but he had to find out who did all this himself.

Grinning cheerily, Lovell dropped from the window and re-entered the House through the window of the empty study. A hasty visit to a bath-room rendered him clean again and rid him of the last evidence of guilt.

With infinite caution he opened the dormitory door and crept to his bed. There was a sleepy grunt as he undressed.

"Hallo! Who's that moving?"

No reply.

A figure sat up in bed, and Lovell recognised it. It was Jimmy Silver.

"Shut up, you ass! It's me—Lovell."

"Where on earth have you been, you ass?" ejaculated Jimmy.

"Ragging Carthew!"

"Wh-a-a-at? What do you mean?"

"I've paid off what I owe him," said Lovell, grinning in the dark and slipping into bed.

"Oh, you fathead! What potty game have you been up to now?"

"I've ragged his study," answered Lovell coolly. "He'll lose ten years' growth when he catches a glimpse of it. Ha, ha, ha!"

And Lovell burst into a fresh chuckle as he thought of it.

"Ragged—ragged his study!" repeated Jimmy Silver dazedly. "Oh, you ass! You fathead! He'll be down on you like a ton of bricks for this, you idiot!"

"Let him!" remarked Lovell carelessly.

"You ass!"

"Thanka!"

"You—you imbecile!"

"Yaw-aw! I'm going to sleep. Give your lower jaw a rest, Jimmy, old man."

"You—you——"

Jimmy Silver stuttered.

He felt unable to express his opinion of Arthur Edward Lovell at that moment.

CHAPTER 4.

Lovell is "For It."

"MY dear chap——"
"Carthew will skin you!"
"My dear chap——"

"Not that he doesn't deserve it," admitted Jimmy Silver. "A rotter like Carthew deserves all that comes to him—and he laid into you a jolly sight too thick. But, all the same, he will tear his hair when he sees that study—or, rather, I suppose he has done by now."

"Must have done," remarked Raby. "It's only a few minutes to brekker-bell. I'm expecting a visit from Carthew at any moment myself."

"A stormy one," agreed Newcome.

Arthur Edward Lovell drew a patient breath.

It was early; breakfast was due in a few minutes. And Lovell had just, in the privacy of the end study, informed his chums of the havoc wrought overnight in the study of Carthew of the Sixth. Hence a difference of opinion among the Fistical Four.

Lovell was cool and confident; his chums apprehensive and suspecting that Lovell's excitement had taken him a little too far.

"You see, he will be bound to report it," explained Jimmy Silver. "And the Head will look on it as an outrage——"

"My dear chap," interrupted Lovell serenely, "if you could see an inch in front of your nose, you'll see that whatever Carthew wants to do he won't dare to do it!"

"Why not?"

"Where was he while I was wrecking his study?" inquired Lovell coolly.

"Playing cards with Knowies and his set, I suppose."

"Just that. Can't you see now, you asses?"

"Phew! I'm beginning to see daylight," remarked Jimmy Silver thoughtfully. "Carthew can't very well report that a lot of damage was done while he wasn't in his study—when he ought to have been fast asleep like a good little boy. My hat! He's in a corner!"

"Exactly," assented Lovell complacently.

"By Jove, something in that!" agreed Raby. "Man can't complain of what goes on in his study while he's on the giddy razzle. Did you think all that out yourself, Lovell?"

"Why, you ass—" began Lovell sulphurously.

"Steady, old man," said Jimmy Silver soothingly. "I believe you're right—Carthew won't dare to kick up a shindy. What a score for the Fourth! You're developing into quite a brain-worker, Lovell, old bean. Of course, Carthew will suspect—"

"He can," said Lovell, grinning. "There's no charge!"

"Lovell!"

A fat face appeared in the study doorway, and the podgy figure of Tubby Muffin rolled, uninvited, through it.

Four hands were raised simultaneously, and four index fingers were directed at the open door.

"Scat!"

"Scuttle!"

"Travel!"

"Hit the trail, Fatty!"

"Lovell! Is Lovell here? Oh, there you are!" ejaculated Muffin, breathing hard with excitement. "Shut up scating, you silly asses! I say, Lovell, you're for it, you know!"

"I'm what?" exclaimed Lovell.

"For it!" said Muffin, with emphasis.

"What for? Cough it up, you fat-head!"

"Carthew," said Muffin. "Carthew says he's going to skin you and flay you, and then boil you in oil—"

"Nice man," remarked Lovell.

"And all for wrecking his study."

finished Muffin, almost bubbling with excitement.

"Not really?" asked Lovell, affecting a yawn.

"Aren't you going to hide?" ejaculated Tubby, as Lovell continued to swing his legs from the study table, whereon he was sitting. "I know I should, if Carthew was after me looking like he was just now. You must be an ass—I looked into the study. Did you make all that mess, Lovell?"

Arthur Edward Lovell grinned.

His chums were looking serious. In their opinion, the situation was becoming serious. It was not a question of what Carthew could or could not do, but what he would do, now that he had seen the state his study was in.

But Lovell did not regard the matter seriously at all. Muffin's wonder at his daring made him chuckle.

"Alone I did it," he answered, grinning. "Did it look pretty in daylight, old fat bean?"

"Like—like—I can't describe it!" gasped Muffin.

"Ha, ha! And Carthew's coming here, raging, what!"

"Foaming at the mouth and twisting his ashplant," said Muffin impressively.

"Oh, my hat! Here he is!"

Tubby had been standing near the door. But as Carthew loomed up in the passage he skipped across the study and took refuge behind the table. Tubby Muffin did not want to break the fury of the storm, as it were. He left that unpleasant task to the imperturbable Lovell.

Carthew's eyes glistened in at the doorway, and they came to rest on Lovell's smiling visage. Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome looked grim. Lovell might be to blame, but they did not intend to stand by and watch Carthew wreak his ugly temper on their chum.

The prefect appeared to have difficulty in finding speech at first. When he spoke it was almost a snarl. The least pretty side of Carthew's unpleasant nature was uppermost now.

"Lovell, get off that table!"

"Quite comfy, (thanks!" said Lovell calmly.

"Get off that table! You hear me?"

"Get off, you ass!" breathed Jimmy Silver. "He's probably looking for a chance—no excuse is better than none!"

"What did you say, Silver?"

"Ahem!"

"I demand to know what it was. Tell me."

"Hem!"

"Very well. Hold out your hand."

Jimmy Silver hesitated. He could see Carthew's game clearly enough now. The bully of the Sixth could not mention the study ragging, but he could take it out of the Fistical Four in other ways—and this was the start. But he was in the right so far. Jimmy held out his hand grimly.

"Jimmy, you ass——" began Lovell.

Swish, swish!

In spite of himself, Uncle James of Rockwood winced.

"The other hand."

Swish, swish!

Jimmy Silver was pale after that infliction. The severity of the strokes was out of all proportion to the offence. Lovell's face was grim and set.

Carthew gave him a look, and it was easy to see that he was in a furious mood. But three juniors at least met his gaze with hostility.

"Lovell, do you know anything about the ragging of my study?"

Lovell raised his eyebrows.

"This morning," said Carthew thickly, "I rose early and took a fairly long stroll. On my return—I was absent an hour—just after rising-bell, I found my study had been wrecked, evidently the work of some reckless young hooligan. It was not done when I went out——"

"Well, my hat!" breathed Lovell.

"You—you Ananias!"

"What?"

"It was done last night—while you were playing cards over on the Modern side!" roared Lovell angrily. "And you know it, you rotter!"

"It was done this morning—after I went out for a stroll," said Carthew evenly. "I shall stick to that—and there's nothing to disprove it. You admit your guilt, then?"

Lovell stuttered.

He could find nothing to say.

And his chums' faces were grim.

Carthew, with rare cunning, had evolved his version of the facts—a version he could present to the "beaks" without fear of his forbidden practices coming to light. Brainy as Arthur Edward Lovell had been, Carthew had outpointed him. And the situation was serious—remarkably so.

"Look here," began Lovell indignantly, "I did it—you may as well know that. But report it, and I'll say when I did it, too. You'll have to prove that it happened early this morning."

"You were down early," said Carthew coolly. "I got that from Muffin. You can't deny what I say. I give you your choice—take a record licking from me, or let me report it to the Head. You'll be taught a lesson, either way."

Lovell's lips were set. It seemed that, after all, Carthew had trapped him. But his face brightened suddenly. A chord of memory had stirred.

"Wait a minute!" he ejaculated grimly.

Carthew slipped his ashplant into his hand.

"When I was ragging your study," said Lovell, with enjoyment, "I remember I knocked down your clock—it fell on the rug, and didn't make much sound. But it stopped—I remember that. It ticks rather loudly, if you remember. It wasn't ticking when I left the study. Have you put it on again this morning?"

Carthew bit his lip. His look showed plainly enough that he had not. And the clock would be witness to Lovell's story.

Carthew turned to the door.

He found Newcome and Raby lined in his path. Jimmy Silver and Lovell closed in from behind.

"I—I may have made a mistake!" said Carthew, moistening his dry lips.

"No doubt about it—you have!" grinned Lovell. "And I guess it won't be much good your trying to get that clock to go again—something went inside when it fell."

"Get out of my way, Raby!" snapped Carthew.

"Not yet," grinned Raby. "You haven't apologised."

"Haven't what?"

"Haven't apologised for licking Jimmy—and making up lies into the bargain," said Raby. "You can say you're sorry, or take a ragging. We're giving you the choice, same as you gave Lovell, you know."

"You—you—get out of the way!" roared Carthew, losing his temper at last. "Stand there another second and you'll get my ashplant!"

As Raby did not move, the prefect did not hesitate.

The ashplant swept up, and there was a loud thwack and a louder yell as it descended with terrific force on Raby's shoulders.

"Yarough! You dangerous maniac! Mob him!"

"Grab him!" panted Jimmy Silver.

"Down with Carthew!" roared Arthur Edward Lovell.

Carthew made a dash for the passage.

He entered it with four enraged juniors close behind him, yelling furiously. Their yells awoke to life the whole passage, and in a flash fellows began to pour out of the studies. In the midst of the uproar the breakfast-bell sounded, but for once it was given no heed.

"What's up?"

"What's the racket?"

"Oh, my hat! Carthew!"

"After him!"

"He came here to rag the Fourth!" hooted Lovell. "Rag him! Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with the Sixth!"

A mob of excited juniors swept after Carthew of the Sixth as he broke for

the stairs. Carthew was not thinking of his dignity. His one desire was to get away.

He reached the head of the stairs with a rush, but not before Jimmy Silver and Lovell, and Mornington and Conroy and several other fellows. As Carthew ran, a foot was stretched out, and his leg was hooked away from under him. With a crash that shook the staircase Carthew went over.

"Woooooop! You young fiends! Woooooop!"

Carthew went over, and nearly a dozen fellows piled on him immediately. In a trice he was hidden from sight amid a struggling mass of humanity, each trying to get in a punch on Carthew's anatomy.

Then, when he began to feel that every bone in his body was broken, the prefect was lifted bodily and poised in the grasp of many hands over the staircase.

"Oh! Ow! Yow-wooop! Lemme down, you young ruffians! I'll smash you!"

"One!" called Jimmy Silver. "When I say three, let him go—and a good swing, mind!"

"You dare!" panted Carthew desperately.

"Two!"

"You—you——"

"Three!"

And at the word three Carthew was swung far out over the staircase and let go.

Possibly it was a reckless proceeding. Carthew might have crashed on the stairs and done himself some serious injury, but the juniors were too excited to think of that.

Fortunately for Carthew, he did not crash on the stairs. His fall was broken in quite an unexpected manner. For one giddy moment he hovered in space, and then a figure—a figure in cap and gown—appeared at the foot of the stairs. The figure appeared only just in time.

Mr. Dalton was ascending, to see why the Fourth had not come down to

breakfast, while Carthew was descending, because he could not help it. They met midway, and there was a gasp and a crash. Before the Fourth's horrified gaze Carthew and their Form-master rolled, inextricably mixed, down the stairs. Each bump their Form-master suffered in the descent increased the horror of his pupils above.

Mr. Dalton rolled over at the foot of the stairs and gazed for a moment at Carthew. He did not speak. Then he transferred his glance to Jimmy Silver & Co. at the head of the stairs.

His voice, when he spoke, resembled the rumble of distant thunder.

"Silver!"

"Oh dear! Yes, sir!"

CHAPTER 5.

Carthew Decides!

"WHAT—what is the meaning of this, Silver?"

Jimmy Silver groaned inwardly. The rest of the Classical Fourth shuffled their feet uneasily.

There was really nothing to be said. Mr. Dalton knew as much as there was to be known—he had borne the brunt of the whole affair, in fact. In those circumstances he could hardly be expected to be in a calm and reasonable mood.

"You—you see, sir——" began Jimmy.

Mr. Dalton's lips were set as he ascended the stairs, with Carthew, bruised and breathless, but grinning triumphantly, just behind him.

"I have just witnessed a lamentable display of hooliganism!" said Mr. Dalton icily. "I demand to know the meaning of this at once. Silver, you are head boy of the Form. Tell me."

"Choke it up!" murmured Lovell. "Dicky can't flay us!"

"Lovell!"

"Sir?"

"Did I ask you to speak?"

"Nunno, sir!"

"Then kindly do not. Silver, am I to address you again?"

"You—you see, sir, Carthew came up into our passage to—to speak to Lovell, and we—we threw him downstairs. We didn't see you in time, sir. We wouldn't have thrown Carthew at you for the world, sir."

There was a faint chuckle at that and a scowl from Carthew. But Mr. Dalton's frown did not conduce to chuckling.

"So I imagine," said Mr. Dalton coldly. "You say Carthew came here to speak to Lovell. Do you consider that a good and sufficient reason for throwing a prefect down the staircase? Carthew might have been seriously hurt. If that is all you have to say, I am surprised at you, Silver!"

Jimmy Silver gasped.

Put that way, the ejection of Carthew assumed terrific proportions. And it was difficult to make a Form-master see the truth of the matter.

"Carthew came up here to bully me," said Lovell bluntly. "Jimmy and my pals weren't standing by and seeing that—they cleared him out of the passage. That's how it lies, sir."

"Oh! What have to say to that, Carthew?"

Carthew's eyes glinted evilly.

He was hurt, and his dignity had suffered. Now he had the upper hand, and he did not hesitate to use it.

"I came here to ask Lovell for some lines, sir," said Carthew coolly. "Before I could speak the young rascals made a rush at me, and the whole passage was—ahem!—pursuing me. I had no alternative but to run. The rest you know, sir. In my opinion, they want tanning till they can't howl!"

"I did not ask for your opinion, thank you!" snapped the Form-master. "But there is no denying that my boys have acted in an utterly reckless and disrespectful manner. I am sorry that boys of my Form should have treated you so, Carthew."

Carthew smiled. It was as good as an apology for the misdemeanours of the Fourth, and it was a feather in Car-

thew's cap. He enjoyed the effort it cost Mr. Dalton to make it.

"Silver!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You have nothing to say in extenuation of your conduct?"

"Only that Carthew was bullying Lovell, sir. We interfered, and called in the rest of the fellows. They aren't really to blame, sir."

"Every boy who had a hand in assaulting Carthew is to blame," retorted Mr. Dalton. "I can see that you need a lesson. The whole Form will be gated on the next half-holiday. You will attend in the Form-room at two o'clock, when Carthew will set you to work till five. That is all."

"Oh, sir!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Lovell.

The ejaculations of the Fourth did not affect Mr. Dalton. He swept down the stairs, Carthew accompanying him, and the juniors followed more slowly.

"But Dicky surely knows that we're due at Bagshott next half!" ejaculated Raby excitedly. "Oh dear! That rotten cad Carthew! Just like him, to muck up a big fixture!"

"Of course, the howling rotter had it all planned out," growled Lovell angrily. "He knew Dicky would come down like a ton of bricks if we laid hands on him. He was bound to catch us one way or the other."

"It's awful!" agreed Jimmy Silver thoughtfully. "Pankley & Co. will crow no end if we have to scratch. Blow Carthew! Bust Carthew! Bust Carthew, in fact!"

"Tell you what," suggested Mornington hopefully, "if we're as good as gold in Form to-day, Dicky may relent. Jimmy could spin it to him like a Dutch uncle after class, and there might be a chance—what!"

"My hat, yes!"

"It's worth trying," agreed Jimmy Silver, his eyes brightening.

"Good as gold, then," warned Mornington, as the Fourth trooped, late, in to breakfast.

Breakfast was a meagre meal with the Fourth that morning.

Usually Mr. Dalton had to reprimand several fellows for talking, and to keep an eagle eye on Tubby Muffin's gaseous performances. But this particular morning the Fourth was on its very best behaviour. Nobody talked and nobody whispered. There was no need even for a sharp word to Muffin. Mornington, who sat next to him, kept the fat junior in order.

When the bell for classes went Mr. Dalton came into the Form-room with a grim brow. He looked considerably startled to see the whole Fourth in their places, waiting demurely for his arrival. And they were not talking. The usual cheery hum of conversation was absent. A pin could have been heard to drop.

Mr. Dalton stared a little, but made no comment. Perhaps he began to perceive the reason for the startling change. If so, he did not show it.

"You will give your exercises to Silver, boys," said Mr. Dalton calmly. "While I am marking them, go on with your Virgil. I shall expect the next passage to be translated by the time I have finished."

In respectful silence the Fourth settled down to Virgil, Jimmy Silver collecting the exercises set for prep and handing them to the Form-master.

Mr. Dalton began to mark, and Lovell whispered to Jimmy:

"It's working. Dicky is beginning to look quite cheery."

"Get on with your Virgil, ass!"

"I say, do you think he will spot my exercise?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"I didn't have time to finish it. And I'm not sure if it's quite right in places. Oh, my hat!"

Mr. Dalton had been engrossed in marking the exercises. Now he glanced up, and his glance—a grim glance—settled on Arthur Edward Lovell.

"What do you mean by submitting this exercise, Lovell? It is incomplete."

"I—I didn't have enough time, sir!" gasped Lovell.

"And it is full of the most absurd

mistakes. Do you or do you not know the definition of an ablative absolute, Lovell?"

"Oh, yes, sir! An—an ablative absolute is—is—well, an ablative absolute, sir."

"Oh dear!" groaned Jimmy Silver.

Latin was not Lovell's strong point. He was much better on the playing-field than in class. And at Latin he was slightly worse than at most other subjects. It was sheer bad luck that Mr. Dalton should have picked on him on this especial morning.

"You are an ignorant boy, Lovell. I really do not know which is the bigger dunce—yourself or Muffin. Come out before the class!"

Lovell groaned, but he stepped out.

Mr. Dalton swished his cane.

Swish, swish! Swish, swish!

"That will do. Next time you will give more attention to your Latin preparation, Lovell."

"Oh yes, sir!"

Mr. Dalton went on marking exercises, while Lovell nursed his aching palms under cover of his desk. The Form-master paused to accost Tubby Muffin, and then he spoke to Peele, and Gower and Lattrey. It was not a happy morning for the Fourth, after all. And when dismissal came at last, Jimmy Silver did not approach his Form-master. It was hardly a polite moment.

There was a meeting extraordinary of the football committee in the end study, at which there was some very plain speaking. But plain speaking did not improve the situation; only angelic behaviour could do that.

"Try again after class—if Lovell hasn't trodden on Dicky's corns again," suggested Mornington sagely.

But afternoon classes were not smoothly conducted, and Jimmy Silver postponed his petition till the next day—the day before the Bagshott match. Once again the Fourth trooped into class, and once again they did their best to avoid the vials of Mr. Dalton's wrath. Lovell had done his prep this

time, and there was no hitch. Even Tubby Muffin played up.

"Now's the time!" whispered Mornington, as the class was dismissed.

Jimmy Silver nodded, and approached his Form-master.

"If you please, sir——"

"What is it, Silver?"

"About the—the Bagshott match, sir. If you——"

Mr. Dalton raised his eyebrows.

"That matter is closed, Silver. You will oblige me by not referring to it again."

"Oh! But—but——"

Mr. Dalton turned to his papers, evidently determined.

With a sinking heart Jimmy Silver followed his chums from the Form-room. He was met by eager glances.

"Any luck?"

"Nothing doing," said Jimmy morosely. "Dicky's sticking tight."

"Oh, rotten!"

As a rule, they liked and respected their Form-master. In their eyes "Dicky" was rather a sportsman. But on this occasion they felt that he had overstepped the mark a little. And it was all Carthew's fault, that was agreed.

"Come up to the study, Morny," said Jimmy Silver. "We may be able to think of something."

Mornington nodded, and he and Erroll accompanied the Fistical Four to the end study.

Something had to be done, that was certain. Pankley and his chums would smile loud and long if their rivals were forced to scratch—not that Jimmy Silver intended to scratch. Form-master or no Form-master, the match had to be played. But how?

"I've been thinkin'," remarked Mornington, as he settled in the study arm-chair.

"So have I," said Lovell. "But we're no forrarder."

"Carthew's keepin' it dark about his study bein' ragged, isn't he?"

"That's so," agreed Jimmy Silver. "He wouldn't want that known, now,

he's cooler. It wouldn't be safe, considering where he was at the time."

"An' Carthew's goin' to be left in charge of us to-morrow afternoon—what?" continued Mornington thoughtfully. "Dicky will probably go out of gates—we know he's fond of trampin' on a half-holiday. So we shall only have Carthew to deal with."

"What difference does that make?" asked Lovell curiously. "He'd report us fast enough if we cut detention."

"Would he?" queried Mornington coolly. "You know who ragged his study, Lovell. If you chose to blab, it would soon be all over the school. The masters would be bound to hear of it. And Carthew, obviously, doesn't want it blabbed."

"That's so."

"Can't you see what I'm drivin' at?" grinned Mornington. "One good turn deserves another—what? Carthew's keen on muddin' up his study raggin'. Why should Lovell help him?"

"No reason at all," admitted Lovell.

"Supposin' we didn't turn up for detention?" asked Mornington. "Supposin' Carthew got a note, puttin' it quite plain? If he chooses to say nothin' about our cuttin', Lovell will keep quiet, too. Otherwise, you never know, do you?"

"My hat!" gasped Lovell.

"By Jove! I believe it could be worked," ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"Easy as fallin' off a form," assented Mornington calmly. "We can slip out of gates without bein' seen, an' nobody will ever be the wiser. If Carthew plays up, Dicky will think we were with him all the afternoon. If he doesn't—but he will. He doesn't want the study raggin' to be broadcast, we know that. It's worth riskin', anyway."

"And even if it comes out, and we're gated on another day, it won't be so bad," grinned Raby enthusiastically. "Another day there won't be a match."

"Put it to the vote," said Jimmy Silver, his eyes gleaming.

The motion was carried unanimously.

"Good egg!" said Lovell. "Then we—"

Rap, rap!

"Come in!" called Jimmy Silver.

Carthew of the Sixth looked into the study.

He was met by grim looks.

"You fags are takin' classes with me to-morrow afternoon, Mr. Dalton tells me," said Carthew, eyeing the juniors rather peculiarly.

"Are we?" asked Lovell.

Carthew's eyes glimmered for a moment.

"I just thought I'd warn you," he remarked coolly. "Mind you're there."

And the door closed behind Carthew of the Sixth.

If the Fistical Four could have known Carthew's thoughts just then they might have been surprised.

Carthew was still hungering for vengeance for that study ragging, though outwardly he appeared to have forgotten it. And the offer of the rascally Captain Punter lingered in his mind. By delivering Jimmy Silver & Co. into the hands of the captain he could liquidate his debt—a debt which he knew he could never pay. Jimmy Silver & Co. were due in the Fourth Form-room on the morrow afternoon. But Carthew had more than a suspicion of the trend of affairs in the Fourth.

He called to a fag in the quad.

"Wegg!"

"Yes, Carthew?"

"Take this note to the Bird-in-Hand. There's no answer."

"Yes, Carthew."

Carthew watched the receding form of the fag, with a smile.

CHAPTER 6.

The Ultimatum!

CARTHEW stared.

It was the day of the Bagshott match, and the time wanted but a few minutes to two o'clock.

Carthew was sitting alone in his study, thinking.

His thoughts were not very pleasant.

The spectre of disgrace, consequent on exposure at the hands of Captain Punter, had been floating before his eyes ever since that interview in the lane. The way out was simple, but even Carthew shrank from giving Jimmy Silver & Co. into the power of Punter and his associates, though it could be done easily enough. Carthew's cunning was equal to the task, but his nerve, or his rascality, was not.

He had sent a note to the man Punter—a note which would raise hopes in the captain's breast. Captain Punter and his friends were to wait in the lane for the Rookwood charabanc, with Jimmy Silver & Co. aboard.

To Carthew it was a rather grim kind of jest. If the Fourth-Formers accepted their detention quietly, Punter would wait in vain. Carthew would explain that a mistake had occurred afterwards. But if—as he could not help suspecting—they took the law into their own hands and broke detention, then they would have to take their chance. Looking at it that way, Carthew managed to quiet his conscience a little.

In a few minutes he was due in the Form-room to take detention. He would know then what was to happen.

A faint footstep from the corridor made him look up. His eyes lighted on a card, obviously just pushed under the door.

Carthew stared.

Then he stepped across and threw open the door.

The passage was deserted. Scuttling footsteps sounded in the distance.

Carthew closed the door again and picked up the card.

"Mark Carthew, Sixth Form.—We beg to state that we shall be unable to attend detention in the Form-room this afternoon, as we have a match at Bagshot. We hope that you will not see fit to report our absence to Mr. Dalton, in which case we, in our turn, will see that all details concerning the ragging

of your study are suppressed. One good turn deserves another.—THE FOURTH."

Carthew stared and stared again at that remarkable communication. For some moments he could hardly credit that the Juniors were in earnest. He had suspected that they might make a break for it, but this was a different matter. And as the prefect re-read that cool ultimatum, he realised that the Fourth had him in a cleft stick.

Assuredly he did not want that study ragging talked up and down the school. Now that he was cool he could see that Lovell could prove his case easily enough. Witnesses would be able to vouch for Lovell's presence in the dormitory, but Carthew had nothing but his own word.

He looked at the card again.

"By gad! So the young rascals are going, and they expect me to keep it from Dalton. And—and Punter—"

Carthew turned to the door.

In another moment he was striding down the corridor, en route for the quad. The cricketers would probably not be gone yet. There was a chance of catching them, and, in spite of what depended on it, Carthew could not leave them to Punter's tender mercies. He had to make some effort to stop them. If they refused to obey him it would be their own fault.

As Carthew appeared in the House doorway there was a shout from Tubby Muffin at the gates.

"Cave, you fellows! Carthew!"

"Quiet, you ass! You'll fetch Dicky out!" gasped Lovell.

The cricketers broke up the lane at a good pace. They had arranged for a charabanc to meet them at a distance of a few hundred yards, and once they could board that all would be well.

"Put it on! We're not stopping now!" panted Jimmy Silver.

Lovell glanced back and gave an exclamation.

"Here he comes! Halt, you men!"

"All together!" rapped out Jimmy Silver.

As Carthew came after them the Rookwood footballers halted. Carthew came up with a rush right in the midst of the juniors. He had time for one word, and one only. Then a score of hands seized him, and he was whirled off his feet like a feather.

"Stop! Yaroooop! Groooooogh!"

What Carthew said did not interest the Fourth-Formers. They whirled him over and rolled him in the dusty lane. Lovell jerked his tie out, and Jimmy Silver jammed his cap down the back of his neck. Mornington dragged off his jacket and threw it over his head like a hood, tying it there by the arms.

As the juniors released him, Carthew rolled wildly across the lane, and disappeared into a ditch. A fendish yell testified that the ditch was full of nettles.

"Pile in!" rapped out Jimmy Silver. "We're late as it is!"

The footballers piled in.

The charabanc rolled away just as Carthew, having dragged the jacket from his head, looked over the edge of the ditch. He shook his fist in mute rage, and Lovell, grinning, blew him back a kiss.

The charabanc rolled on between green hedges, and Carthew was, for the moment, forgotten. There was one thing, and one thing only, that mattered just then—the chastising of Pankley, Putter & Co. on their own native heath. All else was for the nonce dismissed from the Rookwooders' minds.

"We shall lick 'em," opined Raby. "I can feel it in my bones."

"Of course, when they beat us a month ago it was a fluke—just that," agreed Newcome. "But I wasn't playing then—that may have had something to do with it."

"Well, I had your place, and now I'm twelfth man," remarked Putty Grace. "I shall expect to see something special from you to-day, Newcome."

"Don't worry, old son, you'll see it. Hallo! What's up?"

"Man waving his paws about in the

middle of the road," said Jimmy Silver. "Something blocking it ahead, I expect."

The charabanc slowed down and came to a stop.

The man—an aristocratic gentleman with a bowler hat and malacca cane—approached and bowed.

His keen eyes searched the car and alighted on Lovell. A shade crossed his face, rendering it brutal and venomous.

"My hat! Punter!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"What's wrong ahead, sir?" asked the chauffeur.

Captain Punter did not answer. He threw up his hand, and from the hedges on either side broke half a dozen of the loungers who were to be found any day outside the Bird-in-Hand, waiting on the chance of stray drinks. Unshaven for the most part, unwashed to a man, they were all smelling strongly of spirits.

In a trice the car was surrounded, and the ruffians eyed the juniors grimly, awaiting the captain's command.

"Here, I say, what's the idea?" ejaculated the chauffeur indignantly.

"Keep your mouth shut and you'll not get hurt," observed Captain Punter curtly. "Now, young gentlemen, you can take your choice. Come out of your car, or be dragged out! Whichever it is, make up your minds quickly."

"Why, you rotter—" burst out Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Steady!" whispered Jimmy Silver grimly. "All make a rush together—we may stand a chance!"

As Punter opened his mouth to speak again, Jimmy gave the word. Like one man the cricketers leaped out of the charabanc and engaged fiercely with the ruffians. The chauffeur sprang out, as well, and in a moment a wild and whirling combat was in progress. Punter wisely kept back, leaving the struggle to his men.

"Take that! And that! And that!" panted Lovell, hitting out recklessly at a bearded face.

"Back up!" panted Jimmy Silver. "Oh, crickey!"

Uncle James of Rookwood went down with a fast-closing eye and a crimson nose, and in a few moments the rest of the team were in little better condition. Game as they were, they were no match for the hulking ruffians Punter had brought to deal with them. The chauffeur put up a good fight, but was overpowered at last. After that the fight was brief.

Reeling in their captors' grasp, the footballers were dragged across the lane and through the hedge, Punter following.

A couple of hundred yards across a ploughed field stood a deserted barn. This was their destination.

Captain Punter, smiling grimly, threw open the door, and the prisoners were forced inside. While one of the men closed the door, Punter lit an oil-lamp and stood it on a beam.

By the dim light it threw he surveyed the juniors. They in turn glared back at him. The Fistical Four, at least, knew why they had been captured, but they were far from cowed. Indeed, Arthur Edward Lovell was boiling with rage. He eyed the captain wolfishly as he spoke.

"I guess my business is with four of you boys only. Silver, Lovell, Raby, and Newcome. Stand forward, you four!"

Released, the Fistical Four stood forward grimly.

Captain Punter leered at them.

"You low hound!" ground Lovell fiercely. "I suppose, now you've got us, you think we're going to beg for mercy? Well, we're not, so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

"Hear, hear!" chorused Jimmy Silver, Raby and Newcome.

"You'll sing a different tune when I've finished with you!" snarled the captain. "Hold them, Casey! I'll begin on Lovell."

No time was wasted in ceremony.

One of the ruffians stepped forward and gripped Lovell by the arms. Bending his shoulders, he "hoisted" the junior in the same manner as old Mack

went to do for flogging in Hall. Lovell struggled, but he was powerless against the man.

Captain Punter, with a malicious smile, swished his cane through the air.

"The last time I met you, you young hound, you robbed me of ten pounds and took the liberty of handling me. Well, we'll see how you like a dose of your own medicine. That's for a start!"

Thwack!

The cane whistled through the air, and there was a report like a pistol-shot as it smote Lovell's trousers. The junior gave no sign, but he could not have helped feeling that brutal slash.

A murmur of anger from the juniors greeted it.

"You hound!"

"You howling rascal!"

"Hard words!" sneered the captain. "The young villain will remember Captain Gerald Punter by this!"

Thwack!

The cane swept down again, and Lovell shivered. But still he gave no cry. If the man had cut him to pieces he would not have spoken. Punter should not have that satisfaction, at least.

"The—the craven skunk!" gasped Jimmy Silver, his face white with rage. "If—if only a fellow could lay hands on him!"

"By heck! I'll make you squeal this time, my beauty!" ejaculated the captain, swinging his cane high.

Jimmy Silver made a desperate plunge as it descended. His captor grabbed at him, but missed. Jimmy's clenched fist took Punter behind the ear, and he reeled over. Jimmy Silver glanced round him desperately. He was surrounded. There was no escape!

Crash!

It was a crash at the door of the barn, and a voice that the Rookwooders knew well shouted to them—the voice of Mr. Dalton.

"Silver! Lovell! Are you here? Open the door!"

"We can't, sir!" shouted Jimmy Silver, sudden hope leaping in his breast. "We're prisoners!"

"One moment!"

Crash! Crash! Crash!

There was a lock on the barn door, and Captain Punter had turned the key in it. But no lock was made to resist that terrific crashing—caused by a log of wood wielded vigorously by the athletic Form-master without. There was another voice, too—that of Bulkeley, the captain of the school.

The ruffians in the barn grouped round the door as it creaked and groaned under the assault. With a sudden crash the lock burst and the door was thrown open.

"Wade into 'em!" shouted Mornington.

"Smash 'em!"

Mr. Dalton and Bulkeley did not stop to ask questions. As the juniors rushed from the rear, master and senior attacked from the front, and between the two fires, so to speak, the ruffians faltered.

Mr. Dalton was in the champion lightweight class as a boxer, and Bulkeley was the best fighting man at Rookwood. With that addition to their forces, the juniors were able to deal with their adversaries. And the ruffians, finding the battle going against them, were keen enough to surrender.

Captain Punter stopped a straight left from Mr. Dalton, and went down and out like a log. Several of the ruffians were groaning on the ground and nursing aching jaws and bruised faces by the time the Form-master had finished with them.

Mr. Dalton wiped a streaming nose and paused for breath.

"Silver, who is this man?"

Captain Punter had raised himself on one elbow. As the Form-master spoke, the rascally captain made a sudden leap. Lovell grabbed at him, but he was just too late. The fleeing figure of the captain was followed, as if at a command, by the rest of the ruffians.

Bulkeley sprang to intercept them, but it was impossible to stop them all. And the captain and his men disappeared across the fields, running hard.

"It was a fellow styling himself Captain Punter, sir," said Jimmy Silver, as Mr. Dalton repeated his question. "We—we fell foul of him, and I suppose this was his way of getting revenge."

"You would not have been here if you had not cut detention," observed Mr. Dalton grimly.

"Ahem!"

"You will return to the school—all of you," said the Form-master. "Whatever the reason for this escapade, you should not have been out of bounds. I shall deliberate upon your punishment. In the meantime, you had better get back and bathe your hurts."

"Oh dear! Certainly, sir!"

There was no help for it.

And it was with dismal faces that Jimmy Silver & Co. walked haplessly back to Rookwood.

CHAPTER 7.

Fed-Up with Carthew!

"O W!"
 "Yow!"
 "Oooooogh!"
 "Grooh!"

Four juniors of the Classical Fourth were coming along the Fourth Form corridor.

They did not look happy.

Jimmy Silver's face was screwed up as if in direst agony; Lovell was squeezing his hands under his armpits and gasping. Raby and Newcome appeared to be imitating the performance of professional contortionists. They punctuated their movements with grunts and moans.

The Fistical Four had had it hot; there was no doubt about that.

"Wow-wow! My paws are skinned, I believe!" gasped Raby.

"Ow! Oh dear! Gated!" groaned Lovell. "Gated for the next two half-

holidays And a licking! Oh, my hands!"

"All through Carthew!" grunted Newcome vengefully. "Oh, don't I wish I could give him my giddy paws for a minute or two just now! What a life!"

To which Jimmy Silver, with an ex-cruciating smile, responded:

"Keep smiling!"

"Ass!"

"Fathead!"

"Jabberwock!"

The Fistical Four did not keep smiling; even Uncle James himself found it a difficult feat at that moment.

Certainly Mr. Dalton had laid it on thick. In his opinion, it was necessary.

The junior crew had broken bounds, and only the fact that he had glimpsed them leaving had saved them from a very rough handling from Captain Punter and his rascally crew. Added to that, on his return to the school, the Form-master had met Carthew—bruised, dusty, and vengeful Carthew. The story of Carthew's ragging had come out, and had been added to the list of Jimmy Silver & Co.'s sins.

Mr Dalton had said he would consider their punishment; and he had done so. They were to be gated for two half-holidays, and in order to drive home the lesson the Form-master had followed up with a record licking apiece. Carthew had looked on.

Mr. Dalton's arm must have ached after those severe inflictions, but Jimmy Silver & Co. ached still more. The Fistical Four had escaped from their friends and were heading for the end study to recuperate—and to slang Carthew.

They turned dismally into the study and stared.

A fat figure rose from the easy chair to greet them. At the sight they presented Tubby Muffin grinned. Then he chuckled.

"He, he, he! I say, you do look a lot of moulting owls, you know. Dick J laid it on thick, what?"

"No!" hooted Lovell. "We're doing all these contortions just to make you laugh, you fat, cackling dummy!"

"He, he, he! Well, it's enough to make a fellow grin, you know. Bear up, Jimmy. It's not so bad as all that, is it? I say, I've come to tea."

"You've—you've what?"

"Come to tea," repeated Muffin. "That beast Higgs won't let me tea in my study—just because I can't pay my whack to-day. I promised to stand treat to the whole study to-morrow, but he didn't believe me. Now I shan't. I'll treat you fellows instead, if you like."

"To-day?"

"Nunno — to-morrow," corrected Muffin hastily. "I shall have a cheque —"

"Out with him!" rapped Lovell grimly. "I'm not in the mood to be foisted on by a fat scoundrel, for one! All together!"

"Here, I say—you rotters!" roared Muffin in alarm.

The four juniors did not pause to heed Muffin.

They were hurt, and they were savage. Muffin appeared to them almost in the light of a godsend. Four pairs of hands grasped Tubby, and he was whirled to the doorway.

"One—two—three!" rapped Jimmy Silver.

And Tubby flew.

He landed with a crash and a howl in the corridor, and rolled over. The door of the end study slammed after him.

Four juniors plumped down miserably into chairs and continued their interrupted lament.

"Carthew wins!" growled Lovell sulphureously. "We've got it—did you see how the cad was chuckling at us, Jimmy?"

"The rotter!" groaned Newcome.

"I saw him," answered Jimmy Silver. "There's no denying Carthew wins this time—"

"All along the line," added Raby.

"He gets us gated——" began Lovell afresh.

"All through his rotten bullying," agreed Newcome.

"We trap him over that—and then that man Punter steps in and puts a stopper to our match. If I meet Punter again I shall brain him! But the rotter will keep. As soon as we get back Carthew's on the trail again, and Dicky comes down on us——"

"Like an avalanche," finished Raby.

"Keep smiling," urged Jimmy Silver. "We shall get over it."

"But are we going to let a howling cad like Carthew put it across us—us, you know—like that?" roared Lovell indignantly. "Not jolly well likely!"

"We'd slaughter him, if only we had the chance!" assented Raby. "But how——"

"That's what I'm trying to think out!" snapped Lovell. "Carthew's a beast and a bully of the first water——"

"Cave!" gasped Jimmy Silver abruptly.

There had been a rap on the door, but Lovell, in his excitement, did not appear to notice it. If he noticed it, it was beneath him to stop. He went on fiercely:

"A cringing worm, in fact——"

"Shut up, you blithering idiot! It may be Carthew!" gasped Raby.

"A rotten, smoking, gambling cad!" roared Lovell at the top of his voice.

"Who is?"

Lovell condescended to glance round at that.

The door had opened—and Mark Carthew stood on the threshold of the study. His eyes, gleaming at Lovell, suggested that he had overheard some of that junior's reckless tirade.

Lovell eyed him back coolly enough. Even after a severe licking, Lovell was still Lovell—with nerve unlimited.

"What do you want?" he asked bluntly.

Carthew's eyes glittered.

"Whom were you talking about just now?" he demanded.

Lovell's lip curled.

"Eavesdropping, what?"

"If you were speaking of me——"

"If I was, are you going to take me to Mr. Dalton?" asked Lovell coolly. "Anything you may have heard you heard before you came into the study. You can explain that to him."

Carthew bit his lip.

He knew that Mr. Dalton would not approve of his acting on a remark overheard by chance. The Form-master had decided views on eavesdroppers.

"We'll let that drop," answered Carthew calmly. "I've looked in about another matter entirely. Muffin!"

Tubby Muffin appeared behind Carthew. He threw a beseeching glance at the occupants of the study. Tubby was not a sneak—but his tongue had an unfortunate habit of running on.

"You were thrown out of this study just recently?" demanded Carthew, in his most bullying tone.

"Ow! Yes, Carthew."

"Why did you throw Muffin out, Silver?" queried Carthew grimly. "You should know better than to play dangerous pranks with your Form-fellows. Muffin might have been hurt."

"Oh, he'd bounce," answered Lovell coolly.

"I am waiting," said Carthew grimly.

"The fat idiot had come to palm himself off on us for tea," said Jimmy Silver, after a pause. "We aren't in the mood to put up with him. You can report us to Mr. Dalton if you like, Carthew!"

"Mr. Dalton doesn't want to be worried by your fag disturbances every five minutes!" snapped Carthew. "I'm dealing with this. You will each write me two hundred lines—and hand them in before bed-time. Mind they're done!"

"You—you rotter!" gasped Lovell ferociously.

"You will write me three hundred!" said Carthew coolly. "And if they're

not done, look out for a licking—that's all!"

In deep, expressive silence the Fistical Four watched the door close behind Carthew. For some moments even Lovell could find nothing to say.

But when it came it was a storm.

"Of all the rotten, sneaking bullies

"He's going for us at every turn, now that Dicky's down on us!" growled Lovell.

"Thinks he's got us taped," gasped Raby. "Two hundred lines—by supper-time. We shall have to work like niggers to get our prep done as well."

"That doesn't matter to Carthew," said Jimmy Silver between his teeth. "I must say he's overstepped the mark a bit this time."

"Look here—are we standing it?" demanded Lovell.

"Can't do much else, can we?" asked Newcome.

"We can!" snapped Lovell.

"Well, what?"

"For one thing," said Lovell grimly, "we're not going to do those lines!"

"And get a licking in dorm?"

"If we knuckle under now, we shall be underdogs for good!" said Lovell impressively. "Carthew knows that Dicky's got his eye on us, and he thinks he can do as he jolly well likes. He's out to make our lives a misery—any fellow with half an eye can see that."

"Carthew always was down on this study," agreed Newcome.

"Can't you think of anything, Jimmy?" asked Raby.

"You're leader," reminded Lovell.

"It's up to you, Jimmy. We're not standing any more rot from Carthew—that's plain."

Uncle James smiled.

"I've got an idea," he admitted. "It might work—"

"Cough it up!"

"But it would need a lot more fellows to help. Something's got to be done about Carthew—I can see that. Suppose you scout along the passage for

some of the fellows, Raby? Then I can unfold my scheme."

"Good egg!"

George Raby left the end study to rally the principal members of the Classical Fourth. He returned in a few minutes with Mornington and Erroll and Conroy and Van Ryn, Oswald and Flynn and Higgs and a dozen more. Those who could be squeezed into the study. The rest congregated in the passage.

"On the ball, Jimmy!"

"We're all fed-up with Carthew!"

"He licked me in the passage for cuffing young Wegg!" said Higgs sulphureously. "Just as if a fellow can't cuff a cheeky fag without a cheeky senior butting in. What are we going to do with Carthew, Silver?"

"Boil him in oil!" suggested Oswald feelingly. "I've just got lines off the beast—sliding down the banisters. Any decent fellow would have looked this other way—but not Carthew. Blow him!"

"Silence for Uncle James!" called Mornington.

Jimmy Silver rose to his feet.

"I take it we're all fed-up to the neck with Carthew?" he asked.

"Carried nem. con.!" shouted Flynn. "Bejabbers, I'd like to flay the spalpeen alive, for one!"

"This has got to be kept dark," said Jimmy Silver coolly. "It's a risky scheme—but if everybody keeps as mum as an oyster, it should work. And we shall be able to snap our fingers at Carthew."

"That's the idea! Cough it up!"

"I can't very well shout it into the passage," said the Rookwood junior captain. "As many of you as possible crowd into the study. The rest will be told as soon as we've discussed the details."

There was a hasty movement to crowd into the end study. That celebrated apartment had never been so full in its long career as it was when Lovell

squeezed the door shut and turned the key.

"Higgs! I say, Higgs!" called Lovell through the door.

"Hallo! Room for one more?"

"No. Hang about outside, will you? If anybody comes, clear them off, or give us the tip!"

"Oh, all right."

And while Alfred Higgs mounted guard over the council chamber, Uncle James of Rookwood unfolded his scheme whereby Mark Carthew of the Sixth was to be brought to his senses.

There was scepticism at first, but on consideration the juniors began to like the scheme. In the end, there was a burst of applause for Jimmy Silver.

"By Jove! You've hit it, old man!"

"Poor old Carthew!"

"What a surprise for him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And, still chuckling with gleeful anticipation, the meeting broke up. By bed-time all the Fourth—or all the trustworthy element—knew the details of Jimmy Silver's tremendous scheme for the discomfiture of Carthew.

And when Carthew saw lights out for the Fourth that night—having first with great enjoyment given the Fistical Four one on each hand for forgetting their lines—he did so without a suspicion of what was coming to him.

He was soon to learn.

CHAPTER 8.

The Fate of Carthew!

"O H gad! What's a fellow to do?" Mark Carthew of the Sixth gazed dismally at a letter which he held.

He had seen lights out for the Fourth some time ago; according to the customs of Rookwood he should have been in bed and asleep. No objection was raised if a senior wanted to burn the midnight oil, "swotting" for an exam, but Carthew was not swotting.

He was looking very worried, and the letter appeared to be responsible.

It had come by the afternoon post, addressed in neat, quite distinguished caligraphy. A Form-master glancing at the envelope would not have suspected that it emanated from a gambler and cheat of Captain Punter's calibre. Within, the letter was curt and to the point. Carthew read and re-read it with deep misgivings:

"Dear Carthew,—I guess you know by now how our little arrangement of yesterday turned out. Whether it was your fault or not does not interest me. I warn you that I intend getting even with those four boys somehow—and you have got to help me. I don't care what it is, or what risks you run. Remember what will happen to you if you can't pay at the end of the fortnight's grace I have given you.

"GERALD PUNTER."

"Dash it all, why can't the man forget it?" ejaculated Carthew angrily. "What if he was handled? By Jove, though, I expect Dalton gave him something to remember him by yesterday. Serve the cad right!"

And the prefect grinned for a moment at the thought of the weedy captain opposed to the attack of the athletic Form-master. But his face was serious again as he returned to grapple with his problem—how to escape from the man's clutches, clear of debt.

In Carthew's hour of stress, it was some comfort to "take it out" of his old enemies in the Fourth—and Jimmy Silver & Co. were quite unwittingly paying for a few of Captain Punter's sins. In his irritable and harassed mood, Carthew, the bully, was not likely to become more kind-hearted and forbearing; and he was finding considerable solace in his feud with the chums of the end study.

That the junior footer eleven should be gated for the next two holidays did not seem to Carthew a very serious

matter. It paled into insignificance beside his own worries and fears. But Carthew was destined to learn that the junior eleven was not taking its gating quietly.

Quite unaware of the plot against him, Carthew retired to bed fairly late that night. He dismissed Captain Punter from his mind with an effort.

"Hang Punter and all his works!"

And with that Carthew turned in and composed himself to sleep. For some time slumber refused to come, but he dozed at length. A faint scratching sound caused him to roll, but he did not wake.

His deep, regular breathing testified that he was asleep at last. A further scratch passed unnoticed, and a third. The faintest murmur of voices came from the corridor without. Then, infinitely slowly, the door handle began to turn.

Still Carthew slept.

The handle turned and the door opened, half an inch at a time. There was a cautious whisper in the darkness:

"Quiet!"

Faint sounds of movement must have reached Carthew's ears; he grunted and rolled over again. A fresh movement, closer than the rest, startled him into wakefulness. He stared about him in the dark, unable to make out a thing.

But there was somebody—something—in the study. Of that Carthew was sure. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Silence!" hissed a voice.

Carthew shivered.

Icy fingers touched his forehead, and for a moment he felt frozen with horror. But in a few seconds the thought that he was the victim of a reckless jape flashed through his mind, and his nerve returned.

"Who—who is it? You young villains

—"

"Silence!"

"What?"

"Do not speak unless you are spoken to," came a deep, unrecognisable voice from the darkness.

"You—you—if this is a jape I'll smash

you!" snarled the prefect, sitting up in bed and reaching for his ash-plant.

He gave a gasp as unseen hands gripped his shoulders and forced him back on his pillow. The deep voice sounded again.

"Resistance is useless. You have fallen into the hands of the Fascist Band of Rookwood. I am the Dictator!"

"The—the what?"

"The Dictator."

"What's that, you young fool?"

"My word is law," responded the deep voice, utterly without emotion. "Your fate depends entirely upon my will."

"You young jackanapes—"

"Silence!"

Carthew stuttered.

In spite of his conviction that it was a jape of the juniors, he could not help being impressed by the stately dignity of the self-styled Dictator. There was something implacable about the Dictator's utterance that sent a shiver down the prefect's spine.

Staring into the dark, he could make out dim white forms—crowding in the study and in the corridor beyond. Their faces seemed to be concealed—they were a jet mass. White cowls on their heads and white draperies to their feet rendered recognition impossible.

"Look here, chuck this tomfoolery at once, and—and I'll see what I can do about it!" finished Carthew lamely. He could have bitten his tongue off the moment he had said it. It showed that he was unnerved—and nothing more was needed to encourage the mysterious Fascist Band, if they needed encouragement at all.

"Are you prepared to answer for your crimes to the council of the Fascist Band?" demanded the Dictator grimly.

"No!" snapped Carthew decidedly. "Get out of my study, all of you! I shall investigate this in the morning."

"Ha, ha! The prisoner seeks to intimidate us!" said the Dictator, with a faint chuckle. "So! Bring him along, brothers!"

"You dare—" began Carthew.

His protests ended in a gasp of alarm,

as seemingly numberless hands grasped him and dragged him bodily out of bed.

"If you resist, it will go all the more hardly with you!" rapped the Dictator.

"You—you—you're not going to take me out of the study in my pyjamas!" roared Carthew indignantly. "I'll—"

"Gag the prisoner!" snapped the Dictator. "He will raise his voice and bring succour. Good!"

"I'll shout! I'll— Gerruuugh! Gerrroooooogh! Mmmmmmm!"

Something soft and clinging was thrust into Carthew's mouth, and he bit savagely on it. It was a rubber sponge, and it defied Carthew's wildest champings.

"Let the prisoner have his dressing-gown," ordered the Dictator considerably. "He will have to stand a lengthy trial."

"Mmmmmooooogh! Gerrrrroooooogh!"

"If he ejects the gag, see that it is replaced," commanded the Dictator coolly. "Blindfold him! Good! Now, quickly! This way with him!"

Carthew, gurgling and spluttering, did not know where his mysterious captors hustled him. He only knew that they had left the Sixth Form passage behind, and that he was being rushed willy-nilly up a flight of stairs and along a corridor. Then he was shoved through a doorway and the bandage and the gag were removed.

Gasping from the exertion, Carthew stared round the room. He was familiar with every nook and corner of Rookwood's ancient pile, but with a startled sensation he realised that he had never seen this place before.

Shadowy figures moved silently on every side, but that was not the most surprising circumstance.

The walls appeared to be draped with a dark material, and a canopy overhung the farther end of the room. Beneath this, on a dais, was a draped throne—or so it appeared in the light of half a dozen candles.

Carthew gave a gasp.

"Mum-mum-my hat! What on earth is this?" he ejaculated involuntarily.

"Usher the prisoner forward!" commanded the Dictator coolly. "The mystic rites of the accused will now be performed."

Carthew set his teeth. He had an uncanny feeling that he was hopelessly in the power of these white-robed beings. And the uncertainty of their identity was maddening.

With measured steps, the Dictator paced his way to the throne, before which he bowed three times. Carthew watched almost fascinatedly. The Dictator turned and held up a short wand.

"Let the prisoner approach!"

Carthew suffered himself meekly to be led forward, half-way to the throne. Two white-robed figures stood on each side of him, and two more followed behind. He had no chance of escape.

"You are required to answer the questions of the council!" announced the Dictator grimly. "You will do so with accuracy, and I may warn you for your own good to adhere closely to the truth."

"What's the meaning of all this—this nonsense?" snarled the prisoner.

"In accordance with the ancient rites of our court," continued the Dictator, unmoved, "you are given the choice of three tests of innocence. You are accused of misdeeds to the common woe in this our school of Rookwood. You have overridden the rights and privileges of freedom in a tyrannical manner; you have vented personal spite in the guise of authority. Now you are called before the Grand High Council of the Fascist Band of Rookwood, before the Dictator, whose lightest word is law, unto the death. Do you prefer the alternatives to a full and fair trial? If you can pass the tests, you may go scot-free."

"T-t-tests?" stuttered Carthew dazedly.

"The test of water," responded the Dictator coolly. "You may place your hand in boiling water in view of the court. If your hand is unhurt, you will be acquitted without a stain on your character."

"You young fool!"

"The prisoner refuses the test of water. The test by the mouth is second. Take a handful of rice, place it in the mouth, and blow. If the rice comes forth dry, the prisoner is guilty. If it remains in the mouth, innocent. Do you accept the test?"

"No!" snarled Carthew.

"The test by iron is the third and last alternative. Have we the iron bar heated?"

"Red-hot and glowing," answered one of the robed figures.

"You are required to carry the red-hot bar three paces, when you may let it drop," announced the Dictator. "If your hand is not burnt—"

"You cheeky fag—"

"We shall release you," continued the Dictator imperturbably. "If it is burnt, you will be judged guilty. Do you accept this test?"

"No!" hooted Carthew, beside himself with anger.

"Very well. The prisoner refuses all three of the tests for innocence. He will now have a full and fair trial—at his own request. The weight of evidence proving his guilt notwithstanding, he is entitled to his defence. Do you wish to defend yourself, prisoner?"

Carthew ground his teeth. Anger and apprehension were making it difficult for him to speak.

"He does not. Does anyone wish to defend him?"

Apparently no one did.

"Then the council itself will state its charges. I hereby administer a last warning to the prisoner. If he refuses to defend himself, the court may deal harshly with him. So harshly that he will remember their sentence for the rest of his days. I warn him that the weight of evidence is overwhelming."

"I'll—I'll—wait till I get you tomorrow!" hissed Carthew.

The Dictator did not reply.

With stately dignity he ascended to the dais and took his seat on the draped throne, the wand grasped in his hand.

In dead silence the Dictator waved the wand three times over the assembly.

"The court of the Grand High Council of the Fascist Band of Rookwood is now open. Mark Carthew, you are standing on trial!"

CHAPTER 9.

In the Hands of the Fascists!

"PRISONER, you are arraigned—"

"You fool—"

"Arraigned upon a number of charges," continued the Dictator evenly.

"You—you, oh, just you wait, you young imps!" gasped Carthew.

"Most of these, I find," went on the Dictator, referring to a paper which was handed to him by an assistant, "to be of considerable magnitude. The prisoner will do well to contain his impatience and answer these charges in a manly and straightforward manner."

Carthew spluttered.

"This court is not prejudiced," said the Dictator judicially. "But it is to be hoped that the prisoner will realise the seriousness of his position."

There was the faintest suspicion of a chuckle at that, but a motion of the Dictator's wand of office silenced it at once. There was no chuckle from Carthew. The prefect was almost inarticulate with anger.

The startled sensation which he had felt at first was wearing off, and giving place to a deep and burning rage. Carthew yearned to lay his hands on the robed forms—to rip off their black masks and reveal their identities. But the masks concealed their faces completely, and the robes and cowls rendered them totally unrecognisable.

Possibly Carthew did not realise the seriousness of his position. He regarded it as a reckless jape on the part of the Fourth—and he had a pretty shrewd suspicion of the identity of the Dictator. That he was entirely in the hands of the Fascist Band did not occur to him with any force.

His eyes glittered as the Dictator's steady voice droned on.

"The first charge which I have to

bring against you, Mark Carthew, is one of chastising one Arthur Edward Lovell for no justifiable reason. Have you any plea to make?"

"Hang you?" snarled the prisoner.

"You are recommended to plead bad temper," advised the Dictator solemnly.

"It is the only chance of mitigating the sentence."

"You—you——" Carthew's utterance trailed off again as his rage overcame him.

"The prisoner refuses to plead," announced the Dictator calmly. "The next charge will be brought. The prisoner, having been amply repaid for the chastisement he gave Lovell, by bringing Mr. Dalton into the matter, got the whole of the Fourth gated. What do you say to that?"

"I'll skin you by inches!" promised Carthew grimly.

"The prisoner has nothing to say in his defence. The third charge is that he deliberately took advantage of the position of the Fourth in their Form-master's eyes, to inflict summary and unjust punishment on various members of the Form. Think well before refusing to plead, Carthew. This court cannot commend your present attitude."

"Look here, how much more of this tomfoolery?" roared Carthew savagely. "Release me at once—do you hear? By gad, I'll make it warm for you in the morning if you don't!"

"It is of no avail for the prisoner to raise his voice," responded the Dictator evenly. "We are to take it, brothers, that Carthew refuses to plead. You have all heard the case against him stated. Is he guilty or not guilty?"

Every robed arm in the dim-lit chamber was raised simultaneously. From every throat came the same pronouncement:

"Guilty!"

The Dictator bowed.

Carthew's anger abated a little. There was something ominous about the calm deliberations of the Facists. His wrath had failed signally to cow them. To what length might they go—feeling

themselves secure behind their disguises? Carthew shivered at that thought.

He clenched his fists as the Dictator faced him again.

"The sentence of the Grand High Council will now be carried out," announced the Dictator grimly. "The prisoner is requested to bear in mind that this is the first punishment—the warning. If the Band is called upon to deal a second time with the same offender, much more serious measures will be taken. Seize him!"

Carthew began to struggle, but he had no chance. Many hands pinioned him, and he was dragged towards a chair which stood in a shadowy corner of the chamber. Plumped on the chair, the prefect could do nothing but gasp and splutter and glare ferociously at the masked and hooded heads which gathered round him.

"Brother Ivan, have you the shears?" asked the Dictator coolly.

Carthew jumped.

"O Mighty One, I have!"

"Then kindly proceed."

"You—you dare!" hooted Carthew, in dire alarm. "You touch my hair with those, and I'll—I'll——"

"Silence!" thundered the Dictator.

Carthew relapsed into silence involuntarily. He hardly knew whether he was awake or dreaming as a hooded figure leaned over him, and a huge pair of shears began to clip among his hair.

Clip, clip, clip!

The shears were not suited to the work, but that circumstance did not appear to trouble the Fascist brother who wielded them.

As it happened, Carthew needed a hair-cut. In the next few minutes he received one—gratis. Locks of hair began to fall in Carthew's lap, and he gave a gasp of dismay. It was not a dream—far from it. At each clip of the shears a fresh lock fell from Carthew's head.

"You—you young criminals! What shall I look like after this?" hissed the prefect.

"Rather distinguished, I shouldn't wonder!" answered the Dictator, with a sound that might have been a suppressed chuckle. "Let him down lightly, Brother Ivan. He will be able to get a close crop at the barber's, and hide it afterwards."

"Lots more left yet, O Mighty One. The punishment of the Grand High Council must be executed in full."

"So be it."

Clip, clip!

To Carthew, it did not seem possible that there could be a solitary hair left intact upon his scalp. And still the shears continued their deadly clipping—and still the locks fell into the prefect's lap. But the clipping ceased at last, and the operator stepped back.

"I think that satisfies the sentence, O Mighty One. If we go any further he will be disfigured for weeks."

"And that is not the intention of the council—at present," agreed the Dictator.

Carthew gritted his teeth, and his eyes gleamed burningly on the masked face. At that moment he would willingly have given a term's pocket-money to know who was behind those masks—so that he could bring them to an awful justice when he escaped.

"The second part of the sentence will now follow," announced the Dictator calmly. "Brother Vladimir, have you the scissors?"

"You—you touch me again, you young villains, and I'll have you flogged till you can't crawl!" vowed Carthew desperately.

"Here are the scissors, O Mighty One," answered one of the robed figures.

"You will trim the prisoner's eyebrows," commanded the Dictator.

"Just you dare!" breathed Carthew.

His face was crimson as Brother Vladimir bent over him. He jerked his head back as the scissors tweaked at his eyebrows.

"Mind your eye!" warned the operator. "Keep steady, and I'll do my best. If you move, you never know, do you?"

With eyes that fairly burned, Carthew

watched the operator attending to his eyebrows. He had no choice. He did not want his eye poked out.

Trimming Carthew's eyebrows did not take long. But the prefect had a peculiar appearance by the time it was done.

"You—you—What do I look like?" demanded Carthew, torn between fear and anguish.

"Just civilised—but no more," answered the Dictator. "Prepare for the third part of the sentence."

"Wha-a-at?" Carthew gasped. The next moment he opened his mouth and began to yell in good earnest. Whether he could be heard he did not know—but anything was better than meekly submitting to his fate.

"Help, help, help!"

"Gag him!" snapped the Dictator.

"Help, help, help—wurrrough! Gug-gug-gug! Grooogh!"

With a sponge impeding his speech, Carthew relapsed suddenly to wild gurglings. A handkerchief was whipped out and bound round his face, preventing him from ejecting the gag.

"Brother Serge, have you the oils?" said the Dictator.

"Here, O Mighty One!"

"Then begin your task."

Carthew's look spoke volumes as Brother Serge approached him, bearing a paint brush and a palette. It needed little imagination to perceive Brother Serge's intentions; and Carthew wriggled miserably in apprehension.

"Keep still!" ordered Brother Serge, as he moistened his brush. "If you move, it may spoil your beauty."

"Hold his head!" commanded the Dictator.

Two brothers held Carthew's head, and Brother Serge began to lay on the oils.

He painted Carthew's nose a bright blue, and Carthew gasped and wriggled without avail. Then he began on the prefect's cheeks, and gave them a sickly yellow tint. With a brush loaded with crimson, Brother Serge proceeded to paint huge circles round the prisoner's eyes, giving him an altogether remark-

able appearance. The bright crimson enhanced the ferocity of Carthew's venomous glare—and, in spite of the severity of the atmosphere, there was a smothered chuckle among the Fascists.

"Now his ears," remarked the Dictator.

Brother Serge's assistants hung on to Carthew's hair—what there was left of it—while their brother attended to the prefect's ears. He painted one a vivid green, and the other a deep purple. He finished covering Carthew's forehead with spots of every colour on the palette.

When he stood back the complete effect was startling.

It was some minutes before the Dictator was able to speak.

"Brother Serge, you have done your work well. This will lead to advancement in our order. Have we a looking-glass?"

"Here, O Mighty One."

"Regard yourself, Carthew!" commanded the Dictator, holding the looking-glass before the prefect's vivid countenance.

If Carthew had been glaring before, he surpassed himself when he glimpsed his features in the mirror. From behind his gag came a succession of deep and expressive, though muffled, ejaculations.

"Mmmmmmm! Gruuuugh! Ymmmmmmmm!"

"Prepare for the fourth and final part of the sentence," announced the Dictator coldly. "So far, you have been lightly treated. In comparison with your offences, the punishments have been in the nature of warnings only. You will be bound to your chair and taken to your study. I trust you will pass the remainder of the night in comfort."

"Gerruuugh! Groooooogh!"

There was no doubt that Carthew wanted badly to say something. But the Fascists were in no mood to listen to his remarks. At a motion from the Dictator ropes were produced, and several of the brothers busied themselves with fastening Carthew securely

in his seat. With ropes securing his arms and his legs and twining round his body and under the chair, there was little chance of Carthew being able to free himself.

"Bring him along!" ordered the Dictator coolly.

"Mmmmmmmmm! Grrrrrrroogh!"

Carthew was making terrific efforts to speak, but they resulted in nothing more than muffled growls. With eyes like coals, he watched the Fascists lift him bodily on the chair, and bear him out of the council chamber into the draughty corridor.

As they emerged, Carthew glanced eagerly about him. At least he would know in what part of the building the council chamber lay—and there might be a clue to be found there in the morning. Already Carthew was promising himself a terrific reckoning—with flogging all round in the very best style. He gave a fresh and really ferocious growl as a handkerchief was slipped over his eyes. The knowledge of his whereabouts was denied to him now. He grunted and gasped savagely behind the gag—and the party proceeded.

"Mmmmmooooch! Grrrrroogh!"

Where he was he could not tell—it seemed that a longer route was being taken than when he had been brought to the chamber. With a feeling of baffled rage he realised that the Fascists were probably taking him back to his study by a roundabout route, in order to avoid the possibility of his remembering the way.

There was nothing to do but to sit tight and hope for the best.

Carthew, seething, resigned himself to sitting tight.

He heard a door open, and he was carried into a room. The chair was set down, and the handkerchief was taken from his eyes. With a gasp of relief he saw that he was back to his study again—though still gagged and fast bound to the chair.

There was the faint sound of a closing door.

Staring into the darkness, Carthew realised that he was alone.

Bitting desperately on the sponge, Carthew strove to shout. But the only sounds he succeeded in making were too faint to carry to the next study, where Bulkeley lay sleeping.

"Mmmmmmm! Groooooogh! Gerruuuuugh!"

In the silence of the study Carthew desisted at last.

CHAPTER 10.

Not Guilty!

"MY sainted aunt!"

"Gerruuuuugh! Groogh!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

Carthew grunted furiously.

It was morning; rising-bell had tolled nearly half an hour previously.

That particular morning had seemed to Carthew as if it would never come. Bound and gagged in his chair, he had dozed fitfully throughout the remaining hours of the night. He had watched the dawn come in at the window, from the very first beam till the summer sunlight was streaming across the room. With infinite relief he had heard the rising-bell tolled by old Mack, and the sounds of Bulkeley getting up in the next study had raised his hopes high.

But Bulkeley was an athletic fellow; he liked a sprint in the quad before breakfast, and he did not even think of looking into Carthew's study before he left the Sixth Form corridor. Neither, as it happened, did any of the Sixth. With fellows moving on every side, so to speak, Carthew was obliged to sit and glower at the door and grunt frantically.

It was doubtful if his muffled grunts would ever have been heard; but at breakfast his absence was at last noticed. Very good-naturedly George Bulkeley left the breakfast-table and slipped up to Carthew's study. If he thought anything, it was that the prefect had overslept.

When, upon knocking, there was no

response, Bulkeley opened the door, fully expecting to find Carthew still in bed and asleep. What he did find drew a gasp of astonishment to his lips.

Certainly, George Bulkeley had never seen a Sixth-Former in Carthew's remarkable plight before. In spite of the seriousness of the matter, Bulkeley grinned. Carthew was really more than flesh and blood could be expected to stand.

And his desperate grunts, though he was far from imagining it, added to the effect.

"Mmmmmmmmm! Grrrrrrrr!"

"Oh, Great Scott!" gasped Bulkeley. "Hold on for a minute! I'll soon have you undone!"

He drew a knife, and speedily cut Carthew free. Carthew did not jump up. On the contrary, he rolled out of his chair, and would have fallen had not Bulkeley supported him.

But he recovered the use of his voice as the captain of the school jerked the gag out of his mouth.

"Ow! Wow! Pins and needles!"

"How ever long have you been tied up like this?" ejaculated Bulkeley.

"Yow-wow-wow! I've got the cramp! Ow! Since last night, you burbler!"

"What!"

"Silver and a crowd of the young fiends!" gasped Carthew.

"Suppose you start at the beginning?" suggested Bulkeley, in amazement.

"Wow-wow! It's getting better. Oh, won't I take it out of their hides! Won't I just!"

"Take it gently, old bean," advised Bulkeley coolly. "Now, then, how did you get in this fix?"

"Wow! The young hounds tied me up and—and you can see what they've done to me!" ground out Carthew.

"Phew! You look like—like——"

Bulkeley broke off. It was really impossible to say exactly what Carthew looked like. In his present state he was unique.

"I'm all right now!" snapped Carthew. "Get out of the way, Bulkeley. I'm going to Dalton!"

"What, in your dressing gown?" exclaimed Bulkeley.

"Get out of the way!" snarled Carthew, beside himself with rage.

"But——"

As Bulkeley did not offer to remove himself Carthew took him by the shoulder and fairly whirled him across the study. A moment later and Carthew, his dressing-gown trailing behind him, and his face still decorated in the highly original manner of Brother Serge, had dashed out of the study, en route for Mr. Dalton.

"Well, I'm blowed!" ejaculated Bulkeley. "The—the raving maniac. Dalton will think he's off his onion—and I don't believe he will be far wrong!"

And the captain of Rookwood hastened after Carthew, his mind still confused as to how the prefect came to be in that really phenomenal condition. As for Carthew, he was fairly boiling over with rage and humiliation. In a cooler moment he would have hesitated to present himself to Mr. Dalton's gaze attired and decorated as he was just then. But rage made him blind to his own appearance. His overruling desire was to get within cuffing distance of Jimmy Silver, whom he firmly believed to have been the Dictator.

Flogging and even expulsions fitted through Carthew's mind as he headed with long strides for the Fourth Form-master's study. Already he could hear the music of the birch as it descended on the person of the Dictator. Beside that consummation all other considerations paled.

The Form-master's door loomed ahead, and Carthew hardly paused to knock.

Rap, rap, rap, rap, rap!

"Come in!"

Mr. Dalton, a little surprised by that urgent series of raps, glanced up curiously as Carthew entered the study. As Carthew dawned properly upon his horizon, so to speak, Mr. Dalton gasped.

The master of the Fourth was used to surprises in his scholastic career. But this was more than a surprise—it was a

sensation. Mr. Dalton passed a hand across his eyes and looked again. Carthew, spluttering for words, was still there.

"Carthew! Is that you?"

"It is I, sir," answered the prefect, controlling himself only with an effort.

"What—what ever has happened, Carthew?"

"Those young imps——"

"What!"

"Those young hounds——"

"Carthew!"

"Those young rascals——"

"What young rascals?" gasped Mr. Dalton.

"Silver, Lovell, and the rest! They did me up like this. Cut my hair, and trimmed my eyebrows, and—and painted my face——"

"And tied me up in a chair and left me all night," wound up Carthew, his voice rising to a hoot.

"Tied you up in a chair?"

To Mr. Dalton it felt as if his head was turning round.

"They've got to be flogged!" roared Carthew. "Flogged till they howl!—and then some more! Silver will have to be expelled——"

"Calm yourself!" said Mr. Dalton severely. "You are speaking without thought, Carthew. I can perceive that you have had great provocation——"

Carthew stuttered.

"But pray keep cool. We shall arrive at the truth much sooner. What has happened?"

"Look at me, sir!" gasped Carthew.

"I am looking. You are certainly in a most remarkable state, my boy."

Carthew gulped. To him it appeared more than merely remarkable.

"Those young hounds—Silver and the rest——"

"Please control your language, Carthew," said Mr. Dalton sharply. "Tell me connectedly what has occurred."

Carthew took a grip on himself.

"When I went to bed last night——"

"Yes?"

"A crowd of masked figures came into my study and dragged me away to a

room—I couldn't recognise it—and affected to try me at a mock court. It ended by a young scoundrel calling himself the dictator—Silver—ordering them to cut my hair and eyebrows, and make me up like this. Then they carried me back to my study, and left me, tied to a chair, where Bulkeley found me a few minutes ago, sir."

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Dalton.

"That's all, sir," said Carthew. "Enough, too, I should think. The cheeky little rotters! Wait till I get my hands on them and I'll flay them alive!"

"That will do, Carthew, thank you!" said Mr. Dalton, with asperity. "The matter must be investigated at once, of course. I appreciate its seriousness, but you must keep your temper, my boy. You say Silver was the ringleader of all this—this extraordinary affair!"

"Yes, sir," gasped Carthew savagely. "Or else Lovell, or—or one of the young rascals!"

"There is a considerable difference between Silver and Lovell, Carthew," said Mr. Dalton sharply. "Surely, if you recognised the leader you can say which one it was?"

"I couldn't recognise any of them!" roared Carthew, his temper blazing out again. "How could I, when they wore black masks over their faces, and white robes and cowls? But I know it was Silver or Lovell. It must have been!"

"I fail to see how you have arrived at your suspicions at all, Carthew!" exclaimed the Form-master, a little grimly. "If you could not recognise your assailants it is ridiculous to bring charges against boys who may be perfectly innocent. I have always found Silver and Lovell respectful in their manner. I should be loth to suspect either of them. Why do you give their names, Carthew?"

"Because——" Carthew paused.

He could hardly explain to Mr. Dalton that it was because he had made a point of being "down" on his old enemies just lately that he suspected them most

strongly. In Mr. Dalton's eyes the dictator might be any fellow in the school.

"Well?"

The Form-master's impatience was plain.

"They—they've been giving me a lot of trouble just lately, sir. I have had to correct them a good many times. And now I come to think of it, I did recognise Lovell, sir."

Carthew watched Mr. Dalton keenly to observe the effect of that lie. He was sure, in his own mind, that the Pistical Four had been at the bottom of his punishment, and he did not intend seeing them slip through his fingers at any cost.

But even Carthew coloured a little as Mr. Dalton's lips curled.

"I think you are letting your anger get the better of you, Carthew," said the Form-master coldly. "I will send for Silver and Lovell to satisfy you. If they are guilty they shall be punished with severity. But I see no reason to suppose them so at present. But, in any case, rest assured that every effort will be made to punish the real culprits, my boy. Try to look at the matter in an impartial light."

Carthew gulped. He could not reply to that. But he waited with grim satisfaction while the Form-master sent Toby for Silver and Lovell.

There were footsteps in the corridor, and two demure faces appeared in the study doorway.

"Come in, my boys!" said Mr. Dalton.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Arthur Edward Lovell involuntarily.

The sight of Mark Carthew in the broad light of day was a little too much for Lovell's equilibrium.

"Those are the young scoundrels!" said Carthew fiercely.

"Kindly leave this matter to me!" snapped Mr. Dalton. "Silver and Lovell, I have summoned you here to ask you a question. Carthew, as you see, has been shamefully treated by a number of boys of this school. He tells me it occurred during the night,

that he was dragged out of bed, and—ahem!—painted, after which he was tied in a chair and left till this morning. Now this is a most serious matter.”

“Oh, yes, sir!” gasped Arthur Edward Lovell, stifling a chuckle.

“I cannot bring myself to suspect either of you, and I should not have sent for you myself. But Carthew lays a very serious accusation. Which of these juniors was it you accused of being the—ahem!—dictator, Carthew?”

Jimmy Silver grinned.

It was evident that Mr. Dalton was annoyed at the flimsy evidence Carthew had to offer, and he had not much patience with the prefect.

But the prefect's look as it rested on the Fourth-Formers was malevolent.

“Lovell, sir,” he answered thickly. “And I remember Silver, too. He was the rascal who painted my face!”

“You hear what Carthew says, my boys,” said Mr. Dalton seriously. “I may say that all I require is your assurance that you were not among the band who apparently kidnapped Carthew last night. I shall believe you in what you say. Were you the dictator, Lovell?”

“No, sir,” said Lovell, grinning at Carthew.

“Were you, Silver?”

“No, sir.”

“Were either of you out of your dormitory last night at all?”

“No, sir,” answered Jimmy Silver and Arthur Edward Lovell together.

Mr. Dalton nodded, a smile playing round the corners of his mouth.

“Very well, my boys. I am sorry to have suspected you. You may go.”

“They're lying, Mr. Dalton!” panted Carthew, leaping forward, his eyes glittering. “I tell you—”

“That will be all for the present, Carthew,” said Mr. Dalton icily. “I will institute investigations at once, of course. But it is plain that your suspicions against Silver and Lovell are unfounded. You had better go and—ahem—clean yourself, I think.”

And, with feelings really too deep for words, Carthew went.

CHAPTER 11.

Carthew's Strategy!

“O H, my hat!”
“Oh dear! I shall burst a boiler in a minute!”

“Did it work?”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

The Fistical Four were waxing hilarious. A crowd of the Fourth were roaring with them in the Hall—all apparently in possession of some jest of unusual dimensions.

“Were you out of dorm, Jimmy?” sobbed Lovell.

“No, old chap. Were you?”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“By gad! What a sell for poor old Carthew!” chortled Mornington.

“Thought he had us in the palm of his giddy hand,” grinned Lovell. “We were going to be hanged, drawn, and quartered if Carthew had had his way. You fellows should have seen his face when old Dicky said we could go!”

“Poor old Carthew!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

There was a fresh roar at the expense of the unpopular Sixth-Former.

Whatever the joke, it was plainly against Carthew. And it was not difficult to surmise that it had something to do with the mystery of the Rookwood Dictator—at present unidentified.

That secret council in the End Study had borne fruit—and the strategy of “Uncle James” had, so far, outwitted the cad of the Sixth. Jimmy and Lovell had been able to answer with perfect truth that they had not been concerned in the happenings of the night. They had been fast asleep in the Fourth Form dormitory—according to plan, as Lovell put it.

Who was the Dictator? That secret was known only to the select Fascist Band themselves—whoever they were. But Jimmy Silver and Lovell were innocent enough—as Carthew had learnt.

The chuckling crowd of juniors were waiting for Carthew now—waiting with keen anticipation to see his face after his interview with Mr. Dalton. They

had been waiting some time, for Carthew, at the conclusion of that interview, had adjourned wisely to a bath-room to remove the traces of the night's escapade.

In the bath-room he found there was plenty to occupy him. His cropped hair and eyebrows were beyond immediate aid. Time alone could restore them to a reasonable length. But the paint could be removed—and with pumice stone and much elbow grease Carthew proceeded to remove it.

He was hot and breathless and simmering with wrath when he had finished—and more than one trace of Brother Serge's decorations remained even then. But he was at least presentable. Carthew greased his hair and combed it scowling into the mirror with a fixed scowl. The Fascists had been merciful. He looked no worse than if he had had a close—a very close—crop at the barber's. But Carthew was not feeling grateful.

He left the bath-room with glittering eyes, and headed for the stairs. The situation, in Carthew's opinion, called for lickings of the most severe kind for every Fourth-Former on the Classical side. Whether they had been concerned in the outrage did not matter a great deal. The innocent could suffer with the guilty, in order that the prefect might be avenged on the latter.

Unfortunately, Mr. Dalton did not view the matter in that light; he had excused Jimmy Silver and Lovell, evidently trusting their statement that they had been in their dormitory all night. Carthew did not believe that; he was not likely to believe any statement of the juniors' in his present mood. But after Mr. Dalton had dismissed them, Carthew could not pitch into Jimmy Silver and Lovell on suspicion. He realised that if the culprits were to be brought to book, he had to "get at" them some other way. It did not occur to Carthew that the Dictator had another identity altogether.

As he came down the stairs into Hall, his scowl deepened. The crowd of

juniors below had been in a hilarious mood; at the sight of the prefect they became more so.

"Hallo, Carthew! You look worn!" "You've missed your breakfast, old bean!" drawled Mornington.

"Feeling feverish, Carthew?" inquired Lovell solicitously, as Carthew descended the stairs.

The Sixth-Former did not reply. As he strode amongst the juniors, he let his ashplant slip down into his hand. Oswald bumped quite accidentally against him, and the ashplant thwacked.

"Yoooooop!" Oswald sprang away from Carthew rubbing his shoulder. The prefect was evidently not a fellow to bump against just then.

"Make way for Carthew!" sang out Mornington, with mock ceremony. "Scatter, you varlets. Way for Carthew!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" The juniors scattered—partly as a joke, and partly to avoid receiving the ashplant.

Carthew, with a set face, marched between the two ranks. He halted as his burning eyes fell on Jimmy Silver's cheery countenance.

"Silver!" "Yes, Carthew?" answered Jimmy demurely.

"Mr. Dalton does not think that you were concerned in the—the outrage last night. I'm warning you—touch me again and I'll get you thrown out of the school neck and crop—do you understand, you young villain?"

"But I'm not a young villain!" ejaculated Jimmy, grinning. "I haven't touched you yet. Do you think I should spin a yarn to Dicky if I had?"

Carthew breathed hard. "Well, I've warned you!" he snapped. "Dear man. He wants another dose," murmured Valentine Mornington to his chum Erroll.

"What was that, Mornington?" Carthew's quick ears had caught the whisper.

"By gad. It wasn't meant for you, dear man."

"Meant or not, I heard it," snapped the prefect. "Repeat it in full, Mornington."

"Sorry, old bean!"

"Then hold out your hand!"

"Oh dear. What a fog."

Mornington, his lips set, held out his hand as commanded. He could do nothing else. Carthew was in the right now—and he knew it.

"Swish swish, swish.

"Now the other!"

"By gad! You're goin' it, aren't you?" ejaculated Morny.

But he did as he was ordered.

Swish, swish, swish.

Carthew looked a little happier after he had inflicted that punishment. He glanced coolly at the rest of the juniors.

"Anybody else got anything to say?"

Apparently nobody had.

Carthew grinned and tucked the ash-plant under his arm. He strode out of the House with a jaunty air, feeling that he had got a little of his own back, at least.

"The cad! Picking on you like a beastly Prussian!" growled Lovell angrily, and putting a hand on Mornington's shoulder. "He wants another dose, right enough."

"All in the game, dear boy," said Morny, forcing a grin. "As it happened, he wasn't far wrong in his choice—what? Lucky for me Carthew was only actin' on supposition, really!"

"Well, yes," assented Lovell. "If Carthew knew—"

"Mum's the word!" put in Jimmy Silver warningly. "Carthew's gone over to the Modern side for some reason, probably to see Knowles and Frampton. Let's run over and rag Tommy Dodd & Co., and keep an eye on Carthew at the same time."

"There's a few minutes before classes," agreed Lovell.

"Come on, then!"

Carthew had gone over to the Modern side, looking and feeling very much better. A group of the Fourth followed

him at a distance—a safe distance. They saw the prefect disappear into the House, and Tommy Dodd & Co., sunning themselves on the steps before classes, turn to stare after him. Carthew's shorn appearance and the traces of paint round his eyes and ears had rather startled them.

"Cheerio, Tommy!" called Jimmy Silver, as the Fistical Four approached. "Pax, you know."

"Pax if you like," agreed Tommy Dodd. "Always ready to oblige you if you change your mind, though. I say, what have you been doing to your pet Carthew?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Did you like his hair?" roared Lovell.

"His hair and his eyebrows——"

"And the paint?"

"You haven't been ragging him?" ejaculated Tommy Dodd.

"We have. We has."

"And—and you're still alive? Why, if we touched Knowles or Catesby or any prefect, he'd skin us afterwards!"

"I bet we could handle Knowles for you in the same way!" grinned Lovell at once.

"Classical fathead!"

"Modern ass!"

"Pax, you dummies!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver pacifically. "We've come over to keep an eye on Carthew, Tommy. He's come to see Knowles, I fancy."

"But—but how on earth did you manage to rag him like that without getting slain?" asked Tommy Doyle, deeply mystified.

"Oh, we've got our ways and means on the Classical side!" remarked Lovell airily.

"You silly jabberwock!"

"Jabberwock yourself!" retorted Lovell.

"Pax!" roared Jimmy Silver.

"Yes, but how did you work it?" demanded Tommy Dodd. "There must be a catch somewhere."

"There was. We caught Carthew!" grinned Lovell, enjoying the mystifica-

tion on the faces of the three Tommies. "Wouldn't you fellows like to join?"

"Join what?" asked Tommy Cook.

"We can do with some more members," assented Jimmy Silver thoughtfully. "Owing to the—ahem!—circumstances, we can't all be on the spot at the same time. Care to join, Tommy?"

"Join what, fathead?" asked Tommy Dodd. "You're talking double Dutch to me!"

"Keep it dark!" urged Lovell. "Awfully, fearfully, dreadfully dark! Once the beaks get a murmur the game will be up. Catch on?"

"Dashed if I do! You talk such a lot of rot, you know!"

"What?"

"If it's a way of handling the prefects without them being able to retaliate, we're on!" said Tommy Dodd, with emphasis. "Suppose you tell us what you're driving at. We'll keep mum, of course."

"Not that I suppose it will be much good, as it's a Classical wheeze," added Tommy Cook.

"You fatheads! Of course, you'll be junior officers to commence with—" began Lovell.

"Shut up, Lovell!" grinned Jimmy Silver.

"Junior to you idiots!" roared Tommy Doyle. "Faith, an' I like that! Sure I do! What shall we do with them, Tommy?"

"They want rolling down the steps," said Tommy Dodd decisively. "It'll take some of the bounce out of 'em!"

"Just try it, that's all! Yarooooop!"

Lovell broke off with a wild yell.

The three Tommies were at the top of the steps. Their visitors were half-way down. The Moderns had the advantage of position, and they took it. A violent shove in Lovell's chest sent him reeling backwards, and he let out a yell of alarm.

"Woop! Look out, you idiot!" roared Jimmy Silver desperately.

"Yaroooooh!"

Crash!

"Wow-wowwow-wow!"

That shove of Tommy Dodd's was disastrous.

Lovell reeled against Jimmy Silver, and Uncle James of Rookwood lost his balance. He crashed on Raby, and Raby in turn landed on Newcome and Conroy. Conroy bowled over Mornington, and Morny, being in the rear, bore the full brunt of the collapse. He was the undermost of the yelling, struggling heap at the foot of the steps.

Serene at the top, Tommy Dodd & Co. roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silver!"

"Oh, my hat!"

The yelling ceased suddenly.

A window had shot up not far distant, and the grim features of Knowles, captain of the Modern side, appeared in the aperture.

"Silver! What do you mean by coming over here and creating a disturbance?" rapped Knowles.

"Ow! Oh, dear! Nothing!" gasped Jimmy, dismally mopping his nose where somebody's boot had caught it.

"Wait a minute till I come down!" rapped the captain of the Modern side.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Hard cheese, old beans!" murmured Tommy Dodd sympathetically.

Jimmy Silver & Co. waited dismally until Knowles appeared in the doorway gripping his ashplant.

"This will teach you a lesson in orderliness," he remarked coolly. "Silver first!"

In mute dismay Jimmy Silver held out his hand.

He received two stinging cuts, and gasped.

Lovell came next, and received the same. Raby and Newcome and Conroy followed. When he came to Mornington, still gasping from his previous infliction, Knowles paused. He seemed to catch something of the gleam in Mornington's eye.

"Cut off!" he snapped.

And the Classical juniors, gasping, obeyed.

CHAPTER 15.

Asking for It!

"HERE comes Knowles!" remarked Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Never mind Knowles, old fellow. I'm just a little bit fed-up with Knowles."

"Oh, all right!"

"Play!"

Jimmy Silver, the champion junior bowler of Rookwood, sent down the ball, and Lovell cut it away.

Classes were over for the day, and the Fourth were putting in some cricket at the nets before tea. For the time being they had completely forgotten Carthew and Knowles.

Mornington, putting two and two together, had suggested that it was at Carthew's request that Knowles descended upon them so heavily for "ragging" with the Moderns. It was more than probable, having regard for Carthew's chumminess with Knowles and Catesby and Frampton of the Modern side.

But while cricket practice was "on," prefects were at a discount, so to speak.

And Jimmy Silver took no special notice as Knowles strolled on to the junior pitch and stood for a few moments watching the bowling.

Jimmy bowled again, and this time Arthur Edward Lovell did not get the ball away. It curled round his bat, and a crash told its own tale.

"My hat! Well bowled, Jimmy!" gasped Lovell, handing his bat to Conroy.

"Play!"

Conroy did his best—and he was a good batsman. But the ball spun awkwardly, and almost before he knew it the balls were lying strewn on the turf.

Jimmy Silver chuckled.

"Silver!"

"Oh, my hat! Knowles!" breathed Raby.

"Hallo! Do you want me, Knowles?" asked Jimmy.

"Your bowling isn't so bad for a

junior, Silver. You can come along and trundle a few down for me on Big Side."

Really, "Uncle James" ought to have appeared surprised and delighted to comply with Knowles' lordly request. But he was not. Jimmy Silver, in fact, often bowled at the senior nets for such mighty pajandrams as Bulkeley and Neville, so he was used to the honour. And he was busy licking his team into shape for the postponed match with Bagshot—an arduous task, without interruptions from Knowles.

Still, it could not be helped. And it was undoubtedly kind of Knowles to call upon him.

"Right-ho, Knowles! Coming!" answered the Rookwood junior captain.

"Oh, and I forgot my bat!" remarked Knowles airily. "Just run up to my study and fetch it, will you?"

Jimmy Silver stared for a moment.

Knowing that the Modern skipper was a close friend of Carthew's, he could not help suspecting him of being in league to get Carthew's own back for his treatment at the hands of the mysterious Fascists. "Fagging" for seniors was among those things "not done" in the Fourth, and Jimmy hesitated.

"Don't waste time!" ordered Knowles irritably.

Uncle James drew a deep breath. But he did not want to appear disobliging. He trotted off meekly to the House, and returned in a few minutes with Knowles' bat.

The grin on the prefect's face did not improve his frame of mind.

"Thanks!" remarked Knowles coolly. "Oh, by the bye, I left my gloves on the table—close to the bat. You must have seen them."

"The bat was in the corner, so it couldn't have been near the gloves," answered Jimmy calmly. "As it happened, I didn't see them."

"Well, don't hang about," said Knowles, with a gleam in his eyes. "I want them!"

Jimmy Silver breathed hard.

"Don't go, Jimmy," whispered Lovell angrily. "He's trying to make a fool of you!"

"Buck up!" snapped Knowles.

Uncle James pondered for a moment. But he set off quietly to fetch the gloves. When he returned with them his expression was perfectly meek.

"Now we'll have some of your bowling," remarked Knowles, with his most patronising air. "Catesby and Frampton want a bit of practice, too. Follow me!"

"Jimmy, you ass, they're making a fool of you!" growled Lovell.

"Come along and look, and don't jaw," retorted Uncle James confidently.

He followed Knowles and Lovell and Raby and Newcome, and several other fellows followed him to watch. They could not understand Jimmy's meek obedience to Knowles' commands, but they had great faith in their leader.

On the senior pitch, Knowles and Catesby and Frampton were preparing to receive bowling from Jimmy Silver. Knowles was taking guard as the onlookers arrived.

"Play, youngster! Don't be afraid to bowl up!"

"Have his middle stump, Jimmy!" chirruped Lovell.

Uncle James of Rookwood had set his teeth. He had taken Knowles' impertinence lying down, but now it was his turn.

Knowles himself was quite a good batsman, but Catesby and Frampton were negligible. Jimmy had an idea that he could make the Moderns rather sorry they had picked on him before he had finished.

He put all he knew into the first ball.

Knowles, with a cool grin, played forward to it, expecting to hear the clack of the willow and see the ball leaping away over the turf. What he did hear was the crash of a broken wicket and the chuckle of the juniors by the ropes.

"How's that, sir?" roared Lovell enthusiastically.

"Clean bowled, by gum!" grinned Raby.

Knowles was looking more serious as he prepared for the next delivery. Jimmy Silver was looking serious, too. He had resolved on a hat trick.

"Play!"

The ball came down, and Knowles played back for safety. But the ball came off the bat, high and straight for the bowler. Grinning, Jimmy Silver took an easy catch.

"Caught and bowled!" gasped Lovell in delight. "Keep it up, old man!"

Knowles set his teeth to face the third.

He hit out at it, determined to send it to the boundary and silence the chuckles at the ropes. But there was a cunning spin on the ball, and it evaded the prefect's bat as he lunged at it. Once again the balls were scattered, and Jimmy Silver broke into a laugh.

"Hard luck, Knowles!"

The prefect scowled angrily.

"Get away from the ropes there, you young rascals!" he shouted, waving his bat. "Get away—do you hear?"

"Oh, dear, we've got to go!" groaned Lovell. "Knowles thinks the sight is too pathetic for our young eyes. Come on, chaps!"

The Modern skipper watched angrily as the juniors disappeared towards the House. Then he nodded curly to Jimmy Silver.

"Carry on! Those were lucky ones."

Whether they were lucky or not, during the next few overs Knowles found himself beaten many more times than he appreciated. But he stuck to it grimly, and as the junior captain began to tire he began to hit the bowling a little.

"I think that'll do," remarked Knowles at last. "Catesby, you take a knock."

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

He was tired; but Catesby was waiting, and there was no help for it. Uncle James comforted himself with the reflection that Catesby was of a very different calibre to Knowles.

The first two balls spreadeagled Catesby's wicket, but under Knowles' eye he kept on. Jimmy Silver turned a dripping face to the Modern skipper after a few more overs, gasping with exertion.

"I say, Knowles, haven't you had enough?"

"Keep on till I tell you to chuck it," ordered Knowles grimly. "Bowl up! I don't encourage slacking!"

Jimmy set his teeth and kept on. But it was an effort to bowl now. And even Catesby began to hit with some freedom. Catesby called a halt at length, and Jimmy Silver mopped his brow dizzily.

"Now give Frampton a turn!" rapped Knowles coolly. "After that you can go."

"Dash it all, I'm nearly done!" ejaculated the Rookwood junior captain angrily.

"You'll keep on till I tell you!" snapped Knowles meaningly. "I've got an ashplant here to ginger you up if you slack down!"

Jimmy Silver bit his lip. He understood now why Knowles had ordered his friends away from the nets. He did not want witnesses to this little scene. The hand of Carthew was plain to see behind it all now.

The junior glanced round in the hope of spotting some senior who would rescue him; but there was none. They were all at tea. With a heavy heart Jimmy went on to bowl again. He had thought of bolting, but with three seniors at hand his chances would have been negligible.

Though his bowling arm ached as if it would fall out of its socket, Jimmy continued to bowl to Frampton, who enjoyed himself thoroughly. Frampton could not have touched Jimmy's bowling in the ordinary way, but he could hit what was being sent down now, and he did unmercifully.

The sweat was pouring from the junior when Knowles took the ball out of his hand.

"That'll do for this time, youngster.

I shall want you for the same to-morrow. You understand?"

"I understand," answered Jimmy Silver grimly.

"Right-ho! Cut off! And if you complain about this, look out for yourself, that's all!"

The junior did not answer.

It was as much as he could do to drag himself as far as the end study and flop down in the easy-chair.

"My hat! We thought you were never coming, Jimmy!" ejaculated Raby.

"Just coming out to look for you," said Lovell. "By Jove, has that rotter Knowles been lamming you on the quiet?"

Recuperating in the easy-chair, Jimmy Silver explained briefly. His chums' looks grew grim as he proceeded.

"Oh," said Arthur Edward Lovell at the finish, "so that's the game, is it? That's how Carthew reckons to get his own back on us, what?"

"Looks like it," assented Raby.

"Shall I call in the fellows, Jimmy?" asked Newcome.

Jimmy Silver nodded, and Newcome left the study. When he returned it was with Mornington and Conroy and Pons and Oswald.

They were all looking grim. When Uncle James had explained the situation they looked grimmer.

"By gad! That about does it!" remarked Mornington coolly. "In my capacity of—"

"Lock that door!" rapped Lovell.

"I suggest that we put Knowles an' Catesby an' Frampton on the list for immediate attention," said Mornington, when Raby had turned the key.

"Carried unanimously," agreed Lovell. "But I think I ought to take the lead this time, Morny. It isn't fair to you to take all the risk. This study can look after itself—"

"Dear man," smiled Mornington urbanely, "leave it to me. Jimmy has been ragged, an' we're proposin' payin' Knowles and his cronies back in the

same coin. Who do you suppose they will suspect at once?"

"Us," said Raby ungrammatically.

"Exactly! Therefore, I advise you to leave the whole affair in my hands as before. When they pick me as a giddy victim you men can exact the revenge. All agreed?"

"I suppose so," said Jimmy Silver. "It's jolly sporting of you to take the lead like this, Morny!"

"Bosh!" snapped Mornington coolly. "We're only actin' on the rules of the giddy organisation. I'm revellin' in it, I know that. Now my idea is that we act this evenin' while prep is supposed to be goin' on."

"It'll save getting up after lights out," agreed Oswald.

"An' it will enable Jimmy an' Lovell to prove an alibi," put in Mornington calmly. "Lend me your ears!"

CHAPTER 12.

A Surprise for Knowles!

FOR some moments the "dear men" lent their ears. Then they acclaimed Morny's scheme with approbation.

"Don't forget, then," said Mornington, nodding coolly. "This is goin' to put a holy fear of the Dictator into every bully in the school!"

And the committee left the end study, the plan of action. Tea was a late but very cheery meal with the Fistical Four that afternoon. After tea their actions might have surprised a fellow who knew them.

"Come on, Lovell!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Oh, dear! This is going to be torture!" groaned Lovell.

The two juniors strolled into the masters' corridor, and Jimmy Silver knocked respectfully at the door of Monsieur Guillaume Monceau, the French master at Rookwood.

"Come in!"

Jimmy Silver entered the study, with his most demure expression.

"Vat is it you vant viz me, Silver?" asked Monsieur Monceau.

"We—ahem—Lovell and I—would like you to translate a difficult passage from—from Victor Hugo, please, sir!" gasped Jimmy.

"Certainly, mes garçons! I am pleased to see that you are interested to study the works of Victor Hugo in your spare time. Vat is the passage?"

Jimmy Silver pointed out the passage, and Monsieur Monceau plunged gaily into a detailed enunciation of the wonders of that great French author Victor Hugo. Jimmy Silver and Lovell listened, more or less attentively. Monsieur Monceau probably thought them very assiduous and enthusiastic pupils. Had he known what was uppermost in their minds he would have been considerably startled.

"Your deal, Catesby!"

Cecil Knowles of the Modern Sixth puffed out a little cigarette smoke, and smiled.

Catesby and Frampton looked cheerful, too, though at present a small pile of winnings in front of Knowles represented most of their spare cash. They had hopes before the evening was out of winning it back, perhaps with interest.

And there was a general atmosphere of good will among the little party as Catesby dealt.

"By gad," chuckled Frampton, lighting up from Knowles' cigarette, "I shan't forget young Silver's face in a hurry! Looked like a boiled lobster when we'd finished with him!"

"He had what he asked for!" grinned Knowles coolly. "Carthew can't handle the kids, but we can—what?"

"No doubt about that," agreed Catesby. "And it's Lovell to-morrow, isn't it?"

"What can we do to take it out of Lovell?" asked Frampton thoughtfully.

"All in good time!" answered Knowles easily. "Clubs are trumps. I'll go four!"

The game was nap, and for the next few minutes the three Sixth-Formers were deeply engrossed in the play.

It was the hour set aside by the school authorities for prep; but Knowles & Co. rarely thought of prep when there was a chance of a "little flutter" to while away the evening. With the fellows in their studies there was small chance of interruption, and, to make assurance doubly sure, Knowles invariably locked the door.

What Dr. Chisholm would have said could he have looked into that Sixth Form study just then it was impossible to imagine; certainly it would have meant the end of Knowles & Co.'s career at Rookwood. But the sportive Sixth-Formers had come to disregard the risk. They played on cheerfully, the pile of winnings before Knowles increasing steadily.

It was a faint sound from the corridor that caused Catesby to glance up suddenly.

"What was that, Knowles?"

"Eh—what was what?"

"I heard something—as if somebody was creeping along the passage!"

"Rot, old man! You're getting nervy! Get on with the game!"

Catesby listened, but the sound was not repeated. He took up his hand again uneasily.

"My hat!"

It was a sound this time beyond doubt, and all three of the Sixth-Formers turned startled glances to the door. At that moment they were deeply thankful that it was locked.

Rap, rap!

"My—my hat, we're caught!" gasped Catesby, in a fright.

"Keep cool, you idiot!" hissed Knowles. "It's probably only Cart-hew!"

Rap, rap, rap!

"Clear the table!" hissed Knowles. "Get those cards out of sight, and

wave a paper about to clear out the smoke! Quick!"

"Knowles!"

Frampton and Catesby were hurrying to obey when that voice smote their ears from the corridor. At the sound of it their blood ran cold.

"The Head!" muttered Frampton, has face white.

"Quick!" gasped Knowles, striving to retain his nerve. "Open the window and let out the smoke! Chuck some school books on the table—pens, ink! I'll pretend the key's fallen out of the lock!"

"Knowles, are you there, my boy?"

Knowles set his teeth and took a breath. He steadied his voice before replying.

"Is that you, Dr. Chisholm?"

"Whom should you suppose it to be, if not myself, Knowles?"

"Ahem! I've been busy studying, sir! Just—just a moment while I unlock the door!"

"Is it your custom to keep your door locked, Knowles?"

"Oh, no, sir! Only when I'm studying!"

"I see! Pray open it! I wish to speak to you!"

Knowles took an anxious glance around the study before approaching the door. Catesby had pushed up the window, and most of the tobacco-smoke had cleared out by now, and Frampton had concealed the cards and money in a drawer. So long as the Head did not notice that there had been smoke, Knowles knew he could bluff it out.

"Knowles, am I to wait in this corridor while you unlock the door? What is the matter with you, my boy?"

"Ahem! The—the key has fallen out, sir!" gasped the prefect. "Just a moment!"

"I am beginning to suspect that there is something in your room that you do not wish me to see, Knowles!" came a grim voice from the corridor.

"Oh, no, sir! I've found the key!"

"Then kindly waste no more of my time!"

Knowles took a last glance round the study before turning the key in the lock. The traces of his little party seemed to have gone now, and but for the faint odour of stale smoke there was nothing to fear. And that risk had to be taken.

"All ready!" murmured Catesby, opening a work of Plato.

"Right away, Knowles!" muttered Frampton, assuming a scholarly interest in elucidating the mysteries of Aeschylus.

Click!

Knowles turned the key in the lock, and threw open the door. His smile, in readiness for the Head, froze on his face.

"What——"

He got no further than that.

There was a rush—a rush of white-robed figures—and in a flash the prefect was borne back into his study, innumerable hands grasping him.

"What the thump——"

"A rag!" gasped Catesby, Plato framing to the floor.

Frampton and Catesby had no time for further exclamations. A flood of white-robed, white-cowled figures had invaded the study. In the twinkling of an eye the three seniors were grasped, and handkerchiefs wound tightly round their mouths. They were whirled towards the door, struggling fiercely, but with no chance of escape. Behind their gags they grunted and gasped, but in vain.

Knowles' glittering eyes were upon each of the robed figures in turn, seeking to discern their identity; but the robes and cowls, with black masks completely concealing their faces, baffled him.

One of the number stepped to the doorway and glanced along the corridor. It was deserted.

"Bring them along!" rapped the figure in a deep, unrecognisable voice.

Two of the figures stepped back, and as Knowles was forced through the door they slipped a mask over his head, blindfolding him. As Catesby and

Frampton passed they were served in like manner.

The door of Knowles' study was closed silently by the last of the procession. Seething with wrath, but unable to utter a sound or catch a glimpse of where they were being borne, the three Sixth-Formers were half rushed, half carried along the corridor.

There was a turn and a flight of stairs. Then two more turns, and more stairs. Their footsteps seemed to be echoing in a long corridor, but in what corner of the building it was impossible to surmise. A faint click told the prisoners that a door was being opened for them, and after that another turn and more stairs, and finally another click of a lock.

The sound of a door closing warned them that they had reached their destination, wherever it was.

"Let the prisoners see!" commanded a deep, unemotional voice.

The masks were ripped from the Sixth-Formers' eyes, and they saw.

They were in a draped chamber, with a canopy facing them, beneath which, on a draped throne, sat a quiet, ominous figure in the white robe and cowl and jet mask of the order.

That they had been conveyed via the connecting passage between the Classical and Modern sides of Rookwood, and were now on the Classical side of the quad, did not occur to Knowles or his cronies. But there was no doubt that Knowles, at least, was almost bursting with rage.

"Remove the gags!" commanded the seated figure.

The handkerchiefs were unwound, and the prisoners could speak. Knowles, his face crimson with rage, did not hesitate to begin.

"You—you young rascals! Do you think for one moment you can impress me with your tomfoolery? You will release us at once, and——"

"One moment!" interrupted the seated figure coldly. "You may be interested to know that you have been summoned before the Grand High

Council of the Fascist Band of Rookwood! You have to answer to the Dictator for certain acts this day at Rookwood. I have the honour to be the Dictator!"

"You'll have the honour to be flogged and expelled!" snarled Knowles. "Chuck this before I lose my temper—"

"Silence!" snapped the Dictator.

"I tell you——"

"If the prisoner is not silent he will be gagged again!" said the Dictator coolly.

Knowles, his face livid, bit his lip. He was beginning to realise that he was in the power of the Fascist Band, and that they knew it. Whatever he might do afterwards, he was theirs to wreak their will on now.

"Knowles, Catesby and Frampton," continued the Dictator coldly, "you are accused of having exercised your powers as prefects in order unlawfully to oppress certain members of the junior school. In this you are suspected of acting on the suggestion of one Mark Carthew, with whom this council has had cause to deal previously. Am I not right?"

The seniors were silent.

"I take your silence to mean assent. We have dealt with Carthew, and, if necessary, will do so again. With you we propose to deal at once. Have you any defence?"

"You dare not touch us, you young sweeps——" began Knowles.

"That is not a defence! The sentence upon which we have decided will be carried out forthwith!" commanded the Dictator.

"Just you dare——"

"Silence!"

Knowles suppressed his feelings as best he could. Rage was uppermost in his mind, but both Catesby and Frampton were looking scared. Carthew's experience at the hands of the Fascists was fresh in their minds.

As the Sixth-Formers watched, three chairs were placed in a line, and three

robed figures took up their stand behind them.

"Seat the prisoners!" commanded the Dictator.

In the grasp of many hands the seniors had no alternative. They were seated in the three chairs, behind which, cold and implacable, stood three robed figures with shears in their hands.

"The first portion of your punishment will proceed!" announced the Dictator calmly. "Your hair will be trimmed!"

"Touch my head, and I'll—I'll have you flogged till you can't stand!" burst out Knowles, beside himself with rage.

Complete silence greeted his outburst. Clip, clip, clip!

Under Knowles' horrified eyes a lock of hair fell over his shoulder into his lap, and then another, and another. Knowles fairly gasped with helpless rage. And the steady clipping of the amateur barbers continued, while Catesby and Frampton writhed unavailingly under the same punishment.

It seemed an age to Knowles before the Dictator gave the order for the clipping to cease. It seemed to Knowles that there could hardly be a hair left on his head.

"Leave their eyebrows!" commanded the dictator. "Proceed with the adornment of their faces!"

"Yes, O Mighty One!"

Three "brothers" with three palettes confronted the prisoners, and three brushes loaded with colour began to adorn the faces of Knowles and Catesby and Frampton.

With green circles round his eyes, and a crimson nose and yellow ears, Knowles presented quite a startling sight. Catesby and Frampton speedily rivalled him in effect.

The seniors were gasping, but the Fascists remained deadly serious. Not once did a chuckle go up while Knowles & Co. assumed those remarkable make-ups.

"That will suffice!" said the Dictator

at last. "Now affix the beards and moustaches!"

"The—the what?" ejaculated Knowles dazedly.

"You—you touch me again, and I'll—I'll— Yoop! Gug-g-g—" Catesby broke off.

A brush laden with gum met his chin, and a good deal of the gum penetrated into Catesby's mouth. Gum, in liberal quantities, was painted on the chins and upper lips of all three seniors.

Then, while Knowles and Catesby and Frampton watched with horrified amazement, the three silent brothers approached them bearing long, curly beards and curling moustachios.

CHAPTER 14.

The Mystery Unsolved:

"HOLD their ears!"

Knowles hardly dared to breathe as the Dictator gave that command.

A finger and thumb fastened on either ear with a grip like a vice, and Knowles' head was held stationary.

Before him, coolly and unemotionally, the white-robed Fascist prepared to affix the long, flaming beard which he held in his hand.

Knowles gasped.

His upper lip and chin were running with gum—a thick, oozy concoction that the prefect had tasted without relish. Indeed, the gum was of a very special admixture. Much time and trouble had been spent by the Fascists in assuring themselves that it would hold, and hold firmly. There was gum, and there was glue, and there was secotine in that oozy solution. There was a dash of rubber solution binding the whole to a nice consistency. That much Knowles could plainly see. He had a feeling that the beard, once affixed, would take some getting off.

And there was no opportunity of dodging the attentions of his tormentor. The slightest movement of the head re-

sulted in agonising pains from one or other of his ears.

"Affix the beards!"

"You dare—" panted Knowles, straining in his seat. "Yooooop!"

The latter exclamation was the result of a tweak at his ear—a warning to keep still. Fuming, but helpless, Knowles kept still.

The beard—a long, curly one, flaming red in colour—was placed against his chin and pressed tightly there. While the prefect spluttered and gasped furiously; that awful mixture of gum and glue and secotine and rubber solution began to do its work. The beard was fixed at last; and the robed figure stood back.

"You've put it on crooked, Jimmy!" came a whisper from one of the Fascists.

A sudden gleam leaped in Knowles' eyes.

"Silence!" rapped the Dictator.

Nothing further was said, but Knowles had heard enough. There was only one junior at Rockwood who was called familiarly among his friends by the name of "Jimmy." Knowles knew now, beyond the shadow of a doubt, who it was that had affixed that flaming beard to his chin. It was some comfort to the prefect to reflect upon the punishment which awaited Jimmy Silver when he should be released.

"The beards have been affixed, O Mighty One," said one of the Fascists.

"Then attend to the moustachios, brother."

Catesby had a long, ragged grey beard, giving him an appearance reminiscent of Rip Van Winkle, and Frampton had a short, spiky appendage that rendered him more like a Guy Fawkes than anything else. Catesby and Frampton gasped in idle rage as their tormentors approached them with long, curling moustachios.

But Knowles found the indignity easier to bear now.

He watched in grim silence while the robed brother fastened two black moustachios to his upper lip, contrasting



Knowles was gasping for breath as he burst into Mr. Dalton's study, with Catesby and Frampton close behind him, their beards still clinging to their faces: "Knowles—Catesby! What—what does this mean?" exclaimed the amazed master of the Fourth.

remarkably with the red beard beneath. Knowles was thinking of the retribution to come.

Over Catesby's long, grey beard, were affixed two crimson wisps that appeared to have strayed from Knowles' beard, and over Frampton's spiky appendage were placed deftly two patches of the "Charlie Chaplin" variety. Catesby and Frampton gazed at each other and at Knowles in mute rage as the brothers stepped back to admire their handiwork. Only Knowles was cool.

"I think that will do," announced the Dictator from his raised seat. "Prisoners, are ye repentant for the misdeeds which have brought ye to this pass?"

"No, hang you!" snarled Catesby.

Knowles and Frampton were silent.

"You should be. Let this be a warning to you, at the least. If the Grand High Council has occasion to deal with you again I cannot promise such lenient treatment. Any attempt to revenge yourselves on totally innocent youths will be visited with summary punishment, and of a kind that you will not readily forget.

"Wait till I get you before the Head!" ground Frampton.

"Enough! Gag and blindfold the prisoners!"

Knowles and Catesby and Frampton submitted to the indignity of having their mouths bound and their eyes masked; they could do nothing else. But about Knowles there was a quiet grimness which Catesby and Frampton could not share.

"The court will now adjourn," announced the Dictator.

The three seniors could see nothing now, but their arms were gripped, and they were led towards the door. They felt the corridor beneath their feet, and then came a flight of stairs. As before, the way lay round unexpected turns and up and down flights of stairs, all invisible to them in their present state. There was again the clicking of a key in a lock, and the sound of a heavy door being opened. The Sixth-Formers

felt themselves shoved unceremoniously through the aperture, and there was the sound of a door closing. The shooting of bolts followed. Then silence.

For some moments they stood, listening, waiting to be hurried on again. But there was no sound beside their own breathing.

The truth dawned suddenly on Knowles.

He reached up and tore the gag from his mouth, then the mask.

Catesby and Frampton were standing by his side, but of the Fascists there was no sign.

With a gasp, Knowles realised where they were standing—on the Modern side of the connecting door between the Classical and Modern buildings at Rookwood.

"My hat! Take off your gags, you idiots! And your masks! They've left us!"

"What!"

Catesby and Frampton wrenched away the handkerchiefs and masks from their faces, and gasped.

"By Jove! Then we've been across to the Classical side without knowing it!" ejaculated Frampton.

"And the young rascals have escaped!" ground Catesby. "They're safe on the other side of that door, by Jove!"

"Safe—for the present!" snapped Knowles. "But I know who they were—or at least one of them!"

"Oh, good! You recognised one of 'em? Dashed if I could!" admitted Frampton, in great excitement.

"No. One of them called the other 'Jimmy'!" rapped Knowles. "That doesn't need much thought, does it? Carthew swore that Silver was responsible, in spite of Dalton accepting the kid's denial. Now we're sure of it—what?"

"By gad, yes!"

"Hurry up and get these beards and things off!" snapped Knowles. "And then I think there's a reckoning for Jimmy Silver and the other young ruffans!"

"Come on!" gasped Catesby.

From the connecting corridor to the bath-rooms was fortunately a short distance, and the seniors covered it without encountering anybody. In their remarkable state they were glad of that. Even a royal revenge on the Fourth would not make up the dignity which would be lost if they were glimpsed for a moment in coloured beards and moustachios.

Knowles plunged into the bath-room, and Catesby and Frampton followed suit. In a few seconds hot water and soap and pumice-stone were doing their utmost to remove the hairy appendages which the Fascists had given Knowles & Co.

But that mixture of gum and glue and seccotine and rubber solution had not been concocted for nothing. It was, as Arthur Edward Lovell had remarked, guaranteed to stick, and stick it did. Despite the almost ferocious efforts of the three prefects to remove their beards and moustachios, that mixture refused to melt. The beards were on, and it appeared as if they were on for good. Lovell had once stuck a pair of rubbers to his shoes with the rubber solution, and it was not surprising that Knowles & Co. found difficulty in budging it.

"By gad! I don't believe it'll ever shift!" ejaculated Knowles, after a fierce struggle lasting half an hour.

"Oh, dear, I can't get it off!" gasped Catesby dismally. "Oh, won't I skin those kids—won't I, just!"

"They'll be flogged and expelled!" snarled Frampton. "And that's too good for 'em. By gad! We shall never get these off, Knowles. What about going to Dalton?"

"What, like this?" roared Catesby.

"Cut the beastly things off short!" snapped Frampton.

"It's the only thing we can do," agreed Knowles, with a gasp of rage. "Oh, dear! What will Dalton think when we turn up like this?"

"Can't be helped!" snapped Frampton. "They'll get it all the heavier!"

"Something in that," agreed Catesby.

Knowles, his teeth set, gave a furious tug to his flaming and now sodden beard. A moment later he gave a howl of pain, and stopped tugging suddenly. His eyes fairly glittered at the other two.

"Come on!" he rapped. "Dalton's going to see us just as we are! And if he doesn't flay the little villains alive, I'll do it myself!"

With crimson faces, and beards and moustachios wet and trailing from their chins, the three seniors left the bath-room. Knowles scouted ahead, and reported that the Sixth-Form corridor, at least, was clear.

Knowles and Catesby and Frampton came down the Sixth-Form corridor at breakneck speed, fearful that they would be seen. They swept down the staircase like three whiriwinds and made a reckless bolt for the House door.

A terrific yell greeted them there, for, as luck would have it, a crowd of juniors spotted them.

"Oh, my hat!"

"My only summer bonnet! Knowles!"

"And Frampton! And Catesby! What's happened to you, you men? Playing Rip Van Winkle, Knowles, old man?"

Knowles did not pause to reply.

With Catesby and Frampton at his heels, he fairly flew across the quad. As it was after locking-up time, the juniors should have remained in their House. But a shouting, laughing crowd came dashing in the wake of the prefects.

In the hall of the Classical side there was quite a sensation. Fellows scattered at the flying approach of the seniors, but joined up, roaring with merriment, in the chase.

Knowles was gasping for breath when he burst into Mr. Dalton's study, with Catesby and Frampton just behind him.

He stood, pumping in breath, on Mr. Dalton's carpet, while the Fourth Form-master eyed him in undisguised amaze-

ment. Carthew's appearance after his interview with the Dictator had been startling enough; Knowles & Co. were like Carthew, only much more so.

"Knowles! Catesby! What—what does this mean?"

"It means that we've only just escaped from those young villains—Jimmy Silver and the rest!" gasped Knowles furiously.

"What—what— Pray calm yourself, Knowles. Am I to understand that you have been treated in the same manner as Carthew was recently?"

"We were seized in our study, sir," gasped Knowles, keeping cool only with an effort, "and dragged to a secret chamber. Then they got us up like this! We've been half an hour in the bath-room trying to get these beards and things off, but they won't budge."

"This is monstrous!" ejaculated Mr. Dalton, his face setting severely.

"I know who it was, sir—Silver!"

"Silver!" Mr. Dalton raised his eyebrows. "Are you sure, Knowles? Did you recognise him?"

"One of the young rascals addressed him by name!" snapped the prefect.

Mr. Dalton pursed his lips. He wanted, naturally, to punish the offenders, and to punish them severely; but he did not like to hear accusations against the head boy of his Form.

"You are certain, Knowles? Silver has given me his word that he had nothing to do with the—ahem!—ragging of Carthew."

"He may have had nothing to do with that, sir, though I doubt it; but he was one of the ringleaders in this escapade. I demand that he shall be flogged, sir! Look at me—"

"I am looking at you, Knowles," said Mr. Dalton with asperity. "You have certainly been very—ahem!—badly treated. I will send for Silver at once."

"Very good, sir," answered Knowles, breathing hard.

He waited with ill grace while Toby was dispatched to find Uncle James of the Fourth.

There was a knock at the door at last, and Knowles' brow grew grim.

"Come in!" said Mr. Dalton.

Jimmy Silver appeared in the doorway. He did not look alarmed.

"Come in, Silver!" said Mr. Dalton seriously. "I am sorry to say that Knowles has made a very serious charge against you. Where have you been this evening?"

"For the last hour, sir?" asked Jimmy calmly.

"Yes."

"With Monsieur Monceau, sir," responded Jimmy Silver with perfect equanimity.

"You young liar!" burst out Knowles.

"Silence, Knowles! How dare you make use of such an expression! Silver's statement can be verified. What were you doing with Monsieur Monceau, Silver?"

"Lovell and I were studying Victor Hugo, sir," said Jimmy, with the utmost calm.

"Pah!" ejaculated Knowles.

"Kindly request Monsieur Monceau to step here, Toby," said Mr. Dalton quietly.

Jimmy Silver waited quite calmly for the arrival of Monsieur Monceau. Knowles and Catesby and Frampton eyed him as if they could eat him.

"You wanted to see me, Monsieur Dalton?"

"Ah, yes, Monsieur Monceau. I should like you to verify this boy's statement that he has been with you for the last hour studying Victor Hugo."

"Vy, yes," agreed the little French master, nodding his head. "Ze page called him away to your study, Monsieur Dalton. He and Lovell—zey both very interested in ze work of ze great Victor Hugo."

Knowles' face was a study.

He was a suspicious fellow—a very suspicious fellow. But even he could not suspect Monsieur Monceau of entering into a conspiracy with a junior to escape punishment. He realised, too

late, that the "Jimmy" had been let drop intentionally for him to seize upon and make a fool of himself exactly as he had done. And at that Knowles writhed.

"Thank you, monsieur. That is all. You may go, Silver."

Jimmy Silver nodded cheerily to Knowles, and left the study.

Mr. Dalton gave Knowles a glance. "The matter will be investigated, Knowles. You had better go and take off that ridiculous beard."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

Without a word Knowles and Catesby and Frampton went.

In the passage Knowles gave the others a glance.

"That was set for us. We walked straight into it. But let them wait—that's all!"

And the seniors headed once again for a bath-room.

CHAPTER 15.

A Clue for Carthew!

"THE Brotherhood of the Black Hand!"

Tubby Muffin stopped eating and pricked up his ears.

He was sitting on a stone ledge in a corner of the Cloisters, with a bag of jam-tarts by his side.

The tarts were not Muffin's, hence his retirement to this secluded spot in order to consume them.

Muffin was half-way through a tart when there was a footstep behind the old pillars, and a voice whispered tensely:

"The Brotherhood of the Black Hand!"

It was a fag's voice; Muffin recognised it at once as that of Lovell minor of the Third.

Judging by the footsteps, Lovell minor was accompanied by several other fags, and a babel of fag whispers confirmed this.

"My dear idiot, we shall all be flayed alive!" came Weggs' voice.

"Rot!" Lovell minor sounded excited, and he began to raise his voice. "I tell you we can do it just as easily as they can—a jolly sight better, if you ask me!"

"But it isn't our idea, and we don't know quite how they work it," objected Wegg.

"It is our idea," snapped Teddy Lovell. "That is to say, it's my major's idea, anyway. That makes it mine, in a manner of speaking, and I believe I mentioned something of the kind to him in the first place. Look here, Wegg, you must admit it's high time the prefects were put well and truly in their places!"

"Hear, hear!" came from more than one fag throat.

"We'll start on Carthew!" said Lovell vengefully. "That beast Carthew is scared of the Fourth and their jolly old Dictator, and he's been taking it out of us in the Third instead."

"Hear, hear!"

"It's got to stop, and there's only one way to stop it."

"I agree it's got to stop, but if we touch Carthew——" said Wegg doubtfully.

"If we touch Carthew we shall get licked for our pains," said Lovell minor. "But if the Brotherhood of the Black Hand touch him, he'll knuckle under, the same as he's already knuckled under to the Dictator!"

"Something in that," agreed Algy Silver.

"It's risky——" objected Wegg.

"You've just collected a hundred lines from Carthew yourself," urged Lovell. "You didn't deserve them—you couldn't help bumping into Carthew as you slid down the banisters. It might have happened to anybody. But Carthew was mad——"

"I think I winded him," admitted Wegg.

"Winding Carthew isn't a crime. Anyway, we've all got a lot of old scores to wipe off against the bouncer, and this is our chance to do it. All it wants is a bit of nerve. Are you chaps game?"

"To form the Brotherhood of the Black Hand?" asked Wegg.

"Yes, and deal with Carthew. After we've ragged Carthew, there'll be Knowles and Catesby and the other rotters——"

"The Brotherhood will want a Dictator, same as the Fascists," said Wegg thoughtfully. "It will be a risky job. Who'll take it on?"

"I'm your man," answered Teddy Lovell at once. "What do you men say?"

There was a silence, while the bunch of fags, Wegg and Algy Silver and Grant and Stacey and Pipkin and Sylvester, turned the matter over in their minds.

Concealed from view, Tubby Muffin sat silent on his ledge, tart in hand, his ears absorbing every word.

Teddy Lovell, looking from one to the other of his fellow-fags, could see from their eyes that they were only too eager to pay off old scores against Carthew. But it was a risk. Imitating the drastic and singularly successful policy of the Fascist band might be an attractive programme, but—— There was a "but." It was not so easy for fags to handle a senior as for Fourth-Formers. They did not enjoy the same freedom from observation. The eye of Mr. Bohun, their Form-master, was likely to be on them at any time. On the other hand, difficulties are meant to be overcome, and the dazzling prospect of kidnapping Carthew and trimming his hair and eyebrows in the manner of the Dictator himself was too alluring to be put aside. Whether Carthew deserved this fresh visitation was open to discussion, but undoubtedly he had been even more beastly than usual to the fags since the Dictator had come into power.

Algy Silver, for one, soon made up his mind.

"I'm with you, Lovell," he announced, breaking the pause.

"Me, too," said Grant instantly.

"Count me in," said Sylvester.

"And me," said Stacey.

"Anybody want to back out?" asked Lovell minor coolly.

Apparently nobody did.

"Then all we've got to do is discuss plans for getting hold of Carthew," said Lovell minor.

"They'll take a bit of discussing, if you ask me," said Wegg.

"If you're going to start croaking, young Wegg——"

"Not me, old chap. Go ahead and make a suggestion."

While the fags were speaking, another sound obtruded faintly on Tubby Muffin's ears. Muffin, seated in the corner of the Cloisters, could see along two aisles, out into the quad, though the fags, behind the pillars, could not.

It was a footstep from the quad which attracted Muffin's attention. It was a very faint footstep, and possibly it was only the fact that he was in possession of stolen tarts which rendered Muffin sufficiently alert to notice it.

As it was, Muffin glanced along the aisle just in time to see Mark Carthew of the Sixth slip behind a pillar. Carthew had not seen Muffin, hidden in the deep shadow. But he had evidently caught the whispers of the fags, and was investigating in his usual stealthy style.

Unbeknown to them, Lovell minor and his chums were discussing how to deal with Carthew with the bully of the Sixth only a few feet away from them.

"In the first place, we've got to get hold of Carthew," began Lovell minor, rather thoughtfully.

"You've said that already," grinned Wegg.

"We shall have to think."

"You mean you'll have to think. You're the giddy Dictator," answered Wegg.

"As Dictator, you can trust me to take care of the thinking," replied Teddy Lovell calmly. "We've agreed to take measures against Carthew for a start. I'll put in some hard thinking this afternoon during classes, and we'll

meet again here directly after classes. That all right?"

"The Dictator has commanded," said Wegg in wed tones, and there was a chuckle.

A moment later Tubby Muffin heard the fags disperse, leaving the Cloisters without seeing Carthew.

Muffin, quiet as a mouse, watched while Carthew emerged from hiding, and stood gazing after the fags with burning eyes and twitching hands. For some reason of his own he did not follow them. Perhaps, knowing when they would meet again, he preferred to catch them red-handed. He had never suspected Lovell minor of being the Dictator, but here was proof positive. The thought of getting his hands on the Dictator at last made Carthew fairly burn. But he had to catch them on the job, as it were. He had learned the folly of making wild accusations.

Carthew set off towards the House after a few moments, leaving Tubby Muffin trembling with excitement.

As soon as the coast was clear, Muffin sped into the House himself, using the back stairs to avoid meeting Carthew. He fairly raced to the end study, catching the Fistical Four just preparing for class.

"Jimmy! I say, Jimmy——"

It was obvious that Muffin had something really extra special to impart.

"Come inside and shut the door!" snapped Lovell major.

"What's wrong, old fat man?" asked Jimmy Silver keenly.

"Lovell minor — and Carthew!" gasped Muffin, completely forgetful that the bag of tarts still grasped in his fat hand had been purloined from this very study table only an hour previously.

"What's that about my minor?" demanded Lovell, his eyes fixed on Tubby Muffin's face.

The tarts were still in Muffin's hand when he had finished telling what he had seen and overheard. The Fistical Four were not thinking about tarts. They were thinking that Carthew had

got a clue at last to the identity of the Dictator, an incorrect one, but a clue that might lead to serious trouble for Teddy Lovell and his chums.

"The silly young idiot!" gasped Lovell major. "Why can't he keep out of trouble?"

"Like his major, perhaps," suggested Raby.

"Look here, Raby——"

"Cut out the ragging," snapped Jimmy Silver. "We've got to act, and act quickly."

"But what can we do?" asked Lovell blankly.

"After classes this afternoon Carthew will catch your minor and the rest red-handed."

"Not if we warn them," said Lovell excitedly.

"If we do, Carthew will always believe your minor is the Dictator, and he'll never rest until he has managed to fasten it on to him. I've got a better way. Let Carthew catch them, and take them to their Form-master."

"Wha-a-at?"

"Meanwhile, we shall arrange some evidence which will convince even Carthew," said Jimmy Silver coolly.

"Look here, what are you thinking of doing?" demanded Lovell.

"You'll see," answered Uncle James imperturbably, "just as soon as classes are over."

CHAPTER 16.

Not the Dictator!

"I SAY, shouldn't we be safer disguised?"

Lovell minor of the Third looked at Wegg as they crossed the quad immediately after afternoon classes.

"That's a good idea. You do have a good idea once in a while, young Wegg."

"It isn't mine," said Wegg. "Any more than starting the whole thing is yours. But we shall have to be disguised. I know I'm jolly well not hand-

ling Carthew or Knowles without a mask, at least."

"We can get some old sheets from the house dame, and dye them," said Lovell.

"The house dame will wonder what we want them for, won't she?" asked Wegg.

"Look here, if you're going to put difficulties in the way, we shall never get started at all," said Lovell irritably. "This is the place. The other fellows won't be long."

Lovell minor and Wegg had reached the shadow of the Cloisters. A few moments later and Algy Silver and Grant and Stacey had joined them. Hamley and Sylvester and Tunstall followed. Soon there was quite a crowd among the old pillars, clustering around Teddy Lovell, who mounted a fallen stone to address them.

"I say, Carthew's properly scared by the Dictator" said Stacey eagerly. "Some of the Fourth were ragging in Hall as I came out, and Carthew just walked by them and took no notice."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wait till we've finished with him, and he'll be just as scared of the Third!" said Lovell minor sternly.

"Hear, hear! Hurrah!"

"And don't make so much row! We don't want the beaks here."

"My hat, no!"

"The Brotherhood has assembled to discuss ways and means of dealing with Carthew!" announced Lovell minor, to an attentive audience. "I have decided that we shall have to wear disguises—"

"I suggested that," interrupted Wegg.

"Shut up, Wegg. Every fellow will be expected to make his own disguise," said Lovell. "You can easily make masks, and we needn't have any robes."

"I say, it's going to be jolly risky," said Pipkin.

"Any fellow who feels funky had better back out now," said Lovell coolly.

"I suppose Carthew doesn't suspect already?" asked Hamley. "I saw him

going into Bohun's study just as we came out."

"Probably another complaint," answered Lovell. "Are we going to stand Carthew's bullying indefinitely?"

"No!" came in a full-throated chorus.

"Good enough. This is the programme, then," went on Lovell. "We're going to paint Carthew."

"Paint Carthew? Whew!"

"Just that," grinned Lovell minor. "The Fascists painted Carthew, but theirs was only an amateur effort. I've always wanted to go in for the higher art. I'm going to make a start by painting Carthew properly. I'm willing to waste my new paint-box on him—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's in a good cause, if it means a bit of peace for us. The beast has given every fellow in the Third lines this term, most of us more than once—"

"Not quite every fellow," interjected Wegg.

"I'm talking in round numbers," said Lovell majestically. "If Carthew has missed anybody, you can bet he doesn't know it. Now, we've agreed to paint Carthew—the only thing left is to decide how we're going to get hold of him."

"We can't tackle him in his study," said Wegg seriously. "We want him in a place like this—"

"What was that?" asked Stacey suddenly.

"A rat!" answered Lovell. "If you men are getting nervous already—"

"I thought I heard something," said Pipkin.

"Rot!" Lovell surveyed his followers, his face filled with enthusiasm. "Young Wegg is right when he says we've got to get Carthew on his own, in a place like this. It oughtn't to be so difficult. I know he sneaks off with Knowles for a quiet smoke sometimes—"

There was a faint sound, almost like a suppressed snarl, which Lovell minor heeded not in his excitement.

"Once get Carthew here alone, and we can do what we like with him."

"The beast!" said Hamley.

"Beast is right!" agreed Algy Silver. "I had a cut across the palm just for looking at him yesterday."

"You shouldn't put your tongue out when you look at a prefect, young Silver," retorted Lovell minor. "Nevertheless, if we only had Carthew here now, we'd—"

Lovell minor broke off abruptly.

He stood, staring over the heads of his followers, as though fascinated by what he saw beyond them.

Two figures had appeared suddenly from behind the pillars, the figures of Mr. Frank Bohun, master of the Third, and Mark Carthew!

The fags turned as Mr. Bohun and Carthew walked into their midst. There was a silence that could be felt.

Carthew broke it, pointing a trembling finger at Lovell minor.

"That young scoundrel—"

"Pray, leave this matter to me, Carthew!" snapped Mr. Bohun, obviously much put out.

Mr. Bohun fixed Lovell minor with a grim glance. Mr. Bohun was a mild man, and he did not like to think that a boy in his Form was responsible for the outrages perpetrated by the Dictator. But here was Lovell minor openly discussing dealing with Carthew! Mr. Bohun had disdained to remain in concealment and hear what was said. The mere fact that boys in his Form had gathered together to discuss dealing with Carthew was enough to horrify Mr. Bohun. And Carthew had assured him that before classes he had heard Lovell minor referred to by the other fags as the Dictator.

Mr. Bohun surveyed Lovell minor almost in sorrow, while Carthew's eyes simply burned at him.

"I am sorry, Lovell, to find a boy in my care cherishing such—such outrageous designs against a prefect," said Mr. Bohun at last. "I am horrified to think that you have been responsible for the trouble which the Dictator has caused. I cannot believe it yet, but I have the evidence of my ears and also Carthew's

word. If this is proved, it may mean expulsion for you, Lovell minor."

Lovell minor said nothing. There was really nothing he could say. But Wegg spoke up:

"Lovell isn't the Dictator, sir."

"You ask me to believe that, Wegg?"

"Yes, sir. Lovell was a silly ass—he thought it would be a good idea to imitate the Fascists and pull Carthew's leg—that's all, sir."

"That is certainly a more pleasant explanation," said Mr. Bohun slowly.

"I tell you he's the Dictator, right enough!" snarled Carthew.

Mr. Bohun regarded Lovell minor directly.

"Are you the Dictator, Lovell?"

Lovell minor gulped. It went against his rather obstinate nature to profess innocence, but, after all, he was not the Dictator.

"No, sir."

"Can't you see the young rascal's lying, sir?" hooted Carthew furiously.

"I can see nothing of the kind," responded Mr. Bohun tartly. "I have certainly found Lovell a headstrong boy, but never a liar. However, this is a matter for the Head to sift. You boys will follow me into the House. Come, Carthew."

Obediently the fags followed at the heels of Mr. Bohun and Mark Carthew. Every now and then Carthew flashed a venomous glance backward over his shoulder at Lovell minor. Carthew had no doubt that he had at last found the Dictator, though if he had stopped to think clearly he might have realised that the organisation of the Fascist band was rather above the weight of the Third. But at the moment one thing only was uppermost in Carthew's mind—vengeance—and he did not stop to think calmly.

As the little procession entered the House, Bulkeley, the captain of the Sixth, met them. Bulkeley was looking startled, and he seemed relieved to see Mr. Bohun.

"Mr. Bohun, have you seen the Third Form room?"

"I have seen the Third Form room quite a number of times, Bulkeley," answered Mr. Bohun.

"I mean recently, sir," gasped Bulkeley.

"Not since classes. Has anything occurred there?" asked the Form-master, in surprise.

"Rather a lot has occurred, sir," answered Bulkeley. "I think you ought to see it."

"At the moment I am taking these boys to the Head," said Mr. Bohun. "Carthew imagines them to be the Fascist band, and Lovell minor the Dictator."

Bulkeley stared, and almost burst out laughing.

"In that case, sir, I really think you ought to see the Form-room first!" he gasped.

Mr. Bohun hesitated, and then led the way without a word to the Third Form room. As he opened the door, Lovell minor and the rest crowded round to gaze in and solve the mystery. What they beheld drew from them gasps and exclamations of surprise and wrath.

The Form-room certainly presented a remarkable appearance. It looked as if a cyclone had struck it, followed by an earthquake, with a tornado thrown in. The lockers of the fags had been opened, and property of all kinds was strewn round in every conceivable place. The desks were up-ended, and books littered the floor. After the first shock it was apparent that no actual damage had been done, but a "rag" of no ordinary dimensions had obviously taken place. And it was obviously directed against the Form as a whole.

A large placard over the fireplace drew Mr. Bohun's attention. It read, in big block capitals:

"TAKE WARNING! THE DICTATOR WILL TOLERATE NO IMITATORS!"

Mr. Bohun read and re-read that notice, and the corners of his mouth twitched. It was possible that he was

relieved to find this indisputable proof that his boys were not the original Fascist band. If he had needed further proof, the wrathful remarks of the fags would have supplied it. Those remarks were not feigned. As for Lovell minor, he stood crimson-faced under the expressive glances of his Form-fellows. Evidently it did not pay to imitate the Fascist band and to take the name of the Dictator in vain!

Even Carthew was convinced.

He avoided Mr. Bohun's gaze.

"I—I—I think Lovell minor and the rest were probably going to join the Fascist band, sir—" he began.

"Personally, I think the idea of rebellion against authority has gone to their heads a little," said Mr. Bohun grimly. "I may say, too, that I have noticed a number of my boys engaged in writing lines for you, Carthew. You will please remember that I am their Form-master, and unless they are deliberately insubordinate you will avoid giving too many impositions."

"Yes, sir," said Carthew, swallowing his wrath.

"They will certainly be punished," said Mr. Bohun, eyeing his flock.

They were—with a stiff caning, which Carthew stayed to see. But it was of little satisfaction to Carthew now that he knew that the Dictator was still at large, and likely to act now at any moment.

CHAPTER 17.

Punter Gets Impatient!

"**L**ATTREY! Stop a minute!" Mark Lattrey of the Fourth stopped in the lane.

A tall, distinguished-looking gentleman detached himself from a stile and strolled elegantly towards him swinging a malacca cane.

Lattrey did not appear pleased at the sight of Captain Punter. He had, in fact, been hurrying past the stile, hoping that the captain would not spot him.

Captain Punter was smiling genially,

evidently pleased at that chance meeting after classes. Lattrey was wishing that he had stayed within gates. But it was too late for wishing now, and the cad of the Fourth endeavoured to smile as the captain came up.

"Hallo! Fancy meetin' you!" ejaculated Lattrey, affecting surprise.

"Hoped I might catch sight of you," responded the captain, swinging his cane and eyeing the junior keenly. "You saw the result of the Bartown Race, I suppose?"

"Yes; but you've cleaned me out already," said Lattrey bluntly. "You'll have to wait, that's all."

Captain Punter smiled. It was not a nice smile.

Since coming to the Rookwood district Captain Punter had found the "sportive" fellows in the school a lucrative source of income. Seniors and juniors had fallen into his net, and once in it they discovered that the captain was no better than any other kind of sharper. Lattrey figured now among that unhappy number.

But there was quite a friendly note in the sharper's voice as he answered:

"Don't let it worry you, my dear boy. We all find ourselves in a corner now and then, what?"

Lattrey stared.

He was not quite so simple as the majority of the "giddy goats" of Rookwood, and he had sized-up Captain Punter for what he was worth. Only the prospect of a "dead cert" had tempted the Fourth-Former to bet; and he could not affect to understand the captain's friendly overtures at that moment. He had nothing to give away.

"I'll pay you as soon as I can," he answered after a pause. "Three pounds, isn't it?"

"When will you have three pounds?" asked the captain coolly.

Lattrey bit his lip. He knew better than anybody that he was not likely to have that sum for weeks at least.

"Now I want you to listen," continued the captain quietly. "You owe me three pounds, and you can't pay. I

don't want to make a fuss, but your headmaster would sit up and take notice if I went and saw him—"

"Don't!" ejaculated Lattrey. "I'll pay somehow—"

"Listen!" snapped Captain Punter. "You can't pay. But I may be willing to forget the debt—in certain circumstances."

"For-got it!" gasped Lattrey dazedly.

"In fact, I'll wash it right out," offered the captain generously. "Always agreed that you do what I suggest."

"And what's that?"

Lattrey's eyes were gleaming. He was not an overscrupulous youth at best, and the prospect of escaping from this rascal's clutches was alluring.

"I dare say you know that I've had some dealings with a kid named Lovell—a fag—"

"I know," assented Lattrey, grinning.

"His brother and three friends interviewed me," went on the captain calmly. "I'll make no bones about it, though you probably know the facts already. The boy Lovell thrashed me with my own cane—thrashed me like a dog—and the rest helped to give me what you would call a ragging. I looked a sight for some days."

"I heard about it."

"They were crowing—what? Well, Captain Punter isn't the man to take such treatment lying down. I arranged with Carthew to get them into a barn, where I was waiting with some friends—"

"I heard about that, too!" grinned Lattrey. "Dalton and Bulkeley butted in and gave you and your men a thundering licking, didn't they?"

"Somebody gave me a prize jaw," answered the captain with an evil smile. "It all comes to this—I've been swindled out of young Lovell's money, and I've taken two handlings on account of those four fellows. I'm not the man to forget or forgive. They're going to rue it—you understand?"

"Easy enough to catch them alone

and lick them, I suppose?" queried Lattrey.

"Not so easy," responded the captain, shaking his head. "And the matter's gone beyond that. I'm going to make those young hounds pay dearly, and you're going to help me!"

"Here, I say——" began Lattrey in alarm.

"Either that, or I go to your headmaster with an interesting story!"

"Oh, what—what do you want me to do?" gasped Lattrey.

"Nothing that need alarm you. Carthew owes me some money. I gave him a fortnight to pay. The fortnight's up, and he hasn't paid. I want you to go to him for me and ask for the money—twenty pounds."

"Oh, I'll do that fast enough," said Lattrey, relieved.

"Wait a minute. That's only the beginning," continued the captain. "He won't be able to pay, though if he can I'll be glad of the cash. But he won't. And then we put our scheme into operation. It would amuse Carthew if I could tell him. If he can pay he gets clear. If not, he plays a leading part in my scheme to get Lovell and his friends expelled from Rookwood——"

"Wha-a-at?"

"Just that!" said Captain Punter between his teeth. "You might remember that you can't swindle me and handle me like a dog with impunity, Lattrey! Now, listen here! If, as I expect, Carthew can't pay, you will come and tell me. I shall be waiting here at the stile. Then you will tell me when Carthew is likely to be out of gates at the same time that those four fellows are out, too."

"What do you mean?" asked Lattrey with deep uneasiness.

"Simply this: Carthew is going to be knocked over the head; nothing serious, but enough to stun him. He will never know that I did it, and there will be an inquiry at the school. That's where you come in, Lattrey."

"Look here, this is villainy!" ejaculated Lattrey.

"You know the alternative. It's all square. I'm letting Carthew off his twenty pounds in consideration of the part he will play. It's cheap at the price. And when the school is questioned I want incriminating evidence discovered among the belongings of Lovell and the others—sufficient to get them expelled from the school, branded as dangerous young hooligans—as they are!"

"But—but it's mad and—and rotten!"

"You will be responsible for landing them with the evidence," went on the captain grimly. "The stick I use—with blood on it—that's one thing. You can hide it in their study. It'll be easy enough, and no risk at all for you. That's all you're likely to worry about, if I know you, Lattrey!"

Mark Lattrey licked his dry lips.

Rascal as he was, he shrank from the scheme which the captain had outlined. Punter, of course, was inflamed with the loss of a debt and two thrashings, and his venomous nature was stirred to its depths. Getting four innocent juniors expelled did not seem very terrible to him, but to Lattrey the matter appeared in a different light. Certainly the scheme was workable. And there was a debt of three pounds hanging over Lattrey's head.

"There's no need to get afraid!" sneered the captain contemptuously. "You'll have nothing risky to do, as I said. And if you're too squeamish to come in with me, think of what Dr. Chisholm will say about your little bet on High Hope."

"I—I say, I suppose Carthew couldn't grumble," muttered Lattrey hesitatingly. "He'll get off twenty pounds. But convicting Silver and the rest——"

"It's either that or else convicting yourself," remarked Captain Punter. "See here, my mind is made up. Get along to the school now and see Carthew. You can get back and let me

know the result before the gates close. Then we'll make final arrangements."

"But look here—I can't——" protested Lattrey.

"Then I'll walk up to the school with you," answered the captain coolly.

Lattrey gasped. He shrank from the villainy of Captain Punter's suggestion; but, on the other hand—— He was trapped; it was expulsion for the Fistical Four or for himself. And Lattrey had no doubt that if the captain made known all his dealings with him and the visits after lights-out to the Bird-in-Hand he would have to leave Rookwood.

He gave Punter a hunted look.

"I—I'll go and see Carthew. He may be able to pay."

"Get along, then!" agreed the captain. "And don't forget to drop back and let me know what's to happen."

"All right."

Mark Lattrey's thoughts as he turned towards Rookwood were not pleasant. His mind was a chaos of conflicting emotions—fear of Punter, and shrinking from the task imposed upon him chief among them.

Bitterly now did Lattrey regret that little gamble which had landed him in the rascal's power. But there was no blinking the fact that Punter could at will get Lattrey expelled—and that he would not hesitate to do it.

As the cad of the Fourth came in at the gates he caught a glimpse of Carthew in the quad. And the sight of Tubby Muffin, the fat and fatuous, extending fingers and thumb from the tip of his nose towards Carthew made Lattrey jump.

Carthew made a stride after Muffin, and a yell floated to Lattrey's ears.

"Yah! Keep off, you rotter! I'll set the Dictator on you!"

Carthew paused with his hand raised to cuff the fat junior. Then he turned and hastened into the House. Lattrey, viewing it all from a distance, gasped. It was a win for Muffin—with the threat of the Dictator to back him up.

Who the Dictator was Lattrey did not know. If it was not Jimmy Silver—and that had been demonstrated for the benefit of Knowles and Catesby and Frampton—he could not guess. But there was no doubt that Carthew was taking the lesson to heart.

Lattrey followed the prefect into the House and up the staircase to the Sixth Form corridor.

Carthew entered his study, and Lattrey followed close behind him. The prefect glanced round irritably.

"Hallo! What do you want, you cheeky fag?"

Carthew was usually on quite good terms with Lattrey—they were birds of a feather. But in his present harassed mood Carthew was fed-up with fags of all descriptions. He saw the shadow of the Dictator in every Fourth Form face, and the strain of keeping his temper in hand was telling on his nerves.

"I've just seen Punter——" began Lattrey.

"Hang Punter!" snarled Carthew. He had forgotten the sportive captain completely. The recollection of his debt startled him.

He strode across to his desk and threw his cap inside. Then he started.

"Good gad! What——"

He drew out of the desk a card—a large white card—bearing an inscription. As he read that inscription Carthew's face grew livid.

In big red letters ran the following:

"HANDS OFF THE FOURTH!—THE DICTATOR."

Carthew whirled round, beside himself with rage. His glance almost burnt through Lattrey.

"Lattrey! Did you put this here?"

"Eh? Put what where?"

"This! You did! I can see it in your face, you young whelp!"

Lattrey stared aghast at the card which Carthew thrust under his nose. It was a startling communication, and enough to annoy any senior. To

Carthew it was the last straw, and something had to go."

"You put it here; I saw you in the corridor before I left the study!"

"I came with some lines for Bulkeley!" ejaculated Lattrey, alarmed by the terrific expression on the prefect's face.

"A likely yarn!" sneered Carthew contemptuously. "I saw you in the passage—that's enough! So you're one of these Fascists, Lattrey! Hold out your hand!"

"I'm not, I tell you!" shouted Lattrey furiously.

"It wasn't half an hour ago!" snapped Carthew. "I saw you; and it isn't easy for a fag to get into the Sixth Form corridor without being spotted! Hold out your hand, I tell you!"

"I tell you I didn't—yoooooop!"

Carthew made a leap.

He was quite beside himself at that moment.

The shadow of the Dictator, and the effort of keeping his hands off the junior he suspected, had told heavily on Carthew. Quite how he had restrained himself from slaying Tubby Muffin in the quad he did not know. And the card bearing the warning of the Dictator was more than he could stand.

His grasp closed on Lattrey, and the ashpant rose and fell on the hapless junior's shoulders. The dust rose in clouds, and Lattrey's yells filled the corridor.

"Whoooooop! Yooooop! You rotter! Ow-wow-wow-wow!"

There was the sound of doors opening along the corridor. Other seniors were beginning to wonder what was occurring in Carthew's study. There was a knock at the door, and Carthew paused.

He jerked open the door and beheld the surprised features of Bulkeley. The next moment Carthew had whirled Lattrey through the opening, and Bulkeley skipped out of the way only just in time.

Slam!

The door closed in Bulkeley's face, and Lattrey sprawled, gasping and groaning, at his feet.

Within the study Carthew threw himself into an easy-chair to grapple with the problem of Punter—recurring now that his fortnight's grace had elapsed.

CHAPTER 18.

Dirty Work!

"HOLD on a minute, you fellows—"

"Can't stop, Lattrey!" said Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Hop out of the way," added Raby.

Mark Lattrey's eyes gleamed at the Fistical Four.

It was the day after his interview with Captain Punter, and Lattrey had thought out his position.

Carthew, quite unintentionally, had helped to harden the resolve to which the cad was forced. A little reflection had convinced Lattrey that his career at Rookwood depended on his compliance with the captain's plans, rascally as they were. And the thought of personal danger spurred him to the decision. Smarting still, both in body and mind, from Carthew's licking, Lattrey sunk his scruples. He accosted the Fistical Four now in the faint hope of being able to raise the sum of three pounds to pay off Punter. Even if he had the money, the man would probably force him into his scheme of revenge, but there was at least a chance.

The Fistical Four were in a hurry. They did not suspect that unless they footed Lattrey's gambling debt they were to be the victims of a dastardly plot.

"But, I say—" began Lattrey, grasping at Jimmy Silver's arm.

"Uncle James" was the most good-natured of the four; the softest, as Lovell often described it. Uncle James lived up to his reputation now. He could not help noticing how worried Lattrey looked.

"Get it over quick, if you've anything to say," he said, pausing. "Anything a chap can do?"

"I'm in a hole—the very dickens of a hole!" muttered Lattrey, lowering his eyes.

"Well, choke up the giddy worst!" ejaculated Jimmy impatiently. "I suppose, if you want something, you can say so?"

"I'm in debt," said Lattrey.

"Oh!"

"Gambling!" said Arthur Edward Lovell, in deep disgust.

"I was—was swindled!" muttered Lattrey. "I owe a man three pounds, and if I don't pay this afternoon he'll come up to give me away! Lend me three pounds, Silver, and I'll pay you back somehow—honest Injun!"

"Phew!"

Jimmy Silver whistled.

Lattrey's appeal was pitiable enough. The gambler was paying for his "little flutter" in fear and apprehension. The Fistical Four would have helped him quickly enough; but three pounds was a sum beyond most junior pockets.

"How much have we got, you chaps?" asked Jimmy Silver.

Lattrey's face brightened.

"Stony!" announced Lovell calmly. "My last sou went into picnic supplies!"

"What about you, Raby?"

"Three bob."

"We can't raise it," said Newcome.

"Who's the man?" asked Lovell, with a sudden start.

"Captain Punter. You fellows know him," said Lattrey, licking his lips.

"My hat! That rotter again!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"By Jove!" Arthur Edward Lovell's face was alight with enthusiasm. "If it's Punter, we'll interview him again, what? We warned him to clear out of the district last—"

"And he hasn't gone!"

"He will after this dose!" said Lovell grimly. "Come on, you chaps! This will give us an appetite for the picnic!"

"Rather!"

"Leave Punter to us, Lattrey!" said Jimmy Silver, grinning.

"Look here——" began Lattrey, in sudden alarm.

"Bow-wow! If Punter's still in the land of the living after we've done with him, he won't feel like coming within a hundred miles of Rookwood!" grinned Lovell. "Come on, Jimmy!"

And the Fistical Four disappeared towards the gates in great glee. There was little doubt that Lovell, at least, welcomed the opportunity of "handling" Punter again for his dealing with Teddy Lovell of the Third.

Lattrey stared after them with mixed feelings.

The three pounds were not forthcoming, and Captain Punter appeared "booked" for another licking. That did not worry the cad of the Fourth; but it was sure to increase Punter's already overflowing enmity. There was no help for it; the captain's scheme had to be gone through with.

Lattrey was cool and calm when he turned back into the House. On his actions during the next hour or two depended his future at Rookwood; he could not afford to make mistakes.

His first journey was to the dormitory.

It was no secret in the Fourth that the hoods and robes of the Fascists were pillow-cases and sheets respectively, and Lattrey intended to make good use of his knowledge now.

He took a couple of sheets and two pillow-cases from the big cupboard at the end of the dormitory, and hastened downstairs to his study. Two eye-holes in the pillow-cases, and black masks cut from an odd scrap of material, occupied him only a few minutes.

When Lattrey left the study he carried a small bag containing the sheets and pillow-cases. In the corridor and in the Hall fortune was with him, for he met nobody. Fellows were either on the footer-field, or picnicking, like the Fistical Four. The cad passed unnoticed across the quad, and had

reached the gates, when a voice hailed him:

"Hallo, Lattrey! Whither away?"

Lattrey glanced round, his face white.

It was Mornington who had called. Morny was lounging, as he often was on a half-holiday.

"I'm going out!" observed Lattrey shortly.

"So I observe, dear old bean. Care for my company, or is it private? Erroll, my staunch pal an' guidin' hand, is busy chasin' a ball on the cricket field. I stepped off when he wasn't lookin', you see."

"Sorry, I'm not looking for company," answered Lattrey, nodding.

He strode out of gates, and did not glance back until he had gone several hundred yards along the lane.

When he did, he noted with relief that Mornington was not following.

It was a short distance to the old stile at which he had arranged to meet Captain Punter, and Lattrey was early. He dropped his bag on the farther side of the stile and sat there, waiting. After a few minutes a well-known figure loomed up, and Lattrey slipped down from his perch.

As the figure approached, he stared.

It was the same figure, but there was a difference.

Captain Punter was lurching; and he had lost his cane. As he came closer, Lattrey could see that his clothes were rent and dusty, and that his tie streamed from a broken collar. His spats were dragging in the dust as he walked, and of his hat there was no sign. In his hand the captain held a handkerchief, stained a dark crimson. He applied it continually to his aquiline nose.

"By gad!" murmured Lattrey.

He did not need to be told what had happened.

Captain Punter had fallen foul of Jimmy Silver & Co.—as Lattrey had half expected he would. And, judging by appearances, the Fistical Four had

driven home their arguments with even greater force than before.

The sharper caught sight of Lattrey and lurched towards him. He collapsed on the stile, gasping and swearing beneath his breath.

"Great—great Scott! What's happened?" asked the junior, though he knew well enough.

"Those—those young rascals—hounds——" Captain Punter broke into a string of oburgation that shocked Lattrey's ears, hardened as they were.

"I say, put the brakes on a bit!" he urged, after a minute or two. "You fell in with Silver & Co.?"

"I'll—I'll—I'll not rest until I've got them chucked out of Rookwood on their necks—chucked out and branded as hooligans!" snarled the captain, all the venom of his nature aroused.

"Go easy!" advised Lattrey coolly. "I've done my part of the job—it's time for you to do yours."

"Gad! You've got the robes you mentioned?"

"Yes. And Lovell's stick——"

"Great! What about Carthew?"

"We shall have to take our chance with him," said Lattrey. "There's quite a good likelihood of his coming out for a stroll some time before locking up—and, as you know, Silver and the rest will be out of gates for hours yet."

"You should have made certain that Carthew will come out, you young fool!"

"Too jolly risky!" ejaculated Lattrey. "When he's found stunned, I don't want somebody to remember that I got him out of gates. Besides, I couldn't do it. He's on his ear, the rotten cad, as I told you!"

Captain Punter smiled, in spite of his injuries.

And he was severely injured.

Both his eyes were dark and swollen, and were certain to be a rich black on the morrow. His aquiline nose was swollen, too, and he had continually to dab at it with his handkerchief. His

clothes were rent in several places, and covered in mud and dust.

It was little wonder that, after that terrific ragging at the hands of the Fistical Four, his venom had increased in intensity, if that were possible. And the captain little suspected that it was due to Lattrey that he had captured that last ragging.

It was all filed to the account of the Fistical Four. Expulsion and shame were to be their reward for it—all—if Captain Punter could engineer it.

"You say there's a chance of seeing Carthew at any minute?" he asked, beginning to recover his breath a little.

Lattrey nodded.

"Better get the sheet and things on, then. We can crouch behind the hedge.

"I say, you're going to hit him, aren't you?" asked Lattrey uneasily. "It's nothing to do with me if it all comes out. I shall jolly well swear that I didn't think you meant any harm!"

"I shan't hurt the fellow, you fool!" hissed the captain. "Get into your rig and keep your mouth shut!"

In the shelter of the thick hedge, Lattrey and the captain draped themselves in the robes and masks of the Fascist Band of Rookwood. In the broad light of day they were sufficient to startle any beholder. Certainly Carthew would not expect to encounter the shrouded members of the Fascists in the sunny lane.

The wait was long and tedious, and to Lattrey especially irksome. He grew more and more "nervy" as the time wore on, but Captain Punter was implacable. He did not appear to notice the passing of the minutes.

"Oh, my hat! I'm fed-up with this!" growled Lattrey, after perhaps a couple of hours.

"Quiet!"

There were footsteps in the lane—the hundredth time the concealed pair had peered hopefully through the leaves. Lattrey grunted, and relapsed into silence. It was the captain who startled him with a hiss of exultation.

"Carthew!"

Lattrey stiffened. Now that the time had come, he found his knees trembling. He laid a hand on the captain's arm, his face white with fear.

"Punter! You can't——"

"Quiet, you fool!"

Captain Punter was as cool as ice—and his face was set and grim. His grasp closed more tightly on the stick—Lovell's stick—in his hand. He peered through the leaves at the fellow who was approaching along the lane—Mark Carthew of the Sixth.

"Stop trembling, you fool!" hissed Captain Punter. "You've only got to show yourself. I'll do the rest!"

"You—you can't!" gasped Lattrey, realising the dastardly nature of the plot now that he was face to face with its accomplishment. "I'll shout!"

"A whisper, and you're expelled!" snapped the captain, his eyes fixed on the oncoming figure in the lane.

Lattrey was silent.

Carthew came on—till he was abreast of the ambush.

The thought of Captain Punter's twenty pounds, still unpaid, was occupying the prefect's mind. He did not think that the captain was lying in ambush for him.

"Now!"

Carthew spun round.

He had little more than a glimpse of two oncoming figures—white-robed, hooded, and black-masked figures. How many more there might be, he did not know.

"You little villains——"

Carthew had no time for more.

Punter was upon him, and the stick thudded down on the prefect's head. Carthew dropped in the lane with a grunt. Lattrey, almost swaying, stared at him with fear written in his face.

The captain dropped on his knee, and felt inside the senior's jacket. He rose, with a smile of satisfaction.

"Quickly! Give me the card!"

Dumbly, Lattrey handed him a section of white cardboard.

The captain bent over the still form in the lane and affixed the card to Carthew's chest.

Then he grasped the prefect's collar and dragged him to the side of the road.

"He will be out of the way of traffic there" said Punter coolly. "Now clear—and if you breathe a word, you know what will happen!"

Captain Punter hastily doffed the robe and mask, and Lattrey feverishly did the same. Then the captain took a glance up and down the lane. There was nobody in sight. With a nod to Lattrey, he strode quickly down a narrow cart track, to return to the village by a devious route. He did not want to be seen in the lane just then.

Lattrey, with a glance of horror at Carthew, slipped behind the hedge and turned his trembling footsteps towards Rookwood.

CHAPTER 19.

Under Suspicion!

FINISHED packing, Jimmy, you slacker?"

Jimmy Silver glared.

Raby grinned, and Newcome chuckled. Three juniors were busy packing away the crocks after a pleasant picnic in Coombe Woods, and they were making all haste. Call-over was not far distant, and unless the Fistical Four wanted "lines" for missing it, it behoved them to hurry.

In those circumstances it was just like Arthur Edward Lovell to ask if they had finished packing. He himself was lounging at full length in the grass.

"Slacker yourself!" retorted Jimmy. "Oh, bust!"

"It's busted all right!" agreed Lovell. "That leaves us only two cups to the whole study. Clumsy!"

"Perhaps you'd like to come and pack up yourself, you funny idiot?" demanded Jimmy Silver, breathing deep.

"Not at all, old man. It's time you had some practice. Without a handy chap like me you men are lost, you know!"

"Put a bun in it!" suggested Raby.

"Or a sock," added Newcome. "And help instead of criticising."

It was Lovell's turn to glare then.

"If you chumps can't pack a picnic basket without my help—"

"Peace, my infants," interposed Jimmy Silver. "Do you squabblers realise that it wants only a quarter of an hour to call-over?"

"Well, get a move on, then!" grunted Lovell. "I've been waiting for the last ten minutes for you asses!"

"Shall we bump him?" breathed Raby.

"He wants it—badly," added Newcome.

"But we don't want lines" said Jimmy Silver finally. "Put your best feet forward, you cripples, and stop arguing."

And "Uncle James" took one handle of the picnic basket, while Newcome took the other.

As they strode through the wood the juniors realised that they had cut it rather fine—rather too fine, to be truthful. Laden with a basket, their progress was necessarily slower. They were hardly out of the wood and into the lane ere Arthur Edward Lovell glanced at his watch.

"Call-over at this moment," he announced.

"Unless somebody says 'Adsum' for the lot of us, we're booked," remarked Raby.

"Keep smiling. Like a turn at the basket, Lovell?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"What, tired already?"

"No, ass."

"I'll relieve you when you're fagged. Don't be a slacker, you know."

Jimmy Silver breathed long and deep.

It had been an exceedingly pleasant picnic in the woods, but there was, as in most human affairs, a fly in the ointment. On this occasion the fly was undoubtedly Lovell. Perhaps he was worrying a little over his minor's dealings with Captain Punter, and wondering whether the fag would manage to keep clear of the disreputable sharper in future. His chums gave him the

benefit of the doubt. But certainly Lovell was a little awkward that afternoon.

The Pistical Four swung along the lane at their best pace and passed the old stile. Lovell glanced round, but the captain was not to be seen.

"If that rotter doesn't clear out of this district after what we gave him this afternoon——"

"He will old chap," said Raby.

"If he's got any sense," added Jimmy Silver.

"I think I persuaded him that he'd better," went on Lovell musingly.

"You gave him a prize nose and two lovely black eyes," agreed Newcome. "What more do you expect?"

"And we all helped to rag the life out of him," assented Jimmy Silver. "I should chuck worrying about your minor, old chap. Punter wouldn't touch him with a barge pole after two raggings. Besides, the kid's had his lesson. He'll keep clear by himself."

"Who's worrying?" demanded Arthur Edward Lovell, coming out of his reverie suddenly. "Who's that says I'm worrying?"

"Well, aren't you?"

"No!" roared Lovell.

"Oh, my mistake! You must be moulting or something."

The Pistical Four relapsed into silence after that. Lovell was worrying; there was no doubt about that. But he was convinced that he was not worrying; there was no doubt either about that. And his chums wisely gave Arthur Edward his head.

They reached the gates at last, quite twenty minutes after the time for calling-over. The quad was deserted, but old Mack, the porter, called from the doorway of his lodge.

"Which I was told to send ye straight to Mr. Dalton in 'is study, Master Silver."

"All right, Mack."

"It's all in the day's grind," remarked Raby, as they entered the House. "By Jove, there seems to be some excitement about something. Ahoy, Morny! What's up?"

"By gad! So you've come back?" ejaculated Mornington.

"Did you think we were stopping out for the night?" asked Jimmy Silver humorously.

"No. But somethin's happened. You don't know anythin' about it, I suppose?"

The Pistical Four looked puzzled.

There was quite a crowd of fellows in the Hall, and they were all looking at the four juniors who had just come in—looking at them in a very peculiar manner.

Jimmy Silver glanced at Mornington for an explanation.

"I don't catch on. What's happened, Morny?"

Mornington appeared relieved at that.

"You men had nothing to do with it, of course. But you'll have to see Dalton about it."

"About what?" demanded Lovell, puzzled.

"An' if you can prove an alibi it will clear you finally," added Mornington. "Did you happen to meet anybody you know while you were picnickin'?"

"Only that man Punter," said Lovell.

"Oh, gad! He's not a reliable witness, especially as he's a friend of Carthew's. I'd better tell you——"

"Much better, I think," agreed Lovell. "There's enough mystery over this."

"Puttin' the matter in a nutshell," said Mornington. "Carthew has been found lyin' stunned in the lane. Bulkeley an' Neville happened on him——"

"My only hat! Do you think we did it?" roared Lovell.

"I'm sorry for Carthew, of course," said Jimmy Silver; "but if any fellow thinks we had a hand——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Mornington coolly. "A card was found pinned to Carthew's coat. It ran: 'Hands off the Fourth!—The Dictator.'"

Jimmy Silver stared at the dandy of the Fourth.

His chums were silent.

That information put a different complexion on the matter. They had no idea who could have had reason to stun

Carthew. But the presence of that message turned suspicion on to the Fourth at once.

"My—my hat!" breathed Jimmy Silver at last. "It makes it look as if one of the Fascists did it; but that's impossible, Morny!"

"I agree," said Mornington quietly. "But the question is, what will the Head think?"

"We were told to go to Dicky at once," put in Raby. "Better get along and thrash the whole thing out, Jimmy."

Jimmy Silver nodded.

"Carthew hasn't come round yet, of course?"

"Not yet. When he does, he may be able to clear you chaps. That is, if he saw his assailant."

"Come on!" snapped Jimmy Silver.

Way was made for the Fistical Four, and they hastened to Masters' Corridor. Why anyone should stun Carthew was a complete mystery to them, but it had occurred. And the Fascists were implicated—though they were certain among themselves that their identity had been borrowed by the guilty party.

In response to Mr. Dalton's invitation, Jimmy Silver opened his study door, and Lovell, Raby and Newcome trooped in behind their leader.

Mr. Dalton's glance was quite inexpressive.

"So you have returned, Silver? Where have you been, my boy?"

"Picnicking in Coombe Woods, sir," answered Jimmy.

"Very good. Why are you late for call-over?"

"We smashed a few cups and things packing, sir. And I'm afraid we left it rather late before starting."

"That we will pass over for the present," said the Form-master seriously. "I want you to answer my next question carefully. Did you meet anybody whom you know while you were out?"

"Not a soul, sir," answered Jimmy.

"Excepting——"

"Yes?"

"A rascal whom we fell foul of once

before—a Captain Punter, sir. You remember him, I expect. We ragged him. We didn't meet anybody else, sir."

"Are you aware that Carthew has been brought in, stunned?"

"Mornington told us, sir."

"It comes to this," said Mr. Dalton quietly. "Do not think for one moment that I suspect you—I do not. But Carthew did not go out till late in the afternoon—we have Knowles' word for that. Naturally, every junior who returned to the school after the time the deed was done is more or less under suspicion. In the circumstances, your being late for call-over has attracted attention. And a card found on Carthew—throwing suspicion on this—ahem!—organisation known as the Fascists. I shall not ask you boys if you know anything about these Fascists—it would be remarkable if you did not—but I do not consider that a fair question. I merely require your assurance that you know nothing whatever with any bearing on Carthew's accident this afternoon. Have I that?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" said Jimmy Silver at once.

"We've been in the woods all the time, sir, as Jimmy says!" agreed Raby.

"Lovell—Newcome. You say the same?"

"Naturally, sir!"

"Very good!" said Mr. Dalton. "You may go now, my boys. I trust that the culprit will be discovered in due course. If anything comes to your ears, you must not hesitate to inform me. This is an act of utter hooliganism—and you will not be sneaking, as you call it. You have nothing to tell me?"

"I'd like to say a word, sir," said Jimmy Silver thoughtfully.

"Go on."

"That—that card, sir. I don't think the Fascists had anything to do with stunning Carthew. It looks more like a trick of the guilty party to put it on to them. I'm told that the Fascists were only formed to prevent injustice, sir."

Jimmy Silver paused after that rather bold speech. Mr. Dalton gave him a

very peculiar glance. But he did not pursue the point.

"Thank you for the suggestion, Silver. I will bear it in mind. That will be all."

The Form-master nodded, and the Fiscal Four left the study. They repaired to the End Study, with Mornington and Erroll, to discuss the matter which was occupying the minds of the whole school. Who could have stunned Carthew? And for what reason? The card pointed to the culprit being in the school. But it was impossible to fix suspicion on any fellow in particular.

"It wasn't one of the Fascists," said Mornington finally, over supper in the End Study. "Some out-and-out cad using our name—that's plain. But who else had a grudge against Carthew?"

"Goodness knows."

The study door opened, and Conroy looked in, with a glum expression.

"You fellows heard the news?"

"The culprit found?"

"No. All half-holidays stopped till the chap is caught!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Rotten, isn't it?" asked Conroy.

"Awful!" groaned Lovell. "Dash it all, we shall have to put our thinking-caps on and find out who it was."

"And Carthew's come round," added Conroy. "He's in a pretty bad way, it seems. But he says that he saw a figurp, in a cowl and robe, with a black mask—there may have been more."

"By gad!"

"Somebody pinched our clobber," said Lovell grimly.

"But who?" asked Newcome.

CHAPTER 20. A Grim Clue!

THERE was silence in the End Study. The inmates were thinking hard—turning oyer in their minds all the possible delinquents.

"By Jove, it's pretty rotten to have to suspect fellows in our own Form," said Raby thoughtfully.

"The card points to it being somebody in the Fourth," said Mornington.

"And not a Fascist," added Erroll. "Some fellow who wanted to put the blame on our shoulders."

"That takes us a little way," said Jimmy Silver coolly. "We agree that it wasn't one of us, and that leaves only a few chaps whom we haven't admitted to the Fascist Band. Peele, Gower, Lattrey, and their kidney."

"We're narrowin' the circle of suspicion," remarked Mornington. "Take your choice, gentlemen—Peele?"

"Give a chap justice—even Peele!" said Lovell. "Why should Peele knock Carthew over the head?"

"No reason that we know of," admitted Morny. "Matter of fact, I believe they're on rather friendly terms. How about Gower?"

"Hasn't got the nerve, for one thing," said Lovell. "You know he always follows Peele's lead."

"Wash out Gower, then. Lattrey? By gad!"

"What are you gadding about?" demanded Lovell.

"Lattrey!" repeated Mornington, a shade of excitement crossing his face.

"Out with it, Morny. What do you know about the chap?"

"Nothin'—nothin' definite," answered Mornington, regaining his calm. "But we've got down to this: It's a Fourth Form man we're after—an' one of the cads, at that. There aren't many cads in the Fourth, thank goodness. Lattrey's as likely as anybody—an' much more likely than some. An' I've just remembered somethin', too."

"What's that?"

"Carthew was hurt late in the afternoon, when most of the fellows were playin' cricket, or 'boatin', or, at any rate, well clear of the lane. Carthew was attacked only a few hundred yards from the gates, only a few minutes after he left Knowles' study. Dalton told you that much, I suppose?"

"Dicky said that every fellow who came in after that was more or less under suspicion," said Jimmy Silver.

"More or less," agreed Mornington. "But rather less, in my humble opinion."

"Why?" demanded Lovell impatiently.

"Because any fellow who was out at that time was well away from the scene—as you were yourselves," continued Mornington coolly. "On the river—in the woods—in the village—anywhere; but not in the lane a hundred yards from the gates. An' I can imagine any fellow who did the job streakin' back to the school as quick as he could an' sneakin' in the back way, too. What do you think?"

"It's certainly probable," admitted Erroll.

"Now we come to the chap who was seen leavin' the school soon after cricket practice began," went on Morny calmly. "I dodged off the field——"

"When you thought my eye was off you, you slacker!" remarked Erroll.

"Exactly, dear man. An', havin' nothin' to do, I hung around the gates for quite a time. I can't go as far as to say that nobody went out or came in without my spottin' them until Carthew was brought in, but I don't think they did. Whilst I was there that fat fool Muffin played a silly trick. He wants bumpin'!"

"A silly trick?"

Yes. He went up to Carthew, who was standing near, and put his fingers to his nose. Carthew made a jump at him, but Muffin cleared off like the wind, yellin' somethin' about tellin' the Dictator if he was touched. Then I saw Lattrey come out, and disappear through the gates and——"

"When?"

"Quite early. But he seemed excited, an' he refused my charmin' society on his little stroll. Lattrey's usually keen enough to pal up with me, if I'd let him. Point number one. Then he was carryin' a small bag. Why was he takin' a bag out of gates, an' where to? Point the second. Then—an' I'm tolerably sure of this—he didn't come in again be-

fore Carthew arrived, with Bulkeley an' Neville carryin' him."

"That's no more suspicious than us cutting call-over!" snorted Lovell.

"Isn't it? Yet when I followed Bulkeley an' Neville into Hall, there was Lattrey, lookin' as white as a sheet. Funny how he got in again without me seein' him. I'm not an unobservant chap, as a rule. I couldn't swear to it, but it's queer, you'll admit?"

"If you're not mistaken, it's queer enough," admitted Lovell thoughtfully.

"Well, I've stated my reasons for suspectin' Lattrey before the rest of the Form," said Mornington, shrugging his shoulders. "Not that it matters a fig to me, of course. But if it's one of our men, then Lattrey's my choice."

"Might have been a Shell fellow?" suggested Raby.

Jimmy Silver shook his head.

"Not very likely. They don't breed nerve of that kind in Adolphus Smythe's crew. I'm beginning to think there may be something in what Morny says."

"So am I," announced Lovell. "Lattrey's just the kind of worm to do a thing like that—always supposing he had some pretty strong reason."

"The kind of worm Lattrey is cannot be regarded as evidence," reminded Jimmy Silver. "All the same, it won't do any harm to ask Lattrey one or two questions in dorm to-night, will it?"

"Rather not!"

"No bullying, but a plain answer demanded!" remarked Raby.

The study door opened, to admit Bulkeley's head.

"Bed-time, kids! Get a move on!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. made a move with considerable alacrity. Whoever had attacked Carthew deserved to be visited with the severest punishment; that was agreed. Ragging Carthew was one thing, but attacking him like a hooligan was another. And, with half-holidays stopped till the delinquent was found, the matter demanded immediate attention.

The suspicions that Mornington had outlined were communicated to the rest

of the Fascists, but no move was made until Bulkeley had turned out the light. Then candles began to be lit, and several fellows rolled out of bed.

Lattrey sat up in his bed, looking considerably alarmed, as a little group gathered around his bedside.

In the candle-light his face was white, and if innocent he did not look the part. But fair play was Jimmy Silver's motto, and, so far, there was nothing but mere unsatisfactory suspicion against Lattrey.

"Look here! What's this game?" snapped Lattrey, as he was surrounded.

"It isn't a ragging, so keep cool," answered Jimmy Silver judicially. "We're a committee of inquiry into the mystery of the attack on Carthew."

"What? You—you don't suspect—"

Lattrey's tongue clove to the top of his mouth. He was fortunate that in the candle-light his fear did not show up so plainly as it might have done.

"Morny saw you go out of gates looking suspicious," said Jimmy Silver coolly. "You carried a bag, and you didn't want company. This committee wants to know where you went. If you can give a satisfactory reply, that's good enough!"

"Think out a good one, Lattrey, old bean!" urged Mornington.

"Shut up, Morny!"

Lattrey licked his lips.

He had never dreamed that suspicion would centre upon him at once. But he realised that on his reply depended everything that mattered. He pulled himself together with an effort, and contrived to get a sneer into his voice when he spoke.

"Fast enough downin' on me, aren't you, Silver?"

"That's not an answer," said Jimmy coolly.

"Well, if you must know, I went to the village an' took the bag to be mended!" snapped Lattrey, his eyes gleaming at the juniors.

"Oh!"

"And if you're not satisfied, go and tell Dalton your rotten suspicions!" flamed the cad. "I'm goin' to sleep!"

And Lattrey dropped his head on his pillow sullenly.

Jimmy Silver shrugged his shoulders, and Mornington laughed.

"Nothin' doin'—what?"

"We can't treat the chap as if he were guilty," said Jimmy.

"No, you're right, old bean," admitted Mornington. "We can't yet. Good-night, Lattrey!"

Mark Lattrey did not reply.

Mornington's suspicions had hit him hard—had aroused a host of fears in his bosom. But he had his part to play, and there was nothing for it now but to play it out to the bitter end. It was dawn before Lattrey slept properly, and his heavy eyelids did not pass unnoticed in the morning.

"Sleep well, Lattrey?" asked Mornington keenly, as he left the dormitory.

"Eh? No. Toothache," snapped Lattrey.

Mornington nodded, and went down with Erroll.

At the breakfast-table Lattrey's heavy looks were commented upon in whispers. Already suspicion was floating around him—striving to drag him into her net, as it seemed to the cad of the Fourth.

He went in to classes that morning with a haggard face, but endeavouring to keep his nerve successfully. Classes were an ordeal for Lattrey. He had, somehow, to keep his nervous and harassed state from his Form-master; but it was difficult.

He was called upon to construe, and boggled miserably over a simple passage from Livy.

Mr. Dalton's keen glance rested on him, and there was more than one murmur in the Fourth.

"By gad, Lattrey's givin' himself away!" breathed Mornington to Erroll, in the next seat.

"It looks like it," agreed Erroll.

"Lattrey, have you prepared this passage?" asked Mr. Dalton grimly.

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"I—I had a headache last night, sir."

I've been awake nearly all night with that—and toothache as well."

Mr. Dalton's expression softened. Even a slacker like Lattrey was entitled to consideration if he were unwell.

"Very well. Does your tooth trouble you now, my boy?"

"A little, sir."

"You may go to the House dame and get something to ease it, if you wish," said the Form-master kindly.

"Oh, thank you, sir!"

Lattrey left the Form-room, and the lesson proceeded.

The cad was deeply thankful for the respite. It gave him time to think. He could see that he was giving himself away; but how to dispose of the terrible fear that gnawed unceasingly at his mind he did not know.

He tottered up to his study, with the intention of staying there until he had mapped out some plan to avoid conviction. Going on at his present rate he would give himself away completely before long.

He turned into the Fourth Form corridor, and stopped dead. There were voices—masters' voices—coming from the studies! With a wildly beating heart Lattrey slid into an alcove in the wall and listened.

He recognised the full and fruity voice of Mr. Greely, the master of the Fifth, followed by the grim tones of Dr. Chisholm, the head himself! And their very next words startled Lattrey as if they had been a bombshell.

"I think that will do, Mr. Greely. We will now search this room."

Unable to restrain himself, Lattrey peered round the corner of the wall and glimpsed the Head and Mr. Greely just entering the End Study.

Lattrey's breath became almost inaudible.

There was relief—and a terrible sense of guilt—in his heart at that moment. The Head and the Fifth Form-master were searching the studies while their occupants were in classes, and the cad

did not need to be told for what they were searching.

Carthew had been stunned, and Lovell's stick had been used. Lattrey had with his own hand concealed it, and he trembled at the thought.

He longed to tear himself away—to return to the Form-room and let matters take their course. But the words of the two masters held him as if hypnotised.

"There appears to be no sign in this room, Mr. Greely. It is hardly to be expected—Silver and his friends occupy it, I believe."

"Indeed, sir?"

"What have you found, Mr. Greely?"

"Something of paramount importance, sir," came Mr. Greely's fruity voice.

"What—what is that?"

"A stick, sir—a stick, the head covered with bloodstains. It was behind this bookcase—"

"Let me see it, Mr. Greely."

"There is no doubt that that is the stick which was used, I think, Dr. Chisholm?"

There was a pause.

"There cannot be, Mr. Greely. There is a name here, I see, scratched on the band."

"Exactly, sir. The name is that of Arthur Edward Lovell, of this study."

Lattrey gulped.

He could stand no more.

But with a supreme effort he threw off his look of fear and apprehension. There was no need to fear now. With a set mouth, he returned to the Form-room.

He drew a good many glances as he resumed his place.

Lattrey sat coolly in his seat as the lesson wore on.

CHAPTER 21.

A Bolt from the Blue!

"YOU will continue, Muffin—"
Tap, tap!

Mr. Dalton glanced rather irritably at the Form-room door.

Tubby Muffin sat down again, laying down his book with considerable relief.

All the Fourth, in fact, appeared relieved and pleased as there came that tap. Nobody enjoyed Latin construe, even with a sportsman like "Dicky" Dalton. Any kind of interruption was welcome—and judging by the august shadow on the glass of the upper panel, it was the Head who wished to speak to Mr. Dalton.

"Your luck's in, Tubby," whispered Lovell, grinning. "The Head will keep Dicky occupied for some time—if he's in his usual form!"

"I hope so," muttered Muffin. "I say, what does 'Arma virumque cano' mean, old chap?"

"Silence!"

"Oh, lor'!"

Mr. Richard Dalton glanced severely over his Form before calling in response to the Head's tap. The Fourth obediently relapsed into silence.

"Come in."

The door opened. Mr. Dalton stared a little.

The Head inclined his head, and entered the Form-room. He was followed by Mr. Greely, the master of the Fifth, and Mr. Greely wore an expression of the utmost seriousness.

"Dr. Chisholm. You wished to speak to me?"

"Yes, Mr. Dalton, I did. Pray close the door, Mr. Greely."

"Certainly, sir."

Dr. Chisholm's stern eyes roamed over the Fourth, and there was an involuntary hush. The Head's manner was one of grim foreboding. Evidently some fellows had transgressed more seriously than usual, and each of the juniors sat tight and hoped devoutly that it was not himself.

"Mr. Dalton, I have to broach an exceedingly serious matter—referring to Carthew's accident in the lane yesterday."

"Indeed, sir! You have discovered the culprit?"

"I would not say that, sir. But a

piece of evidence has been brought to light—"

"I have it here, Mr. Dalton," said Mr. Greely ponderously.

"You mean—"

"I regret to say that I believe the guilty lad to be a member of your Form, Mr. Dalton," said the Head.

"Oh!"

There was a gasp from the Fourth at that.

Surprise and not a little indignation showed on nearly every face. Only Lattrey sat silent and pale as a ghost. But nobody noticed Lattrey just then.

Perhaps the Fourth did not look at Carthew's accident in quite the same light as the Head. Although they were sympathetic, they could not realise the enormity of the matter in the way that Dr. Chisholm could—and did.

To the Fourth, Carthew had been knocked over the head. A serious enough matter, but not so serious as all that. In Dr. Chisholm's eyes there had been a brutal attack upon a prefect, calling for summary vengeance when once the culprit or culprits were discovered.

Mr. Dalton, after a startled look had flitted across his face, regained his composure.

"I hoped that the guilty boy would be found elsewhere, sir," he said quietly. "I should be very sorry to learn that there is a boy in my Form who is capable of so dastardly an act."

"I am sorry also," said the Head dryly. "But Mr. Greely has proof. Pray show Mr. Dalton the stick, Mr. Greely."

"This, sir," said Mr. Greely ponderously, "was found in—"

"One moment, please!" interrupted the Head hastily.

Mr. Dalton had taken the stick—Lovell's stick—found only a few minutes previously behind the bookcase in the End Study. He turned it over in his hands, his face grim.

"Bless my soul! There are blood-stains on the head!"

"Carthew was struck by some such implement," said Dr. Chisholm. "And this stick was found in concealment, and in a junior study."

"Oh!"

There was a further gasp from the Fourth.

Dr. Chisholm's kindly old face was set and severe. The Fourth did not look happy as his glance played on them. The knowledge that somewhere among them sat the fellow who had stunned Carthew in cold blood alarmed and sobered them.

"My boys, I regret having to address you in this way. But in your midst is the owner of this stick, which you can all see."

Mr. Dalton held up the stick grimly.

"It is upon the owner of this—this implement that suspicion descends," announced the Head quietly. "There are bloodstains on the head, and the stick was found concealed in one of your studies. All this points to the owner being the junior who, I hope, in a reckless moment which he has since regretted, attacked Carthew brutally in the lane. I now call upon the owner to stand out before the class. He may rest assured of fair treatment. I should be loth to condemn him unheard. I am offering him a chance to give himself up to justice, to enable me to make the punishment a little lighter. I am waiting."

Dr. Chisholm pursed his lips and stood grimly in front of the Fourth.

Among the desks there was a murmur.

The Head was trying to be lenient, to make every excuse for the culprit, and to give him every chance. Only a fool would hang back.

"By gad! There isn't exactly a rush," whispered Mornington, leaning across to Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy was silent. And Mornington, as he followed the junior captain's glance, started violently.

That glance rested on Lovell, as did that of Raby and Newcome. It was a glance of surprise, astonishment, dis-

belief. And Arthur Edward Lovell, as he sat on his form, stared mutely at the stick which Mr. Dalton held up.

He recognised that stick. It was a present from an uncle. On Sundays it was Lovell's custom to take it for walks in the lanes, swinging it carelessly over one arm. That he should be sitting in the Form-room and looking at his stick in such circumstances almost numbed the junior's senses.

It was monstrous, impossible! But he knew that stick—the knobby head and the plain silver band, with his name scratched round it. And it was the stick that had stunned Carthew!

Lovell hardly heard the Head begin to speak again.

"I am still waiting! I warn the guilty lad that he will gain nothing by refusing to come forward. The name of the owner is scratched round this silver band."

Another gasp from the Fourth.

And Lovell turned an agonised glance towards Jimmy Silver.

"Jimmy, it can't be—"

"It is, old man," said Jimmy Silver grimly. "How it happened in that state I don't know, but it's yours. Better claim it at once, and we'll all stand in together. The Head will see it's all a mistake."

"For the last time," announced Dr. Chisholm. "I shall call the boy forward by name if he still refuses to admit his guilt."

Arthur Edward Lovell rose in his seat.

With a set face he walked coolly down the gangway and out before the class. While the rest of the Form stared in amazement, Jimmy Silver, Raby and Newcome followed him quietly.

The Head's face was a study as four juniors confronted him coolly. Mr. Dalton stared at them, astounded.

"What—what—which of you claims the stick?" ejaculated the Head.

"We're all in this sir," said Jimmy

Silver coolly. "It's nothing more to do with Lovell than with the rest of us."

"It's my stick, sir," explained Lovell quietly. "I could hardly believe it at first, but I recognise it well enough. But how it came into that state I don't pretend to know."

The Head gave the Fistical Four a glance of frank astonishment.

"The stick was found in the study which you four boys occupy," he said at last. "It was concealed behind a bookcase."

"I don't know anything about that, sir," answered Lovell coolly. "I used it last Sunday, as usual. I shouldn't have looked for it till next Sunday. It's usually kept in the corner with the cricket bats, sir."

"Yet on this occasion it was concealed," said Dr. Chisholm grimly. "And you are unable to account for the bloodstains? You know nothing of the attack on Carthew?"

"Nothing at all, sir," said Lovell frankly.

"Where were you at the time of the attack?"

"In Coombe woods, sir—picnicking."

"You were all four there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you take no other junior with you?"

"No, sir."

The Head's eyes gleamed a little.

"Can you call any person to witness that you were picnicking at the time of Carthew's accident?" he demanded.

"We can't do that," said Jimmy Silver quietly. "But I give you my word, sir, that we know nothing of the affair at all. Lovell left his stick in the study when we went out. Any fellow might have taken it, and concealed it after he'd stunned Carthew."

"So that is your statement?" asked Dr. Chisholm. "The stick must have been abstracted from the study by some person unknown. The same person concealed it again before you returned. Very good. I do not deny the

possibility. But there is another point. Am I not correct in saying that Silver and Lovell, in particular, have been on bad terms with Carthew recently?"

"That's true, sir," said Jimmy, after a pause.

"It has come to my ears that some kind of secret society has been formed among the juniors, and that unheard-of liberties have been taken with prefects. You two boys gave your assurance to Mr. Dalton that you were not concerned in—"

"That is so," said Mr. Dalton, nodding.

"But I suspect that the outrages were conducted with your cognisance," went on Dr. Chisholm keenly. "Indeed, I may go so far as to say that I believe the Fascists, as they are called, originated at your suggestion. That is neither here nor there, however. My point is that you were on bad terms with Carthew. You cannot explain your whereabouts at the time of the attack. And the stick with which the act was perpetrated has been found concealed in your study. It is Lovell's stick. I can draw but one conclusion."

"But I didn't, sir—" broke out Lovell excitedly.

"You are under suspicion," said the Head coldly. "If you are innocent you have nothing to fear. But the evidence, at least circumstantially, points to your guilt. And your friends are under suspicion of aiding you."

"One moment, sir!" said Jimmy Silver coolly. "I think Carthew said his assailants wore robes and masks and cowls. Have they been found yet?"

Mr. Dalton started.

And the Head gave "Unsele James" of Rookwood a glance.

"They have not, Silver."

"Until they have I don't think that stick is enough to condemn Lovell on," said Jimmy grimly.

The Head paused.

The Fourth waited with bated breath for his decision.

"I certainly think there is something

in what Silver avers," said Mr. Dalton quietly. "The robes and cows have not been found, Dr. Chisholm. Had they been in the study——"

"I should have found them," said Mr. Greely decidedly.

Dr. Chisholm nodded slowly. He gave Lovell a glance of doubt.

"There is still a grave element of doubt," he admitted. "And until more definite proof is forthcoming we cannot arrive at a decision. Can I trust you to make every inquiry, Mr. Dalton?"

"Assuredly, sir."

"Very good! The matter will stand in abeyance pending further proof. In the meantime, Lovell, you will be confined to the punishment-room——"

"But, sir——"

"I cannot overlook the extreme seriousness of your situation," said Dr. Chisholm coldly. "Will you see that this boy takes his place in the punishment-room at once, Mr. Greely?"

"Certainly, sir!"

"Silver, Raby and Newcome, you will remain under suspicion," said the Head. "I advise you to remain within call of my study."

Jimmy Silver's face was grim as the Head nodded and left the Form-room.

With him, with Mr. Greely's eye on him, went Arthur Edward Lovell—suspected of a dastardly act, and confined on suspicion to the punishment-room!

CHAPTER 22.

Sentenced!

AN instantaneous buzz followed the closing of the Form-room door.

Even the presence of their Form-master could not stop the Fourth Form expressing their feelings at that moment.

Lovell, of all fellows, confined to the punishment-room—under suspicion of having attacked Carthew! It was unthinkable; ridiculous, in fact. Lovell was the last fellow to adopt underhand methods against a foe. Yet the

Head evidently more than half believed in his guilt, and in the guilt of Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome, though at present there was no evidence against them.

Mr. Dalton opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again. He realised that he was powerless to quell that hubbub.

"It's rot, I tell you!" shouted Gunner, leaping on to a form. "Lovell's one of the straightest chaps in the Form, and we all know it!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Gunner's right this time!"

It was not often that the Fourth were in agreement with Cuthbert Gunner, but they were with him almost to a man now.

"By gad! Are we goin' to stand by an' see Lovell punished for what some slinking rotter has done?" exclaimed Mornington, his eyes gleaming. "We know it wasn't Lovell—so it comes to this: Some crawling cad with a grudge against both Carthew and Lovell hid the stick where Dr. Chisholm found it, intendin' all the time that the fellows in the end study should get the blame. Is that good enough for the Fascists?"

"No!" came a roar that shook the Form-room.

"Then what are we goin' to do? I suggest holdin' an inquisition here an' now to find out whether any fellow is in Lovell's position—unable to prove where he was yesterday afternoon. What do you think of that?"

"Carried unanimously!" shouted Conroy.

"Boys——" began Mr. Dalton, his face growing grimmer.

"Sorry, sir," said Mornington coolly. "This is rather a serious matter, I think you'll admit."

"Very serious indeed," agreed Mr. Dalton dryly. "And still more serious when Fourth Form boys forget their Form-master's orders!"

"But, sir——"

"I have heard enough," rapped Mr. Dalton sharply. "I shall name the next boy who raises his voice. You are for-

tunate in that I excuse your initial outburst. If you have anything to say, Mornington, it can wait till you are dismissed. You will construe next, please."

For a moment Valentine Mornington breathed hard.

But he saw the wisdom of Mr. Dalton's words, and began to construe.

There was comparative order in the Fourth Form-room till dismissal.

But, at the word, the Fourth rose as a man and followed Jimmy Silver and Mofnington into the corridor.

"Meetin' in the Common-room," shouted Mornington. "Any fellow who cuts will be suspected first. Bear that in mind, Lattrey!"

"Hang you, I'm going out for a stroll!" snapped Lattrey.

"You're not. You're comin' with us!" corrected Mornington coolly. "Take his other arm, Jimmy. Oh, my hat! Stop him!"

Mark Lattrey did not wait for Jimmy Silver to take his other arm. He broke suddenly for the stairs, and half a dozen juniors, at Mornington's cry, broke after him.

"Let me go, hang you! Make them let me go, Silver, you cad! If you think I had anythin' to do with Carthew, you're a suspicious fool!"

"You're bringing suspicion on yourself by acting like this," said Jimmy quietly.

"Hang you! Will you let me go?"

"Come along to the meeting," suggested Uncle James tactfully. "You've nothing to fear."

"I won't!"

"Look here, you chaps!" ejaculated Mornington. "Isn't this a bit queer? Lattrey's in the bluest of blue funks at the prospect of an investigation. By gad, we'll question him first!"

"Lattrey's got the wind up!" howled Tubby Muffin, from the outskirts of the crowd.

"Funking!" boomed Gunner grimly. "What over? Fraid of being found out, you rotter?"

"You—you cads!" panted Lattrey,

beside himself with anger and fear. "I—I know nothing whatever about it, I tell you!"

"Not good enough!" snapped Mornington decisively. "Yank him along to his study, you chaps. We'll search the place before holdin' the meetin'—it may not be necessary."

"Yank the cad along!"

"Up you come!" roared Gunner, getting a grip on Lattrey's coat collar.

Lattrey's face was white with fear now. But he set his lips. He had to go through with it now. Discovery could only mean one thing, and that expulsion from Rookwood. The latter thought steadied his quivering nerves.

He had no choice about going. A surging crowd bore him along the corridor, and Mornington threw open the door of the study which he shared with Peele and Gower.

Peele and Gower were on the fringe of the juniors, and they were careful to remain there. If any incriminating evidence was found in Study No. 5 they were perfectly willing to leave Lattrey to explain how it came there. And the expression of fury and fear on Lattrey's face encouraged them in the opinion that there might be.

"No time to stand on ceremony," rapped Mornington colly. "Unlock your desk, Lattrey!"

"What do you expect to find in it, you cad?" snarled Lattrey.

"The robes an' cowls are somewhere," said Mornington coolly. "Jimmy Silver pointed that out. They may be in the desk. Quick!"

"I refuse!" snapped Lattrey grimly. "If you open my desk it will be without my permission, and you'll answer to the Head!"

"Two seconds!" said Mornington calmly. "After that we bust it open. Hand over that poker, Erroll."

"Here you are."

"Hold on. I—I'll open it!" gasped Lattrey.

"Sharp's the word, then."

Lattrey drew out a key, and threw up the lid of the desk. Mornington

shoved him back, while Conroy and Erroll and Van Ryn turned out the contents on the floor.

Papers—pink racing papers—there were in profusion, and two packs of cards, and a number of odds and ends. A sheaf of papers, a school book or two and a file emptied the desk.

Lattrey looked on with a sarcastic expression.

"Satisfied?" he demanded, as the last paper was turned out.

"Not by a long chalk!" snapped Mornington coolly. "Rout round the study, you men. Don't mind if you upset anything. Peele an' Gower won't mind, will you?"

"You dare——" began Peele, but a movement of the crowd silenced him.

Lattrey watched with a set, pale face while Conroy and Oswald and Erroll, and two or three more, routed round the study in search of clues. But the search came to an end without having revealed anything of value.

"Nothing doing, Morny," said Erroll at last.

"Not a clue," added Van Ryn.

Mornington bit his lip.

"Well?"

Lattrey was grinning now.

"We've drawn a blank," announced Mornington coolly. "Though I still believe Lattrey—— Oh, gad!"

"What's all this?"

George Bulkeley of the Sixth, captain of the school, stood looking grimly into the study.

"Well, what's the meaning of this set-out, Mornington?"

"Oh, gad! We suspected Lattrey," gasped Mornington, the wind taken completely out of his sails for once.

"Why?"

"Suspicious character, you know," gasped Mornington unhappily. "But we've drawn a blank—searched the study, but nothin' has come to light."

"I should think not," said Bulkeley dryly, "considering that the real culprits have been discovered beyond a doubt."

"What?"

"Who?" demanded Jimmy Silver, his face lighting up.

Bulkeley gave him a grim glance in return.

"Nothing for you to look relieved about, you young ruffian!" he snapped sternly. "You and Raby and Newcome—wanted in the Head's study at once!"

"But, Bulkeley——" ejaculated Jimmy Silver, his brain in a whirl.

"We didn't do it!" roared Newcome indignantly.

"Do you think we're that kind of rotten cowards, Bulkeley?" demanded Raby grimly. "You ought to know us better!"

"I thought I did," said Bulkeley sternly, "but it appears that I was mistaken. The Head has just searched the Fourth Form dormitory——"

"Well, and what if he has?"

"Robes and cowls, made from sheets and pillow-slips, with black masks, have been found packed away at the bottoms of you three juniors' trunks," said Bulkeley coolly. "Come on! The Head's waiting."

"I tell you——" burst out Raby.

He got no further.

Bulkeley, out of patience, grasped his collar in a firm grasp, and Raby was forced out of the study. Jimmy Silver and Newcome, staggered and incapable of thought, followed as if in a dream.

They left a terrified and indignant buzz in their wake as they followed the school captain to the Head's study.

"Come in."

Bulkeley entered the study, and the three juniors followed. They found Arthur Edward Lovell already there, looking grim and sullen.

The Head rested his stern glance for a moment on their faces, and motioned Bulkeley to stand aside.

Jimmy Silver opened his mouth, but the words refused to come. The Head believed him guilty; and his own Form-master, standing behind the Head, appeared to be looking through him.

"Silver, I have to inform you that fresh and conclusive evidence has come to light!"

The Head's voice was calm, but there was a stern and inflexible note in it. Jimmy Silver set his lips.

"There can be no evidence that Lovell or the rest of us had anything to do with the attack on Carthew," he responded firmly.

"You will do yourself no service by adhering to that statement, my boy," said Dr. Chisholm. "In the bottoms of your boxes robes and cowls have come to light. Carthew, who is recovering slowly in the sanatorium, has seen them, and he affirms that they were worn by his assailants yesterday. Coupled with this we have Lovell's stick, which Carthew also recognises. You see, the evidence will not bear denial. Your best course is open confession. In that case I might be able to deal more leniently with you."

"I have only one thing to say, sir," said Jimmy Silver steadily.

"And what is that?"

"The evidence may be black, but it is false. I do not know how it came in our boxes, or how Lovell's stick came to be used, and then hidden in our study. But we are innocent!"

"Enough! I had hoped that you were speaking the truth; no purpose is served by such obstinacy at this time! Have you anything to say with regard to the charge against you, Lovell?"

"Only what Jimmy has just said. We're all innocent, sir!" said Lovell grimly.

"Raby?"

"The same, sir!"

"Newcome?"

"We know nothing about Carthew, sir!"

"Very good! You are foolish, but you must adhere to your story if you wish. It does not alter my decision."

"Give us time, sir—" began Jimmy Silver desperately.

"We'll find the real culprit if you'll hold over your decision, sir!" broke in Lovell.

Mr. Dalton's face lightened a little, but the Head shook his head slowly.

There was a streak of obstinacy in

Dr. Chisholm's kindly nature. It was aroused now by what he considered a foolish adherence to what had been proved a prevarication. His mind was made up.

"I am sorry, Silver. I have always held the highest opinion of you, but my duty is plain! You and your friends will leave this school by the first train to-morrow morning! Lovell will be flogged publicly in Hall first!"

"But, sir, you must listen—"

"I am under no such compulsion!" snapped the Head, with a heightening of colour. "I have listened to as much as I deem necessary! There is no room for young hooligans in a school such as Rookwood. That is all!"

Jimmy Silver, his fists clenched and his eyes gleaming, took a step towards the doctor's desk.

Lovell took a step also.

But Bulkeley stepped forward and swept the junior captain back, and Mr. Dalton took Lovell by the shoulder.

In dead silence the Fistical Four were escorted from the Head's study to the punishment-room, there to await their fate on the morrow morning.

Expulsion—disgrace for life—that was what the scheming of Captain Punter and his accomplices in the Fourth had engineered as a reward for the raggings he had received at the hands of the Fistical Four.

It was the captain's hour of triumph—and for Mark Lattrey worry and fear preyed on his conscience day and night.

That night the Fistical Four slept, despairingly enough, in the punishment-room. And Lattrey, safe in the Fourth Form dormitory, tossed miserably with the knowledge that was his.

CHAPTER 23.

The Dictator Moves!

"HALLO! Somebody getting up?"
Kit Erroll rolled over in his bed in the Fourth Form dormitory, and yawned and rubbed his eyes.

He stared as his gaze fell upon Valentine Mornington, the only junior stirring among the Fourth.

It was early; rising-bell was not due for another half-hour. Yet Mornington was astir and nearly dressed.

He nodded to Erroll, lacing his shoes swiftly.

"Cheerio, old bean! Did I startle you?"

"Fathead! What are you getting up for?"

Mornington's face set a little.

"Don't you remember what's on this morning?"

"My hat, yes! But what——"

Erroll gave his chum a very keen glance.

This morning was the last that the Fistical Four were to spend at Rookwood. After breakfast there was to be a flogging for Lovell in Hall, and then Mr. Dalton would see the four juniors off at the station.

Expelled! That was the sentence that had taken all Rookwood by storm. Jimmy Silver & Co., the leaders of the junior school, convicted of a dastardly exploit and condemned to leave the school!

The Head believed he was doing right—indeed, to his eyes the whole affair was plain enough. Whether Mr. Dalton agreed with him was not certain; but, in any case, it did not matter. The Head's decree had gone forth, and the Fistical Four were expelled.

In the Fourth there was terrific indignation on every side. But the tongues of Peele and Gower and Lattrey and fellows of their kidney were at work, and the seeds of doubt were growing in many breasts. After all, you never knew a fellow till you found him out.

But in the hour of doubt and trial Jimmy Silver & Co. still had a band of faithful chums, and among these Mornington and Erroll figured. For some reason Mornington was astir long before rising-bell. And Kit Erroll could not help suspecting that it had something to do with the Fistical Four.

"Look here, Morny. If you've thought of anything to help Jimmy——"

"You've hit it, dear man!"

"Then I'm with you. Wait a tick while I slip on my clobber."

"I'd rather not, Kit," said Mornington seriously. "You see, it's a one man job—there's a big risk. Two would bungle it. Leave it to me—an' I'll let you into the giddy secret as soon as I've brought it off."

"Ass! Are you going to open the punishment-room door?"

"Nothin' like it."

"Well, what then?"

"Curiosity killed the cat," remarked Mornington, smiling coolly. "I'm off now. If the fellows wonder where I've gone, tell them for a stroll."

And with a cheery nod, Valentine Mornington opened the dormitory door and disappeared.

Kit Erroll stared after him, deeply mystified. But he did not follow. If Mornington wanted to be on his own, he knew best.

Erroll would have been considerably startled had he been able to follow his chum's movements after he left the dormitory.

In Mornington's cool brain there had evolved a scheme—a daring scheme—to save the Fistical Four at the eleventh hour, and it needed all the dandy's cool nerve to carry it through successfully.

After breakfast Jimmy Silver & Co. were to be expelled. Much was to happen before then if Mornington's plans went well.

His first destination was his study.

He was busy there with pen and paper for some minutes. Then creeping cautiously along deserted corridors, he made his way to the Head's study.

Dr. Chisholm was an early riser, and usually worked in his study before breakfast. But Morny had forestalled him, and the maid was busy sweeping out when the Fourth-Former arrived.

Slipping into an alcove, Mornington waited patiently. In a few minutes the

maid left the corridor, and for a brief period the junior had the Head's study to himself. He was in and out again long before the stately tread of the Doctor sounded along the corridor.

Dr. Chisholm wore a worried look as he entered his study on that sunny summer's morning. He had done what he regarded as his stern duty in sentencing the Fistical Four to expulsion; indeed, with the evidence before him convicting them of the attack on Carthew, he had no choice.

With an exclamation the Doctor dismissed the matter from his mind. His decision was taken, and there was no reason to alter it.

He was about to seat himself in his favourite chair, when a paper pinned to the desk caught his eye.

Adjusting his glasses, the Head detached the paper and held it up.

As he read it his eyes started, and an expression of complete amazement appeared on his august features.

Certainly the gist of that message was startling.

"In expelling Silver, Lovell, Raby, and Newcome for the attack on Carthew you are doing a very great wrong. If you will see me, I can show you something that will alter your views considerably. For various reasons I cannot come up to the school. Will you meet me by the old Abbey ruins at seven-thirty this morning?"

"A Well-Wisher."

The Head readjusted his glasses and read that communication a second time.

For some moments he appeared in doubt as to its authenticity. But it was early, and the juniors were not yet out of their dormitories. It would have been simple enough for some witness, with his own reasons for not wishing to be seen at Rookwood, to creep across the master's lawn and slip into the Head's study via the window to leave his message.

"Bless my soul! This—this is a very remarkable communication!"

Dr. Chisholm was surprised and not a little disturbed.

For a moment he thought of calling in Mr. Dalton's opinion of the note, but he refrained. Evidently the witness wished to remain anonymous. It was for the Head alone to see him. And if any important fact was disclosed regarding Carthew, clearing the Fistical Four— The Head did not hesitate long.

His duty was clear.

However unconventional the message, there was a chance that it was right—that a miscarriage of justice was imminent. And with his duty plain before him Dr. Chisholm did not linger.

The time was creeping on. He would have to hurry to be at the Abbey by seven-thirty.

Slipping the note into a pocket the Head left his study. In the corridor he passed the maid with a majestic "Good-morning!" In the Hall and in the quad he encountered nobody.

The ancient Abbey ruins were situated at some little distance from the school precincts, and formed a popular rendezvous for juniors who wished to keep out of sight of authority.

Fights galore and secret exploration parties and other scenes had taken place in the tumbled pile which had once formed a part of the Abbey of Rookwood. The Head was not surprised that the unknown witness had chosen that out-of-the-way spot to interview him. Certainly they would be perfectly safe from observation.

Revolving the matter in his mind, Dr. Chisholm crossed the playing fields and approached the ruins. There was a possibility that he was about to meet the actual attacker of Carthew— anxious to clear others of his own blame, but keen to evade public recognition himself. At that thought the Head quickened his pace.

The old ruins appeared very silent and deserted as he set foot among them.

Dr. Chisholm glanced round, looking for the writer of the note.

There was no sign of him—for all he knew to the contrary the stately old Head was alone amid the tumbled stones.

"Ah! The vaults!"

Dr. Chisholm remembered, suddenly, the extensive series of vaults which ran beneath the ruins. Fellows explored them on half holidays, in the hope of unearthing the treasure of the old monks. The vaults were well known, and it was probable that the unknown was taking cover within them till the Head should arrive.

Dr. Chisholm stepped to the square opening which led via a flight of worn steps to the vaults. It was dark and uninviting as he peered down.

"Are you there?" called the doctor, raising his voice a little. "I have received your note, and come in answer to it!"

He waited till the echoes of his voice died away below, and then a gruff, muffled voice responded from the opening.

"You've come, then? Will you come down, Dr. Chisholm?"

"I would rather you ascended," said the doctor. "You will be quite safe from observation here, whoever you are."

"That's all you know, sir. I'm not coming up; I've a good reason. Come down—I've got a light, and you'll learn something you didn't know."

"You are exceedingly mysterious!" ejaculated the Head, with a touch ofasperity.

"I've a reason to be!" came the muffled voice from below.

The Head paused.

He did not want to descend into the shadowy vaults to meet a stranger—and a stranger who avowedly wished to keep out of sight as much as possible. But he had his duty to do, and it was his duty to assure himself of the guilt of the Fistical Four before he sent them away from Rookwood.

"I will come down!" said the doctor shortly.

"I'll show a light on the steps, sir."

There was a movement in the vaults, and the light of a candle streamed on the worn steps by which the Head had to descend. The candle was held so as not to reveal the holder, however.

With set lips, Dr. Chisholm began to descend. As he reached the bottom, his gaze searched keenly for the holder of the candle.

"Now. Why did you wish to see me?" he asked.

There was no response. Instead, at a sudden puff, the candle went out, and the Head and the unknown were left in darkness. Above, the light at the opening revealed the steps. But, below, it was impossible to see a foot.

Dr. Chisholm breathed hard. He was beginning to suspect—with an access of anger—that he had been tricked. For some reason his time was being wasted, though why he could not fathom.

There was a chuckle near at hand in the darkness.

"Keep quite still sir. You're safe enough."

"What—what does this mean?" demanded the Head angrily. "Kindly light the candle again, and state why you left your note on my desk."

"Because the four juniors you have sentenced are innocent!" came the gruff voice of the invisible speaker.

"What proof have you to offer?"

"None—at present. But I'm goin' to get it, and until then, you'll not mind staying here, sir!"

"You—you insolent, rascal!" ejaculated Dr. Chisholm. "Do you dare hold me—"

The Head broke off.

There was a sudden movement in the blackness, and a form brushed past him. His startled eyes had a glimpse of somebody ascending the steps, and then the light from above was blotted out for a moment as the unknown clambered into the open air.

"Sir! This is monstrous! I demand

The Head made a leap—quite a creditable leap, despite his years—towards the steps. He was half-way up when there was a rumble from overhead and the light was suddenly blotted out completely.

With a gasp of alarm and anger, Dr. Chisholm paused.

He was shut in!

With a rush, he arrived at the top of the steps, and bore against the stone above with his shoulder. But it did not move, and he desisted helplessly.

With his mind in a whirl, Dr. Chisholm descended into the darkness of the vaults again—a prisoner!

Above, the unknown was at large. What was his reason for imprisoning the Head of Rookwood? How long was this state of affairs to last?

Dr. Chisholm held his forehead as he tried vainly to answer these questions.

CHAPTER 24.
Light at Last!

"JIMMY!"

"Hallo, there!"

"All serene, old top!"

"Eh? What's all serene?"

"The Head's missin'!" whispered Mornington, through the keyhole of the punishment-room, with great enjoyment.

"Talking out of your hat, Morny?" demanded Arthur Edward Lovell, in accents of disgust.

"Not a bit of it, old bean. The Head has really an' truly gone—an' nobody knows where!"

"But—but—"

There were gasps of amazement from within the punishment-room.

Breakfast was over; the four condemned prisoners had been well fed on their last morning at Rookwood—like convicts before the scaffold, as Lovell grimly remarked.

Now they were waiting, with what

resignation they could muster, to be called into Hall for the final ceremony.

In those circumstances, Mornington's excited whisper was sufficient to set hope leaping in their breasts again. But it was hard to swallow.

"Say that again, Morny!" called Jimmy Silver.

"You chaps aren't goin' to be expelled this mornin'—because the Head isn't here to do it!" grinned Mornington, in delight.

"But—where on earth is he? He can't have gone far."

"Fact is that he's gone—never mind where!" said Mornington coolly.

"Erroll's here—he'll tell you the same."

"You there, Erroll, old man?"

"Yes, rather! Morny's not talking out of his hat—though I can't understand what can have happened. But Mr. Dalton has been to the Head's study, and Dr. Chisholm isn't there. Mary, the maid, saw him in the corridor before breakfast, but that's all. The whole school is in a buzz!"

"My hat! I should think so!" chortled Lovell.

"Bulkeley and Neville and a crowd of the Sixth are searching for him, but they've drawn blank so far."

"Good egg!"

"Let them keep on drawing blank!" ejaculated Raby excitedly. "They can't jolly well expel us till Dr. Chisholm is found. But how could he disappear—"

"Cave! Bulkeley!" whispered Erroll.

"Keep your peckers up, old beans!" said Mornington, as a parting shot. "An' trust the giddy Dictator to clear you somehow!"

"My hat! You haven't—" began Jimmy Silver, with a sudden deep suspicion.

"Now, then! Haven't you been warned not to speak to Silver and the others, Mornington?" demanded Bulkeley's voice grimly.

"Yaas, old bean!"

"Two hundred lines, then. The same for you, Erroll. Now, cut!"

"Anythin' to oblige!" said Mornington gracefully.

He was grinning as, accompanied by Erroll, he left the corridor wherein the punishment-room was situated. Kit Erroll was looking puzzled and suspicious. He could not help thinking that Morny's satisfaction at the disappearance of the Head was a suspicious circumstance, coupled with his veiled remarks when leaving the dormitory before rising-bell.

But it was impossible to get anything out of his chum at present. Morny was evidently playing some deep game of his own, and he was convinced that he could help the Fistical Four. Erroll followed him into the quad before speaking again.

"Whither bound now, old chap?"

"Sanny," answered Mornington coolly.

"To see Carthew?"

"Exactly! Jolly old Carthew may be able to give us a pointer or two if we ask him nicely. He should be gettin' over that crack on the napper by now."

"He was getting better yesterday. Didn't we hear that he said he was attacked by a fellow in robe and cowl—"

"I want to hear more than that," interrupted Mornington crisply. "This way. Hallo, Knowles! Why the worried frown?"

Cecil Knowles of the Modern side glared at the grinning Morny. He did not see anything funny in the long search which he had undertaken for the missing headmaster of Rookwood. The Head was nowhere in the school—that much was certain by this time. The supposition remained that for some reason he had gone out, though it was impossible to guess where or why.

The prefects had searched the school buildings from end to end without result. The Head was gone—disappeared as completely as if swallowed up in the middle of the quad.

"What are you grinning at, you young

sweep?" snarled Knowles, swinging his ashplant.

"Nothin'!" answered Mornington innocently.

"Have you seen the Head this morning, either of you?"

"I haven't," said Erroll.

"Have you, Mornington?"

"The Head?" said Mornington reflectively. "Let me see, now. An old johnnie with a rather heightened colour—"

"You disrespectful young idiot!"

"With no end of an opinion of himself an 'all that he does? That fit the man you want, Knowles?"

Knowles' eyes gleamed.

He had not forgotten—or forgiven—his treatment at the hands of the Fascists. He did not know whether Mornington was a Fascist or not—but it was very probable. And Knowles did not intend to miss an opportunity of getting a bit of his own back.

"You are disrespectful, Mornington. Hold out your hand!"

"Oh gad!"

"You asked for it, you know," murmured Erroll.

"At once!" snapped Knowles.

Mornington shrugged his shoulders and obeyed. He received two stinging cuts, then shrugged again as Knowles, grinning, strode off.

"Fathead! What did you want to get Knowles' rag out for?" demanded Erroll.

Morny's eyes glimmered.

"Because I couldn't answer his question outright," he responded, chuckling. "I had to get past him, you know. Come on, I want to see Carthew."

Erroll was staring at his chum when they arrived at the school sanatorium. His suspicions were becoming steadily more concrete.

"Can I see Carthew, miss?" asked Mornington.

Erroll and he were ushered into the room where the prefect lay, and the nurse withdrew.

Carthew glanced at them rather peculiarly, and waited for Morny to speak first. He did not expect to be visited by juniors, but even Carthew was more inclined for conversation in a sick-bed. He found the hours passed slowly enough with books and papers.

"I've dropped in to ask you a few questions, Carthew," said Mornington easily, taking a chair at the bedside. "Feelin' better this mornin', what?"

"A little, thanks," answered the prefect. "I don't know that I want to answer questions, though. What do you want to know?"

"It's serious," said Mornington grimly. "Deadly serious! You know that Silver an' his friends are bein' expelled this mornin' for pitchin' into you?"

Carthew nodded grimly in return.

"I want you to think," said Mornington, earnestly. "I know you're not on the best of terms with Silver an' the rest of us—but have you ever known us to overstep the mark before?"

"You're a lot of unruly young villains!" grunted Carthew.

"Granted. But we're not hooligans. There's a difference," said Morny coolly.

"Well, it's been proved that Silver and Lovell and the others went for me this time!" snapped Carthew irritably.

"I want you to think," repeated Mornington. "I don't believe they did it, for one. Hardly a fellow in the junior school does. How many robed an' cowed figures did you actually see, Carthew?"

The prefect stared. But he answered, after reflection:

"Two. I suppose the others were behind somewhere. But they didn't help; Lovell did that too well by himself."

"You only spotted two," said Mornington musingly. "Did you recognise Lovell as the chap who struck you?"

"How could I, when he wore a mask?"

"My point, you see," went on the

Fourth-Former calmly. "You didn't recognise him. Now, think hard. Was there any peculiarity about the man that you can remember? Or about the other fellow you saw?"

"No. Wait a minute. The chap who hit me seemed—well, bigger than myself. But I must have been mistaken—the hooligan didn't give me much time to see anything."

"Bigger than you?" reiterated Mornington, his brows puckered. "Was the other man smaller? The size of a junior, for instance?"

"Yes, so far as I can recollect."

"Now, listen," said Mornington smoothly. "I can't make head nor tail of this yet. But it's growin' plainer an' plainer that we haven't caught the real culprits. Silver & Co. say that they went picnickin' that afternoon——"

"Lies!"

"They met one man who could prove their alibi—and they ragged the life out of him!" said Mornington.

Carthew's brows lifted.

"What man?"

"Fellow callin' himself Captain Punter," answered Mornington.

"By gad!"

Carthew stared. He had forgotten Punter, and the man's threat of vengeance on Jimmy Silver & Co.—on Lovell in particular. Now, those threats stood out in Carthew's mind, and he recalled that the afternoon of the attack had been that on which his fortnight's grace expired. Could Punter possibly—— Carthew licked his lips at the thought.

"You know Punter?"

Carthew nodded, hardly realising it.

"On good terms with you?"

Carthew shook his head.

"By gad! You've thought of something, Carthew. Out with it, man! Don't you realise that four fellows are bein' branded for the rest of their lives over this—an' that they're innocent?"

"I'm beginning to believe they are," said Carthew, shivering. "I'll tell you

—If you'll promise to keep it mum. Promise, both of you?"

"Rely on us!" said Erroll.

Carthew licked his lips and began.

He was beginning to observe dimly, some of the cunning workings of the rascally captain to gain his revenge on the Fistical Four.

And as he unfolded Punter's threat to Mornington and Erroll, their faces showed that they were beginning to see light, too.

Carthew owed Punter money; and Punter was willing to let him off the debt if he could get Jimmy Silver & Co. into his hands. The attempt resulted in a further drubbing for the elegant captain, and deeper animosity towards the Fistical Four. Then Carthew's fortnight of grace had expired, and the captain had not come up to the school. Instead, Carthew had been attacked in the lane, by a fellow bigger than himself, with an assistant. The blame had fallen on Jimmy Silver & Co.—on evidence which, Carthew could see now, could have been "planted" easily enough by the captain's assistant.

Reviewing the whole matter carefully, it did not take the prefect and juniors long to see the plot of the rascally sharper.

Mornington drew a deep breath at the end of Carthew's recital.

"There's just one more point," he said coolly. "We've got to find the assistant. By gad—Lattrey!"

"We suspected Lattrey before!" ejaculated Erroll. "I don't think there can be much doubt now."

"Wait a minute," interposed Carthew, regaining his nerve. "I'm not in this, remember! What I've told you is in strict confidence. I leave you to find a way out for your friends, Mornington. You can land all the blame on Punter—so long as I get clear."

"That's agreed," said Mornington coolly.

"But how are we going to get proof?" asked Erroll, in perplexity. "What we suspect, or even know, isn't evidence."

"Punter will have to stand the whole racket," remarked Mornington coolly.

"How are we going to make him?" asked Carthew.

"I'm goin' to see him now," answered Mornington, with a cool smile. "He's comin' back with me to tell the Head that he did it—which is all that matters. We can keep you out of it, Carthew—and Lattrey, too, though neither of you deserve it! So-long!"

And Mornington and Erroll left the sanatorium.

It was in an agony of doubt that Carthew stared helplessly after them.

CHAPTER 15.

Persuading Punter!

"THAT'S the bell for classes," said Erroll, as Mornington and he re-entered the quad.

"I think not!" grinned Morny.

"You mean—"

"No classes for us this mornin'!" grinned Mornington. "We're goin' visitin'—visitin' the estimable Punter in his den."

"And choke out the truth, what?" chuckled Erroll. "By Jove! We may be able to clear Jimmy Silver and the rest now before the Head's found. Come on, Morny!"

"Bags of time, old bean!" remarked Mornington coolly. "Look out—there's Knowles!"

The two juniors dodged behind a convenient elm as the Modern captain walked past.

It would have been disastrous to have been spotted leaving the school just then.

They had learnt much from Carthew—and putting two and two together, there was little doubt in their minds that Captain Punter was the party guilty of the assault on Carthew. All that remained was to find and tax the captain, and to force him to confess. And in the punishment-room the Fistical Four, meanwhile, were merely await-

ing the return of Dr. Chisholm to receive sentence of expulsion from Rookwood.

It was not a time to worry over the consequences of "cutting" classes.

"All clear now, Kit," said Mornington coolly. "We've got the morning to ourselves now. I happen to know that Dr. Chisholm won't turn up inconveniently."

"What have you done with him, then?" demanded Erroll suspiciously. "I'm beginning to think that you've shut him up in a box-room, or something like it; though even you would hardly have the nerve for that!"

Mornington's eyes glimmered, but he did not reply.

He glanced up and down the lane before leaving the gates.

"Put your best foot forward," he urged. "If we're lucky we'll find Punter at the Bird-in-Hand."

Side by side, Mornington and Erroll swung along the lane. Erroll was thinking hard, trying to fathom the reason for his chum's elation. And Mornington wore a smile of cool satisfaction. He was confident that he was well on the way to clearing Jimmy Silver & Co.

They halted at last, some distance from the disreputable public house known as the Bird-in-Hand. A narrow lane led along the margin to the inn gardens, and down this Mornington drew Erroll.

Peeping through the hedge, Mornington endeavoured to make out if anybody was in the garden. In the old days he had been well known at the Bird-in-Hand, and he knew the precincts like a book.

"By gad, look!"

"What's the matter?"

"The man sittin' at that little table."

Erroll beat his head and peered through the thick hedge.

On a lawn at a little distance was set out a rustic table and chairs, with glasses and a decanter on the table. In one of the chairs reclined a figure—an elegant figure, which Mornington had recognised at once.

Their luck was good. It was Captain

Punter, lazily scanning a sporting paper in the sunny summer forenoon.

"Punter?" whispered Erroll, his mouth setting.

"The very man. We'll take him by surprise."

Erroll nodded, and Mornington began carefully to part the hedge.

Probably nothing was further from the captain's mind as he sat out on the lawn than a visit from Mornington, of Rookwood. Captain Punter was, for once, in quite a pleasant mood. He had heard from Lattrey that his rascally plan had succeeded—and that the four juniors against whom his enmity was directed were condemned to expulsion. The news that Lovell was first to be flogged had afforded the captain additional satisfaction.

The captain laid down the sporting paper as there were footsteps on the lawn. He glanced up expecting to see the beery features of Joel Hook, the "bookie."

He stared as he beheld two juniors—both of whom he recognised. Mornington and Erroll had been in the Rookwood Junior Eleven when Punter had trapped them in a barn. On that occasion Mr. Dalton and Bulkeley had arrived in the nick of time, and saved the juniors from a rough handling. Punter recalled the occasion with a scowl.

"What do you want?"

Mornington grinned as the captain half started to his feet.

"Keep cool, old bean! Sit down; we're goin' to."

And the Fourth-Former dropped coolly in a vacant chair; Erroll followed suit.

Captain Punter stared angrily, and then dropped back into his own seat. His instinct was to lay hands on the juniors there and then, but he restrained himself. The inn garden was too open.

"Well, what have you come for?" he snapped.

"Matter of fact, I'm on rather a de-

icate mission," admitted Mornington frankly. "It's about Carthew."

For a moment Captain Punter changed colour. But his face remained set and apparently calm. Mornington smiled. He had not failed to note that slight sign.

"I've been havin' a chat with Carthew," he went on coolly. "Really quite an interestin' chat. We discussed the fellow who hit Carthew over the head—discussed him minutely. He was a fellow about your build, Captain Punter."

Punter returned the junior's keen gaze calmly enough. He was prepared for what might come now.

"You're talking in riddles to me, young man," he answered. "What's this concerning Carthew? You say he has been knocked on the head? What makes you think I have anything to do with it?"

"It's no good pretendin' innocence," said Mornington grimly. "Carthew is recoverin'—and he has told me a lot that the beaks don't know yet. He told me about your offer to let him off his debt if he would land Jimmy Silver & Co. in your net. If you're willing to forgo twenty pounds for revenge, you'd do almost anything that occurred to you. An' it occurred to you that by gettin' a fellow to bag Lovell's stick—Lattrey, for instance—"

"Lattrey! Has he—"

The captain broke off.

But it was too late.

His sudden alarm at the thought of Lattrey revealing his scheme had not been suppressed in time.

His eyes glistened as Mornington went on calmly.

"You arranged with Lattrey to bag Lovell's stick an' use it to put Carthew on the injured list. You get Lattrey to put robes an' cowls into Silver's and his chums' boxes, to make it appear conclusive. You intended to get Lovell an' Silver an' the others chucked out of Rookwood on their necks, Captain Punter."

The captain bit his lip.

"What proof have you to offer?" he sneered.

"None—only a jolly lot of suspicious circumstances. An' it happens that I know Jimmy Silver an' his pals—an' they're above suspicion in a case of this kind. It's clear enough in my mind that you're the man, Punter."

"What's clear in your mind isn't evidence!" snapped Punter coolly. "Tell the masters, and go to blazes! They won't believe you—and I shall deny every word!"

Erroll glanced at Mornington rather uncertainly.

As far as that went, the captain was right.

If he chose to deny all knowledge of the affair, there was not an atom of proof—only the knowledge that came from the faith in the Fistical Four. And there was no doubt regarding Punter's course.

But Mornington did not appear dismayed. On the contrary he was smiling.

"Dear old bean. You think that settles it, Punter?"

"It does!" snapped the captain coolly.

"Not quite, if you'll hear me out. We suspect you—and we can rake up a lot of suspicious circes against you. An' I suppose you haven't got any too delicate a character—what? Silver an' his pals have a good record to fall back on. The Head won't listen to any more argument—"

"Then, what's the use of this?" grinned Punter.

"But the police may," went on Mornington, with the utmost coolness. "I'm goin' straight to the police now—to tell them everythin' I know!"

"How do you like the idea of a police investigation, Punter, old bean?"

"You wouldn't dare—"

Captain Punter gasped.

There was no doubt—no doubt whatever—that the captain did not want a police investigation. Mornington was right concerning his previous character—it would not stand him in good stead. And he knew that the police would not

rest till they had ferreted out all the facts. With bitter chagrin, Punter realised that Lattrey was not the kind of fellow to stand up against a police interrogation, and a word from Lattrey would bring his whole scheme toppling about his ears like a card castle.

His look, as it rested on Mornington, was not pleasant.

Morny bore that burning glance quite imperturbably.

He had the captain in a cleft-stick, and none knew it better than he. Erroll was smiling grimly now. He, too, could see that Captain Punter was trapped.

Once the police received news, Mornington had little doubt that the truth would come out, and the same conviction was in the rascally sharper's mind.

His glance, from one that burned, became almost haggard. He sank down into his chair again, all the stuffing knocked out of him. Mornington's cool handling of the situation had reduced him to impotence.

"Now perhaps you'll listen to a suggestion, Punter?" asked Morny coolly.

"Go to the police, and be hanged to you!" snarled the captain.

"I'm suggestin' a way out, dear man. Don't you want to get clear?"

The sudden look in Punter's eyes told how eagerly he would grasp at the chance.

"Listen!" went on Mornington. "Carthew an' Lattrey both want to get out of this mess. If everything comes out, the Head will bunk them for gamblin', and Lattrey will capture a floggin' probably as well. I've agreed to get them clear, an' you're goin' to help me."

"How?"

"I've taken rather drastic measures to stop Silver an' the rest from bein' expelled," went on Morny coolly. "By shuttin' the Head in the vaults beneath the old abbey ruins——"

"Morny, you haven't?" interrupted Erroll.

"I have, dear man. It was the only thing to do. Now, my idea is this:

Punter will come back to Rookwood with us, an' I'll release the Head. Then Punter can confess, takin' all the blame, and sayin' that Carthew was mistaken if he thinks there was more than one attacker. The Head will probably be a little bit doubtful, an' then we come to the master stroke."

"Handing me over to the police—eh?" demanded Punter. "Not quite good enough, thanks!"

"Nothin' of the kind!" said Mornington. "Erroll and I will be near you, holdin' you, if possible. If we're not, we'll bump into the fellows who are. Anyway, after you've confessed you make a sudden dash for freedom, and Erroll an' I keep you from bein' grabbed. Do you think you could get away across the playin' fields, Punter?"

"Of course! Easily, if you hinder them. But supposing Dr. Chisholm puts the police on my track—what then?"

"He won't."

"The Head won't want an official inquiry and the publicity," explained Erroll. "You'll get off scot free, which is more than you deserve, you scoundrel!"

"Hard words break no bones!" sneered the captain. "All I'm worrying about is my get-away. But I think it could be worked—if you two promise to help me."

"You've got it," said Mornington. "Easy as fallin' off a form. An' you can think yourself lucky I don't go straight to Inspector Sharpe at Lantham!"

Captain Punter rose from his chair, looking very unlike the supercilious dandy who had lounged in it only a few minutes previously.

"You've got me!" he remarked resignedly. "Remember, you get me clear!"

"Come on!" said Mornington crisply. "An' bear in mind, your gettin' clear depends on your keeping Carthew an' Lattrey out of it. You savvy that?"

Captain Punter nodded grimly.

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CHAPTER 26.

The Triumph of the Dictator!

"**B**LESS my soul!"

Mr. Dalton, the master of the Fourth, stared at the gates. The Triumph of the Dictator! Mr. Greely, who was with him, stared also.

It was morning break, and most of the junior school were taking an airing in the quad preparatory to resuming classes.

Messrs. Dalton and Greely were not taking an airing; they were looking, as were the majority of the masters and seniors of Rookwood, for the Head.

Dr. Chisholm had been missing since before breakfast, and continuous searching had produced no result. The reverend Head had disappeared as completely as though he had been wafted away into thin air.

"Really, sir, that is not the head-master! I thought for the moment that it was he at last!" ejaculated Mr. Greely.

"It is Mornington and Erroll, the juniors who cut classes this morning," explained Mr. Dalton. "And they are bringing a man here. Do you not perceive that they have hold of his arms, Mr. Greely?"

Mr. Greely peered through his glasses towards the approaching figures.

There was no doubt about it.

As Mornington and Erroll came nearer it could be seen plainly that they were holding a man between them—a very tall and quite distinguished-looking gentleman, it seemed.

"This is remarkable, Mr. Dalton. The man appears to be a prisoner."

"Mornington! Erroll!" rapped Mr. Dalton.

His voice drew the attention of several fellows, and there was a gasp as Morny and Erroll came up to the two masters with Captain Punter between them.

"Mornington, you and Erroll were absent from class this morning. How

do you explain this? And who—who is this man?"

"Sorry to cut class, sir," said Mornington coolly, "but we had no choice, as it happened. This is a witness for Jimmy Silver, sir. Captain Gerald Punter, at your service!"

"A—a witness?" boomed Mr. Greely in amazement. "Do you mean to affirm that Silver is innocent, and that this man can prove it?"

"Just that, sir," assented Morny. "Captain Punter has very kindly consented to come along and explain a few circumstances, you see. Would you mind if I take him straight along to see the Head, Mr. Dalton?"

The master of the Fourth gave Mornington a fixed look.

"Do you know where Dr. Chisholm is, Mornington?"

"I think so, sir."

"Then you may lead Mr. Greely and myself to him at once."

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"Very well, sir."

With a cheery smile on his face Mornington started for the playing-fields, still with his grip on Punter's arm. Erroll marched on the other side, and the two masters followed, deeply mystified. A few yards behind them a crowd of interested juniors trailed eagerly.

Punter himself was silent. He realised that his safety depended on his fulfilling his part of the contract, and he had steeled himself to carry it through. He was relying a great deal on the utter amazement which his statements would cause to aid his escape.

Mornington's destination was speedily apparent.

The junior paused at length in the midst of the ruins and beckoned to Conroy, who was among those behind.

"Take his arm, Conroy, old chap."

"Right you are."

"What—why—is the headmaster down in the vaults?" demanded Mr. Greely anxiously.

"You'll see, sir," answered Morny cheerily.

He stepped across the moss-grown flags to the stone slab with which he had sealed the Head's prison. One wrench and it was moved aside, revealing the opening leading down into the musty vaults.

A gasp from below greeted the moving back of the stone.

"Bless my soul! It—is that you, you rascal?"

"It is I—Mornington, sir!" called back Morny coolly. "Shall I come down and help you up, sir?"

"Pray do not bother! I am coming up at once."

The Head's august features as his face appeared over the edge of the cavity in the flags was a sight to be remembered. It was grimy and it was grubby, and it was grim with foreboding. The one thought in Dr. Chisholm's mind just then was to discover who had confined him in the vaults, and make an example of them.

As his eyes fell on the two masters and the crowd of juniors behind, amazement appeared in place of anger.

"Mr. Dalton—Mr. Greely. What is the meaning of this?"

"I do not know, sir," responded Mr. Dalton. "Mornington led us here, from which I deduce that he had something to do with your disappearance this morning. Beyond that, I am as much in the dark as yourself. Perhaps you will question the boy?"

"Indeed I will, sir!" remarked Dr. Chisholm grimly.

He turned a glance of thunder on Mornington.

But the junior forestalled him.

"If you'll let me explain, sir——"

"I shall be greatly surprised if you are able to explain these remarkable circumstances, sir!" retorted the Head majestically.

"I can explain everythin' if you'll listen for a few moments, sir," answered the junior calmly. "This fellow here has come to act as witness for Jimmy Silver an' his chums——"

"Who are you, sir?" interrupted the Head.

"My name is Captain Punter," responded the captain with a slight bow.

"And what is your business?"

"I am here at the request of these two boys," answered Punter, nodding to Mornington and Erroll. "They apparently discovered that I, and not a pack of juniors, was responsible for the attack on Carthew recently. I have come here as a witness to clear four innocent boys of the blame which is attached to them."

"You—you attacked Carthew?" For once the Head's dignity forsook him. He was amazed—he hardly knew whether he was upon his head or his heels.

"I did. I had my reasons—good ones, if only you knew. But I failed—and these boys got on my track. They threatened to put the matter in the hands of the police if I refused to come here and confess to you."

"Bless my soul!"

"Then you are the guilty party, sir?" demanded Mr. Dalton, regaining his breath first.

Punter took a quick glance round and made a sudden movement.

"Seize him, boys!" rapped Mr. Dalton. "Quickly!"

Conroy, who was nearest, made a grab at the captain's coat-tails. But Mornington somehow stumbled against him, and they fell together. Erroll was a second too late, and Punter had a good start.

"After him!"

"The rotten hooligan!"

"He knocked Carthew out! Rag the cad!"

A swarm of whooping juniors gave chase at once to the fleeing sharper.

But the captain was possessed of long legs, and his start served him well. Also, he knew what to expect if he were caught. He ran as he had never run before, and took a flying leap over the distant hedge into the lane.

Mornington turned, grinning, to the Head.

"He's got away, sir. But I think that clears Silver an' the others, doesn't it?"

Dr. Chisholm gave him a penetrating look.

"Mornington, did you shut me in the vaults?"

"Ahem! Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"You see, if I hadn't, Jimmy Silver & Co. would have been expelled by now, sir. I knew I could make Punter own up—and a chat with Carthew confirmed my suspicions of the man. As you saw, he was glad to confess rather than bring the police into it."

"I perceive that, Mornington. There is no doubt that Silver and Lovell and their friends have suffered a great wrong. Only your exceedingly cool grasp of the situation has saved them, Mornington."

"I hope you didn't mind me shuttin' you in the vaults, sir?"

There was a faint chuckle among the crowd, to be silenced by a stern glance from Mr. Dalton.

"I am coming to that, my boy," went on Dr. Chisholm grimly. "There was no need to have taken such extreme measures as that. Had you come to me with your story I should have listened and taken what measures I deemed fit. You will regard yourself as severely reprimanded, Mornington. In the—ahem!—circumstances I cannot find it in myself to punish you as you deserve. The sentences on the four juniors in the punishment-room are rescinded."

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

"Three cheers for the Head!"

The cheers were given with a will. And they were followed by three more with great gusto for Mornington—the fellow to whom Jimmy Silver & Co. owed the clearing of their names.

And then there was a rush for Mornington, and, gasping with alarm, he was lifted on high and borne in triumph into the House.

"Gentlemen——"

"Hear, hear!"

"More ginger-pop this way, Erroll!"

"Gentlemen——" recommenced Arthur Edward Lovell, holding up a brimming glass.

"I say, is there a cream bun left?" demanded Tubby Muffin, who had somehow squeezed into the spread.

"Gentlemen, I give you a toast!" roared Lovell over the noise and clatter of the festive board in the End Study.

"Good man, Lovell!"

"On the ball!"

"And what's the toast?" asked Jimmy Silver, filling his glass.

"The Rookwood Dictator!" said Lovell, with a glance at Valentine Mornington. "The chap who cleared us—even when it meant shutting the Head in the vaults——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A friend in need is a friend indeed," said Lovell seriously. "Therefore, I propose to honour our guest by the toast of the evening—the Rookwood Dictator!"

"Seconded!" said Jimmy Silver promptly.

"Carried unanimously!" shouted Conroy.

The juniors gathered round the table in the End Study rose to their feet. Mornington gave a gasp.

"Sit down, you asses! I didn't do anythin'!"

"The Rookwood Dictator!" announced Lovell.

Solemnly the juniors drained their glasses and sat down again.

"And that's that!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver in high glee. "If it hadn't been for Morny we'd have been going home by now—when it was that rotter Punter all the giddy time!"

"There's one chap to be dealt with yet," remarked Mornington quietly.

"Who's that?"

"Lattrey. Listen, and I'll tell you."

In a few words Mornington outlined Mark Lattrey's part in fixing the guilt on the shoulders of the Fistical Four.

"My hat! And the sneaking cad gets off scot free!" ejaculated Conroy.

"Hands up we rag the life out of him!" shouted Higgs excitedly.

"Morny made it a condition that Punter shouldn't split on the chap, but that's no reason why he should escape. Let's make a clean slate all round while we're at it. Carthew's had his dose from the captain himself."

"Good egg! Find Lattrey!" exclaimed Oswald.

"And smash him!" concurred Van Ryn.

There was a movement towards the door, but Jimmy Silver held up his hand.

"Hold on a minute, you fellows!"

"What's the matter, Jimmy?"

"Let him off!" urged the junior captain of Rookwood.

"Wh-a-a-at?"

"Off your onion, old chap?"

"I know he's a worm!" admitted Uncle James, colouring.

"He is!"

"And a howling cad, too. But it's all over now. If Lovell's willing, let's call it square."

"You ass!"

"Well, I'm willing," put in Arthur Edward Lovell grimly. "In fact, chuck it. The chap will feel it bad enough when he finds we don't intend to hurt him. Let it rest."

"Good man!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver happily.

"You asses!" said Conroy.

"Thanks!"

"Blithering soft-hearted cuckoos, in fact!"

"Any old thing!"

"Chuckle-headed idiots!" added Mornington.

"Look here, shut up!" roared Lovell, jumping up. "Say another word—"

"Here, stop him! Don't you know Morny's your giddy guardian angel, you ass?" grinned Jimmy Silver, leaping up to intervene.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Whereat Lovell subsided, and the subject of Lattrey was dropped at the celebration feast in the End Study.

But it was long ere Lattrey quite got over his fear that his part in the whole miserable affair might come to light—and not till he heard that Captain Punter had left the district did he feel safe.

And it was longer still before Rookwood as a whole forgot the regime of the band of Fascists and the debt of the Fistical Four to the Rookwood Dictator.



The END



BOY INVENTORS

THOMAS EDISON. Think of inventors, and that name is certain to be the first that comes into your mind. The most famous of modern inventors, and one of the greatest of all time, Edison's wonderful inventive brain provided the world with nearly two hundred things it had been waiting for, and brought him a fortune of over two million pounds.

Labour-Saving.

The enthralling story of this great American's career is full of achievements that stir the imagination, but the one episode that he himself used to enjoy relating more than any other concerned his first invention. It came about when Edison was a lad of fourteen employed as a night telegraph-clerk, and he admitted he was fairly driven to it by his longing to avoid tedious work.

It was his duty to report himself every half-hour by telegraphing to the head office the word "six." This was to prove that he was on the alert. Young Edison had an inclination to sleep whilst on duty, but he preferred to take all the exercise he could get in the open air.

After racking his brains for a while, and doing some experimenting, he found a way of avoiding that irksome report duty. He managed this by making certain notches on a wheel and attaching it to the works of a cheap clock. This "home-made" apparatus, when fixed to the telegraph instrument, would transmit the signal word six every half-hour with unflinching regularity, and instead of being kept tied to the office, Edison's ingenuity provided him with plenty of spare time in which he could do just as he liked.

A Boy Makes It Easy.

One of the most important discoveries in the history of steel-making was the Bessemer mild steel process, and it was the clear thinking of a schoolboy that can be said to have brought it to perfection.

Sir Henry Bessemer, the inventor, admitted that the one serious drawback to his process was that the product often varied in quality from day to day. Briefly told, the process was to force air through the molten mass of iron in the "converter" to burn out the sulphur, carbon, and other impurities in the ore. It was necessary to let a certain amount of carbon remain, and the workmen, who judged the amount as accurately as they could by the colour of the flame, were often at fault.

Walking through the works one day with his son, just home from Eton, Sir Henry explained this difficulty. The lad stared in fascination for some minutes at the stream of flame and sparks that fired out of the mouth of the huge converter, and then exclaimed:

"Well, father, why don't you blow all the carbon out, and then put in as much as you want?"

It had taken a boy to hit on the easy solution to a problem that had beaten the most skilled men in the industry.

The Schoolboy Boss.

Still more astonishing was the early career of John Ericsson, the man who built the iron bridge at Sunderland. He was a brilliant engineer when only twelve, and had 600 men employed under him whose daily work he directed and supervised. Even before then Ericsson had invented a new form of sawmill. The working model of this

sawmill he made of an old watch spring moved by a crank constructed by a broken teaspoon, and his only tools were a knife, a file, and a gimlet!

Fame and Fortune At Fifteen.

Have you ever looked inside a piano to see how it works? If you have, you probably thought that it must have been a very clever man who made it possible to set that complicated mechanism working by the mere touch of a key. Yet the inventor who did, perhaps, most of all towards giving us the piano in its present form was a boy of fifteen.

He was Sebastian Erard, a native of Alsace-Lorraine, and his double-escape-ment action, as it is known, brought him fame and a fortune in less than a year. His employer took the first instrument he made, and tried to pass it off as his own invention; but when the buyer asked him about the mechanism he was completely puzzled, and had to call in young Erard to explain.

The Story of Steam.

The story of James Watt and the kettle—of how the famous inventor of the steam-engine, then a young boy, was first struck by the power of steam as he watched the lid of his mother's kettle being lifted by its pressure—is too familiar to be worth repeating. But the part played by another youngster in helping Watt to perfect his invention, though not nearly so well known, is even more interesting.

When Watt introduced the steam-engine it was still incomplete, owing to the fact that he had no way of opening or closing the valves except by means of levers worked by hand. One of his largest machines was installed at a mine, and a boy was left in charge to work these valve-levers. Although it was not hard work, it needed constant attention.

As he was working the levers, the boy in charge of the engine was observant enough to notice that certa

parts of the mechanism moved in the right direction and at exactly the same moments as he had to open or close the valves.

A Boy's Brainwave.

This gave him an idea. Collecting several pieces of strong cord, he made them fast at one end to the moving parts of the engine and at the other to the hand levers. A few moments' test showed that the engine worked as well as ever, without needing any of his attention.

A short time after this the foreman of the mine came along and found the boy playing marbles. But his anger soon vanished as he looked at the machine, turning first to blank surprise and then to ungrudging admiration when he saw the ingenuity of the boy's contrivance for dodging his work, as well as the advantage of it.

James Watt, of course, had the improvement carried out at once, giving full credit—and a handsome reward as well—to the young pit-boy whose clever idea had made the steam-engine a perfect automatic-working machine.

Solved So Easily!

Up till the year 1873 all oil-lamps, then the most advanced form of lighting known, had solid wicks similar to pieces of cord, and the use of glass chimneys had not been discovered. In that year a Swiss chemist named Argand invented a circular form of burner, but, although this was a great improvement on those then in use, it was by no means perfect, and the light was flickering and uncertain.

One day Argand's young brother wandered into his work-room and began to play with an empty oil-flask which he found lying on the floor. After a time he fitted it over the circular wick of the oil-lamp, beside which his elder brother was working, and at once the flame burned up bright and clear. The secret of the lamp-chimney had been found!

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