

# THE SCHOOL FOR SLACKERS!

by  
CHARLES HAMILTON



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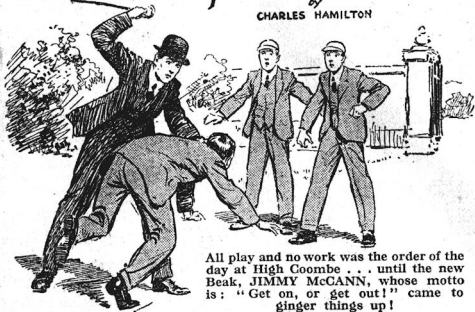


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# FRANK RICHARDS

# The SCHOOL for SLACKERS!

by  
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All play and no work was the order of the day at High Coombe . . . until the new Beak, JIMMY McCANN, whose motto is: "Get on, or get out!" came to ginger things up!

## CHAPTER 1.

"He's a live wire!"

"McCANN! That's the name!"  
"Is it a name?" yawned  
Aubrey Compton.

And there was a lazy laugh in Big Study.

It was a large, handsome room, with tall windows that looked out on the quadrangle, across the Sixth Form green. There was a glimpse of rolling cliffs and coombes, and the Atlantic, in the distance. It was handsomely furnished, like all rooms at High Coombe School. And the fellows who lounged in it were, so to speak, handsomely furnished also.

They were very careful about their clothes at High Coombe. Virgil of old sang "Arms and the Man," but had Virgil belonged to High Coombe he cer-

tainly would have made it "Clothes and the Man."

They were not quite so careful about other matters. In football and cricket, for instance, High Coombe's record was deplorable.

But they did not deplore it.

If Okeham beat them at football, they, at least, wore infinitely better cut trousers than any man at Okeham. If there were no silver pots on the side-board in Hall, there were perfectly cut clothes round the Prefects' table that might have made any pot-hunter sigh with admiring envy.

High Coombe was perfectly well satisfied with itself.

Nothing could have been more elegant than the figure of Aubrey Compton, reclining on a tapestried sofa, his well-manicured fingers clasped behind

his head, his rather long legs stretched lazily, yet with a due regard to the crease in his trousers.

Compton was the best-dressed man in the Fifth, which was saying a great deal, for they all delighted the hearts of their tailors.

Properly speaking, only First Eleven men and prefects should have used Big Study. Tredegar, the captain of High Coombe, should have seen to that. But Tred never bothered about that, or anything else. At the present moment Tred was busily engaged in brushing a flake of cigarette-ash from his sleeve. He was greatly relieved to find that it had left no mark there. That would have worried him.

There were six or seven of the Fifth in Big Study, as well as some of the Sixth. Randal of the Sixth had his shoulders in the seat of a deep, big chair, his legs across a cane chair.

"I ought to run you in, Tred," he declared.

"What's that?" asked the captain of High Coombe.

"I'm a prefect! You're not! You're smoking, and that's against the rules. If it wasn't too much trouble to get out of this chair I'd run you in."

And there was a chuckle in Big Study at the idea of Randal ever getting up enough steam to run anybody in.

There was only one discordant note in the scene. That was provided by a fellow who stood outside the open window, looking in. He was in football garb, and had a Soccer ball under his arm. It was he, Bob Darrell of the Fifth, who had spoken the name of McCann—dropping it in at the window, as it were.

"Is it a name?" he repeated after Compton. "Of course it's a name, ass! It's the name of the new Beak!"

"I'll take your word for it, old bean," said Aubrey. "If you say it's a name, it's a name. But it sounds to me more like an uncouth ejaculation."

And there was another ripple of laughter in Big Study.

Darrell frowned in at the window.

He was the only man—or almost the only man—in the High Coombe Fifth who was keen. Keeness was not popular at High Coombe.

Not that Darrell himself was unpopular. He was generally liked. If he was keen on games, and even did a little work in class, he had many good qualities to compensate for such shortcomings.

And, after all, as his pal Seymour said, why shouldn't a fellow be keen on games if he liked? It wasn't in accordance with High Coombe tradition, but where was the harm? Indeed, it came in useful at times, for High Coombe did play matches, though in a very haphazard way, and then Darrell came out very strong.

"Look here, turn out, you slackers!" said Darrell.

"Turn out?" repeated Compton. "Why?"

"What about Soccer?"

"Don't!" said Randall, in a feeble voice. "You're makin' me tired."

"We were licked seven goals to one in our last match with Okeham," said Darrell. "The Okeham men were killing themselves laughing when they changed after the match."

"So were some of us!" said Compton mildly. "Did you notice the trousers they changed into?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Snort from Darrell.

"Well, I can tell you one thing," he said. "There will be a bit of a change when McCann takes the reins—and he's coming to-day. I've heard of the man—heard a lot about him."

"Anythin' remarkable about him beside his name?" asked Compton.

"He's young—about a hundred years younger than our old Head," said Darrell. "He's a tremendous gamesman. I'm hoping that he will wake up High Coombe. We've been called the School for Slackers. And we deserve it—you men do, at any rate!"

"Guilty, my lord!" murmured Compton.



"Well, when Jimmy McCann blows in

"Great pip! Is his name Jimmy as well as McCann?"

"Yes."

"My hat!" said Compton.

"The governors," said Corkran of the Sixth, "ought to be called to order for appointin' a man with a name like that Head of High Coombe. Fancy Jimmy McCann, after Dr. Chetwode!"

"And he's a live wire—what?" asked Compton. "One of those energetic hemen who make you sit up and take notice. I don't think he'll have a lot of effect on High Coombe."

"He will!" said Darrell.

"He won't! I've seen these young masters, old boy. They blow in burst-in' with pep, make themselves a general nuisance for a term or so, and then settle down into the rut. New ideas aren't popular in any Public school—least of all in High Coombe. These new young masters—"

"It's a new Head this time—that makes a lot of difference! In fact, I fancy it must have dawned on the governors that the old show needs bucking up a bit or they'd never have sent McCann here," growled Bob. "There was a time when High Coombe used to capture pots—"

"Anybody here want to capture pots?" drawled Compton.

"We used to bag scholarships—"

"Anybody here want to bag schols?"

"Is that a football you've got there, Bob?" asked Randal, sitting up in his chair and looking at the stalwart figure framed in the open window.

"Do you know one when you see one?" asked Darrell sarcastically. "Yes, it's a football."

"What are you doin' with it?"

"I was hoping that some of you slackers would turn out for a pick-up game. I'd like McCann to see something going on when he blows in, otherwise he might think he'd dropped into a home for the aged and infirm."

Some of the fellows in Big Study

chuckled. Tredegar threw away his cigarette and glanced round.

"What about it?" he said. "Let's."

"Rot!" drawled Compton. "Hand me a smoke, old bean, and don't talk out of your hat!"

"Who's coming out for a pick-up?" demanded Bob.

"Nobody, old bean! Run away and play! You're makin' us all tired," said Aubrey in a plaintive voice. "Can't you see you're makin' us all tired? Give us a rest!"

"You're the laziest slacker of the lot, Compton! I'd like to see Jimmy McCann give you six of the best on those beautiful bags of yours."

Aubrey chuckled at the idea.

"You're not likely to see it," he remarked.

"I'm not sure of that. From what I've heard of McCann he's a man—and the man we want here."

"My dear lad," drawled Aubrey, "if the new Head tries any new games, he will find the whole school up against him. And he won't try it on for long. We've got traditions here, and even a headmaster is bound to respect tradition. Now don't tell us any more about McCann—you're borin' us! Anybody seen the 'Sporting Times'?"

Bob Darrell gave a grunt and walked away with the ball under his arm. There was no doubt that High Coombe was a school for slackers—and, in Bob's opinion, at least, it wanted waking up. He wondered whether Jimmy McCann would wake it up. If he tried, there was at least one fellow in the Fifth Form who was going all out to help.

## CHAPTER 2.

"Touch your toes!"

JAMES McCANN, M.A., walked in at the great gateway of High Coombe School.

He walked with a quick, springy stride.

Old Judd, the porter, looking out of his lodge, wondered who he was.

It was not likely to occur to old Judd

that this was the new headmaster of High Coombe.

Mr. McCann might have been taken for many things—cricketer, footballer, boxer, rowing man—but few would have spotted him, at first sight, for a headmaster—especially headmaster of a school like High Coombe.

He wore a bowler hat. It was not the latest thing in bowlers, as Compton of the Fifth could have told at a glance, and it was tilted just a little to one side of his head.

It revealed hair that had a rather ginger tinge—the fighting colour. It was auburn hair, close-cropped and glossy, but there was a spot of ginger in it. In Mr. McCann himself there was more than a spot of ginger.

His eyes were grey, hard, and clear. His limbs were sinewy. He was young. That, of course, was a fault that time would correct. But at the moment there was no doubt that James McCann was very young for such a position as he had come to take up at High Coombe.

Juddy took him for an elder brother of one of the High Coombes. Juddy did not wholly like his looks. His manner was quiet, yet there was an air of life and vigour about him which seemed strangely out of place in the School for Slackers.

Judd knew that an unexpected young man had been appointed to succeed Dr. Chetwode, the venerable Beak. He knew, as all High Coombe knew, that Mr. Chard, the master of the Fifth, had confidently expected the succession, and was intensely disappointed and exasperated by the appointment of Mr. McCann. Judd knew all about it. But he did not guess that that young man, with his elastic, boyish look, was the new Beak.

The thought did not cross Juddy's mind for a moment. He simply wondered who the man was, and came out of his stone-walled, ivy-clad lodge—old and venerable, like everything else at High Coombe—and touched his hat in a very perfunctory manner

He noticed that the young man's boots were muddy. Apparently he had walked from the station, more than a mile away. Devonshire lanes were muddy in the spring. But there were taxicabs to be had, if a man wanted them. Mr. McCann had preferred to walk, breathing in the glorious air of the Devon moors. But old Judd had not a lot of respect to waste on a man with muddy boots and a stick under his arm. He might as well have had a black-and-tan dog at his heels.

"Porter, what?" said the young man, in quite a pleasant voice, before old Judd could speak. "My baggage will be along shortly from the station."

"Baggage!" repeated old Judd.

"Have it taken into my house."

"Your 'ouse!" repeated Judd.

"I should say Dr. Chetwode's house," said the young man, with a smile that lighted up his keen, serious face quite pleasantly. "It will not be my house for a few hours yet. What?"

Judd could only blink at him.

"You—you—you ain't Mr. McCann, the new 'eadmaster?" stammered Judd at last.

"I am Mr. McCann!" answered the young man; and with a nod to the porter he walked on, leaving Judd rooted to the ground.

Mr. McCann glanced round the quad with an appreciative eye. The old buildings, the ivy-mantled tower, the mullioned windows of the library, the stout old oaks, were very pleasant to the sight. From the school field came a sound of shouting. Some juniors were punting a football about there. A bigger fellow, rather handsome and sturdy, with cheery blue eyes, was among them, apparently giving them some instructions. This was Mr. McCann's first view of Bob Darrell of the Fifth. He gave him a distant nod of approval, unnoticed by Bob.

Three fellows, coming down from the House, faced Mr. McCann.

They were Aubrey Compton and Teddy Seymour, of the Fifth, and Corkran, of the Sixth Form.

Still at a distance, they eyed the newcomer.

Mr. McCann, glancing round at the School Field, visible between the library and the clock-tower, did not, for the moment, observe them. But they observed him.

And he gave a start as he heard a voice, very clear and distinct, ask the question:

"Who's that bargee?"

It was Compton who spoke.

Mr. McCann's eyes left the footballers at once and fixed on the three seniors of High Coombe. And there came a gleam into them. Compton had not lowered his voice in the least. He intended the newcomer to hear what he said.

Seymour coloured.

"Shut up, you ass!" he whispered.

"The man can hear you!"

"Why shouldn't he?" asked Compton calmly.

"Dash it all, Comp, that may be the new Beak!" breathed Corkran. "Accordin' to what Bob said, he's a young man and a bit of a bounder."

Compton grinned. He had guessed at once that this was the new Beak, having rather more penetration than old Judd.

"Oh, rot!" he answered, as distinctly as before. "In that hat!"

"Quiet!"

"And those trousers!"

"For goodness' sake, Comp!"

"Better tell the man that the public ain't allowed in here!" added Compton, with perfect coolness, and he walked towards Mr. McCann.

Seymour and Corkran followed him, wondering at his nerve. Compton liked to make fellows wonder at his nerve.

Mr. McCann had stopped. He was sturdy, and rather stocky in figure, and he stood rather like a rock. His face was almost expressionless, but there was a gleam in his grey eyes.

James McCann was a stranger to High Coombe personally. But he knew all about the School for Slackers. He

knew why the chairman of the governing body had insisted upon his appointment as headmaster, overriding many other claims. He knew the task that lay ahead of him at High Coombe. He knew, too, that he would be able to handle it. Dr. Chetwode had been Head of High Coombe for thirty years, and in the latter years the school had drifted into a state of dry rot. Jimmy McCann was blowing in like an invigorating sea-breeze.

"Excuse me," said Compton, as he came up, his manner a delightful mixture of politeness and impertinence. "I think you've come in at the wrong gate, my man."

Seymour and Corkran hardly breathed. If this blighter turned out to be the new Beak, as they feared, what was going to happen to Compton? Fortunately, senior men at High Coombe were never whopped!

"The tradesmen's gate," continued Compton, as Mr. McCann looked at him quietly and steadily, "is on the other side!"

"The tradesmen's gate?" repeated Mr. McCann.

"Yes. Judd will show you. You'll find him at the lodge. You shouldn't really come in this way, you know."

"No?" asked Mr. McCann.

"No! I believe," went on Compton, "that you're from the outfitter's at Okeham. I think I've seen you serving at the counter there. Isn't that so?"

"No!" said Mr. McCann. "Not at all."

"My mistake," said Compton gracefully. "Anyhow, ask the porter and he will tell you where to find the tradesmen's gate. Better cut, my man—you'd get into rather a row, comin' in this way!"

And Compton of the Fifth made to walk on.

Then Mr. McCann spoke.

His voice rang sharp and commanding.

Compton glanced round at him haughtily.

"Did you speak to me?" he asked.

"I did!" assented Mr. McCann. "I told you to stop! Your name?"

Compton raised his eyebrows.

"My name hardly concerns a shopman from Okeham," he said. "Don't be impertinent, my man."

"You are labouring under a slight error," said Mr. McCann. "I am not a shopman from Okeham."

"No?" said Compton. "No? Now I think of it, I think I've seen you in the draper's at Moordale. That's it, isn't it? You're the draper's young man."

"Wrong again!" said Mr. McCann quietly. "If I were the draper's young man I should not, I hope, be ashamed of it. But as it happens, I am James McCann, the newly appointed headmaster of this school. And what is more, I am convinced that you are aware of it."

Mr. McCann slipped the stick from under his arm into his hand. Compton & Co. stared at that proceeding.

"If you fancied," went on Mr. McCann, "that I was the outfitter's young man, or the draper's young man, your impertinence would still have been inexcusable. I am convinced that you had guessed my identity and that it is your intention to be insolent to your new headmaster. I am unwilling to inflict a punishment in my first moments at High Coombe, but I cannot allow this to pass."

"Really, a fellow couldn't be expected to guess it!" drawled Compton. "You must allow me to say that you don't look the part."

"Possibly not. But you will find that I shall act the part!" said Mr. McCann. "Bend over and touch your toes!"

"Wh-a-a-t?"

"Do I not speak plainly?" asked Mr. McCann. "I told you to bend over and touch your toes. I am going to cane you."

Aubrey Compton stared at him in sheer amazement.

"Really, sir," cut in Corkran of the

Sixth. "As you're new here, sir, perhaps I'd better tell you that Compton is in the Fifth, and the Fifth are never whopped."

"You need not speak, my boy!" said Mr. McCann. "Compton—if your name is Compton—I am waiting for you to obey my order."

Compton stood erect, breathing hard and deep. His eyes were glittering, his cheeks flushed. He looked very handsome in his anger and excitement and very unsubdued. Compton might be a slacker of the first water, but he had a passionate temper and plenty of courage. At that moment he would not have bent over at the order of this bouncer to save his life.

"You hear me?" said Mr. McCann very quietly.

Compton shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not deaf!" he answered coolly.

"I ordered you to bend over!"

"I'm not a fag in the Fourth Form!"

"Will you obey my order?"

"No!" said Compton between his teeth. "I won't!"

. . . . .

Seymour and Corkran watched McCann's quiet face, wondering what on earth was going to happen now. If James McCann began his headmastership by taking that, his headmastership looked like being an even slacker and easier proposition than Dr. Chetwode's. But the young man was not in a hurry to act. He seemed to be considering the matter thoughtfully.

Compton made a move to turn away, as if the matter was ended. Then he discovered suddenly that it wasn't!

James McCann's left hand shot out and grasped his collar. Seymour and Corkran gasped.

Compton gave a yell. Then he struggled.

But if he had been a Lilliputian in the grasp of Gulliver his struggles could not have availed him less.

The grip on his collar seemed to be of iron. The strength in James

McCann's arm seemed unlimited. Compton was no weakling, but he was twisted over in the new headmaster's grasp as if he had been an infant.

Wriggling, struggling, panting, Aubrey Compton was bent over—irresistibly. Then the stick in Mr. McCann's right hand came into play.

Whack, whack!

Seymour and Corkran gazed on helplessly. Other fellows in the quad gazed. Faces appeared at the windows, gazing. Old Judd, from his lodge, gazed. Even Dr. Chetwode disengaged himself from the armchair in which he spent a great deal of his time, and gazed from his study window. Mr. Chard, master of the Fifth, gazed from the window of his study with unbelieving eyes. All High Coombe, in fact, stood at gaze!

And Mr. McCann, apparently unconscious that he was the cynosure of countless amazed eyes, whacked and whacked.

There was a yell from the football field, and the juniors there came scampering over to see this amazing sight. Bob Darrell came with them. He had expressed a hope, only an hour ago, that Compton would get six on his beautiful bags from the new Beak! Now Compton was getting them—and Bob fairly blinked.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Mr. McCann released Compton, who staggered against an oak and stood there, crimson, panting, hardly believing that this awful thing had happened. McCann tucked the stick under his arm again.

"That," he remarked genially, "is that! I am sorry for this, Compton! I will not say that it hurts me as much as it hurts you. It doesn't! But I am sorry—and I hope you will never ask for it again!"

And James McCann walked into the Head's house, leaving the quadrangle in a buzz behind him. Compton of the Fifth, wriggling and writhing, glared after him in speechless rage.

### CHAPTER 3.

#### Backing Up the New Beak!

HIGH COOMBE was shaken. It was shaken almost to its ancient foundations.

Big Study buzzed with it. Masters' Common-room echoed with it.

Juniors, meeting one another on staircases and in passages, said in breathless tones:

"Seen the new Beak? He's mad!"

Ferguson of the Fourth, who was Compton's fag, went specially to Compton's study to see how he was taking it. Compton had retired to his study to hide his rage and humiliation from all eyes. Ferguson expected to find him in a bad temper. He found him in a worse one than he expected. Other fags, waiting at the corner of the passage for Ferg, saw him open Compton's door and go in.

A split second later he came out again. An elegant and well-fitting shoe was glimpsed behind him, flashing from the doorway. Elegant and well-fitting as it was, it fairly lifted Ferguson of the Fourth. He flew across the passage, and the study door slammed after him as he crashed.

Ferg was limping as he rejoined his breathless friends. Still, he had discovered what he had gone to learn! Compton of the Fifth was still in a very bad temper. He was taking it badly—very badly!

Other fags lingered by the door of Common-room to hear the deep drone of Chard, master of the Fifth.

"Who is this man?" Chard was heard saying. "He comes from nowhere and beats a Fifth Form boy—one of the best boys in my Form—in the open quad, under the eyes of all the school, before he has been here ten minutes! Who is this man?"

Chard said this over and over again.

Everybody would have liked to know what Dr. Chetwode thought of the new man. Nobody doubted that he regarded him with scorn and

aversion. Those feelings were universal in the school.

But whatever the old Head thought he did not confide it to High Coombe. And he was gone.

He had presented McCann to the school in Great Hall, then left. Masters and boys were sorry to see him go.

They discovered suddenly and unexpectedly that they were awfully fond of the venerable Beak. They had never realised it before. Indeed, disrespectful juniors generally called him Rip Van Winkle—not in his hearing, of course—and members of the staff had been known to allude to him as an old dodderer.

Only Chard was really satisfied with him, because big, aggressive Mr. Chard practically ran him and the school, and expected to step into his shoes when he retired. Even he had wondered why it had never dawned on the ancient gentleman that his resignation was overdue.

But now, so awful was the change from Chetwode to McCann, all the school found that they loved and venerated Rip Van Winkle, and wished from the bottom of their hearts he was still there.

But he was gone, with his silver hair and unseeing eyes, and the new man reigned in his place—a new man whose hair was not silver, but ginger, and whose eyes, so far from being unseeing, were frightfully keen and wary and penetrating.

Tredegar of the Sixth had already taken the box of cigarettes from his mantelpiece and slipped it under some papers in his desk. And Randal had gone round "Big" Study putting the racing papers under the cushions.

Fellows hardly knew what to expect. Life had been so jolly under Rip Van Winkle. Especially in the Fifth they had been a happy family. In the back benches of the Fifth Form Room it was a haven of rest. Fellows arrived there like weary mariners getting into port, with the happy consciousness that they need work no more so long

as they were at High Coombe. Chard never made a man work. Chard was a gentleman. But this new blighter—what was he?

He was already nicknamed the Blighter.

There was one comfort. The whole school was against him. The whole staff was against him. He would plough a lonely furrow at High Coombe.

Only one voice was raised in his favour—that was Bob Darrell's. And it was drowned in a chorus of indignation.

"The man's a blighter," said Randal—"a Nosy Parker! He's been here a few hours and nosed all over the place in that time. He noticed a smell of baccy in the Sixth studies—I saw him sniff."

"If he puts down smoking——" said Bob.

"The fags are ready to lynch him," said Carew. "He barged into the Fourth Form Room in prep and found them playing football. He asked who was the prefect in charge."

"Well," said Bob, "you ought to have been——"

"He thinks he can whop seniors," said Seymour.

"Dash it all, Compton asked for what he got!" said Bob. "From what I hear, he checked the new man——"

There was a roar in Big Study. "Are you speakin' up for McCann?" demanded Tredegar.

"Well, give a man a chance," urged Bob, facing the angry crowd.

He believed in giving the new man a chance, and rather believed that McCann's coming would be a good thing for High Coombe. But he was alone in that belief. It was clear that any fellow who had a good word to say for the Blighter would become as unpopular as the Blighter himself. And Bob liked his popularity, and did not want to lose it.

But he had said too much already. Fifth and Sixth Form men surrounded him with angry faces. They did not

know how to deal with the new Beak, who had taken them all by surprise. But they knew how to deal with one of their own number who showed the slightest inclination to back up the new Beak. Even his own pal, Teddy Seymour, looked as excited and scornful as the rest.

"You're backin' up the Blighter, are you?" roared Tredegar.

"Backin' up that dashed ruffian who's whopped old Aubrey—whopped him like a fag!" shouted Corkran.

"You're a rotter, Darrell!"

"You're a worm!"

"You're a toad—a crawlin' toad! Greasin' up to the Beak!"

Bob's blue eyes flashed.

"Who's greasing up to the Beak?" he roared. "I haven't spoken a word to him yet, and I don't want to! But I say—"

"Every man here," said Randle, "is against him! Every man here is down on him! Every man here is goin' to make it just as hard as he can for the blighter! What?"

"Hear, hear!"

"And if you don't line-up with the rest, Darrell—"

"Hold on!" broke in Teddy Seymour. "Bob's only gassin'! Bob's as much down on him as we are—ain't you, old chap?"

"No," said Bob. "You see—"

He got no further.

Every man in Big Study—and there were two or three dozen big and angry seniors there—would have been glad to handle James McCann had that been practicable. It wasn't! But it was practicable to handle a man who spoke a single syllable in his favour—and they did.

They collared Bob on all sides.

"Bump him!"

"Scrag him!"

"Hands off, you duffers!" roared Bob, struggling frantically. "I tell you—"

—Oh, my hat! I say—yarooocoo!"

Bump, bump, bump!

The Fifth and Six Form men at High

Coombe, as a rule, were much too lofty, and much too lazy, to think of such a fag proceeding as "bumping" a fellow. But they forgot their loftiness and their laziness in their wrath and indignation. Indeed, it almost seemed as if Jimmy McCann had already infused some of his own ample energy into the School for Slackers! At all events, they displayed plenty of energy now.

Bump, bump, bump!

Bob roared and struggled. He was a mighty man of his hands, and two or three fellows were gasping on the floor, knocked flat, while the rest bumped the offender. A table rocked, and several chairs went over. The din from Big Study was terrific. Even the fags in the Burrow had seldom kicked up so terrific a shindy.

In the midst of the fearful uproar nobody noticed the door open. Nobody noticed a stocky man—now in cap and gown—standing in the doorway, looking in with surprised but interested eyes at that remarkable scene. Nobody knew that the new Head was there till Mr. McCann spoke.

"You are making a great deal of noise here!"

"Oh!" It was a general gasp.

Bob Darrell was dropped like a hot potato. Flushed and breathless, the ragers stared round at the Head. Bob lay sprawling on the floor, his face crimson, his hair a mop, his collar and tie gone, his waistcoat buttonless. He gasped and gurgled for breath.

Mr. McCann's clear, keen eyes rested on him. He recognised the fellow he had seen coaching the juniors at footer. He glanced round at the circle of flushed faces. Some of those faces were defiant—as defiant as they dared to be. Probably Mr. McCann grasped how matters stood. He had a way of taking in a situation at a glance.

"I suppose this is what you would call a rag," he remarked, in quite a casual tone.

Bob Darrell staggered up.

"Only a game, sir!" he gasped.

Jimmy McCann smiled.

"Quite," he assented. "But not so much noise, please! Tredegar"—Mr. McCann never forgot a name after once hearing it—"Tredegar, let there be no more noise from this room."

With a cheery nod, the new Beak walked away. Deep silence followed his departure. Tredegar hardly realised that he was waiting till the new Beak was out of hearing before he spoke. But he did wait.

"Does that outsider think he can barge into Big Study and give orders here?" said the captain of High Coombe.

Evidently Mr. McCann did think so. And it really looked as if he was right in thinking so, for there was no more noise from Big Study.

#### CHAPTER 4.

##### Ducking the Blighter!

"HIS on the Beak's Grind!" breathed Aubrey Compton.

"Good luck!" muttered Tredegar.

"Quiet!" whispered Seymour.

Compton sneered.

In the moonlight his face showed white. Over the Devon cliffs and coombes the moon sailed, like a bowl of silver. Strange lights and shadows played among the trees and shrubberies in the Head's garden. Six fellows were there, at an hour when all High Coombe were supposed to be fast asleep in bed.

Mr. McCann had learned many things in one day at High Coombe, but he would have been greatly surprised to find that four of the Fifth and two of the Sixth were watching him from the deep shadow as he paced the Beak's Grind.

It was a path that ran down from the Head's garden to the river—so-called because masters often took their walks there. It was a quiet, secluded path, shadowed by great trees whose

spring green was now silvered by the light of the moon.

Fellows who only knew Aubrey Compton as the slacking dandy of the Fifth would hardly have recognised him now, with the moon gleaming on his white face and burning eyes. The Blighter was going to learn, his first night at High Coombe, that he could not carry matters there with a high hand—not without getting what he asked for, at any rate. There was a kick, even in the School for Slackers!

"Somebody's comin'!" breathed Randall.

Mr. McCann had disappeared in the direction of the river. It was from the other direction—that of the House—that a footfall became audible.

"Another fellow comin' to lend a hand!" muttered Tred.

A shock of fair hair glimmered in the moonlight. It was Bob Darrell who came up, rather breathlessly.

"Oh, here you are!" he panted.

"Quiet, you fool!" muttered Compton.

"It's the Head——"

"He's down the path! If he hears you——"

"For goodness' sake, chuck it!" muttered Bob. "I hardly thought you were in earnest when I heard. But I missed you, Teddy, and came after you! You're not really mad enough to handle McCann——"

"He handled me!" said Compton.

"Oh, you're crazy!" said Bob impatiently. "Tred, haven't you more sense than this? This means sacking if you're spotted."

Tred hesitated. He was an easy-going fellow, and generally the slave of the last word.

"Perhaps it's a bit thick!" he murmured. "After all, he's the Head——"

"If you're funky, clear off!" Compton cut in savagely. "I'm goin' on! I'm goin' to duck that cur in the Clovey, if I have to do it alone!"

"You can't!" answered Bob.

"Can't I?" Compton snarled, and his white teeth gleamed in the moon-



light. "You'll see! By golly, I'll make the cur sorry he laid hands on me!"

And Aubrey Compton started down the shadowed path the way the new Beak had gone. The other fellows followed him.

Bob Darrell stood very still. He realised, as they did not seem to do, the deadly seriousness of what they had planned.

He knew in his bones that if McCann found out who had handled him he would sack the offender, short and sharp—kick him out of the school so quick that it would make his head swim.

But surely they would never carry out that mad scheme? Bob leaned on an oak, his hands driven deep into his pockets, and listened.

Supposing McCann had walked as far as the bank of the Clovey, where the Grind ended in a dark, shadowed spot, overhung by trees, where the stream rippled down to the coombe? Dark and lonely, with hardly a gleam of moonlight through the branches, it was the very spot where a man might be handled without a chance of seeing who handled him.

A sudden sound of scuffling came up the shadowed path—a heavy splash in the water!

Bob started, with thumping heart. They had done it!

From the distance he could hear the splashing and panting of a man struggling in water. Instantly there came a pattering of running feet. They were coming back—they had done it, and were running for the House! Randal was the first to pass him, head low, panting. After him came Tredegar, Seymour, and the rest. Aubrey Compton was last, grinning savagely as he ran.

They passed Bob in a twinkling and disappeared up the dark garden. The pattering of their running feet died away. They had not even seen him there under the tree. Faintly, from afar, he heard a shutting door.

Then up the Beak's Grind, from the river, came a drenched and dripping form, squelching water as it came.

In the clear moonlight, outside the radius of shadow of the tree under which he stood, Bob had a plain view of James McCann. The Head was soaked with water, smothered with mud, and his face glistening wet. But the face, to Bob's surprise, was calm. He even fancied that he detected the ghost of a smile on it.

He backed close to the trunk of the oak. They had pitched McCann headlong into the river, and Bob would not have gone without making sure that the man was safe. But he did not want to be spotted out of the House at eleven o'clock at night. That drenched figure would pass him unseen, as the running schoolboys had passed.

But it did not. Mr. McCann stopped as he came abreast of the spot where Bob Darrell stood in black shadow. Bob wondered whether the man could see in the dark. He seemed to have the eyes of a hawk.

"Step out!" said Mr. McCann.

Bob considered for a second dodging round the oak and cutting across the gardens. Then he stepped out.

He saw surprise dawn in Mr. McCann's face. It was not Bob Darrell he had expected to see. Not the fellow who had coached the fags at football, and had been ragged in Big Study.

"You!" said Mr. McCann.

"Yes, sir."

"Your name?"

"Darrell."

"You had no hand in this?"

"No, sir."

"But you know who had?"

Bob was glad to know, by that question, that Mr. McCann did not know who had ducked him. But surely he was not going to ask for the names? He surely was not going to ask a fellow to give away his friends? Bob could not, surely, have so mistaken his man?

He hadn't!

"You know who had?" repeated Jimmy McCann.

"Yes, sir," said Bob quietly.

"Very well. I shall not ask you who they were." Jimmy McCann smiled at the relief that involuntarily flashed into Bob's face. "Neither shall I ask you why you are out of the house at this hour. Perhaps I can guess as much as you could tell me. But—go in now, Darrell."

"Yes, sir!"

"Good-night, my boy!"

Jimmy McCann squelched on. In his room, when he switched on the light, he stood looking for a long moment at the reflection of his drenched and dripping figure in the glass, with a grim—a very grim—smile on his face. They did not like the new broom at the School for Slackers, that was clear. But, all the same, the new broom was going to sweep clean!

#### CHAPTER 5.

##### Jimmy on the Warpath!

**D**ORMITORY No. 3 at High Coombe School slept. And Dormitory No. 3 was not unique in that. Slumber reigned in all the other dormitories.

The last note of the rising-bell had died away. Here and there a head had lifted from a pillow, and a fellow had yawned and turned over. Randal of the Sixth, in his bed-room study, had exerted himself to the extent of remarking "Bother that bell!" before he went to sleep again.

A bright spring morning beamed down on the green old quadrangle of High Coombe. A fresh wind swept the Devonshire moors. The Atlantic, gleaming in sunshine, boomed on the sand-ridge, sending deep echoes up the wooded coombes. The world—with the exception of High Coombe School—was awakening to a bright new day. High Coombe School wasn't! Any stranger, looking in when old Liggins ceased to ring the rising-bell, would not have wondered that High Coombe was called the "School for Slackers."

Such a stranger, indeed, might have wondered why they had a rising-bell at High Coombe at all.

This was Jimmy McCann's first morning. He had turned out at daylight, and gone down the bank of the Clovey, down the deep-wooded coombe, to bathe in the sea, regardless of the early season. He had come back with his face glowing brighter than his hair, hearing the rising-bell as he came up the coombe.

He was surprised when he arrived in the school to find himself the only man awake there. Even old Liggins had gone back for another snooze after ringing the bell; he did not expect to see anybody about for some time to come.

On second thoughts, Jimmy McCann was not surprised. It had taken him only a few hours to grasp the state of affairs in the School for Slackers—a state of affairs that he was going to change very considerably.

Thus it was that the accustomed calm of High Coombe was broken that morning. At a frightfully early hour—only twenty minutes after the rising-bell had ceased to clang, in fact—footsteps and voices, opening and shutting doors, were heard in the extensive House.

Dormitory No. 3 slumbered on. It was a three-bed dormitory, like all senior dormitories at High Coombe. The three beds belonged to Bob Darrell, Teddy Seymour and Aubrey Compton.

Bob was the only man in Dormitory No. 3—or in all the school, for that matter—who ever turned out at rising-bell. But on this particular morning Bob slept soundly, like the rest. He had been up very late the night before. That was the reason. But banging doors, excited voices, tramping footsteps, awakened Bob, while Seymour and Compton slumbered happily on.

Bob sat up in bed and blinked in the bright sunshine that streamed in at the window.

"You men awake?" asked Bob. No answer. "I say, there's something up!"

Bob listened. Unaccustomed sounds were heard throughout the House. It was difficult to guess what was going on; unless, indeed, all the fellows were getting up at the same time. That seemed highly improbable—at High Coombe!

"Teddy, old bean! Wake up!"

Bob hurled a pillow across at his chum. Seymour woke up with a gasp. He lifted his head and stared sleepily at Bob.

"You ass! Did you wake me? Can't you turn out as usual without spoilin' another fellow's beauty sleep? Go and eat coke!"

"Something's up!" said Bob.

"Rot! Go to sleep!"

"I wonder if the new Beak's about?"

"The Blighter! Bother him! He's not ass enough to turn out at this unearthly hour, I hope! The Venerable Beak never turned out till ten," granted Seymour. "Shut up!"

"But I say——"

Aubrey Compton's eyes opened.

"For goodness' sake don't jaw!" he said. "I was just dreamin' that that new man, McCann, was drowned in the Clovey! You've spoiled a beautiful dream!"

"I believe he's up!" said Bob.

"More fool he! Anyway, I'm not following his rotten example!"

Firm footsteps came up the little stair that led to Dormitory No. 3, which was rather tucked away in a corner of the ancient building. They crossed the landing to the dorm door.

A knock and the door opened.

Without looking round, Aubrey Compton knew that it was Mr. McCann who stood in the doorway of Dormitory No. 3. He went on speaking as if in ignorance that the new Beak was there.

"McCann would hardly be up yet! I admit that he's the sort of pushin', nosin', meddlin' rotter to be poking about at unearthly hours. A rank outsider in every way, if you like! But

"Are you awake in here?"

Mr. McCann's voice came cool, clear, incisive. He did not seem to have heard Compton's words.

"Yes, sir!" stammered Bob.

He blinked at the Head with a red face. He did not want Jimmy McCann to take him for a slacker, which he was not. It was rather unfortunate that he had slept late on Jimmy's first morning at High Coombe. At the same time, from a natural sense of loyalty, he did not want to dissociate himself from the others. He respected the new Head, and already liked him. But the fellows were his friends and comrades. Under the new regime at High Coombe Bob seemed likely to have a hard row to hoe!

"It is long past rising-bell!"

Mr. McCann's voice and manner were quite good-humoured, but there was quiet firmness in both. There was an iron hand in the velvet glove, as Bob realised if his friends did not.

"Not really?" asked Compton.

"Yes, really!" said Jimmy, in the same good-humoured tone. "Turn out, my boys! After this morning I shall expect the whole school to turn out promptly at rising-bell."

"Certainly, sir!" said Darrell.

He slipped out of bed, an athletic figure in his pyjamas. Teddy Seymour looked at him, and looked at Compton. The three were friends; but while Bob was the most energetic fellow at High Coombe, Aubrey was the most determined slacker. Teddy was drawn sometimes to one side and sometimes to the other. He always waited for a lead.

Compton did not stir. A hard defiance was forming in his handsome face. Who was this stocky outsider who had barged into High Coombe, where he certainly wasn't wanted, and was upsetting everything and everybody?

Teddy hesitated.

"Come on, Teddy!" said Bob, anxious to avoid trouble.

And, as Compton did not speak, Seymour turned out.

Mr. McCann, in the doorway, fixed his blue-grey eyes on the dandy of High Coombe.

"Compton!"

"Yes!"

"Yes what?" asked Jimmy, in a dangerous tone.

"Yes, sir!" muttered Compton unwillingly.

"That is better! Good manners cost nothing, Compton."

Aubrey breathed hard. This rank outsider was setting up to teach him manners—him, the glass of fashion and the mould of form in the School for Slackers!

"I have told you to turn out, my boy!" said Jimmy McCann, in quite a kind tone. "Now let me see you do it!"

Jimmy McCann did not see Aubrey do it. Aubrey remained as motionless as a stone statue.

"Aubrey, old chap!" whispered Bob.

"Come on, Aubrey; all the fellows are going down," said Teddy Seymour. Aubrey Compton yawned.

Mr. McCann stepped into Dormitory No. 3. His manner was still very quiet, but his eyes were glinting.

"Are you getting up, Compton?" he asked.

Slacker and dandy Aubrey Compton might be, but nobody had ever said that he was wanting in courage. And it needed some courage to face the glinting eyes of the new headmaster of High Coombe. But Aubrey faced them without turning a hair.

"Perhaps I'd better explain, sir," he said, in a manner in which respect and disdain were beautifully mingled. "We're Fifth Form men in this dorm, and not used to bein' bundled about like fags. And when Dr. Chetwode was here——"

"Dr. Chetwode is no longer here, Compton! You are dealing with a new headmaster! Get up at once!"

"I generally come down in time for brekker, sir," drawled Compton.

"That's rather the rule!"

"It is a rule that will be changed,

dating from this morning!" said Mr. McCann. "Now, Compton, I am waiting!"

"Perhaps you'd rather wait somewhere else, sir," suggested Aubrey. "You're rather disturbin' me here!"

Mr. McCann stepped to Compton's bedside. One jerk of his hand tore off the bedclothes. The next moment Compton was whipped out of bed and landed on his feet.

"Get along to the bath-room, Compton!"

Aubrey panted with rage.

"I'm not goin'!"

"I think you are!" said Mr. McCann grimly.

His grasp fastened on the back of Aubrey's neck like steel pincers. The dandy of High Coombe was propelled out of Dormitory No. 3 with a force that was irresistible. He wriggled and yelled as he went down the short staircase to the passage. But he went!

"My hat!" breathed Teddy Seymour, staring after them. "I say, that dashed ruffian——"

"He's a man!" said Bob.

"Will you let go, you rotten blighter?" came Aubrey's frantic howl, as he was propelled along the passage through a staring, gaping crowd.

Mr. McCann did not heed that extraordinary way of addressing a headmaster. Neither did he let go. He propelled Aubrey along the passage to the big bath-room at the end, where a good many fellows were already gathered, unwillingly and rebelliously, and getting under the showers. A twist of Mr. McCann's sinewy arm and Aubrey spun in across the wet floor and sprawled among them, landing under a streaming shower in his beautiful silk pyjamas.

"Lose no more time, Compton!" said Mr. McCann genially. And he nodded to the staring crowd of High Coombers and walked away.

It seemed that early rising was going to be the rule, instead of the exception, at the School for Slackers!

## CHAPTER 6.

## Rowdy Breakfast!

THE Blighter—everybody at High Coombe already called Jimmy McCann the Blighter—breakfasted in Hall with the school. The headmaster at brekker was an innovation—one of many that were coming! The Venerable Beak had never breakfasted in Hall, at least within living memory.

Nobody liked the idea—except, no doubt, Jimmy himself. Jimmy, fresh and pink, clean as a new pin, keen as a razor, looked cheery and bright, and did not seem to have the remotest suspicion that most of the fellows there would have liked to pelt him with the eggs and ram the kidneys down his collar.

Mr. Chard, the master of the Fifth, was Master in Hall that morning. But he came late.

Jimmy, in his early rising campaign, had had plenty of work on hand, and had not roused out the Beaks. Perhaps, having arrived so very recently to take control, he felt a slight diffidence in dealing with members of the old-established staff; men who had been fixtures at High Coombe for years on end. Though, as a matter of fact, diffidence did not seem to be highly developed in Jimmy.

Anyhow, Chard was late, as usual. Slackness at the School for Slackers was almost as conspicuous in masters as in boys. Chard—big, aggressive-looking, loud-voiced—did not look like a slacker; and it was related that once upon a time, as a new master, he had been energetic. Perhaps the atmosphere of the place had caught him. Moreover, he liked to be liked; and the only way at High Coombe for a master to be liked was to let the fellows do as they pleased. Popularity was as the breath of his nostrils, and he did not suspect that in Big Study he was nicknamed "Popularity Peter"—Peter being his first name.

Mr. McCann's keen glance swept over Hall when he came in; a single glance

that took in everything. He did not yet know the numbers of the school, but he knew that a good many fellows had not yet turned up, and he saw that there was no master present.

Brekker at High Coombe was a very go-as-you-please meal. Fellows strolled in whenever they liked and stood or sat anywhere. And sometimes a group of seniors would remain, talking over their coffee, long after the school bell had rung. Bells rang at High Coombe at specified times; but many of the High Coombers heeded not.

Jimmy found only three men at the high table where the prefects sat. They were Corkran, Coffin and Lacy, of the Sixth. Adjoining the high table, but at a lower level, sat the rest of the Sixth who were not prefects, among them Tredegar, the captain of the school, but not a prefect. Three long oak tables accommodated the Fifth, the Shell, and the Fourth. Forms below the Fourth had long since disappeared from High Coombe.

Ferguson, who was pleased to call himself captain of the Fourth, was pelting Fatty Pye with bread pellets when Mr. McCann came in. Fatty, finishing an egg hurriedly, hurled the shell across at Ferguson, missed him, and caught Donkin of the Fourth in the eye, at which there was a ripple of laughter. Donkin, the duffer of the Form—usually called the Donkey—jumped and knocked over his teacup, streaming tea right and left.

The ripple of laughter grew into a roar. Three prefects sitting at the high table made no difference to the fags, who would have carried on even if Mr. Chard had walked in at that moment. They did not even see Jimmy McCann enter, being quite uninterested in Jimmy McCann.

But they became swiftly aware of his presence. He paused a second in passing the fag table.

"No more of that, please!" said Mr. McCann, in his quiet voice, which, quiet as it was, seemed to have a cutting edge

like a razor. And he walked on, leaving silence behind him.

"Cheeky bargee!" breathed Ferguson, but not till Mr. McCann had sat down at the top table and could not possibly hear.

Ferg gave up pelting across the table. It was rather thick for this bargee to butt in and spoil the fun. But Ferg was no fool, and he knew that this particular bargee was not to be trifled with. Had he not seen, only the previous day, his fag master, Compton, whopped on his beautiful bags by this unceremonious bargee?

Mr. McCann gave his prefects a cheery good-morning, to which they made inarticulate replies, regarding him somewhat as uneasy Poms might have regarded a strange bulldog.

"And where are the others?" asked Mr. McCann genially.

Nobody wanted to answer him. But Corkran, as head prefect, felt constrained to do so.

"Not here yet, sir."

"No?" said Jimmy McCann. He glanced at his watch. "Hall will be cleared in twenty minutes. Anyone who has not breakfasted by then will, I fear, have an unusually keen appetite for his dinner."

The three prefects looked at one another as Jimmy calmly cracked an egg. Corkran rose quietly, and slipped out of Hall. If this bargee—this blighter—this unspeakable nobody from nowhere—was going to wash out brekker for the men who did not turn up on time, a tip to that effect would be useful to fellows loafing about the passages and the stairs.

Mr. McCann's voice, quiet as it was, had carrying powers; it was heard along the senior tables. Fifth Form men looked at one another. Bob Darrell cast an uneasy glance towards the door. He had dragged Teddy Seymour in with him, but Aubrey Compton had declined to be dragged. Aubrey had had some tastes of McCann's quality, but it seemed to be his idea to contest every inch all along the line.

Fellows came in, in twos and threes and in bunches, after Corkran had passed on the tip. But Compton was not among them.

Mr. Chard appeared at last. He rolled into Hall—big, ruddy, stout. Perhaps he was surprised by the unusual number of fellows already present and by the very unusual orderliness that prevailed. He glanced round, as if puzzled. Then, as his eyes fell on Mr. McCann, he gave a start, almost a jump. Chard had rather bulging eyes of a light blue, and they bulged more than ever at that unexpected sight, seeming almost to pop out of his head.

Mr. McCann rose and bowed to him. If he had anything to say about unpunctuality, he reserved it for a more fitting moment. Chard, rolling up Hall, breathed heavily like a grampus. Teddy Seymour winked at Bob, and Peverill of the Fifth grinned. Everybody knew that Chard had expected to step into the shoes of the Venerable Beak when he went, and loathed the newcomer who had barged into the coveted headmastership.

Chard's loud voice had been heard far beyond the walls of the Common-room, saying what he thought of the governors for their extraordinary selection of this unknown young man. Plenty of fellows expected trouble, and Chard looked now as if he was going to start the trouble right away.

"Mr. McCann! Good-morning, sir!" said Chard, in his throaty, chesty voice. "I did not expect to see you here, sir!"

"A pleasant surprise, I hope!" said Jimmy.

"I regret, sir," said Chard, very red in the face, "that, being Master in Hall, I am a few minutes late. I should not have thought, sir, that you would consider it necessary to take my place on account, sir, of these few minutes."

"Not at all, Mr. Chard," said the new Head pleasantly. "I am here because it is my intention to make a rule of breakfasting with the school."

Chard, stout and majestic, looked rather like a Spanish galleon taken

aback by a sudden gale. He gazed at Jimmy McCann.

"Pray sit down, sir!" said Mr. McCann.

Chard breathed very hard.

"With your permission, sir, I will sit with my Form!" he said, with overwhelming dignity, and he rolled to the Fifth Form table and sat down.

Fellows looked at McCann to see how he would take this. He took it with unruffled serenity, proceeding to demolish his eggs and toast with the excellent appetite he had derived from an early bath.

Chard, who had taken no exercise that morning, sat down to eggs and rashers and kidneys. Every fellow at the Fifth Form table signified, in one way or another, his gratification at the presence of Mr. Chard. Not that they derived any great satisfaction from seeing Mr. Chard consume vast quantities of eggs, bacon and kidneys. But it was clear that he was the Blighter's enemy, and any enemy of the Blighter was a man they delighted to honour.

In the struggle that was coming between the New Broom and the School for Slackers, it was something for the slackers to have the senior member of the staff on their side. Some of them even indulged a wild hope that, somehow or other, Popularity Peter might succeed in ousting the Blighter and getting into the headmastership—a prospect that was positively dazzling to fellows who asked only that their happy, lazy life should not be rudely disturbed.

The House butler, Rogers, was in attendance on Mr. McCann, eyeing him very queerly from time to time. Mr. McCann's eye was on the clock. Everybody had come in now except Compton of the Fifth. That handsome and elegant youth was seen to glance in, exchange a word or two with fellows near the door, and then saunter away, his hands in his pockets. He intended, it seemed, to come in to brekker later—when he liked!

"The ass!" murmured Bob Darrell.

Teddy Seymour grinned.

"All right for old Comp," he said. "Chard's here, and the Blighter can't clear Hall while a Beak's feeding."

Bob did not feel so sure of that.

Prompt to time, Jimmy McCann rose. Everybody else rose, except Mr. Chard, who seemed unaware that the new Head was speaking. Chard rather gobbled his food, and perhaps the noise prevented him from hearing Jimmy. But even the obstinate master of the Fifth had to take note when the fellows began to stream out of Hall, many of the latecomers with their meal unfinished. Then Chard rose, in a very bad temper. A smear of egg-yolk at the corner of his large mouth rather spoiled his impressive effect.

"Mr. McCann, sir!" trumpeted Chard.

"What is it, Mr. Chard?"

"Some of the boys have not yet finished their breakfast, sir!"

"No doubt they will be earlier to-morrow, Mr. Chard."

"I have not yet finished my breakfast, sir!" said Mr. Chard, with tremendous dignity and the accent on the "my."

"I have no desire to interrupt you, sir!" said Jimmy. "Pray continue as long as you desire."

Mr. Chard almost choked.

"One boy of my Form, sir, Compton, has not yet come in at all!" he said.

"I am aware of it, Mr. Chard."

"Am I to understand, sir, that this boy of my Form is to have no breakfast this morning?"

"Precisely, sir!" rapped the new Head.

Mr. Chard fell, rather than sat, in his chair. Hall was cleared, leaving the Fifth Form master and the servants to themselves—some of the latter winking at one another behind Mr. Chard's broad back. Jimmy McCann marched briskly out of Hall and in the doorway encountered Aubrey Compton just coming in.

"Compton!" rapped the new Head.

Aubrey glanced round at him as defiantly as he dared.

"Yes, sir."

"Breakfast is over."

"I've not had mine, sir!"

"Quite so! You are not to enter Hall, Compton."

Aubrey set his lips. He looked in and met Mr. Chard's eyes and drew support and encouragement therefrom.

"Am I to have no brekker, sir?" he asked, addressing his Form-master.

Mr. Chard had no time to reply.

The cool insolence of appealing to a Form-master in his, the headmaster's, presence was rather too much for Jimmy McCann.

For the third time since he had been at High Coombe he laid an iron hand on the dandy of the Fifth.

"Come with me, Compton!" he said.

"I shall take you to your Form-room and you will remain there till class. Come!"

"Mr. Chard!" shouted Compton, in reckless rage.

Chard trumpeted at once.

"Mr. McCann! I protest—this boy, in my Form, has not breakfasted. I repeat, sir, that I protest!"

"Very good, sir!" said Mr. McCann.

"Your protest is duly noted. Now, Compton, come with me!"

Compton went, wriggling, red with rage.

"Shame!" shouted a dozen voices after the Head as he went.

Mr. McCann glanced round.

"Who spoke?" he asked.

Silence! The silence remained unbroken after that, while Compton was marched off to the Fifth Form Room. But the fellows were not silent when they went out into the quad. They boiled with angry indignation.

"The blighter!"

"The rotter!"

"The bully!"

"He's a man, anyhow!" said Bob Darrell.

The words had no sooner left his lips when the enraged seniors found comfort and consolation in seizing him and

ducking his head into the fountain in the quad.

They would rather have ducked Jimmy McCann's. But it was some comfort to duck Bob's for speaking a word in his favour, and they ducked it very, very thoroughly.

## CHAPTER 7.

### Red-hot Revolt!

TEDDY SEYMOUR gave a sigh of contentment.

"Thank goodness," he said, "for a rest!"

It was very peaceful in the Fifth Form Room. Peace, perfect peace, reigned there, very soothing to fellows whose nerves had been jarred by the explosive new headmaster.

Aubrey Compton, certainly, did not look peaceful. His handsome face was dark and bitter. Hands had been laid on Aubrey—and laid hard! He was a slacker, but no weakling, and he had been quite surprised by the way he had crumpled up in McCann's steely grip. Deep down in his heart, perhaps, there was some glimmering of respect for a man who was so strong, and so thoroughly fit, and grimly resolute. But that made no difference to his fierce hatred of the man who had mastered him. Aubrey was not beaten yet.

Oddly enough, the fellow who had no energy for football found plenty of energy and determination for a feud with a man who was down on slackers. In his bitter hostility to the new Head there was no sign of slackness. He was prepared to put as much strenuousness into that battle as the keenest footballer could have put into a Soccer match.

But the rest of the Form, as usual, lazed. Popularity Peter was not the man to make his Form work. The Fifth were supposed to be doing Livy. There was more supposition than Livy about it. Chard, from long habit, nodded off in second school. His enor-



mous breakfast made that little nap almost a necessity to him, and under the rule of the Venerable Beak, his nap had never once been interrupted.

Having seen papers passed round the Form, and the Fifth make a pretence of giving them some attention, Mr. Chard settled down to pleasant repose.

His ways were the ways of High Coombe. If a man in the Fifth wanted to work, Chard helped him, without undue exertion. If a man did not want to work, Chard left him alone. He would have said that he trusted his boys, and they trusted him!

Even Chard, however, might have stared a little at the papers at the end of such a class if he had looked at them. But they had a wonderful system in the Fifth Form at High Coombe, established from time immemorial. Marks were given by the head boy of the Form. Being a sportsman, he handed them out, when he collected the papers, with generous impartiality. This was all the easier because he did not even look at the papers before he marked them.

Chard, never looking under the surface, and perhaps not caring to do so, was satisfied with the general level of attainments in his Form. Exams, it was true, brought some surprises. But most of the Fifth were far from keen on a remove. The very few High Coomers who wanted to get on passed through the happy Fifth like swift fishes through a calm lagoon.

It was very pleasant in the well-warmed Fifth Form Room. Outside, the Blighter might rage, but within all was calm and contentment. The Blighter could not worry them there.

But could he not?

In their worst forebodings, since McCann had blown in like a hurricane on High Coombe, the happy Fifth had never anticipated seeing him in their Form-room. Not a man had ever seen the Venerable Beak there.

Chard, breathing stertorously, was asleep. Complan, scowling, was thinking of some scheme for getting his own

back on the Blighter. Teddy Seymour, leaning back in luxurious ease, was reading a novel. Peverill and Burke and Raymond were talking football, with as much keenness as if they were talking croquet. Carter was drawing a caricature of Mr. McCann on the blackboard, watched by a dozen fellows lounging on the desks.

Bob Darrell was working at his Latin paper—almost the only fellow who was. But he worked in rather a desultory fashion. He hated to appear a swot or a sap in the eyes of his fellows. And he was worried about Compton. He was loyal to his friend, and he felt uneasy at the savage glint in Aubrey's eyes, and the bitter set of his lips. He rather wished that old Aubrey would be as slack in feuds as he was in football.

Suddenly the door opened, and Mr. McCann walked in.

There was a gasp from the whole Fifth. McCann had been with the Sixth, and they had never dreamed of seeing him in the Fifth. But here he was, cool, and quiet, and keen. Was it possible that this indescribable outsider was going to interfere with a Form-master in the execution of his duty?

As the Form-master was, at that moment, slumbering, such interference might have been considered as just. But the Fifth did not view it in that light.

They breathed hard and deep. Even Bob Darrell felt a wave of resentment. Schoolboy nature is conservative—a fellow expects things to go on happening as they always have happened.

Chard, unhappily, did not hear the new Head, and slumbered on. Carter stopped chalking on the blackboard and stared at McCann, petrified. Carter was clever at drawing, and he had quite a good picture of the Blighter there. He gazed at McCann open-mouthed.

The Blighter walked up to the blackboard, and Carter's heart almost missed a beat. But McCann's expression was

quite genial as he looked at the drawing.

"Very well done," he said—"very well indeed! You can draw, my boy."

Carter stammered helplessly.

"But is this a drawing lesson?" asked Mr. McCann pleasantly.

"N-n-no, sir," gasped Carter.

"You have not been placed in charge of the class by your Form-master?"

"N-n-no, sir."

"You are not giving them instruction in drawing?"

"N-n-no, sir."

"Then may I inquire what you are doing?" asked Mr. McCann, in the same pleasant tone.

Carter could only stammer helplessly. The Fifth looked on. Chard, accustomed to be lulled by the murmur of voices did not awake.

"Sarcastic beast!" breathed Compton.

The Fifth Formers wondered whether McCann saw Chard there at all. He did not seem to take note of him.

"What is this lesson?" asked Mr. McCann, addressing Bob Darrell.

"Livy, sir."

"Then I fear, Carter, that you are wasting time," said Mr. McCann. "You will take the duster and wipe the blackboard clean, Carter, and go back to your place."

Only too happy to escape so cheaply, Carter did as he was told. It seemed that the Blighter had not recognised his own portrait in the chalk drawing—unless he was making allowances for the state of affairs at High Coombe, and making things as easy as he could. Anyhow, the subject dropped on the spot. A Latin dictionary also dropped—Teddy Seymour dropping it as heavily as he could to wake Mr. Chard.

Unfortunately, Chard was used to drowning on, in spite of dropping books. He did not stir. Only a faint sound came from him—it was a snore!

There was breathless, but suppressed, excitement in the Fifth. It really was an extraordinary scene, for the Head to be standing before the class while the

Form-master slumbered at his desk, unconscious of his presence. Mr. McCann did not once glance at him, though he must have heard that snore.

"Darrell!"

"Yes, sir!"

"You may collect the papers and bring them to me."

Bob coloured. What on earth was McCann going to think of those papers on Titus Livius? His own paper, he knew, was the best, but he did not feel proud of it. Some of the others had not even been touched, though the hour was close on its end. Blank dismay sat on the faces of the Fifth. If this was the way the Blighter was going to work, life was not going to be worth living in the Fifth Form at High Coombe.

"Time's not yet up, sir," said Bob feebly.

"Quite so! But I desire to see the papers," said Mr. McCann. "Collect them at once, Darrell."

Bob looked round helplessly at his friends.

"Don't!" said Aubrey Compton, in a whisper that was intended to reach the Blighter's ear, and did reach it.

"Shut up, you ass!" breathed Bob.

"I am waiting, Darrell!" said Mr. McCann, apparently deaf.

Bob hated to be in opposition to Jimmy McCann. But, right or wrong, he felt that he had to stand by his friends and comrades. Above all, who the dickens was this ginger-headed blighter to barge in and break up immemorial traditions?

"If you please, sir, it's our custom to mark our own papers," said Bob. "We've always done so since any man here was in the Fifth."

There was a murmur of approval. Old Bob was standing up to this meddling rotter!

"Indeed!" said Mr. McCann. "Which boy's duty is it to mark the papers in this lesson?"

"Mine, sir!" said Compton.

In point of fact, it was Burke's, though so easy-going were they in the

School for Slackers that one fellow would pass the duty on to another, unrebuked by Mr. Chard. It mattered little enough, anyway, as the marks given signified simply nothing. If Aubrey was keen to take the lead in dealing with the Blighter, nobody wanted to stop him.

"Very well, Compton," he said. "Collect the papers."

Aubrey hesitated a few moments, to let Mr. McCann see that he was considering whether to obey or not. Then he collected the papers. He took them to Mr. Chard's desk.

"Bring them to me, Compton!" said Mr. McCann.

"I usually mark them at my Form-master's desk, sir."

"Bring them to me."

But Compton's game was to get Mr. Chard into the scene, which he effected easily enough by shoving him, and waking him up.

Mr. Chard started, and stood up and rubbed his eyes. He almost fell down again at the sight of Mr. McCann. Crimson overspread his plump face.

"You — you — I — I —" stammered the Fifth Form-master. "I — I was —"

He was quite overcome, and broke off, gaping.

"Pray continue your repose, sir, if you so desire," said Mr. McCann, in so courteous a tone that it was difficult to spot the sarcasm in it. "I have no wish to disturb you."

"I — I — I fear I — I nodded off for a — a — moment," gurgled the unhappy master of the Fifth.

"I fear that you did, sir, but it is a matter of little moment, as I am at leisure to attend to your Form!" said Mr. McCann in the same courteous tone. "Possibly, however, you would prefer to continue your repose elsewhere."

Mr. Chard did so prefer! At that moment he would have been glad had the solid oak floor of the Fifth Form Room opened and let him drop through out of sight.

As the oak floor did not oblige him, Mr. Chard edged towards the door.

"If — if it is your wish — your intention — to take my Form out of my hands, sir —" It was a feeble attempt at bluster.

"Exactly!"

"Then, sir," said Mr. Chard, mastering all the dignity that was possible in the painful circumstances, "I will retire, sir."

Which he promptly did!

### CHAPTER 8.

#### Putting Paid to McCann!

MR. McCANN stepped to the vacated desk, on which Compton had laid the little pile of papers. Aubrey gave the Form a glance, and read encouragement in all faces. He snatched up the pile from under Mr. McCann's nose.

"Compton!" ejaculated Mr. McCann. Aubrey's heart beat fast. But he was cool as ice and steady as steel. It was the tug-of-war now!

"Darrell's told you that we mark our papers ourselves, sir!" he said. "It's for our Form-master to change the rule. Dr. Chetwode never interfered."

Jimmy's eyes glinted.

"I will pass over your insolence, Compton, if you hand me those papers at once!" he said quietly.

He made a step towards Compton. Aubrey made a swift backward jump. A second more and the whole stack of papers was flung on the Form-room fire.

There was a gasp from the Fifth. Papers flamed up, and there was a roar in the chimney. Mr. McCann stood as if transfixed. Whatever he had expected at the School for Slackers, he had not expected this! It was rank rebellion — red-hot rebellion!

For a moment a pin might have been forced to fall in the Fifth Form Room. The face of Jimmy McCann hardened till it seemed to be moulded in iron. All the Fifth were on their feet, gazing at him breathlessly. He spoke,

after what seemed a long silence, brief as it was.

"You will be flogged for that action, Compton! Go to my study at once." Compton did not stir.

Jimmy McCann's hand rose to grasp him. Twice that day Aubrey had been marched along in a grip of iron—once to the bath-room, once to the Form-room. He knew what that grip was like. He bounded back.

"Teddy! Bob!" he shouted. "Back up, you fellows! Back up!"

"Silence!" roared Mr. McCann.

Compton jumped in among the desks. McCann was after him like a shot, grasping his collar. Aubrey clung to a desk with one hand, to Bob Darrell with the other. Bob was dragged almost over.

A wrench of the strongest arm at High Coombe, and Compton was torn from his hold. Teddy Seymour made a jump after him, grasped him, and dragged at him. That settled it for Bob. He jumped after Teddy, and also held on to Compton. And that settled it for the rest of the Fifth. The whole Form rushed out of their places.

In an instant, Mr. McCann was surrounded by shouting, scuffling, excited Fifth Form men. They swarmed round him. Jimmy Compton was dragged from his grasp, and he was pushed, shoved, tripped, hustled to the Form-room door. Compton, gasping on the floor, picked himself up. He charged at the stocky figure in the doorway, and Mr. McCann went headlong into the passage.

Crash!

There was a roar in the Fifth Form Room. Some fellow threw an inkpot, another a dictionary. Then missiles rained out of the doorway at the Blighter. Bob Darrell slammed the door.

"Oh, my hat!" he gasped.

"Oh, crumbs!" panted Seymour.

Aubrey Compton's eyes glittered.

"We've put paid to that rotter!" he said, between his teeth. "That'll teach him he can't fool about with the Fifth!

He'll steer clear of us after this. And if he doesn't—well, we'll jolly well give him another dose of the same medicine! We're not going to stand any of his old buck! You fellows agree?"

"Down with the Blighter!" roared all the Fifth.

The roar echoed in every Form-room at High Coombe, and made the Sixth, the Shell, and the Fourth start and stare at one another, wondering what was up.

When the bell rang for break, Bob opened the Form-room door. Mr. McCann was no longer to be seen in the corridor. The Fifth Form streamed out, jubilant and victorious. The Blighter was gone—they had put paid to him, as Aubrey declared! They had beaten the Blighter at the first real trial of strength.

But had they? Bob Darrell, at least, doubted!

## CHAPTER 9.

### The Order of the Boot!

"SHUT up, Darrell!" roared a dozen Fifth Form fellows in the quadrangle at High Coombe.

"But I say—" persisted Bob Darrell.

"Shut up, Bob!" urged Teddy Seymour.

Bob Darrell grunted and shut up. He seemed to be the only fellow in the Fifth Form at High Coombe School who had kept his head that morning. But it was no use talking sense to the excited Fifth. Aubrey Compton, who generally had the coolest head in the Fifth, was the most excited of the whole crowd now, and the Fifth followed Aubrey's lead as one man.

Tredegar of the Sixth, captain of High Coombe, came out of the ancient, ivy-clad house. With him came Corran, head prefect. They blinked at Aubrey, untidy for the first time in the history of the School for Slackers. Even as a fag, in his far-off days in the Fourth, Aubrey had been like a new pin. Now he looked as if he had been

in a dogfight. Even the knees of his trousers bagged.

"For the love o' Mike," said Tred, "what's happened?"

"McCann's happened," said Bob Darrell. "And——"

"Shut up, Darrell!" hooted the Fifth.

Bob, once the most popular fellow in his Form, seemed to be at a discount now.

"We've put paid to the Blighter!" grinned Aubrey Compton. "We've tipped the McCann man where he gets off. And he's got off!"

Tred whistled. That was good news if well founded. But much as he disliked the new reign, Tred could not help feeling that putting paid to Jimmy McCann was a tough proposition.

"But how?" asked Corkran. "We heard a fearful row going on in the Fifth. But what——"

"We've booted him out of our Form-room!" said Compton coolly. "He barged in, and Chard cleared out—and we put the Blighter out on his giddy neck! And that's that!"

"Bib-booted him out!" stuttered Tredegar.

"Yes, and we'd do it again!" declared Carter.

"We shan't have to do it again!" said Aubrey Compton. "I tell you, the Blighter McCann knows where he has to get off!"

"But—but you can't boot a headmaster!" babbled Corkran.

"Headmaster!" sneered Aubrey. "A bouncer from nowhere, in a bowler hat and thick boots! A man who doesn't know how to wear a tie! A man who barges into a Form-room and turns out the Beak it belongs to, then——"

"Did he turn Chard out?"

"Well, Chard was takin' a nap when he barged in. You know old Chard naps every mornin' after brekker. And why shouldn't he in his own Form-room? Anyway, Chard cleared, and McCann took us in hand. And we," added Aubrey, with deep satisfaction, "took McCann in hand. He won't

barge into our Form-room again in a hurry!"

"Well, he's headmaster——"

"Rats!"

"Where's the Blighter now?" asked Corkran.

"Keepin' out of sight!" sneered Compton. "Sorry he came to High Combe by this time, I dare say!"

Fatty Pye, of the Fourth Form, came scuttling suddenly out of the House. Fatty seldom ran, but now he was sprinting as if for the school hundred yards. His plump face was red with excitement. He raced across to the group of seniors, so obviously with news that Compton & Co. turned their attention on him. They guessed that it was news about Mr. McCann. Fatty arrived in such a hurry that when he stopped he gurgled for breath, and stood spluttering wildly.

"You splutterin' young ass!" said Tredegar. "What's on?"

"The Head!" gasped Pye.

"Do you mean the Blighter?" sneered Aubrey. Compton, it seemed, did not choose to admit that Mr. McCann was a headmaster at all.

"Oh, yes! I say!" Pye gurgled again. "I say, I just saw him sticking a notice on the board!"

"What about that, you young ass?" snapped Aubrey. "Who cares what notices the fellow sticks on the board?"

"It's about you!" gasped Pye.

Bob Darrell's face became anxious. He grasped the tag by the shoulder and shook him.

"Cough it up, quick!" he snapped. "What about Compton?"

"He's s-s-s-s-sus-sus," stuttered Fatty Pye—"he's sus-sus-sacked!"

"Sacked!" yelled the whole crowd.

"Sacked!" repeated Aubrey dazedly. "He'd never dare—he'd never——"

He broke off. For a moment there was deep silence on the crowd so noisy a minute ago. Then there was a pell-mell rush to the House. Already a crowd was gathering round the notice-board, commenting breathlessly on what was posted there. Aubrey shoved

his way roughly through. His friends followed him.

On a notice pinned to the board, written in James McCann's clear, steady hand, all eyes were concentrated. It was brief. But it was very much to the point.

"A. Compton, Fifth Form, is expelled from High Coombe."

#### CHAPTER 10.

##### Popularity Peter!

**M**R. CHARD, master of the Fifth Form, paced his rooms under the clock-tower with a frowning brow. He was in a state of wrath and indignation, mingled with perplexity.

Chard could hardly have said what he thought of that young man McCann. Certainly he could not have put it in polite language. A man who coolly walked into the Form-rooms to see how things were going on there and took a hand personally if things were not going to his satisfaction! A man who had no respect whatever for tradition! A man who had whopped Compton of the Fifth before he had been an hour in the school. A man strong as a horse, cool as ice, relentless.

"Outrageous!" said Chard again and again, as he paced. "A break with every tradition—outrageous!"

A bell rang. It was the bell for third school. Break was over. Usually when break was over fellows sauntered away to the Form-rooms in no great hurry to arrive there. Especially in the Fifth, Chard's Form, did they take matters easy.

Chard himself took matters easy. He would roll in a quarter of an hour late. But he was never the latest comer. Fellows who sauntered in half through the lesson easily excused themselves to Popularity Peter. And fellows who cut a whole school seldom or never found themselves brought to book.

If Chard ever gave out lines it was very seldom indeed that he remembered to ask for them to be shown up. It

would have endangered his popularity. Also it would have given him trouble. He did not like trouble. In the easy-going atmosphere of High Coombe, Chard had waxed fat and lazy.

But the usual manners and customs of High Coombe seemed to have been knocked sky-high to-day. Soon after the bell ceased to ring there was a rush of feet in the quadrangle. Fellows did not seem to be heading for the House and the Form-rooms. The whole Fifth came scuttling across to Chard's rooms.

Chard, from his window, watched them coming uneasily. What had happened now? What new outrage had been perpetrated by that unspeakable person McCann? Chard had been considering whether to go to his Form-room at all for third school. McCann had chosen to take matters out of his hands there.

Chard had considered the idea of retiring into his massive dignity, like a tortoise into its shell, and leaving it to the new Head to make the next move. Anyhow, he had not yet gone to his Form. Now his Form was coming to him, helter-skelter across the quad.

Chard's door stood wide. He encouraged Fifth Form men to saunter into his quarters for a talk now and then. He would feed them handsomely. Chard, like all the High Coombe staff, had a good salary. He had also private means. Everything and nearly everybody at High Coombe was wealthy.

Sometimes fellows did drop in, especially for the feed, but chiefly to keep Popularity Peter in good humour. Compton had even helped himself, once, to Chard's cigarettes, and Popularity Peter had only wagged a warning finger at him. Happy days—now apparently gone for ever, under the rule of the indescribable McCann!

Tramping of feet woke the echoes of Chard's rooms. There was a thumping on his study door, and it burst open, to reveal an excited mob of the Fifth.

Chard felt a pang. Excitement in the Fifth was a new thing—an unpleasant thing. Where was the old, elegant, easy grace of High Coombe? Nowhere to be seen at the moment.

"My boys!" said Chard, in his massive, rolling voice, not unlike the trumpeting of an elephant in the jungle.

"Sir!" gasped Compton.

"Mr. Chard!" panted Teddy Seymour. There was a buzz, or rather a roar, from the fellows behind.

"Calm yourselves, my dear boys!" said Chard, with a touch of rebuke. "What is the reason——"

"That blighter McCann!" shouted Aubrey Compton.

This was too much even for Mr. Chard.

"Compton! You forget yourself!" he said with dignity. "In my presence, you will speak of your new headmaster with respect."

"He's sacked me!" yelled Aubrey.

Chard almost staggered.

"He has—what? What? Compton! Darrell! Speak! What has happened?"

"There's a notice on the board——"

"In that rotter's fist——"

"It says——"

"Compton's sacked!"

"Expelled!"

"The blighter!"

"The cheeky cad!"

Nearly all the Fifth were speaking at once. Chard's old oak-panelled rooms had never rung to such thunderous echoes. The din was deafening.

Chard waved fat hands for silence. He was almost dizzy at the news. He realised its awful seriousness. Had the man really started with sackings? It was incredible—unimaginable! But if it was true—Chard felt a crushing sense of helplessness. The man was Head! He had the power. If he was brute enough to use it, it was in his hands. But could it be true?

"Silence! Silence!" trumpeted Chard. "Order! Silence! Darrell,

speaking! The others keep silent! Darrell, what has happened?"

There was not silence, but there was a subduing of the roar as Bob answered his Form-master. Bob's face was blank with dismay. He had thought a lot of the new Head; had thought of backing him up—of bringing the other fellows round to back him up. And the man had sacked his friend. At that moment Bob Darrell hated Jimmy McCann.

"It's true, sir! It's on the board, signed by the Head! Compton's sacked from High Coombe, sir! I know we played the goat in the Form-room, but it's too thick! You won't let him go, sir?"

It was awful for Chard. These boys loved and respected him—at least, he was sure they did. They believed his power to be greater than it was. Popularity Peter was not the man to let them think it was smaller than it was! They believed that he could save Compton from this awful fate! He couldn't—unless that villain McCann chose. Villain, yes, that was the word. Chard had been seeking in his mind for a word really expressive of McCann and his works. He had found it!

"You won't let him go, sir?" roared the Fifth.

"Mr. Chard!" panted Aubrey. "You can't—you won't—stand by and see a man in your Form turfed out by that blackguard."

"I can scarcely believe——" faltered Mr. Chard.

"It's true, sir!" said Bob.

"I—I must think!" said Mr. Chard.

"This—this cannot be! Something shall be done!"

"Bravo, sir!" shouted the Fifth. They took this as a promise and an undertaking. Chard did not mean it exactly like that. He only meant, and could only mean, that he would do his best to get that awful sentence rescinded.

But the relief, the satisfaction, of the

Fifth, their faith in him and his powers, influenced him. A doubtful word now meant stemming the tide of popularity. And, after all, he was senior master—the oldest member of the staff, and not without influence even with the governors themselves!

Would that stocky young man resist him—and not only him, but the feeling of the whole school, masters and boys alike? Could he stand out against such a hurricane of resentment, scorn, indignation? Surely not! Popularity Peter was carried away by his own feelings and those around him. He rose to the occasion. His rather protruding eyes gleamed.

"We knew you'd stand by us, sir!"

"You're a sportsman, sir!"

"If only you were Head, sir!"

It was all sweet as honey to Chard. No wonder he forgot, for a moment, the considerations of prudence.

"My boys, rely on me! This—this must be some mistake—at least, a very hasty decision. I will see Mr. McCann immediately, and—and—"

Chard paused. His manner implied that, when he saw Mr. McCann, he would say to that young man. "Wash this out!" and McCann would tremble and wash it out. But Chard's manner was not quite in accord with his secret thoughts.

However, the Fifth Form men saw only his manner, and could not read his thoughts. His inward uneasiness was not betrayed in his plump, aggressive face. As he paused there was a roar of cheering that woke every echo in the ancient clock-tower. So tremendous was that roar that it rang right across the quad, reached Jimmy McCann in the Head's study, and caused him to set his steady lips in a hard line.

"Hurrah!"

"Bravo, sir!"

"Leave it to me, my boys!" said Mr. Chard, carried away by his feelings—natural, in the circumstances. "Leave it in my hands. Rely on me in every way!"

"You'll see the cur at once, sir?" asked Aubrey.

"You must not use such expressions in my presence, Compton! But I will certainly see Mr. McCann at once."

"Bravo, sir!"

Chard would have preferred a little interval—a space for thought and consideration. But the Fifth evidently expected him to strike the iron while it was hot. They looked for immediate action—crushing and triumphant action! Chard had set his large, flat feet on a road from which there was no turning back. What he had said, he had said! After all, would the Blighter dare? And if he beat the fellow in this contest, it was a good beginning—he might hope even to "run" McCann afterwards as he had run the Venerable Beak!

But as Mr. Chard issued forth from his quarters, and rolled majestically across the quad, he did not feel so majestic as he looked.

In plain English, he had undertaken more than he could perform—unless that offensive young man chose to let him down lightly. Chard's majestic roll became slower and slower, and it was almost at a snail's pace that he reached the Head's study.

#### CHAPTER 11.

"Give the boy another chance!"

JIMMY McCANN did not look an offensive young man as he politely bade Mr. Chard be seated. He had respect for Mr. Chard's age and standing, if not for his wisdom. He was rather a pleasant, good-looking young man, and the touch of ginger in his hair really gave him a sort of distinction. Chard's manner was habitually aggressive; Jimmy's was nothing of the kind. It was easy and good-tempered. But there was a quiet firmness in Jimmy that was lacking in Chard.

Jimmy was not, as all High Coombe believed, enjoying the dismay and dolour he was causing in the School for Slackers. He was far from desiring to



follow the methods of a bull in a china shop. But he was there to do a job of work, and he was going to do it. Ten thousand fat and aggressive Chards would not have stopped him.

Chard felt, rather than knew, that if he did not treat this stocky young man with a respect he had never dreamed of showing to the Venerable Beak, the iron hand would crop out of the velvet glove on the spot. It was fearfully disconcerting and humiliating to realise that he had to ask favours of this young man whom he loathed and detested. But it came to that, and there was no getting away from it.

"I have seen a notice on the board," he began. "It appears that a boy of my Form is sentenced to expulsion. Such a very drastic step, sir——"

"Not too drastic in the circumstances, Mr. Chard!" cut in Jimmy. "There was a riot in the Fifth Form Room after you left, sir. Compton deliberately disobeyed my order to go to my study for a flogging. He was the ringleader in a personal attack on myself. I have considered whether to expel every boy who took part in it——"

"Sir!" gurgled Chard.

"But I have decided that the example of one expulsion may suffice as a warning to the others, Mr. Chard. Naturally, I am very unwilling to begin my work here by expelling boys. Compton, unfortunately, has left me no alternative."

"Without consulting his Form-master, sir——"

"In such a matter, Mr. Chard, a headmaster must act solely on his own initiative. The responsibility is mine."

"The responsibility, sir, is very heavy!" said Chard, with a flash of spirit. "This boy's father, Colonel Compton, is a very influential member of the governing board. What view is he likely to take of the expulsion of his son from the school—his own old school, sir?"

"That is immaterial, Mr. Chard!"

"Immaterial!" gasped Chard.

"Quite!"

Chard blinked at him, breathing hard. Aggressive as he was, he stood rather in dread of Colonel Compton, a tremendous old warrior who had once been captain of High Coombe. This stocky young man, it seemed, regarded the tremendous old colonel as nobody in particular.

"If that is all, Mr. Chard——" Jimmy was politely hinting that his time was of value.

"It is not all, sir!" gasped Chard. "Far from it, Mr. McCann. I am bound to tell you that feeling runs very high in Compton's Form——"

"I am aware of it, sir!" There was a glimmer in Jimmy's eyes. Chard realised that he had heard the roar from the rooms under the clock-tower. The Fifth Form master reddened again.

There was a pause, and then the distressed master of the Fifth played his best card:

"Mr. McCann, you have come recently—very recently—among us. It cannot be your desire to cause dismay and discontent throughout the school. If certain things are not to your satisfaction, time will mend them, sir—we are not yet used to your ways. I, sir, have been here twenty years, and there has never been an expulsion in my Form. This is a blow to me, sir, that I should never have expected."

Jimmy McCann was silent.

"I ask you, sir," said Mr. Chard, with a certain genuine dignity, "to give the boy another chance! He may be hasty—unthinking—even rebellious. His action in the Form-room I do not pretend to defend for one moment. But I can answer for it that such an action will never be repeated. The sentence of expulsion, sir, even if not carried out, will be a sufficient warning. Mr. McCann, I am not in the habit of asking favours, but I ask you—I beg of you—to give the boy another chance."

Chard hated himself for saying it, for having to say it, and he was glad that none of the Fifth could hear him. He was humbling himself to this man

—this rank outsider whom he despised and loathed. But it was the only way and he had to do it, or go back to the Fifth and let them see that they had leaned on a rotten reed—that, so far from being the power they supposed, he was only a lath painted to look like iron! He had to eat humble pie.

McCann, standing by the window with the spring sunlight on his clear-cut face, was silent, thinking. Chard would have given a great deal to know what he was thinking. Somehow, he did not believe, though he would have liked to believe, that this young tyrant was eager to use and display his power—that the man did not really want to sack even the fellow who had laid mutinous hands on him.

Indeed, there came a glimmering suspicion into his mind that McCann, though he had felt bound to expel Compton would be glad of a chance not to enforce that drastic sentence. Even that McCann, keen as a razor, had counted on Popularity Peter's intervention and meant to make that a pretext for not enforcing the sentence! If Chard could only have felt sure of that!

But he couldn't! The new Head's face told him nothing. He waited for him to speak, feeling horribly like a fag up before his Form-master.

McCann spoke at last.

"You, sir, as the boy's Form-master, advise me, acting as Head, to give him another chance?"

Chard, as he heard that, was nearly sure! He was being made use of! This outsider was handling him like a craftsman's tool! Chard was on the verge of a bluster. But though he was nearly sure, he was not quite sure. He could not afford to take risks.

"I do, sir," he answered.

"I am new here," said Mr. McCann gravely. "It is a very serious matter, I am glad to have the counsel of the senior member of my staff. A less severe punishment, perhaps—"

"You may leave that in my hands, surely, sir, as master of the Form," said

Chard, with a touch of his old arrogance.

"I propose to do so," said McCann. "I will rescind Compton's sentence, Mr. Chard, to be enforced, however, if there should be any repetition of his mutinous conduct. I will give you the names of the boys concerned in this riot in your Form-room, and you will cane them."

Chard gurgled.

"Canings, sir, in a senior Form?"

"You do not suggest, Mr. Chard, that impositions or detentions will suffice in such a case?"

Chard was silent.

"If you prefer to leave the matter to me—"

"No, sir! No!"

Jimmy sat at his table and scribbled a list of names. Every fellow who had grabbed him in the Fifth Form Room was named in that list. Compton's headed it. He handed the paper to Mr. Chard.

"The canings will take place in Hall," he said. "The school will assemble for roll at the usual time, and then the punishment will be administered in the presence of all High Coombe. I shall be present, but I shall, of course, leave the matter in your hands. And now, sir, I am overdue in the Sixth."

Chard went away with the paper in his plump hand. He had saved Compton from the sack, and he was almost sure that Jimmy McCann had intended all the time that he should save Compton from the sack! But he was assigned the task of caning half his Form under the staring eyes of the whole school. He was the new Head's enemy, and he wanted to feel that he had beaten Jimmy McCann. But in his bones he knew that Jimmy McCann had beaten him!

## CHAPTER 12.

Ferguson Sees the Funny Side!

"PETER'S an ass!" said Aubrey Compton gloomily.

The fact that he was sitting in the Form-room, presumably engaged

in the study of the classics, did not prevent Aubrey from making that remark. True, he did not allow it to reach the ears of Mr. Chard.

Chard, at his desk, was not looking happy. But he was looking a good deal more alert than he was accustomed to look in charge of his Form. Never again was Peter Chard likely to take a nap in the Form-room—not, at all events, so long as McCann was Head of High Coombe. That pushing outsider was not going to catch him again.

He had even murmured a hint to the Fifth not to talk so much. The Blighter might drop in again if he heard careless talk going on instead of lessons. And if he did, even Aubrey Compton had no idea of pushing him out again! Pushing the meddling rotter out of the Form-room was now quite an abandoned idea. Once was enough—considering to what it led.

"An ass!" repeated Aubrey. "He's givin' in to the Blighter! He's havin' his silly leg pulled! Canings in the Fifth!"

"You've got off the sack, old chap!" said Bob. "Never mind the whoppings! I tell you, I was quite sick when I thought you were going."

"Did the man really mean it?" sneered Compton. "He seems to have let Chard talk him over pretty easily."

Bob looked alarmed.

"For goodness' sake, Aubrey, don't be a fool! Don't risk it a second time. I tell you McCann's as hard as iron if he makes up his mind. It's decent of him to go easy. Jolly decent."

"Oh, chuck it! I'm not riskin' it a second time, if I can help it," said Compton. "I can't make out whether the cur was gammonin' or whether he would be glad of a chance to scare the school with an expulsion, but I'm not goin' to be the scapegoat, anyhow!"

Bob was glad to hear that, at all events.

"But Chard's an old ass!" went on Compton. "McCann knows jolly well that if he started caning the Fifth himself, there'd be trouble. He's landed it

on Chard so that we shan't kick. Break-in' us in."

"Well, it would be rather sickenin' for Chard to see his Form caned by another master, even the Head!" remarked Seymour.

"He ought to have refused!" growled Aubrey.

"How could he?" asked Bob. "When it comes to the pinch, how can Chard stand up to the Head, any more than we can?"

"He's lettin' us down! Bendin' over in Hall—with all the fags lookin' on!" said Aubrey, between his teeth. "My own fag watchin' me take six from Chard! I've a good mind to refuse! But that would only make Chard look a fool, and I dare say McCann would like that! Oh, he's a cunning rotter!"

"I fancy he's rather deep," admitted Bob. "But he's not got an easy job here, and I feel sure he wants to go as easy as he can. Thank goodness you've got off the sack, old bear, never mind anything else!" It was Bob's way to take a cheery view and look on the bright side.

Mr. Chard looked up. He hesitated to speak—Popularity Peter all over—then said:

"Less talk in the Form, please!"

The Fifth looked at him. Chard actually coloured. It was a first feeble effort at discipline. He pretended not to observe the scornful curve of Aubrey Compton's lips. He dropped his eyes again at once.

Still, there it was—the invigorating influence of McCann was making itself felt even in the sleepy Fifth Form Room! Neither Chard nor any of his Form wanted McCann to step in again. And after that there was less talk! There was even—wonderful to relate—a little work done!

But the feelings of the Fifth were deep. And when they came out of the Form-room their feelings grew deeper. For all High Coombe was in a buzz with the affair. Canings in senior Forms were unknown, and the Fourth and the Shell

could hardly believe that a whole batch of the Fifth really were going to be caned all at once! They gaped over it. They buzzed with it. And, to the bitter wrath and indignation of the seniors, they evidently looked forward to the unheard-of scene as a sort of entertainment. That was the unkindest cut of all.

Already, it seemed, some spirit of division was creeping into the school, which should have been united as one man against the Blighter. Whopped themselves on occasion, the fags did not seem to see why older offenders should not be whopped, too; and, anyhow, it was fearfully exciting! Aubrey Compton could hardly believe his ears when he came on a group of the Fourth in the quad and heard his own grinning fag, Ferguson, speaking.

"I hear there's nine of them up for whoppings," Ferg was saying. "I say, they look most awfully sick about it. I fancy Compton will have a fit, or something! Frightful come-down for him, you know! Of course, he's above shoving exercise books into his bags—too jolly proud, you know. He gave me six with a fives bat the other day for spilling butter on his bags! I wonder how he will like six himself? Ha, ha, ha!"

Compton stood almost petrified. Ferguson was laughing—actually laughing—at the idea of the dandy of the Fifth getting that six in Hall! His own fag!

"And the Blighter gave him six his first day here!" went on the happy Ferg, unconscious of the proximity of his fag master. "Now he's going to get another six! He will be most frightfully wild. I shall be jolly careful not to laugh in Hall; but it's jolly funny—"

A grip on the back of Ferg's neck caused the affair to cease to seem funny to him on the spot. He stared round in alarm and terror at Compton's furious face.

"Oh!" he gasped. "I say—"

Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack! The hapless Ferg yelled and roared as

Compton smacked his head. The other fags looked on in silence. Corkran and the Sixth strolled up. As a prefect and head prefect—it was up to him to intervene. All he did was to jerk his head towards the big window of the Head's study.

"Ware Blighter, Aubrey!" he murmured.

The angry Compton did not heed.

Smack! Smack!

A casement window flew open.

"Compton!"

Aubrey's hand was raised for another smack, but the blow never fell. His hand remained poised in mid-air, arrested by the commanding voice of the man he hated. He looked round with black bitterness at Mr. McCann.

"No more of that!" said Mr. McCann quietly. "Corkran, it was your duty to stop that kind of thing. I shall expect it of you in future."

Snap! The casement closed. Corkran, very red in the face, walked away. Aubrey Compton stood panting—half inclined to give Ferg's head another smack. But he did not venture to do so. He jammed his hands into his trousers pockets and moved off. Ferguson rubbed his head.

"Cad!" said Ferguson.

And he was not alluding to Mr. McCann!

#### CHAPTER 13.

##### Chard's Way Out!

MR. McCANN called the roll in Hall. It was probably the first occasion for many terms of which every fellow at High Coombe answered to his name at calling-over. Even at roll, slackness had always prevailed. Somehow or other the High Coombes had decided all to be present when Jimmy McCann called the names. They were beginning to feel that it was wiser not to hunt for avoidable trouble. There was likely to be such a lot that was unavoidable!

And a certain unusual briskness i

answering was visible. Fellows did not, as heretofore, stand in chatty groups and draw "Sum" carelessly over their shoulders when they heard their names. If they regarded roll as a useless bore, and the Master in Hall as a cheeky ass for bothering them, they did not at all events express that opinion in their looks.

All the masters were present—Penge, master of the Shell, with a half-smoked cigar, half-hidden in the hollow of his hand, which he had brought into Hall with him. What became of that half of a Havana was a mystery. It utterly vanished after Mr. McCann's eyes had dwelt on Mr. Penge for a flashing fraction of a second.

Chard, of course, was there; red-faced, and looking, perhaps, a little more aggressive than usual. But that was only outward show. Chard tried to think that he had beaten McCann in the matter of sacking Compton, and he hoped that the School took that view. After all, all they knew was that he had gone to see McCann and that the sentence had been washed out immediately afterwards. It looked like a victory, and appearances counted for much. But he was there to "whop" nine men in his Form, and that certainly had no victorious or triumphal look.

But Chard had his own ideas about that whopping! He remembered the ancient proverb that a horse can be taken to water, but cannot be made to drink. There was such a thing as carrying out an order in a way to show contempt of that order. And Chard, if he could not enter into open contest with the Head, was passionately bent on pushing the conflict as far as he dared.

Roll-call over, there was a hush. Then nine names were called: Compton, Darrell, Peverill, Carter, Burke, Raymond, Seymour, Durrance, Warren. Even in the excitement of that wild tussle in the Fifth Form Room, McCann had noted the face and remembered the name of every fellow who had laid a hand on him. It

seemed rather uncanny. The man was keen as a razor.

Nine men marched up Hall, Bob Darrell colouring with discomfort under the eyes of Mr. McCann. The others made it a point to look unruffled, like the old French aristocrats going to the guillotine. Aubrey Compton even yawned slightly under McCann's eye.

Breathless faces, staring eyes, circled them. Even yet it seemed scarcely possible to High Coombe that this wholesale whopping was really going to take place. Ferguson of the Fourth, reminiscently rubbing his ear, winked at Fatty Pye, but Fatty did not venture to grin. History was being made at High Coombe; it was a thrilling moment!

"It is my duty——" said Chard, and paused. His voice, on this occasion, did not resemble the trumpeting of an elephant. Fellows had to strain their ears to hear him. "It is my duty," he repeated slowly, reluctantly, the words coming from him like teeth at the dentist's, "to administer punishment for the—ah—riotous proceedings in my Form this morning Hem! I shall—hem!—administer six strokes to each of you—hrrrrmmm!"

Chard cleared his throat.

"Compton, you will bend over that hassock!"

Compton's eyes blazed. With breathless eagerness the whole school read the intention of refusing in his handsome, passionate face. It was only for a second. He bent over the hassock.

Chard swished the cane.

Six times it touched Aubrey—barely touched him. Compton, in amazement, glanced up. He was not sure that he was being caned at all! Flick, flick, flick! Flick, flick, flick! Then he understood. He told the fellows afterwards, in Big Study, that Chard winked at him as he looked up. Probably that was an error. But there was no doubt that Chard was deliberately turning the whole thing into ridicule; the whole school saw that.

"Darrell!" said Mr. Chard.

A buzz was growing in Hall. Mr.

McCann glanced round, and it died into stony silence. Bob stole a glance at the headmaster's face as he stepped up to take his turn. For a single instant there was a gleam as of bright steel in Jimmy McCann's eyes. It passed—and his face remained expressionless. Six airy flicks barely touched Bob, for which he was duly thankful. Another man took his place—openly grinning.

Grinning faces were to be seen all over the packed Hall now. Everybody knew that Chard was "guying" McCann with that travesty of a whopping. He was making a fool of the Head. It did not occur to the ponderous Chard that he was also making a fool of himself!

But it occurred to Bob, and he could have blushed for his Form-master; so big, so pompous, so important—and so childish!

It was Popularity Peter all over! He made it clear—wanted to make it clear—that he did not approve of this execution; that he was on the side of the school against the new unpopular Chief Beak.

If that was how he felt, he ought to have resigned from the staff, not played the fool in Hall, Bob thought. But how was the Head going to take it?

Man after man came up and bent over the hassock. All of them grinned—one or two laughed! Tragedy had turned into comedy—a most undignified comedy, it was true; but it was up against McCann, so it was all right! Any stick was good enough to beat the Blighter with.

Carter, last of the victims, kept up his reputation of being the funny ass of the Fifth. As Chard flicked him gently, Carter startled Hall by a tremendous yell that woke all the echoes of the old oaken rafters. Chard himself started, and almost dropped the cane.

"Oh, sir, you hit so fearfully hard!" squealed Carter.

Then there was a roar from the crowd in Hall.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

They laughed, and roared, and yelled, and rocked! Carter had brought down the house. All pretence of seriousness was at an end. Hall rang with roars of merriment. Tredegar was seen doubled up with mirth. Chard himself was laughing. All the masters smiled.

Only one serious face was to be seen Jimmy McCann's, expressionless as that of a graven image. The whopping over High Coombe streamed out of Hall, laughing, chuckling, chortling, and wondering how the Blighter liked it!

Probably Jimmy McCann did not like it at all. And probably—very probably he was making up his mind that he and Popularity Peter could not remain at High Coombe together. If Mr. Chard fancied himself in the role of a sturdy mastiff baying defiance at an intruder, he was likely to discover that he resembled much more closely a fat poodle yapping in the path of a steam-roller!

#### CHAPTER 14.

"The whopping of your life!"

"IT'S bullying, I tell you!" growled Bob Darrell.

"What!" exclaimed Compton. "Well, what else do you call it?" demanded Bob.

Aubrey Compton's eyes gleamed. If the dandy of the Fifth Form at High Coombe School was ever guilty of bullying he was quite unconscious of it. It seemed so natural to Aubrey that any Lower boy who disregarded his will and pleasure should be kicked, or whopped with a fives bat on his bags. The word bullying was distinctly unpleasant. It jarred on Aubrey's fastidious taste.

"Oh, draw it mild, Bob!" said Teddy Seymour. "Don't get shirty, Aubrey, old man! You know old Bob's always talkin' out of his hat! He's done mischief enough already."

Bob shrugged his broad shoulders.

The door of Big Study opened, and half a dozen of the Fifth came in—Carter, Peverill, Burke, Raymond,

Durrance, and Warren. They did not crowd in. High Coombe men never crowded or barged. Gracefully they lounged into Big Study.

"Here we are, Aubrey, old boy!" drawled Peverill. "What's the big idea and the glad news? Anythin' up against the Blighter? If so, count on us to the last shot in the locker."

"To the last crease in our trousers!" said Carter solemnly. Carter had his reputation to keep up as the funny ass of the Fifth.

"You men raggin'?" asked Warren. "I say, don't let's rag among ourselves. United we stand, divided we come a mucker."

"Only Darrell preachin' again," sneered Compton. "I've got a stunt for raggin' the Blighter, and Bob calls it bullyin'. He can call it what he likes, but I'm goin' ahead."

"Expound, old bean!" said Peverill. "None of the Sixth here?" remarked Carter.

"I've tipped them to keep clear while we're havin' this meetin'," answered Compton. "Better for the prefects to have nothin' to do with it. McCann's got his eye on them already. But you can bet they're all as keen as we are on worryin' the Blighter—all except Bob!" he added, with a sneer. "Bob rather likes the man!"

"I believe he means well!" grunted Bob. "Anyhow, he's headmaster now, and it's no good thinking of trying to carry on as if old Dr. Chetwode was still Chief Beak! And I think it's a jolly good thing that the Venerable Beak went, if you ask me."

"Nobody asked you, sir, she said!" sang Carter. And there was a laugh in Big Study.

"Cough it up, Aubrey!" said Raymond.

Aubrey Compton went to the door of Big Study, opened it, and called "Boy!"

There was a patter of feet in the passage almost at once. Ferguson of the Fourth came up at a run. Compton's fag was always prompt at the sound of his fag-master's voice. It was

noticeable that, slack as the High Coomers were, and priding themselves on it, they drew a line at slackness in their fags. The juniors could model themselves on the seniors as much as they liked when they were not wanted for fag service. When they were, it was not a paying proposition to slack. Aubrey seldom had to call "Boy!" twice.

Ferg came in, and Compton shut the door. Ferg looked round at the gathering of seniors rather uneasily. He hoped that it did not mean a whopping. Only a few minutes ago he had been confiding to Fatty Pye that he wished the new Beak would give Compton another taste of the cane, and it was rather alarming to hear Compton's voice immediately afterwards calling "Boy!"

Dorm Three already knew Compton's plan. But the later arrivals did not, and they looked on with interest, rather perplexed. The plan, it seemed, included action on the part of the fags. That was rather a relief, in a way. For, fiercely as they were opposed to the new Head, McCann, they felt a certain shyness about coming out into open conflict with him again. They had tried it, and had not forgotten that old Aubrey had had a narrow escape from the "sack" in consequence.

"I say, what's the row?" asked Ferguson. "I say, Compton——"

"Shut up and listen to me!" said Compton. "I suppose you know that that rotter McCann is always in his study from five to six? At five minutes past five, Ferguson, you're going to barge on the Blighter's door—and bang."

"What for?" asked Ferg.

"Because I tell you to!" said Compton irritably. "And at intervals of five minutes every other kid in the Fourth is going to do the same. You're to pass the word round."

Ferguson looked rather alarmed.

"I say, he will tell me to come in if I bang——"

"Then you can cut."  
"Oh!" said Ferg. "I—I see!" He looked very dubious. "I say, Compton,

that man McCann may get fearfully stuffy about it. He works in his study, you know. He will get shirty! He may bag a man and whop him."

"You afraid of a whoppin'?" asked Aubrey.

"Well, yes, rather; he's a hefty brute," confessed Ferg. "You didn't like it when he——" Ferg broke off in time, warned by the look on his fag-master's face. Compton did not like being reminded of that six on his beautiful bags administered by McCann.

"Well, if you're afraid of a whoppin', you'd better do exactly as I tell you!" remarked Compton. "For if you don't, I'm goin' to give you the whoppin' of your life."

"Oh, I say!" groaned Ferg.

Bob Darrell gave an angry growl.

"And you don't call that bullying!" he exclaimed. "You're going to whop the fags if they don't play up, and McCann will whop them if they do! Think they're keen on it?"

"Shut up, Darrell!" hooted the Fifth. The seniors were keen on it, if the fags were not likely to be.

But Ferguson, finding unexpected support in at least one member of the Fifth, took his courage in both hands and proceeded to raise objections.

"Look here, Compton, I'd rather not! Look here——"

"You'd rather not," said Aubrey, with a cheery smile. "I'm sorry for that, Ferguson! Bend over that chair!"

He picked up a fives bat which, with great foresight, he had brought into Big Study in case it should be needed. It was clear that it was needed.

"I—I say!" gasped the hapless Ferg.

The slackest man in the School for Slackers was not slack in handling a fives bat, as Ferg knew by painful experience. He gave Bob Darrell a despairing glance.

Bob strode forward.

"Look here, chuck it," he roared. "You can call it what you like, but I call it bullying, and I'm not stand-

ing for it! Put that bat down, Aubrey, and let the kid cut!"

"Mind your own bizney!" snapped Compton.

"Put that bat down!" roared Bob.

Ferguson watched the dispute with doubt and hope. Bob Darrell's face was flushed, his eyes sparkling. He looked like grabbing the bat away from Aubrey, and laying it round Aubrey's own elegant person if he objected. Ferg hoped that he would.

But from the rest of the Fifth Form men present came a roar.

"Shut up, Darrell!"

"Sit on that bargee!"

"Barge him out!"

Bob's eyes flashed. All the seniors were on their feet, gathering round him with angry faces. He was hustled towards the door. He was not an easy man to hustle, however. He swung back, and Peverill and Warren went stumbling over, landing on the carpet.

"Now look here——" shouted Bob.

"Knock the idiot over!"

"Sit on him!"

Ferg's eyes almost started from his head at the unprecedented scene that followed. Were these the easy-going, graceful nuts of High Coombe—these excited, angry schoolboys, scrapping like a mob of fags in the Burrow! Ferg was rather glad he was there, after all. He seldom had enjoyed a show like this! He gazed on with breathless interest and delight.

Bob Darrell, struggling, crashed on the carpet. Five or six fellows sat on him and pinned him there. He heaved under them, but they pinned him down, and he panted helplessly. Compton looked at him with a cool smile. Then he turned his attention to Ferguson again.

"I think I asked you to bend over, Ferguson," he remarked casually.

"Oh, scissors!" gasped Ferg. In his keen excitement and interest in the scrap he had forgotten what was coming to him. Now he had to remember.

Dismally he bent over the chair. He made a mental resolve to take no further heed of that ass Darrell. A



fellow could not help him who could not help himself. Compton, evidently, was the "goods" in the Fifth Form at the School for Slackers.

Swipe! Swipe! Swipe!  
Aubrey laid it on well. Ferg gave a loud howl at each swipe.

Aubrey paused.  
"Is that enough?" he asked genially.

"Oh, crumbs! Ow!" groaned Ferg.  
"Yes, thank you, Compton!"

"You can have the rest of the six if you like!" said Aubrey, still genial.

"Ow! Oh! No!"  
"Then I take it that you're goin' to do exactly as I've told you to do?" smiled Aubrey.

"Ow! Yes! Wow! Yes, rather!"  
"Cut!"  
Ferg promptly cut.  
"That's that!" drawled Aubrey.  
"You can let that silly ass get up now!"

Bob staggered up, red and breathless. He clenched his hands and gave Compton a look. Aubrey watched him with a mocking grin. Nobody knew better than Aubrey that he was no match for the muscular Darrell if it came to a quarrel and a scrap. But he did not care a straw for that. Teddy Seymour, as usual, barged between.

"Look here, you men——"  
Bob unclenched his hands, but his brows were still knitted as he tramped out of Big Study. He went out into the quad to cool his wrath. In Big Study the heroes of the Fifth joyfully discussed that rag on "the Blighter McCann, and chuckled over it and chortled over it. And when five o'clock drew near they went out into the passage to listen happily for the sound of banging from the direction of the Head's study.

#### CHAPTER 15.

#### Caught in the Act!

JAMES McCANN was busy in his very pleasant, book-lined study. A casement was open, letting in fresh air from the sea.

By standing at the window Jimmy McCann could get a view of coombe and cliff and rolling Atlantic. Every now and then he left his writing-table, walked to the window and drew in invigorating breaths of keen air.

He was standing by his window, with the sunlight catching the red in his hair, when a loud bang came at the study door.

"Come in!" he called, glancing round.

Nobody came in. All Jimmy heard was a swift patter of retreating footsteps. He concluded that some fellow had knocked at the wrong door, discovered his error, and departed in haste.

He turned to the window again, regarding the quad with thoughtful eyes. A group of the Sixth stood in his view—Tredegar, captain of the school, with Randal and Corkran, Coffin and Lacy. They were talking and smiling, as if in possession of some sort of a jest. Jimmy had no objections to the enjoyment of a jest, but he would have preferred to see those Sixth Form men changed for football and putting in some practice.

He had a lot of work on hand at High Coombe, and it was not all to be done at once. It was going to be done, however! The School for Slackers had begun to change—slowly but surely. Even the deadly feud against himself, burning white-hot in the Fifth Form, did not wholly displease Jimmy McCann, much as it would have surprised Compton & Co. to know that! It was, at least, a sign of reviving vigour, even if of misdirected vigour.

Bang! Jimmy looked round at the door again, frowned more deeply, and again bade the banger come in. Nobody came in. Such a hefty knock at the door of the headmaster's study was disrespectful, if not accidental. And the second time it happened Jimmy knew that disrespect was intended. He stood staring at the unmoving door.

There came a third bang on the door. Jimmy's lips set in a tight line. This was a rag!

He crossed the spacious study with a swift stride, and jerked open the door. Nobody was in sight. The broad corridor stretched to right and left, several other passages opening from it at different points in its length. Round any of those corners the banger on the door might have dodged. Jimmy stood staring out for a long moment, then closed the door and went to his writing-table and sat down to work.

It could hardly be Fifth Form men playing a childish prank like this. He could not imagine the superb Compton delivering a runaway knock and scuttling round a corner. The Fifth were hopeless slackers, but they had some sense of their dignity as senior men. This was a rag of the juniors—Fourth or Shell!

That surprised Jimmy a little, for he was aware that he was not so fearfully unpopular among the small fry as among the great men of the Fifth and Sixth. However, he had no doubt that his opening of the door and looking out would mark the end of the rag. He dismissed it from his mind and resumed work on the heap of papers before him.

Mr. McCann took the Sixth Form himself in classics—much to their disgust and dismay. Classical knowledge in the Sixth was at a low ebb. Under the Venerable Beak—the late Head—they had drowsed in contented slackness. How most of them had got into the Sixth at all would have been a mystery to anyone who did not know the ways of High Coombe. Capes, in the Fourth, taught little; Penge, in the Shell, less; Chard, in the Fifth, next to nothing, and in the Sixth they took a long and happy rest. A delightful state of affairs, which Jimmy McCann was going to alter very considerably!

Bang! Jimmy jumped. Deep in Latin papers—most of which would have made a junior at any other school blush, but with which the High Coombe Sixth were quite satisfied—Jimmy had forgotten the rag. He was

reminded of it by a tremendous bang at his study door.

"Upon my word!" ejaculated Mr. McCann.

A scudding of feet and a breathless chuckle came to his keen ear. Then silence.

The rag was still on, and evidently it was going to continue. Jimmy McCann sat staring at the door with a wrinkle on his brow. He was thinking; and when Jimmy put in some thinking, something generally came of it.

The bangs he noted, came at fairly regular intervals. The young rascals gave him time to settle down after every bang before they delivered another. This rag was proceeding according to plan, that was evident. Jimmy made a rapid mental calculation. Four bangs at the door had been delivered in approximately twenty minutes. That gave five minutes a bang. If the rag continued, it was easy to calculate when the next bang was due.

Mr. McCann sat for two minutes thinking. Then he rose from his chair, selected a cane, and stepped quietly to the door, his hand on the door-handle. That door was going to open very suddenly when the next bang came. Jimmy did not think that the next man would get away with it. With a faint gleam in his eye, Jimmy waited.

At a little distance, round the corner by the French master's class-room, there was a group of the Fourth. Patty Pye, deliverer of the last bang, had just rejoined his friends, breathless and grinning. Next man in was Donkin otherwise the Donkey.

Ferguson, presiding over the proceedings, was enjoying himself. Compton's fives-bat had driven him to undertake this warlike operation against the Blighter; but it had gone so well, so far, that Ferg was beginning to think it quite a good stunt. Indeed, being a brainy man, he was already developing Compton's big idea further. He gave instructions to Donkin.

"Yell through the keyhole, Donkey!" he said. "Bang on the door, and yell through the keyhole! Let him have it! See?"

"Make the rotter sit up!" grinned Loom.

Donkin nodded and grinned. Donkin, the duffer of his Form, seldom had a chance of distinguishing himself. He was not going to lose this one. Four fellows had banged on the Head's door and got away safely. Why not the fifth? Donkin was quite keen.

"I'll shout 'Blighter' through the keyhole and then bang and bunk!" he declared.

There was a murmur of approval.

"Good old Donkey!"

"Go it, Donkey!"

Donkey went it.

On tiptoe he crept along the corridor. Five or six eager faces poked round the corner watched him as he went. Cautiously, carefully, the Donkey approached the big oak door. Breathlessly the bunch of juniors watched him arrive there and stoop to the keyhole.

"Blighter!" yelled Donkin, and banged.

Bunking was the next item on the programme. Unfortunately for Donkin, that item was cut. Hardly had he banged when the door flew open, and an arm projected from the doorway, a hand of iron gripped Donkin, and he was jerked into the study, vanishing from the watchful eyes of the Fourth like a spectre at cock-crow.

Ferguson gave a gasp.

"He's got him!"

"Oh, scissors!"

"He'll be after us!"

There was a rush of feet down the passage to parts unknown. Ferguson & Co. were scattering far and wide, almost before Jimmy McCann had fairly landed Donkin in his study. Donkin, unluckily, was not in a position to scatter.

The unhappy Donkin, gripped as if in a steel vice, was landed on the

Head's carpet, and found himself tottering there, facing Jimmy McCann.

"Donkin, I think?" said Mr. McCann.

"Oh! Ah! Yes, sir!" spluttered Donkin.

"You knocked at my door?"

"Yes, sir!"

"What did you want?"

Donkin blinked without answering. He fixed his eyes in anguish on the cane in Jimmy's hand. He wriggled in anticipation. It was an awful moment for the miserable Donkey.

But Mr. McCann did not seem to be in a hurry to use the cane. He regarded Donkin with a thoughtful eye. That this obtuse fellow had thought of such a rag—much less dreamed of carrying it out—Jimmy knew was not the case, and could not be. He had to look farther for the originator of that bright idea. It was the originator of the idea that Jimmy wanted to see.

"I asked you what you wanted, Donkin," said Mr. McCann gently.

"Nothing, sir!" groaned the Donkey.

"You knocked at my door for nothing?"

"Yes, sir!" mumbled the wretched Donkey.

"Quite!" said Jimmy McCann. To Donkin's intense amazement, and still greater relief, he laid down the cane. "You must not let this occur again, Donkin, or I shall be obliged to punish you! You may go! Tell Ferguson I desire to see him in my study."

Donkin, hardly believing in his good luck, tottered away. It was some little time before Ferg arrived in the study. Jimmy McCann was busy again with Sixth Form papers; he was not a man to waste time. But he turned from those examples of the wonderful depth of ignorance in the Sixth Form at High Coombe to fix his eyes on Ferg as he entered, feeling uneasy.

"Donkin says, sir—" began Ferguson.

"Quite!" said Jimmy McCann. His eyes seemed to penetrate Ferguson

like points of steel. "I think you knocked at my door a short time ago, Ferguson."

Ferg knew that Donkin had not given him away. With all their faults at High Coombe, they never did that kind of thing. Moreover, the Donkey would never have dared. This was only another sample of the keenness that High Coombe had already learned to look for in that "unspeakable blighter," McCann! Ferg called himself captain of the Fourth, and was undoubtedly the leading spirit in that Form. Of course, the Blighter knew that! Didn't the beast spot everything?

But Ferg was not the man to ask for a licking. And he had all his wits about him. He assumed an air of mild surprise.

"Do you think so, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, Ferguson, I do think so!" assented Jimmy McCann. "And I think I am not mistaken in assuming that you gave the first knock at my door, Ferguson!"

The beast was evidently a magician!

Ferg opened his lips. Before he could speak, Mr. McCann made a gesture.

"If you deny it, Ferguson, I shall make the closest inquiry as to where you were, and what you were doing, between five o'clock and ten minutes past. It is wrong to tell untruths, my boy, and stupid to tell useless untruths!"

Ferg's face set sullenly.

"Well, I did!" he muttered.

"Quite!" said Mr. McCann. "And did this very peculiar rag originate in your own fertile mind, Ferguson, or was it suggested to you?"

Ferg started and flushed. His fag-master had whopped him into taking on the rag. He would have liked to see Compton whopped. But did this beast—this rotter—this outsider—think that he was going to give a man away? He had an inkling—Ferg could see that.

But he was not going to learn anything from John Andrew Ferguson!

Mr. McCann gazed at Ferg quietly and steadily, and waited for his answer. It came defiantly:

"I'm not going to tell you! I don't care if you do whop me, so there!"

Mr. McCann raised his eyebrows.

Ferg stood panting. He had exaggerated a little. He did care whether McCann whopped him! He knew what such a whopping was like. It was a relief to see a smile glide over the face of Jimmy McCann.

"That will do, my boy!" said Mr. McCann. "You may go, Ferguson!"

"Oh!" gasped Ferg.

He went gladly. As he was going Jimmy McCann drawled casually:

"By the way, Ferguson, whose fag are you?"

Ferg glanced back.

"Compton's, sir."

"Compton's!" repeated Mr. McCann. "Very good! You may go!"

The door closed after Ferguson of the Fourth. In the Fourth Form-room the fags foregathered and compared notes. The Blighter had licked nobody, which was surprising and gratifying. But the rag was at an end. All the fives bats in the Fifth could not have evoked any more bangs on the Head's door.

In his study, Mr. McCann mused for a moment.

"Compton's fag! Exactly!" he said.

Then he resumed his weary labours.

## CHAPTER 16.

### McCann's Revenge!

**C**RASH! Bump!

Suddenly, unexpectedly, and rather violently, the new Head of High Coombe School sat down.

The middle of the quadrangle was not the place in which any headmaster would have chosen to sit down, could he have helped it. James McCann had no choice in the matter.

It was the day following the door-banging episode. That episode seemed to be closed and done with. Mr. McCann had said nothing about it, though perhaps he had thought the more! Possibly he was thinking about that very matter as he walked in the quad, in break, in the bright, breezy morning. Certainly he was taken entirely by surprise by what happened.

Plenty of people were about in the quad. Tredegar stood with some Sixth Form men near the big bay window of Big Study. Compton of the Fifth was walking with Darrell and Seymour—the corner of his eye on McCann.

Mr. Chard, strolling in company with Monsieur Mouton—inevitably nicknamed the Sheep—the French master, pretended not to see the Head. He loathed McCann so deeply and intensely that he found it difficult to treat him with the respect due to his chief—yet there was something about McCann that made it impossible to treat him with anything but respect.

Penge, master of the Shell, threw away a cigarette when he saw Jimmy, and tried to look as if he had not been smoking in quad. Capes, master of the Fourth, was looking out of his study window, half-concealed by the curtain.

Was it possible that Capes knew there was something on among the young rascals of his Form? That, thinking it better not to see it, he remained in his study—but, wishing to see it, all the same, he peered through his window with a surreptitious eye? Was it possible that, having an inkling of the fact that Aubrey Compton was stirring up the fags to deeds of derring-do, Capes approved in his heart, though, of course, he could not say so, and preferred, officially, to know nothing about it? Be that as it may, Capes, unseen, peered into the quad.

Many eyes, besides Capes' and Compton's were on the sturdy, stocky figure that looked so strong, so fit, so elastic, though so much less

venerable and stately than that of the old Beak, Dr. Chetwode.

More keenly than anyone else, Bunn of the Fourth was watching him. Bunn stood by the fountain. McCann, walking slowly and thoughtfully, passed the fountain, spraying silvery in the sunlight. Bunn of the Fourth hesitated one moment. But only one moment, for he was Warren's fag, and Warren and Compton had had a heart-to-heart talk with him, and he knew precisely what to expect if he did not play up.

He played up. Suddenly detaching himself from the fountain, he dashed across the quad—not, apparently, seeing that Mr. McCann was directly in front of him. There was only one possible result. Bunn of the Fourth hit McCann like a cannon-ball, and McCann sat down—suddenly and hard. His mortar-board slipped sideways, his gown picked up mud from an adjacent puddle, and he gave a gasp.

Bunn, spinning round, sat down about a yard from him. Utterly scared at what he had done, the fag blinked at Jimmy with frightened eyes.

Jimmy was first on his feet.

"Oh, sir! So sorry, sir!" gasped Bunn.

Mr. McCann set his mortar-board straight, shook mud from his gown, and gave the panting fag a grim glance. But, ferocious and devouring dragon as the High Coomers considered him, he did not lose his temper. Not a bit shirty, as Bunn breathlessly told his friends and confederates afterwards.

"You careless young rascal!" said Mr. McCann. "Look where you are running on another occasion!"

"Oh, yes, sir!" gasped Bunn.

Mr. McCann walked on. Bunn, very glad that his share in the game was over and done with, picked himself up and scuttled away. Fatty Pye, lurking under the ancient High Coombe oaks, was not feeling so glad. His turn came next on the list. He was Teddy Seymour's fag, but he had his orders from Compton, and he knew better

than to disregard them. After all, Bunn had got off scot-free. Pye hoped for similar luck. And it was a frightfully good jape on the Blighter.

"Young ass!" Bob Darrell remarked to his comrades. "Look here, you men, that man McCann is a jolly good-tempered chap! What do you think Chard would have done to a fag who barged him over in the quad?"

Compton laughed, and Seymour grinned. Bob gave them a sharp look, suddenly realising that this was a new move in Compton's game, and he had been left out of the council of war this time.

"Look here, this is pretty rotten, Aubrey!" he grunted.

"Think so?" yawned Aubrey.

"That sort of thing isn't done!" snapped Bob.

"If McCann doesn't like our manners and customs he can clear out!" suggested Aubrey. "Nobody wants him here."

Fatty Pye, suddenly shooting like an arrow from under the oaks, crashed into Mr. McCann's ribs, a little behind him. The collision was terrific. This time Mr. McCann did not sit down. He tumbled over on his hands and knees, his mortar-board rolling off.

"Oh, sorry, sir!" squeaked Fatty Pye. "So sorry, sir!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from several quarters of the spacious quad.

Mr. McCann was quickly on his feet. Fatty Pye staggered up, quaking. McCann had not looked "shirty" when Bunn barged him over. But he looked fearfully shirty now. The glint in his eyes sent cold chills through Fatty Pye's layers of fat.

Jimmy McCann had taken Bunn's barge as a sheer accident. He did not take Pye's barge as an accident. His quick mind jumped to it at once. He was getting no more bangs on his study door. He was getting barges in the quad instead.

His glinting eyes flashed in the direction of Aubrey Compton. Aubrey,

seemingly, was watching the pigeons in the quad, oblivious of McCann. Jimmy knew exactly how oblivious he was. After that flashing glance at the dandy of the Fifth, Jimmy fixed glinting eyes on Pye.

"You will go to your Form-master, Pye, and request Mr. Capes, from me to give you six strokes!" he said.

"Oh, yes, sir!" said Fatty. And he did not grin till his back was to Mr. McCann. If the Blighter supposed that any man on the staff would go hard with a fag for barging the new Beak, the Blighter was simpler than Fatty believed him to be.

Fatty trotted off quite cheerfully to Mr. Capes—who had his back to the window and a smile on his face when Pye presented himself in the study. Having received the Head's message, Capes, of course, had to give Fatty six. There was dust on Pye's trousers, but it was not stirred by the six strokes that his Form-master gave him. When he left the study he heard Mr. Capes laughing as the door closed.

Which good news Fatty carried at once to Ferguson, who was next on the barging list. Ferg was very glad to hear it.

"It's all right, Ferg, old boy!" smiled Fatty. "He'll only send you to Capes, and Capes will give you a flick or two. I say, I believe old Capers was watching from the window—he was killing himself laughing when I beat it."

Ferg chuckled. Greatly encouraged, he prepared to take his turn in the barging game.

Mr. McCann had reached the library, and turned to pace back. Behind him lurked the wily Ferg. This time it was going to be a collision dead astern. McCann was going flying headlong. Ferg was going to fall on him if he could! That would be an extra one for the Blighter! Ferg pictured the Blighter down on his face, Ferg's knees landing in the small of his back, all the wind driven out of him

—a gasping, gurgling, spluttering Blighter, winded to the wide! Really, it was almost worth a whopping—much more was it worth six airy flicks from old Capers.

Grinning faces, from many directions, looked on. Only one was frowning—Bob Darrell's. Bob thought it rot. Everyone else thought it tophole—an absolute splendid jest on the unspeakable McCann. It would leave the Blighter in no doubt about what High Coombe thought of him. Ferguson, feeling himself the centre of all eyes, was greatly excited and bucked. It was going to be a tremendous barge this time.

Ferg suddenly flew!

James McCann had, of course, no eyes in the back of his head. How, therefore, he was aware that Ferguson of the Fourth was barging at his back was, and had to remain, a mystery.

The dismal fact was, that when the charging Ferg was only a yard from him, the Head suddenly turned.

Instead of crashing into an unwary back, Ferguson of the Fourth landed in McCann's grasp, which stopped him dead, fastening on him like steel pincers. Held by the enemy, Ferg sagged, gasping, his eyes nearly popping out of his startled face.

"Oh!" gasped Ferguson. "Oh! Ah! Oh!"

Still holding him in that pincerlike grip, Mr. McCann glanced round. Grins had faded off faces, as if wiped away by dusters. Only one face wore a grin now. It was Bob's. He was grinning instead of frowning.

"Corkran!" called out Mr. McCann, quickly and clearly.

Corkran, head prefect, was walking with Randal, another prefect. They had their official ashplants under their arms. Corkran rather unwillingly came over at the Head's call. Even at High Coombe, a head prefect did not take a hand in a rag of this kind. But old Corky had had an idea of what was on,

like the rest of the Sixth. He wondered whether McCann knew that.

"Please lend me your cane, Corkran!" said Mr. McCann pleasantly.

"Oh!" said Corkran. "Oh, yes, sir! Certainly."

He handed over the ash.

McCann released the unhappy Ferg, and wished Corkran's cane.

"Bend over and touch your toes, Ferguson!" he said.

Ferg could have groaned. This frightfully keen beast had evidently tumbled to it that it was no use sending a Fourth Form man to the master of the Fourth!

In the lowest of spirits, Ferguson bent over and touched his toes. The swipe that followed could be heard all over the quad. It rang like a rifle-shot. The suffering Ferg had, at least, to respect a man who could lay it on like that. It was quite scientific. It elicited a yell from Ferguson that rang louder than the crack of the cane.

Ferguson fully expected six. He hardly dared to believe the glad truth when McCann, after that one ringing swipe, handed the cane back to Corkran of the Sixth.

"Thank you, Corkran!" said Mr. McCann, and walked on.

Ferg rose from his bending attitude and blinked after him, and wriggled painfully.

And on the face of Donkin of the Fourth was terror and dismay. For he was the next man on the list to bump the Head!

Mr. McCann walked into the House. It was soon reported that he had gone to his study. Break was nearly over, and fellows began to go into the House.

Compton dropped a hand on Donkin's shoulder.

"Stick in the passage," said Compton. "The Blighter will come out in a few minutes—he has to go to the Sixth. Barge him in the passage."

"I—I say, Compton!" moaned the Donkey. "I say, I'm Darrell's fag, you know, and Darrell hasn't said anything, and—"

The glint in Aubrey's eyes cut him short.

"Are you goin' to barge the Blighter?" asked Aubrey.

"Oh, yes, Compton!" groaned the Donkey. "Oh, yes, of course!"

He took up a strategic position in the passage. At one end of that long corridor stood the school notice-board. A crowd of fellows gathered round it, ostensibly to look at the notices while they waited for the bell to ring, actually to watch the Donkey barge McCann when he came out of his study.

The Head's door opened, and he came out.

He had a paper in his hand; apparently a new notice to stick on the board. A crowd of eyes from the end of the passage watched him—and Donkin.

Donkin, with a courage born of panic, barged.

Mr. McCann side-stepped, and the Donkey barged past him, plunged on, stumbled into the Head's doorway, and pitched over helplessly in the study. There the breathless and surprised Donkey rolled, unheeded by McCann.

Apparently forgetting Donkin's existence, James McCann walked on and stopped at the notice-board. There he pinned up the paper in his hand, gave the gathering of High Coomers a cheery smile, and walked away to the Sixth Form Room.

The bell began to ring. But it rang unheeded for some minutes. For all eyes were fixed on the notice Jimmy had pinned on the board. It read:

"Fagging for the Fifth Form is abolished.

"J. McCANN, Headmaster."

## CHAPTER 17.

### Boiling with indignation!

THE school could not quite believe it at first. But there it was on the notice-board, written in the clear, firm hand of James McCann.

"Even that unspeakable Blighter,"

declared Compton of the Fifth, "must draw the line at this!"

"Must!" said Teddy Seymour.

"It doesn't look like it," remarked Bob Darrell. "McCann hasn't put that paper up for a joke."

"Oh, shut up, Darrell!" said both Bob's friends together.

"Fagging for the Fifth Form is abolished.

"J. McCANN, Headmaster."

That was all! But those few words meant much. They meant something little short of a revolution in the School for Slackers. They meant—at least, all the Fifth were convinced that they meant—that the Blighter had declared open war on Chard's Form. But that was the Fifth's look-out. They had egged their fags on to wage war against the Head, and now the Blighter had spiked their guns by abolishing fagging for the Fifth. No Fifth Form man would be able to call "Boy!" and hear the patter of feet as a fag scudded to obey the call! From now on, only the Sixth would be empowered to call "Boy!"

"If that fool," said Aubrey Compton, "thinks that we're goin' to stand this, he's a bigger fool than I've taken him for."

Aubrey spoke in quite a loud voice, careless whether Mr. McCann heard him or not.

"Abolishin' faggin'!" said Peverill, almost dazedly. "Abolishin' faggin'! I've said before that the man's mad!"

"We're not standin' it!" said Aubrey.

"No fear!" said Teddy Seymour, rather doubtfully, however.

Nobody was willing to stand it. But it was not easy to see how it was to be avoided. The Blighter was the sort of man to get his own way. He was about as easy to stop as an armoured car in full career.

"If we stand this, we may as well chuck up the sponge and let the McCann man have his own way all along the line!" said Aubrey.



Bob Darrell grinned. He could not help it. He could see, if the rest of the Fifth couldn't, that McCann was going to have his own way all along the line, anyhow. And he suspected, too, that it would be a topping good thing for the school if he did!

"Look here, you men!" said Bob. "What's the good of blowing off steam? It's an order from the Head. McCann means this——"

"Shut up, Darrell!"

"Oh, talk sense!" insisted Bob. "After all——"

"Bustin' up all our traditions!" said Teddy.

"Traditions be blowed!" said Bob. "The Fifth never used to have fags. It crept in, and I'm not at all sure it's a good thing, either——"

"Why, you fag young Donkin of the Fourth!" roared Burke wrathfully.

"I know! Donkin burns my toast and loses my studs, snaffles my cake, and I help him with his work! I shan't be fearfully sorry to get a rest from Donkin."

"Oh, I say!" murmured Donkin, who was in the crowd.

He did not feel flattered by these remarks of his fag-master.

"Donkin would be a useful fag if you batted him as I do young Ferguson!" said Aubrey. "I know I'm not givin' up my fag, McCann or no McCann!"

"Same here!" declared several of the Fifth.

"It will be the Sixth's turn next!" said Compton.

"Oh! You don't think that really, do you?" exclaimed Randal.

He was deeply dismayed at the idea. Trying to picture himself making his own toast, he felt quite dizzy.

"I jolly well do!" said Aubrey.

"I say, that's the limit, you know! He can't touch Sixth Form privileges, even a McCann!"

For the first time in history, High Coombe fellows beheld Randal of the Sixth showing signs of excitement.

"But what are we goin' to do?" asked Raymond of the Fifth. "What are we goin' to do with the brute?"

"Snaffle him in his study and pour boiling oil into his ears!" said Carter.

But the funny man of the Fifth did not get a laugh. Matters were too fearfully serious for Carter's little jokes to be appreciated.

Aubrey Compton drew a gold pencil from a pocket of the most elegant waistcoat at High Coombe.

"I'm goin' to show the Blighter what we think of his notice, anyhow!" he said.

"Aubrey, old man!" exclaimed Bob, in alarm. He moved forward, but five or six fellows barged him back.

Aubrey, with a firm hand, added his own comment to Mr. McCann's notice. There was a gasp from the watching crowd—and it melted away.

The notice-board, so thickly crowded a few moments before, was deserted. Nobody wanted to be on the spot when the Blighter saw what Aubrey had added to his paper.

Some minutes later, Mr. McCann came out of his study and walked with his springy stride down the corridor. He stopped at the board. No doubt Jimmy McCann was aware of the thrill that his notice had sent through the School for Slackers. Probably he had expected to see a crowd staring at the board, and was surprised to see it deserted. He stopped and looked at it.

Then a grim look came over his face, which set hard. The blue-grey eyes glistened like steel. The stocky young man stood with his eyes fixed on his paper on the board, his face growing grimmer and grimmer. It read rather differently now. Under his own words appeared the following line, in parody:

"Meddling by the Blighter McCann is abolished."

But that added wording was not signed. Aubrey had stopped short of putting his name to it!

## CHAPTER 15.

## Trouble in Dorm. No. 3!

"BOY!" Sharp and clear rang the call. "Boy!"

The call of "Boy!" especially towards tea-time, was a sound that would have drawn no attention at High Coombe in normal times, except, of course, from the fag called.

Even in the present times, which all High Coombe agreed to regard as abnormal, such a call from a Sixth Form man would have drawn the attention only of his fag.

But that call, so old and familiar, caused, on the present occasion, a thrill—a sensation, in fact.

For it was Aubrey Compton who called.

On the board was the Head's notice—a new notice, without further emendations from Aubrey—abolishing fagging for the Fifth. If Head's authority for anything in High Coombe, fagging for the Fifth was a thing of the past, and Aubrey Compton had no more right and power to call "Boy!" than any junior in the Shell or the Fourth.

Staggering as it was, Aubrey could no more fag Ferguson of the Fourth than Ferg of the Fourth could fag Aubrey—if Head's authority went for anything! But did it? That, it seemed, was a matter that was about to be put to the test.

Anyhow, Aubrey called "Boy!"

Dorm No. 3, at night, was a dormitory three-bedded like all Fifth Form dorms at High Coombe. In the day-time it was a study. They were very wealthy and expensive and well appointed at High Coombe, but only the great and glorious Sixth had a room to each man. Three to a room was the rule in the Fifth, where they "found" together—"finding" being the High Coombe term for pooling resources in the grub line. Darrell, Compton, and Teddy Seymour found in Dorm No. 3; and a happy and united family it had been till the arrival of Mr. McCann.

It was tea-time in Dorm No. 3. That was why Aubrey was calling "Boy!"

Nobody looking into Dorm No. 3 would have guessed that it was a bedroom at night. Beds, and all their appurtenances, had vanished. Luxurious ottomans could be seen—not beds. The Persian rug on the floor had cost somebody twenty guineas.

A tapestried armchair covered the spot where Donkin had dropped a hot cinder on it. The Donkey still remembered the whopping he had received on that occasion—not from Bob, his fag-master, but from Aubrey, who had rather a heavy hand with a fives bat. That had led to one of the rows in Dorm No. 3. Bob, finding his fag in a state of fearful woe and lamentation, had pointed out wrathfully that Donkin was his fag. Aubrey, on the other hand, mentioned that it was his carpet. Teddy, as usual, had ironed out the trouble.

There were pictures on the walls, and a Ming jar on the mantelpiece in which Aubrey kept cigarettes. There was a big window looking on Quad, and below it the bulging bay of the great window of Big Study. There was a handsome grate, in which a cheery fire burne, an old oak chest with a carved lid on brass hinges, in which coals were kept—and if old Liggins, the porter, did not see that it was well supplied, woe betide Ferguson of the Fourth if he did not supply the deficiency! There was a radiogram in one corner, connected up with the electric current. No messing about with batteries for Dorm No. 3!

A fellow who could not make himself comfortable in Dorm No. 3 must have been a fellow hard to satisfy. At the present moment, however, discomfort seemed to reign. Bob Darrell, standing before the window with his hands driven deep into his trousers pockets, frowned, and looked worried. Teddy Seymour, as usual, pulled in two directions, rubbed his nose in perplexity, and glanced alternately at Bob and

Aubrey standing outside the door and calling "Boy!"

"Boy" did not seem in a hurry to appear.

Ferguson of the Fourth must have heard. Aubrey's voice was not loud—nothing about Aubrey was loud—but it was very clear, and it carried. At tea-time, too, Ferg should have been very careful to keep within hearing. The Burrow was not far distant, though it was down stairs and round corners, the house being a rambling old place. If the door was shut, and the fags kicking up a row, a call might pass unheard. But it was seldom that a call from the dandy of the Fifth passed unheeded. Ferg knew by experience what it meant for him.

Yet there was no patter of feet!

Aubrey's lips set. The gleam that came into his handsome eyes boded awful things for John Andrew Ferguson of the Fourth. Was it possible that the Head's notice was the cause of this—that its effect on the Fourth had been quite different from its effect on the Fifth?

It was possible that the fag might not see eye to eye with the fag-master on the subject of fagging. Aubrey, had he cast his mind back, might have remembered that in the Fourth he had loathed fagging, and thought it rot. But he did not care to cast his mind back.

If Ferguson was putting on "roll," just because of that notice from that cheeky, meddling cad McCann, Aubrey was the man to give a fag something to cure him of roll.

"Boy!"

"Look here, chuck it, Compton!" came a roar from Bob Darrell. "What's the good of playin' the giddy ox?"

"Mind your own business!"

Bob strode to the door.

"Making us all look fools!" he snapped.

"What?"

"The fags won't come! They know they needn't now—that McCann's washed it out! Think they ever liked fagging for us?" demanded Bob, with

angry scorn. "All the House can hear you! I shouldn't wonder if McCann himself can hear you!"

"I want him to!" said Aubrey, with bitter coolness.

"Oh, rot! All the House hearing you call 'Boy!' and no fag comin', it's foolish! Nobody's likely to come except McCann—and he'll bring a cane with him if he does, as likely as not!"

Aubrey laughed.

"My fag's comin'!" he said. "Ferguson!" he called.

There was at long last a patter of feet. A Fourth Former came running up the short staircase to the landing outside Dorm No. 3. But it was not Ferguson. It was Donkin. He turned a frightened face on the Fifth Form men.

"I—I've come!" he stammered.

"I never called 'Boy!'" grunted Bob.

"I—I came because Compton called!" stammered the Donkey. "Ferg—Ferg—Ferg—" he stuttered.

"Well?" rapped Aubrey.

"Ferg—Ferg—Ferg can't come!" stuttered Donkin. He got it out at last.

That, at another time, would have passed. It was a rule at High Coombe that if one fag belonging to a study could not come for any reason, another fag belonging to the same study was bound to obey the call. Either Donkin or Pye, who was Seymour's fag, had to take Ferg's place if Ferg was unavoidably absent when called. In the same way, Ferg had to replace Donkin or Pye if necessary. Compton would have been satisfied at any other time. Now he was not satisfied.

He stepped towards Donkin with an expression on his face that made the duffer of the Fourth wish that he had not understudied Ferg.

"Why hasn't Ferguson come?" he asked quietly.

"He—he can't!" Donkin stuttered again. "He—he—he c-c-can't!"

"Is he with Capes?" Mr. Capes was master of the Fourth, and there was a

remote—a very remote—possibility that Ferg was under detention.

"N-n-no!"

"Is he in the Burrow?"

Donkin stammered inarticulately. It was only too clear that Ferguson was in the Burrow. And if Donkin had heard Compton call "Boy!" Ferguson had heard! He did not choose to come, presuming on that new order of the Blighter McCann! Donkin, less daring, had come!

"I'm askin' you a question, Donkin!" Aubrey's voice was sharp as steel. "Is Ferguson in the Burrow?"

"Ye-e-es, Compton!" murmured the Donkey feebly.

"And he won't come?"

The Donkey was silent; but it was only too clear.

As a fierce rebel against the authority of the Head, Compton might have been supposed to have a sympathetic fellow-feeling with rebels against authority. That was logical. But there is little logic in human nature. Fiercely bent on resisting authority above, Aubrey was equally bent on exacting submission from below. For the rebel and the tyrant are the same man at heart, only acting differently in different circumstances.

Compton's face was almost pale with rage.

His dream was of High Coombe united as one man against the Head—standing shoulder to shoulder, and presenting an unbroken front to the enemy. And here was a gap in the ranks, a chink in the armour at the very beginning!

"I—I say, Compton, won't—won't I do?" faltered the Donkey. "I—I can make toast quite as good as old Ferg! I say, Ferg came up instead of me yesterday, and I owe him a fagging turn! I say—Yaroooh!"

Donkin was interrupted by Compton taking him by the collar. Compton shook him like a terrier shaking a rat. If the Donkey hoped that he would do instead of Ferg, this made it clear to

him that he would not do at all. Compton stared round at Darrell.

"Hand me a fives bat, can't you?"

"No!" said Bob grimly.

"You fool! Hand me a fives bat, Seymour!" shouted Compton.

"Oh, I say!" brayed the hapless Donkey.

"Here you are," said Teddy, stepping to the door with a fives bat. He passed it out to Compton.

Bob's brow grew blacker.

"Bend over, Donkin!" snarled Aubrey.

"Oh, I say!" moaned the Donkey, more than ever convinced that he had been unwise to come up in Ferg's place.

Bob Darrell strode out of the door. He grasped Aubrey's arm, and shook it loose from Donkin's collar.

"Cut!" he said curtly.

"Oh, I say——" gasped the Donkey.

"Cut!" roared Bob.

"Stop where you are!" roared Compton furiously.

"I—I say, I'm Darrell's fag, you know!" stammered the Donkey. "I say——"

"Cut!"

Donkin cut. His master's voice was good enough for him, and Aubrey's look was terrifying. Not usually swift in his movements, the Donkey put on a turn of speed worthy of a zebra. He vanished down the staircase.

Teddy Seymour fairly bounded out of Dorm No. 3. Never had his activities as a peacemaker been so sorely needed. Donkin had escaped the fives bat, but Aubrey looked at that moment like knocking Bob Darrell on the head with it, and Bob faced him with clenched fists and glowing eyes. Teddy barged between.

"Hold on, you men! Chuck it, I say! Look here, Aubrey, you can't whop another man's fag—you know you can't! Bob, old man, don't be a fool!"

He grabbed Bob by the arm, and dragged him back into Dorm No. 3.

Aubrey, breathing hard, tucked the fives bat under his arm and went down

the stairs. The mountain had not come to Mahomet, so Mahomet was going to the mountain. In Dorm No. 3 Bob Darrell grunted angrily, and Teddy placated him with soothing gestures.

Aubrey Compton headed for the Burrow, to root out the rebel in his lair.

#### CHAPTER 19.

##### Ferg Fizzles Out!

THE Burrow was the resort of all the lower boys of High Coombe—Fourth Form and Shell. It was called the Burrow because fags swarmed in it like rabbits. It was a large room, the length of a long passage from Big Study—but long as the passage was, the row in the Burrow was sometimes heard in Big Study, and a prefect would come down the passage with a cane and distribute impartial whacks.

For it was noticeable that the Lower Forms at the School for Slackers had not fully developed the fine art of slacking as their elders and betters. They were younger, and had not been in the drowsy atmosphere of High Coombe so long. Some of them came from prep schools that were not at all slack, and had not yet forgotten that live people were expected to look as if they were alive.

There were "men" in the Fourth who would have put keenness into games, given half a chance. There were even some who had the extraordinary idea—extraordinary at High Coombe—that fellows came to school to learn things! No doubt, in the course of time, under the genial influence of High Coombe, they would get over all this, and realise that graceful sauntering and well-creased trousers were the beginning and end of all things.

But in this direction quite a lot of the juniors had a lot yet to learn—most of all, Ferguson of the Fourth.

Perhaps Ferg derived vigour from his native Highland air. Perhaps he derived it from his remote ancestor,

the great Fergus, founder of the clan. Anyhow, he had it! True, he was down on the McCann man. He had no use for a nobody from nowhere who barged in where he was not wanted. But he had, at the same time, a sneaking admiration for the man who had given Compton of the Fifth six on the bags, his first day as headmaster. And now, for the first time, Ferg saw good in the changes and reforms that the Blighter was bringing about.

It was all very well for Compton of the Fifth to talk about the old school standing up as one man against that barging outsider. Compton wasn't a fag! Had he been, Ferg thought that he might have viewed the abolition of fagging for the Fifth from a very different angle. Ferg certainly did!

Ferg loathed fagging. He hated a fives bat on his trousers. He disliked having to "chuck" whatever he was doing and scud at the call of "Boy!" No doubt when Ferg got into the Senior Forms he would realise that there was a lot to be said for these old institutions—that traditional things should not be roughly touched or hastily discarded. But at the moment Ferg was in the Fourth, and all he realised was that it would be a jolly good thing to get out of fagging.

Standing on the table in the Burrow, Ferg disclosed these revolutionary views to the Fourth and the Shell. The Burrow was packed. Shell fellows—who did not fag—rewarded Ferguson with catcalls and hoots. They were all for tradition. Why shouldn't the grubby little fellows fag, Battie asked—and most of his Form agreed that echo answered why! But from quite a number of the Fourth came cordial support for Ferguson. They were not, perhaps, prepared to stand up to the fag-masters and hurl defiance in their teeth. But they were ready to cheer Ferg, and they did, with enthusiasm.

"Let the old Donkey fag if he likes!" said Ferguson. He alluded scornfully

to the fact that Donkin had answered the call of "Boy!" passed unheeded by Ferg himself. "I'm not going to. That man McCann is a Blighter, a fearful beast. Nobody wants him here, but, after all, he's Head! What has he abolished fagging for the Fifth for? Because the Fifth set the fags on to chivvy him, banging at his study door, barging him in the quad!"

"Serve him jolly well right!" said Babbie of the Shell.

"Shut up, Babby!"

"Well, if the Fifth want the Blighter barged, let them barge him!" roared Ferguson. "I'll be jolly glad to see them do it, for one! Let them barge him right out of High Coombe if they can! But the man's Head, and he says official, no more fagging for the Fifth! Are we going to be whopped by the Beak because we're so fond of making toast for Compton, and fetching and carrying for Seymour, and smuggling in smokes for Peverill? And I can tell you he's the man to whop! You needn't keep on telling me he's a beast—I know he is! All the same——"

"Ain't you going to fag for Compton any more?" asked Fatty Pye.

Ferg drew a deep breath.

"No," he said, "I'm not! And if Compton gets shirty about it, I hope the Blighter will jolly well give him six, like he did his first day here. And I can jolly well say—— Oh!"

Ferg broke off as the door opened and Aubrey Compton walked into the Burrow.

A moment ago the Burrow had been in a roar. Ferg's voice had barely dominated the cheers of his friends and the hoots of his opponents. Now there was a sudden silence. Ferg's jaw dropped at the sight of Compton's face, quite calm, but ~~set hard~~. He did not fail to notice the fives bat under his fag-master's arm.

Compton had called "Boy!" in vain. Now was the time for Ferguson of the Fourth to tell him that he could call "Boy!" as often as he jolly well liked, but that he, J. A. Ferguson, would see

him blown before he would scud at his call. This, and much more, Ferg had been going to say to Compton of the Fifth, he had told his friends so several times over, in fact. Now was the chance to say it all! But Ferg let his chance pass by, he said nothing.

Standing on the table, and wishing that he wasn't, Ferg blinked at his fag-master in sudden dismay. He was a conspicuous object, standing there—he leaped to the eye, as it were. He wondered whether Compton had heard anything as he came along the passage. He hoped fervently that Compton hadn't. He wished that he had heard Compton coming, so that he could have stepped down in time. He even wished that he had answered the call of "Boy!" He did not like the look in Compton's eye, and he felt deflated.

"Is Ferguson here?" drawled Aubrey.

"Here, Compton!" answered Ferg, a little faintly.

"What are you doin' on that table, you young ass? Get off it!"

Ferg did not explain that he had mounted the table to address the mob as a revolutionary leader; he was not at the moment feeling like a revolutionary leader; he was feeling like a fag with a quaking eye on a fives bat. He got off the table.

"Did you hear me call 'Boy'?"

"Ye-e-s!" breathed Ferg.

"Why didn't you come?"

Ferg glanced round at a silent crowd of juniors. A minute ago Fatty Pye and Loom and Bunn had been roaring applause. They were silent now, and avoided catching his eye. So far from giving Ferg any active support, they were not giving him even moral support.

"I asked you why you didn't come, Ferguson!" Aubrey's voice was quiet and cool and dangerous.

Ferg was driven to answer.

"McCann says we don't fag for the Fifth any more, Compton! I—I—I say, he's Head, you know."

It was feeble, but it was all that Ferg could do. Under the steady gleam



"Upon my word!" ejaculated Jimmy McCann, the new headmaster of High Coombe, as he stared at the weird figure staggering in the corridor. "Mr. Chard, who—what—" "Urrrrgggh! Wurrrrgggh!" gurgled the master of the Fifth. "Gurrrrgggh!"

of Compton's eyes, his revolutionary fervour had fizzled out.

"Did I tell you that no man here was to take any notice of that man McCann's meddlin' rot?" asked Aubrey.

"Ye-e-es."

"Oh! You haven't forgotten!"

"N-n-no."

"Very well! Bend over that chair, Ferguson!"

There was an awful pause. According to the headmaster Compton had no right whatever to give that order. According to the new rule, Compton was asking for a Head's whopping for himself for carrying on in defiance of a direct order from the Beak. But, according to custom and tradition—strong at any school, strongest of all at the School for Slackers—a fag ordered by his fag-master to bend over had to do that very thing. And Ferg, after the briefest pause, did it.

All eyes in the swarming Burrow watched.

Three swipes the hardy Ferg took in silence. The fourth made him jump. The fifth made him wriggle like an eel. The sixth drew from him a frantic yell that was heard as far as Big Study. Compton paused.

By immemorial tradition, six was the limit. Six might consist of half a dozen strokes, or any less number—never of more. Ferg had had the full six. It made him wriggle, it made him writhe. His freckled face was almost pale as he rose after the infliction.

Compton tucked the bat under his arm.

He strolled out of the Burrow. A deep-drawn breath from the swarm followed his departure.

"Wow!" murmured Ferguson. He wriggled.

"Boy!"

Compton's voice called from a distance. It was clearly heard in the Burrow. All eyes were on Ferguson. If Ferguson hesitated, it was not long enough to give Aubrey occasion to call

a second time. He bolted out of the Burrow.

Jimmy McCann had abolished fagging for the Fifth. In Dorm No. 3 Ferguson was fagging with a dutiful assiduity he had seldom displayed before. Carter of the Fifth looked in and grinned.

"What price the Blighter?" drawled Aubrey.

"Twopence, and dear at that!" answered Carter. He went away to call his own fag. If one man got away with it, why not another? In Dorm No. 3 Ferg went on fagging.

#### CHAPTER 20.

##### Whopped by His Own Fag!

"THE Blighter!" breathed Carter of the Fifth. He had been just about to call "Boy!" But when he saw Mr. McCann walking up the passage with a cane under his arm, Carter was glad—deeply glad—that he had not yet called "Boy!" Calling "Boy!" all of a sudden lost its charm.

Carter stepped back into his room so suddenly that he trod on the toes of Burke and Raymond. They ejaculated simultaneously; but Carter made a sign and softly closed the door.

The quiet but firm and steady footsteps of James McCann passed it. They died away towards the short staircase at the end, which led up to Dorm No. 3. Carter and his friends exchanged eloquent looks. The Blighter was going to Compton's room, where Ferguson of the Fourth was in the full tide of fagging. He had a cane under his arm. Had the brute, in his study, heard Compton calling "Boy"? Likely enough—he seemed to see and hear everything that went on at High Coombe! What was going to happen now? Whatever it was, Carter & Co. were glad that it was not going to happen to them.

Jimmy's knock at the door of Dorm No. 3 sounded loud and clear. He opened the door after knocking.

Compton, Darrell, and Seymour



looked at him. They rose to their feet. Even Aubrey, though strongly disinclined to show that mark of respect to the new Head, rose. Tea was going on in Dorm No. 3. Ferg had done his work well. The table was nicely laid—eggs poached irreproachably, toast done to a turn, and jam, marmalade, and jelly set out in enticing array.

Ferg, on his knees before the fire, was making more toast. His face was red from the warmth of the fire, and as he stooped he wriggled. Not for a long time was Ferg likely to forget the haunting twinges of the fives bat. Every now and then he gave a convulsive jerk. He was doing exactly that as Jimmy McCann looked in at the doorway, and the Head's keen eye did not miss it.

Mr. McCann stepped in.

Ferg looked round from the fire. He gave a startled gasp and dropped toast and toasting-fork into the fender. Still on his knees, he blinked at the headmaster. Severely as he had been used, not for worlds would Ferguson have given away his fag-master to the Head. But here was the Head, seeing with his own eyes, and Ferg, like Carter & Co., wondered what was going to happen now.

"Ferguson!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Ferg.

"Stand up!"

Ferg stood up. Involuntarily he wriggled as he did so.

"You are fagging here, I think?" said McCann.

Ferg did not answer. If the man couldn't see for himself, Ferg wasn't going to tell him anything.

Neither did Mr. McCann ask him to do so. He glanced at Darrell, red and uncomfortable; at Seymour, dismayed and dubious; and fixed his eyes on Aubrey Compton, cool and quietly defiant. Aubrey had plenty of nerve, and he needed all he had now.

"Did you see my notice on the board this morning, Compton?"

"Certainly, sir!" Compton would not

have told the man a lie to save his life. Pride, if nothing else, prevented that.

"Yet you are fagging a Fourth Form boy?" said Mr. McCann.

"Fagging is a privilege of the Fifth Form, sir," answered Aubrey, speaking quite casually, as if he were merely explaining things to a newcomer. "It's one of our oldest privs."

"It is abolished for the Fifth Form, Compton."

"Indeed, sir!" said Aubrey.

"Quite!" said Jimmy McCann.

There was a pause. Bob Darrell broke it.

"We're all in this, sir! We're all —" Thus Bob, backing up a friend in a bad cause.

"You need not speak, Darrell!" said Mr. McCann icily.

"But, sir——" began Teddy.

"You need not speak, Seymour."

Silence again.

Mr. McCann seemed to be musing. The cane was under his arm; he did not slip it into his hand. What was he going to do? Faint sounds came from the Fifth Form passage. Breathless fellows were gathering there to learn what was going on. Like wildfire, the news had spread through the Fifth that the Blighter McCann was in Dorm No. 3.

"Ferguson!"

"Oh! Yes, sir?" gasped Ferg.

"Take Compton's chair at the table."

Ferg blinked. The cane slipped into Mr. McCann's hand now. He pointed with it to the chair from which Aubrey had risen. Amazed, Ferg approached that chair. Compton, hesitating, wondering, moved unwillingly, and Ferguson sat down in the chair.

"Darrell! Seymour! You may go!"

"The fellows haven't finished tea yet, sir!" remarked Aubrey, still in a casual tone.

Mr. McCann seemed deaf. He stepped aside from the doorway for Darrell and Seymour to pass out. Aubrey's lips moved. He very nearly said: "Don't go!" But not-quite.

Slowly, perplexed, puzzled, Darrell and

Seymour went out. They joined the crowd of seniors in the passage below—now overflowing on the stair that led up to Dorm No. 3, of which the door remained wide open. Some of them could see into the dorm. All of them could hear.

"Compton!"

"Sir!"

"Take up that toasting-fork!"

Aubrey looked at him. What did the beast mean? He picked the toasting-fork out of the fender.

Ferguson, in Compton's chair at the table, sat dumb. He could not guess what was coming. Neither could Compton. But both of them soon knew.

"Fagging," said Mr. McCann in a quiet voice which, however, reached every ear in the Fifth Form passage, "is abolished for the Fifth Form at High Coombe. Yet I find it continuing in this dorm. This will not do, Compton! However, since I find fagging going on here, it will continue, in my presence. You will fag, Compton."

Compton looked at him.

"You will proceed," said Mr. McCann, "to make toast for Ferguson, Compton. You will make tea. You will fag for Ferguson in my presence and under my eye. If you do not do so satisfactorily, you will be whopped—by Ferguson!"

Ferg's eyes opened wide. They looked as if they would fall out of his head.

Compton trembled with rage. So this was the Blighter's game—to make him look a fool, humble his pride, make him the mock of the very fags in the Burrow! A caning he had expected and cared little for—even a flogging. It would have strengthened his position in the school, to stand up to hard punishment, a martyr to tyranny, a defender of old traditions and privileges against brute force! But this—

"I won't!" Compton found his voice, and his answer came in a yell of defiance.

"I think," said Jimmy McCann, "that you will! Ferguson, I see a fives bat on the shelf. I have no doubt that

you are well acquainted with it. Take it."

Ferg looked at him. He looked at Compton. He almost tottered to the shelf and took the fives bat in hand. A gleam shot into Ferg's eyes. Half an hour ago he had wriggled and writhed under that bat. If McCann really meant this—if he really was in earnest—Ferg knew how he was going to handle Compton's fives bat. But was he in earnest?

He was!

"Bend over that chair, Compton!"

Aubrey did not move.

"Will you bend over that chair, Compton?"

In the Fifth Form passage they listened breathlessly.

"No!" shouted Compton.

Jimmy McCann moved swiftly. Compton did not know that he was in that grip of steel till he was bent over the chair—bent over in a grasp that a fellow twice as strong could not have resisted. His struggles availed him exactly as much as if he had been gripped in an iron vice.

"Ferguson!"

"Oh, crumbs! I—I—I mean yes, sir!"

"You will give Compton six. If you do not lay them on hard, you will be flogged!"

Ferguson laid them on hard. He did not want to be flogged. But he did want to hand back to Aubrey what Aubrey had handed him in the Burrow.

"Six!" said Mr. McCann. "Will you fag for Ferguson now, Compton?"

"No!" It came choking, but it came.

"Six more, Ferguson, please! I hope you are not getting tired, my boy!" added Mr. McCann considerably.

Ferg was not tired. Up went the fives bat again. Down it came with a bang.

"Stop!" Aubrey hissed the word. What was the use? In that relentless grip, what could a fellow do? Already he was humbled to the dust. Fagging was not so humiliating as this. "Stop!"

He did not know how pleased Jimmy McCann was to hear him say it. The

grip relaxed; Compton, white with rage, staggered to his feet. There were tears of fury in his eyes. How was he ever to live this down—whopped by a fag—his own fag! Thrashing the little beast afterwards would be no solace.

"I am glad, Compton," said Jimmy McCann gravely, "that you have decided, sensibly, to obey your headmaster."

Aubrey did not speak. He could not grope blindly for the toasting-fork.

"Obedience," said Jimmy McCann, "is sufficient. I shall excuse you the best, Compton. Ferguson, you may go."

Ferg went, and the fact that Jimmy McCann followed him prevented the Fifth Form men from kicking him the length of the passage. The door of Dorm No. 3 slammed. Fellows who knocked on it received no answer. And it did not open; it was locked. Behind that locked door, Aubrey Compton hid his rage and shame from the eyes of High Coombe.

In Big Study there was gnashing of teeth. But in the Burrow, where Ferg told a breathless tale, there were hoots and chuckles. Every man in the Burrow knew that there would be no more fagging for the Fifth. Aubrey Compton had called "Boy!" for the last time!

## CHAPTER 21.

### Shocks All Round!

CHARD'S trumpeting could be heard from the Head's study. The Fifth Form master at High Coombe had a powerful voice. It dominated the Common-room when Chard sat there with the other Beaks. Now it dominated the Head's study and the corridor outside, and reached the ears of a dozen fellows, who exchanged glances and grinned.

They relied a great deal on Chard to stand up for them against the meddling, unspeakable Blighter. He had rather disappointed them so far. No doubt he did all he could, but it was not so much as they had expected of him. In spite of Chard, the

Blighter seemed to be getting his own way all along the line. But Chard was "going it" now—that was clear. He trumpeted like an elephant in the jungle. No doubt Mr. McCann was speaking, too. But his quiet voice could not be heard outside the study.

"The old ass!" muttered Bob Darrell.

Aubrey did not heed him. He was listening intently to Chard's roar from the study, a gleam coming into his eyes.

"I protest! I repeat, sir, that I protest!" came Chard's voice. "As a Form-master, as senior member of the staff, sir, I have certain rights! My Form had certain rights! It is my duty to uphold both! I repeat that it is my duty!"

Chard had a way of getting additional emphasis by repeating what he said twice, or even three times. He was under the delusion that his remarks were worth hearing more than once.

"To take a Form, sir, out of the hands of its Form-master is an unprecedented step! I am bound to point out that it is a step that was never taken when Dr. Chetwode was here. It is a step, sir, that was never taken by the late Head."

"Dear old Rip van Winkle!" murmured Carter. "How we miss him!"

"Shut up, Carter!"

"McCann's sayin' somethin'," muttered Warren. "What's McCann sayin'?"

As there was a pause in the trumpeting it was evident that the Head was speaking. But not a sound of his voice came through the oak door.

There was silence till Chard trumpeted again.

"I see no reason, sir, to express such dissatisfaction with the work done in my Form! I trust, sir, that I am capable of taking a Form in Livy."

"Trustin' nature, Chard's!" murmured Carter.

This time the funny man of the Fifth was rewarded with a chuckle. But Compton impatiently made a sign for silence.

"If you insist, sir, upon taking the Fifth Form in this class," Chard's voice went on, "I can only protest! But I protest, sir, with all my power. I protest against it as an invasion of my rights! I protest against it as a slight put upon the senior member of the staff.

There were grave faces now in the listening Fifth. Matters were getting serious.

They did Livy in the Fifth. And everyone knows what an impenetrable brute Titus Livius is, unless a fellow works.

The Fifth listened anxiously.

But not a sound of McCann's quiet voice came to them.

Aubrey Compton drew a deep breath.

"That's that!" he said in a low voice. "McCann's takin' us this class."

"Looks like it!" groaned Peveril.

"I say, anybody got a Livy?" asked Raymond anxiously. "If we're going to be up to McCann we ought to take a squint at the stuff. It doesn't matter about Chard—everybody knows he mugs it up himself before he ladles it out to us! But with McCann—"

Compton suddenly ran off down the passage.

"I say, what's the game, Aubrey?" called out Bob, rather anxiously.

Aubrey did not answer. He vanished round the corner into the Form-room passage.

The Fifth Form men looked at one another. Chard, still trumpeting in the Head's study, trumpeted unheeded.

"What's old Aubrey up to?" muttered Seymour.

"Something up against the McCann man!" said Burke. "Let's go an' see."

The whole crowd followed Aubrey. Chard was still trumpeting. But if he was raising his voice for the benefit of an unseen audience, he had lost his audience now.

The Fifth arrived at their Form-room door. It stood ajar, and Aubrey was within.

"Don't touch the door!" came

Compton's voice from inside the Form-room.

"But what——"

"Keep clear!"

The Fifth Formers kept clear. They could see now what old Aubrey was up to, and they grinned happily.

Aubrey was working swiftly. There was no time to be lost if McCann was coming to take class. Standing on a chair inside, Aubrey was lodging a wastepaper-basket on top of the thick oaken door, leaning a little on the lintel of the doorway.

"What's in it, Aubrey?" breathed Teddy Seymour.

"Soot from the chimney, and the best part of a quart bottle of ink!"

"Phew!"

"I've no time for more! But I fancy that will be enough for McCann! Will he feel like spoutin' Livy after this little lot?"

"Will he," chuckled Teddy—"what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Aubrey, old man——" said Bob uneasily.

"You shut up, fathead! All you men clear off—better not be on the scene when McCann gets it in his neck! None of us, of course, knows anythin' about this!"

There was a chuckle.

"But we're supposed to be waitin' here——"

"We've a right to suppose that Chard's still in his rooms, as he hasn't turned up here to let us in," answered Compton coolly. "Get across the quad to Chard's rooms!"

"But you?"

"I'm droppin' from the window when I'm through! Clear off, before the Blighter blows along the passage!"

"Old Aubrey thinks of everythin'," said Peveril admiringly. "Come on, you men! Let's go across to Chard's rooms and inquire why he hasn't come!"

"But, I say——" began Bob.

"Oh, come on!"

Bob was hustled away among the

Fifth. They marched out into the quad and walked across to the old clock tower, under which were situated the rooms occupied by the Fifth Form master. As Chard had not turned up at his Form-room they had a right, as Compton pointed out, to walk across to his rooms and ask what they were to do. It was an excellent excuse, and it got them safely off the scene when McCann put his head into the booby trap.

Aubrey did not linger.

Having given the finishing touch to the trap for McCann, he dropped from the Form-room window and scudded across the quad after his friends.

At Chard's rooms, in a happy crowd, they waited.

"Old Aubrey's the man to put paid to the Blighter!" said Peverill.

And the Fifth chuckled, and agreed that old Aubrey was!

In the Head's study Chard still trumpeted, unheard by his Form. Had they heard him now probably the Fifth would not have been so satisfied with the state of affairs. The trumpet had taken on a more subdued note.

"I am glad, sir—I am glad!" came the trumpet tones, unheard by any but James McCann. "I am glad, sir, that I have convinced you—that you have decided, sir, not to put such a slight upon the senior member of the staff—a member of the staff, sir, implicitly trusted by Dr. Chetwode. I am glad, sir, that you honour me so far as to trust my Form in my hands!" There was a note of sarcasm in the trumpet. "I repeat, sir, that I am glad that you have conceded this point, Mr. McCann!"

The Head's door opened, and Chard appeared in the doorway, had there been eyes to see. But there were no eyes to see. All Chard's Form were on the other side of the quad before this.

"I am glad, sir!" said Chard once more, with great dignity.

"Very well, Mr. Chard!" said James McCann. He had conceded the point—perhaps thinking that the discussion would have the desired effect, and that there would be some work done in the Fifth that morning. Chard, threatened by the indignity of having his Form taken out of his hands, might get a move on.

Jimmy McCann hoped so. He did not want to wound Chard's feelings more than was essential. He wanted, and intended, to stop slacking at High Coombe. But he preferred gentle measures, if gentle measures would effect his purpose. If talking to Chard would work the oracle, Jimmy McCann was willing to let it go at that.

Chard rolled away majestically. He was feeling bucked. He could not perhaps feel that he had put the young Head in his place. But he had, at least, got away with his protest. He had gained his point—he had prevented McCann from barging into his Form-room and taking his Form out of his hands. That, at least, was something—it was a sort of triumph. So Chard felt bucked as he rolled down the passage to the door of his Form-room.

To his surprise, he sighted none of the Fifth. He had felt pretty certain that they had been within hearing of his voice while he talked to the Head in his study. None, however, were in sight now. They were not even waiting for him at the Form-room door. Chard naturally supposed that, tired of waiting, they had gone into the Form-room—as Jimmy McCann certainly would have supposed had he come along in the place of Mr. Chard.

But he hadn't.

It was Chard's plump hand that pushed open the door of the Fifth Form Room. It was Chard's plump figure that rolled in, and upon Chard's majestic head the wastepaper-basket, crammed with soot soaked in ink, descended.

Crash!

Chard gave a gurgling cry.

What had happened was quite unknown to him for the moment. He gurgled, staggered and choked. He spluttered wildly and frantically.

Something black and choking—it was soot—clothed him like a garment. Something bonneted him, fitting over his head like a very large hat—it was the wastepaper basket. The rim of the basket lodged on the bridge of Chard's prominent nose. Its contents streamed over him, blackening him, choking him, suffocating him.

"Urrrrrgh!" gurgled Chard.  
"Wurrrrgh! What—gurrgrgh!"

He staggered back into the passage. Strange noises penetrated to the other Form-rooms. Doors opened. Penge looked out from the Shell, Capes from the Fourth. Goggs, the maths master, popped out of the Sixth, his spectacles almost falling off, his scanty remnant of hair almost rising on end at sight of the wild, weird figure staggering in the corridor.

"What——" gasped Mr. Penge.

"What——" stuttered Mr. Capes.

"Wh-a-at——" gasped Mr. Goggs.

"Urrrrgghh! Wurrgrgghh!  
Gurrgrghh!" gurgled Chard.

He grabbed at the mysterious something on his head, plucked it off and hurled it to the floor. He revealed a face as black as the blackest in Central Africa. His eyes rolled horribly from that blackened face. The other masters stared at him, speechless. There was a tread in the passage, and James McCann arrived. Jimmy McCann was not easily surprised. But he jumped at the sight of the master of the Fifth.

"Who—what——"

"Wurrgrgghhh!"

"Upon my word!" ejaculated Jimmy McCann.

He stared at Chard, then glanced at the sooty wastepaper-basket and the pool of inky soot in the doorway. He understood.

"Guurrrrghh!"

"Pray let me assist you!" Mr. Chard at that moment was not pleasant to touch, but Jimmy was not particular.

He took the Fifth Form master's arm and led him away to the nearest bathroom. Mr. Chard, it was obvious, was not in a state to take his Form in Livy. What he wanted was hot water and soap—lots of hot water and lots of soap! Jimmy McCann kindly piloted him to the region of hot water and soap and left him to it—a faint smile dawning on his face as he walked away.

## CHAPTER 22.

### Carter's Fun Misfires!

THE Fifth Form at the School for Slackers suffered that morning. "Up" to Jimmy McCann for Livy, the High Coombe Fifth groaned in anguish of spirit.

Confident in Aubrey's masterly scheme for putting paid to the Blighter, they had waited, over at Chard's rooms under the clock-tower, in happy anticipation.

No Beak, though never so grimly determined to make himself obnoxious, could possibly have taken the Form in Livy after getting a basketful of soot and ink on his head. It was only an hour, and there was at least an hour's hard labour in getting off that soot and ink. Livy, with Chard, meant an hour's happy slacking, while Jimmy McCann was cleaning off soot and ink. It was all so happy and delightful to anticipate—and all so utterly rotten and deplorable the way it had turned out.

It was foul luck!

For Mr. Chard being on the casualty list, busy with hot water and soap, rubbing and scrubbing at inky soot, the headmaster naturally took the Fifth, after all.

They were summoned to their Form-room, to find McCann there. And with feelings that could not have been expressed in words they prepared for the worst time they had ever experienced at High Coombe.

Jimmy, to their surprise, and considerably to their relief, made no reference to the booby trap. Old Lig-

gins, the house-porter, was cleaning up soot and ink from the doorway while they took their places. Jimmy did not seem to notice it. What had happened was a matter for the Fifth Form master to deal with; and Jimmy, though the High Coomers did not give him credit for it, was not a man to overstep another man's province. Perhaps, too, the peculiar episode appealed to his sense of humour.

Chard, secretly if not openly an aider and abettor of the resistance to the new Head, would probably have smiled had that booby trap caught its intended victim. He was not smiling now! Whatever Peter Chard was feeling like, it was absolutely certain that he was not amused.

The Fifth were taken at every disadvantage. Not a man in the Form had prepared that lesson. Even Bob Darrell, who often set the ancient traditions of High Coombe at naught by doing some work, had been talking games in Big Study the evening before, and had somehow forgotten prep. With Chard that did not matter. With McCann it mattered fearfully.

Bob rather wished that he had given Livy a look-in and postponed till another time the task of explaining to Tredegar, the captain of the school, that a series of defeats through a whole season did not constitute a record to feel satisfied and complacent about! But it was rather too late to wish that now; Bob was "for it" with the rest.

And that was not all. But for their faith in Aubrey's masterly scheme, some of the Fifth, at least, would have taken a hasty squint at Livy before McCann started on them. As the matter stood, they had taken no squint. The book of Livy with which McCann was now dealing was as a sealed book to the unhappy Fifth.

Some of the fellows gave Aubrey Compton rather black looks. Aubrey, popular as a leader of rebellion against the Blighter McCann, was rather at a discount now. Aubrey had landed

them in this—Aubrey, with his dashed cleverness. If the silly ass had, only left things alone!

Unfortunately, he hadn't! Chard rubbed and scrubbed in a bath-room, and in Chard's Form-room they suffered under McCann.

It was rather a surprise to them—and not an agreeable surprise—that the brute seemed to know Livy inside out. It was a standing joke in the Fifth that Chard "mugged up" a lesson before he handed it out. Carter, the funny ass of the Fifth, had even, on occasion, abstracted and hidden Chard's book, and left him at a dead loss. Such a jest would not have served with McCann. The brute seemed to have the whole thing in his head. He was, as Aubrey remarked in a bitter whisper, the kind of brute who would!

But there was not much whispering in the Fifth. McCann's eye would glint at a whisper. Nobody wanted to catch that eye.

He soon had them, as Peverill elegantly described it afterwards, sweating.

The new Head was getting to know his High Coombe; but even he seemed a little surprised by the abysmal depths of ignorance in the Fifth Form.

He did his best to lift the Fifth out of that abyss.

Not a man in the Form escaped.

Man after man stood up, with resentful heart and burning cheeks, to display his dismal and woeful ignorance of that great Latin historian, Titus Livius.

Bob Darrell, after a series of blunders, felt rather ashamed of himself. Every other fellow in the Form, after much worse blunders, felt only angry and indignant. Who was this rotter who was making them work like fellows swotting for a beastly scholarship? What the dickens did Livy matter, anyhow? The High Coomers shared the opinion of the Old Boy in the song:

"A man doesn't come up to Barcroft to learn,

But because his dear pater has money to burn!"

Certainly the Fifth Form men were not there to learn, if they could help it. The awful trouble was that they couldn't! Gladly they would have risen as one man, and hurled Jimmy McCann forth from the Form-room that he was desecrating with these new ideas about work.

But they had tried that game once and found it far from a paying proposition. With gloomy, indignant faces they suffered under McCann—and dismally resolved to give prep a look-in in the future, in case the unspeakable brute took them in hand again.

How McCann packed so much work into an hour was a mystery. He put as much into that hour as Chard put into a term. Happy slackers in the back benches of the Fifth, accustomed to having that drowsy existence forgotten by Chard, were called up, one after another, bewildered and indignant at the mere idea they they might possibly know something about the lesson in hand. They blinked like owls dragged into unaccustomed daylight.

After a minute with Jimmy they sank back on their benches, spent and exhausted, feeling their happy world crumbling to pieces round them. Sixty seconds with Jimmy tired a fellow more than sixty whole classes with Chard.

Only Carter, greatly daring, ventured to introduce an element of comedy into that tragic hour. Carter had his reputation as a funny man to keep up; and, really, the tormented Fifth was in need of a little comic relief.

Carter affected an ignorance even more abysmal than that actually existing in the High Coombe Fifth. With a face of innocent inquiry, he asked Mr. McCann whether Titus Livius was the same person as the Emperor Titus. Even Peverill knew better than this.

Mr. McCann gave Carter one keen, searching glance. But Carter's face was as innocent as a baby's. He assumed the air of a fellow who, eager to know, was taking this opportunity of acquiring knowledge. A happy grin went round the worried Fifth. That beggar Carter was pulling the brute's leg! They wondered at his nerve, but they were glad to hear him.

"No, Carter," said Mr. McCann, perhaps not oblivious of the happy grin on many faces, "Titus Livius, the historian, was quite a different person from the Emperor Titus."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" said Carter meekly. Having got away with this, Carter pursued the game. "I thought they might be the same person, sir, as they both had the surname of Oates."

There was a suppressed gurgle in the Fifth. Carter was going strong!

"The surname of—what?" asked McCann.

"Oates, sir!" said Carter, innocently. "The celebrated and infamous Titus Oates, sir."

Carter might have got away with his first leg-pull. A fellow—at High Coombe, at least—might imaginably have mixed up Titus the historian with Titus the emperor. But even at High Coombe no fellow could possibly have mixed up either of them with Titus Oates. Carter, in his laudable desire to relieve the tension in the Fifth Form Room, had gone too far.

Mr. McCann's eye seemed to penetrate the jester of the Fifth like a lancet. Carter, wishing that he had stopped in time, stood uneasily under that penetrating eye.

"To whom do you go for history, Carter?"

"We're up to Mr. Mace for history, sir," faltered Carter.

"Very good!" said Mr. McCann. "Your questions show, I fear, that you have paid very little attention to Mr. Mace. I shall speak to Mr. Mace."

Carter breathed more freely. He was not afraid of Mace.



But Jimmy had not finished yet.

"I shall ask Mr. Mace to set you three papers, Carter—one on Titus Livius, one of the Emperor Titus, and one on Titus Oates."

"Thank you, sir!" said Carter demurely. Mace, of course, would set him the papers if McCann gave the word. But Mace would never ask to see them, so that did not matter.

Alas for Carter! Even yet the Blighter had not finished.

"I shall ask Mr. Mace to bring the papers to me for my inspection, Carter. If they are not satisfactory I shall set you a whole book of Livy to write out, and you will remain in detention after three every day until it is completed. The papers must be shown up this evening."

Collapse of Carter!

He sat down with a bump. His legs failed to support him. Three awful history papers, which had to be done, and done well! The alternative was days—weeks—of detention. "After three" was the High Coombe term for the end of the day's work. After three nobody at High Coombe even pretended to work—until prep, when a few did pretend. After three a fellow was free as a bird in the air, unless he had detentions, which seldom happened. Carter had an awful vision of his unhappy self, sitting lonely in the Form-room after three every day for days on end writing endless Livy!

Seldom, or never, had a funny man looked so dreadfully serious as Carter looked now. Three rotten history papers, every one of them a "stinker"—or else endless Livy! The joy of life had departed from Edward Carter. Nobody looking at him now would have supposed that he had ever been funny in his life, or fancied that there was such a thing as fun in the scheme of things. An undertaker's mute, sitting beside Carter, would have looked merry and bright in comparison.

Needless to say, there were no more comic interludes in that hour. Never

had an hour lasted so long. There were, of course, only sixty minutes in it, but each minute seemed to drag its weary length along like a wounded snake. It seemed to the Fifth almost too good to be true when the Blighter dismissed them at last. They almost tottered out of their Form-room.

The next school, fortunately, was history with Mace. They had a much-needed nerve rest, in history with Mace. Mr. Mace, one of the oldest institutions at High Coombe, had reached the ripe age of seventy. He liked to take things easily; so did the Fifth! Whether Mace said anything to them during that school, the Fifth did not know. If they did, they did not listen—they were too busy telling one another what they would like to do to Jimmy McCann!

## CHAPTER 23.

It's a Winner!

"YOU fool!"

Aubrey Compton raised his eyebrows.

They did not call one another fools at High Coombe except perhaps in moments of terrible stress. Silly asses, cads and fatheads they might call one another—but not fools. That kind of expression was barred.

But Carter of the Fifth, glaring into Study No. 3, did not seem to care a bean for the gracefulness of manner and elegance of expression on which High Coombe justly prided itself. High Coombe fellows did not call other fellows fools, but Carter called the dandy of the Fifth a fool, and followed it up with a series of other epithets seldom heard in that elegant and luxurious study.

Compton could raise his eyebrows no further without pushing them over the top of his head. But his stare of surprised disdain had no effect on the enraged Carter. Striding into Study No. 3, he actually shook his fist at the disdainful Aubrey.

"Draw it mild, old chap! said Bob

Darrell, glancing up from the grate, where he was making toast for tea.

Toast-making was a new industry for the Fifth-Formers. It dated from the abolition of fagging for the Fourth—one of the reforms of the unspeakable McCann.

If Fifth Form men wanted toast for tea, they had to make it themselves. Hence Bob's present occupation; hence, also, the fact that Teddy Seymour was spreading butter on toast; hence, likewise, the frowning look on Aubrey's handsome face. If there was one rotten act for which Aubrey could forgive McCann less than for any other, it was taking away his fag. He felt rather like an ancient Roman patrician deprived of his slave.

Carter brandished his fist at Aubrey. He seemed almost on the point of tapping Aubrey's nose with it.

"You silly ass!" said Aubrey.

"Fathead! Idiot! Look what you've done!" yelled Carter. "You had to lay a fatheaded booby trap for McCann! Chard had to poke his silly head into it! And now I'm landed with three putrid history papers!"

"Mace ought to refuse to take the papers to the meddlin' cad!" said Aubrey.

"Talk sense!" barked Carter. "What can Mace do, except dodder? He told me he was sorry—fat lot of good that does! Dodderin' old ass! McCann's jawed him, and he's set me three genuine stinkers!"

"Go to Chard!"

"I've been to Chard," wailed the hapless Carter. "Popularity Peter can't do anythin'. He doesn't seem keen, either! He seems to me rather sore about gettin' that muck on his napper this mornin'."

"He must know that it was meant for McCann—"

"Fat lot it matters whom it was meant for to the man who fielded it!" growled Carter. "I can tell you Peter's shirty."

Compton shrugged his elegant shoulders.

"Squat down and have some of this toast," suggested Bob. "You've got time for the papers between tea and prep!"

"Prep!" groaned Carter. "Yes, there'll be prep! Can't risk cutting it as usual with that brute on the prowl. But look here—that idiot Mace has set me three awful stinkers. What am I going to do? What do I know about Titus Livius, or the other dashed Titus, or Titus Oates? It was a dirty trick, the Blighter catching me up like that! Look here—you landed me in this, Compton, and it's up to you to get me out of it. You must think of something! See?"

Aubrey was silent. He had set himself up as leader of rebellion. Fellows had followed his lead. There had been disaster. All the Fifth had been through it, Carter the worst of the lot. It was up to Aubrey to help him—if Aubrey could think of anything useful. And he could feel for a fellow who had three papers to do in one afternoon.

The amount of mugging-up required was tremendous. Mace had to be asked for books—the books had to be dug into—skimmed, if not read. Knowledge, certainly, would have been acquired in the process. But Carter was not an eager fellow in quest of knowledge; he was only eager for a way of getting out of doing these three papers, which he justly, if inelegantly, described as "stinkers."

"I've a jolly good mind—" began Carter wrathfully. His fist was clenched, and his eyes fixed on Aubrey's nose. One, at least, of the rebel leader's followers was on the verge of mutiny—red and rabid mutiny. Three "genuine stinkers" fed up Edward Carter with the superb Aubrey as leader.

Bob Darrell interposed hastily.

"Chuck it, Carter, old man!"

"I've a jolly good mind—" repeated Carter. It seemed that he expected to derive some solace in his calamity from the punching of Aubrey's nose.

"No good raggin'!" said the pacific Teddy.

"Three stinkers!" hissed Carter. He came back to that like the refrain of a song. "Three awful stinkers!"

"If you'd shut up a minute——" drawled Aubrey.

"Three genuine stinkers——"

"I gather that Mace has to take the papers to McCann before prep," said Compton. "Suppose you write them and give them in to Mace. Mace will be satisfied with them, whatever they're like——"

"What's the good of that, when McCann's going over them, you ass?"

"Suppose McCann never saw them?"

Carter blinked.

"He will see them if Mace takes them to his study, won't he? Think he's going to go suddenly blind just to please me?"

"Do give a man a chance to speak!" complained Aubrey. "Suppose two or three fellows were barging about in the corridor and barged into Mace—quite by accident, of course—as he was passin' the corridor window. The window's open——"

"It's always shut!"

"It will be open this evenin'. Mace comes a cropper—the papers fly out of the window, with a little assistance, perhaps—and a man under the window snaffles them. They disappear."

"Oh, my hat!"

"What can McCann do?" argued Compton. "The papers have been done—though accidentally lost! Mace will testify that they were good papers. Mace is a gentleman. McCann can't do anythin'. You've done your papers, and that's that."

Carter stared at Aubrey and drew a deep breath. Teddy Seymour gazed at him with open-mouthed admiration. Only Bob looked dubious.

"It's a winner!" said Teddy. "McCann can't do a thing! Aubrey, old man, I've always said you had a head on your shoulders."

"By gum!" said Carter. "I say, I'm sorry I called you names, Compton. I might have known you'd see a way

out!" Carter's fists were undoubted now and he no longer looked warlike. "I say, it's a corker! McCann couldn't even smell a rat. And if he did, he couldn't do anythin'." Carter chuckled, in good spirits again after a weary day. "I say, it will be one up against the Blighter! I say, I'll get those papers done—if McCann isn't goin' to see them they'll be all right! Anything will do for Mace."

Carter, grinning, went back to his own study to write the papers. The load was lifted from his mind. It was no longer a question of work. What Carter of the Fifth knew about Titus Livius, the imperial Titus, and Titus Oates would not have covered half a sheet of paper.

But as he had said, anything would do for Mace! Mace was a gentleman—in the High Coombe definition of that word. If Mace had ever found fault with a fellow's work it was so long ago that the oldest inhabitant could not recall it. Mace might have given a fellow full marks for describing Titus as Emperor of Japan!

Carter was precisely twenty minutes writing out three history papers. All he had to do was to cover the sheets with writing. That was easy enough. Certainly, those papers, if they had met Jimmy McCann's eyes, would have caused those eyes to open very wide—almost to pop out of his head! But they were not going to meet Jimmy McCann's eyes, so that was all right! Anything was good enough for Mace; and quite good enough to fly out of the corridor window and disappear!

Study No. 3 were finishing tea when Carter came back, beaming.

"Right as rain, you men!" said the happy Carter.

"You've done them already?" asked Bob, with a stare.

"Done them, and taken them to Mace, and been told they are quite good—'quite good, my dear Carter!'" answered Carter, with a delightful imitation of Mr. Mace's cracked and squeaky voice.

Study No. 3 laughed.

"Mace is goin' to the Head at six!" added Carter. "It's up to you now, Aubrey."

"Leave it to me!" drawled Aubrey. "I'll see to it that those papers never reach McCann!"

Carter went back to his study happy. Aubrey looked at his watch.

"Plenty of time yet!" he remarked. "But we'd better be ready! Come on, you men."

Bob Darrell hesitated a moment. Aubrey's eyes glittered at him.

"You're comin'?"

"Oh! Yes! I suppose so!"

And Bob came. Aubrey's strategic dispositions were soon made. It was all so simple—easy as falling off a form. The corridor window, close by the Head's study, was wide open. Outside, in the quad, Teddy Seymour took up his stand, leaning idly on the old stone wall, waiting for the papers to drop out like ripe fruit into his hands.

In the corridor, Aubrey and Bob waited. Six o'clock rang out from the clock-tower over Chard's rooms across the quad. Mace was not yet in sight. Aubrey knitted his brows. The Head generally left his study at six. If that doddering old ass Mace was late—

He was late! It was more than five minutes past six when he appeared. Mace was old and slow. Still, Mr. McCann had not left his study, so that was all right. Having an appointment there with a member of his staff, no doubt McCann felt bound to wait.

"Here he comes!" breathed Aubrey at last.

Mr. Mace appeared round a corner. He was a tall, thin, old gentleman, with gold-rimmed glasses on a long, sharp nose, and white hair—what there was of it. Mace had never been known to keep an appointment to the exact time, so long as the present generation of High Coomers had known him. Late as he was to see Mr. McCann, he doddered slowly on his way, the papers in his hand.

As he reached the open corridor

window, Compton nudged Darrell. Both of them rushed madly down the corridor.

Bump!

Mr. Mace spluttered and staggered. Two seniors of the Fifth crashing into him almost up-ended him. He clutched at Darrell with one hand, at Compton with the other, spluttering, the papers in his hand fluttering anywhere.

Bob Darrell grasped Mace to steady him, skilfully revolving him away from the fallen papers. Two of them had fluttered out of the window on their own. In a twinkling, Aubrey had fielded the other and tossed it after them.

One swift glance showed him Teddy Seymour bagging all three outside. Then he turned to Mr. Mace, profuse with apologies.

"Oh, sir! So sorry, sir—quite an accident—"

"Urrrggh!" spluttered the history master of High Coombe. "Wurrgh!"

"Awfully sorry, sir!" said Bob, sincerely enough. He thought it rather rotten to barge Mace—though he had done it.

Kindly, politely, dutifully, they helped the breathless master on towards the Head's study. In his dizzy confusion, Mace seemed not to have missed his papers yet, which was all to the good. The later he inquired for them, the better chance for Teddy Seymour. As they helped Mr. Mace onward Compton winked at Darrell behind his doddering back.

## CHAPTER 24.

### Putrid Luck!

JIMMY McCANN, at six o'clock, rose from his writing-table in his study.

Mr. Mace's knock should have been heard on the door precisely at that moment had Jimmy's staff been as efficient as Jimmy himself. But it was not heard; and Jimmy, having to wait for Mr. Mace, walked to the window, which was wide open, and stood looking

out into red sunset glowing over moors and coombes and rolling Atlantic.

He stood there, breathing in deep breaths of salt air from the sea—and, in the meanwhile, noticing that a Fifth Form fellow was leaning idly against the stone wall under the corridor window next to his study.

Jimmy frowned a little. He did not like to see senior men loafing idly about like that. He was considering whether to call to Teddy Seymour and give him a hint to get moving, when a surprising thing happened. Papers fluttered from the corridor window.

Teddy grasped at them as they landed, and captured them.

Stuffing them under his coat, he started to run.

For a second, Jimmy, at his study window, stood transfixed. Then his voice shot after Teddy like a bullet.

"Seymour!"

Teddy spun round in utter dismay.

His eyes almost goggled at Jimmy, framed in the window.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Oh! Yes, sir!"

"What are those papers, Seymour?"

"Pip-pip-pip-papers, sir!" stammered Teddy.

"Give them to me at once!"

Like a fellow mesmerised, Teddy Seymour came to the window and handed the papers up to the Head.

"Thank you, Seymour!"

Teddy tottered away.

Mr. McCann looked at the papers, and his face grew grim as he read Edward Carter's compositions on the three subjects of Titus the historian, Titus the emperor, and Titus Oates!

There was a knock at his door.

Mr. Mace came in rather breathlessly. Compton and Darrell had helped him as far as the door. Compton's swift glance, before the door closed, fell on Jimmy McCann—on the papers in his hand, and on Carter's almost illegible scrawl on the papers! Compton jumped as if he had been shot. The door, closing, almost hit him on the nose. Darrell stared at him.

"What's the matter, old man?" he asked.

Aubrey did not answer. His feelings, just then, were too deep for words. He almost limped away. In Study No. 3 they found Teddy Seymour, and from that dismayed youth learned what had happened.

"Of all the putrid luck!" groaned Aubrey when Teddy had told his story. "Who could have thought of the Blighter looking out of his window at the wrong moment—or have guarded against it? I thought my scheme for saving Carter was watertight—and now he's properly in the soup. The Blighter'll skin him when he reads those papers!"

Four or five Fifth Form men had to hold Carter when he saw Aubrey again after he had seen McCann! Carter was absolutely frantic. Those papers, never intended for Jimmy's eyes, had come under the Head's survey, after all. And Jimmy had not been so satisfied with them as Mr. Mace had been! Livy, endless Livy, stretched before Carter of the Fifth! Livy, and Livy, and Livy—every day in the Form-room, after three! Livy, and Livy, and Livy—world without end!

Carter raved. Only by sheer force was he kept from assault and battery. Judging by Carter's remarks, his feelings towards the Blighter McCann were as moonlight unto sunlight compared with his feelings towards Aubrey Compton of his own Form.

Even Aubrey had to acknowledge that prosperity, so far, did not seem to be smiling on the Fifth Form feud!

## CHAPTER 25.

### A Staggering Invitation!

"I 'M not botherin' about a dashed usher!" said Aubrey Compton, the Dandy of the Fifth.

Teddy Seymour grinned, and Bob Darrell frowned.

The "dashed usher" to whom the magnificent Aubrey alluded was no

less a person that James McCann, the new headmaster of High Coombe.

There was a chuckle from five or six seniors in Big Study.

"Usher!" remarked Corkran of the Sixth. "That's good!"

"Oh, good!" said Tredegar, captain of High Coombe "I'd like the Blighter to hear that—what?"

"A dashed usher!" repeated Aubrey. "The man comes here from nowhere, looks like a commercial traveller, and acts like a prison governor. He barges into the old Head's place, and fancies himself a headmaster! Headmasters are gentlemen!"

"But——" said Bob Darrell.

"You shut up, Darrell, old man!" said Corkran. "If you can see some good in McCann, nobody else can, and we don't want to hear your views!"

Bob Darrell grunted.

"Who's coming out for games practice?" he asked.

There was a howl of indignant protest in Big Study.

"Oh, shut up, Darrell!"

"Give us a rest!"

"Park it, old man!"

Games practice did not appeal to the fellows who were adorning the comfortable armchairs in Big Study with their elegant persons. Randal of the Sixth, laziest man even in the School for Slackers, lifted his head from a pile of cushions, and said:

"You idiot!"

After which effort, Randal's head sank back again.

"I was sayin'——" said Compton.

"Go it, Aubrey!" "That chorus of encouragement showed how much more popular Aubrey's remarks were than Darrell's in Big Study.

"I was sayin' that no man here is goin' to change his manners and customs to please a sneaking usher from some dirty little private school."

"Hear, hear!"

"We're makin' up a little party for the Okeham Theatre to-night, just the same as if the Venerable Beak was still

here and the Blighter back in the slum he came from," said Aubrey.

If Aubrey Compton expected the chorus of encouraging approval to be renewed, he was disappointed. Not a sound came from the Fifth and Sixth Formers in Big Study. Indeed, Tredegar of the Sixth, who was leaning on the door, opened it and strolled out, as if he had suddenly remembered business elsewhere. Corkran half-rose, but, catching Aubrey's eye, sat down again, looking rather uncomfortable. Carter winked at Bob Darrell, who laughed. Aubrey knitted his handsome brows with vexation.

Instead of rising to his words with enthusiasm, the seniors looked as if he had given them a cold shower-bath.

"If any man funks, he can stick in," said Aubrey, with a curl of the lip. "I'm goin' exactly the same as if the McCann man had never blown in."

"There'd be a row if he spotted us breakin' out!" murmured Peverill.

"Too jolly risky!" said Raymond.

"Where's the risk?" Aubrey sneered. "Even the Blighter hasn't taken the prefects' keys away yet! You're a prefect, Corky, and you've still got your key to the lobby, and your key to the gate."

"And I'm keepin' them," said Corkran, "on my key-ring, and my key-ring in my trousers pocket, old bean! I'm not askin' that usher to sack me from High Coombe!"

"It's the sack for breakin' out at night if a fellow gets snaffled!" said Peverill. "Not good enough, Aubrey, old man!"

"I dare say the brute would be jolly glad to make an example of a man!" said Carter. "It would be like him!"

"Rot!" answered Aubrey. "He made out that he was goin' to sack me his first week here, but Chard talked him round. And I'm jolly certain he wanted to be talked round. He don't dare sack a man. The governors would pretty soon call him to order if he started sackings!"

"Um!" said Corkran.

"I'm goin'!" said Aubrey Compton.

His eyes were gleaming, his handsome face set and obstinate. "Who's comin' with me?"

Dead silence!

Enthusiasm in Big Study had absolutely petered out.

"Don't all speak at once!" said Aubrey, with bitter sarcasm.

Nobody spoke.

"I'm goin'."

Silence!

"You men all lettin' me down?"

Still silence! Apparently they were.

"You're lendin' me your key, Corky, if you're not comin'?"

Slowly Corky shook his head.

"No, old man! Better chuck it——"

"I'm not askin' for your advice—I'm askin' for your key."

"Nothin' doin'!" said Corkran. "I'm a prefect, and——"

Aubrey Compton walked to the door. He threw it open, then turned his scornful glance on the men in Big Study. They all looked at him uneasily. They all liked and admired old Aubrey, hailed him as a leader in the resistance to McCann and all his works. But——

There was a big "but." McCann had the eye of a hawk. Suppose he swooped like one on a fellow out of bounds after lights out! It was, as Peverill had said, not good enough!

Under Aubrey's scornful stare, only one mouth opened. It was Teddy's. But again a glare from Bob stopped him and Teddy shut it up again, his words unspoken.

"So nobody's coming with me to-night?" said Aubrey. He did not lower his voice, though the door was wide open and his words were perfectly audible in the passage outside.

"Well, I'm goin'."

With that, Aubrey stalked out of Big Study and slammed the door after him, with a slam that echoed through the House. Which was quite an unaccustomed thing in that dwelling-place of elegant and fastidious slackers!

## CHAPTER 26.

At the Head's Telephone!

THERE was considerable, if suppressed excitement in High Coombe that afternoon. Excitement was unusual, or had been unusual, in the School for Slackers. But things were not as they had been. High Coombe had fallen upon new and exciting times. Under the Venerable Beak, nothing special had ever seemed to happen. Now something or other always seemed to be happening.

Corkran, as head prefect, was worried and annoyed. Head prefect's duty, of course, was to put a stern stop to that sort of thing. Worry about duty had never bothered Corky very much before the coming of McCann. But he did not want to be called over the coals by the Blighter. He did not want to be deprived of his prefectship, perhaps of his Sixth Form privileges!

He considered that Aubrey might have taken care not to mention the matter in his hearing. As for lending the breaker of bounds his key, wild horses would not have dragged that key from Corky's trousers pocket.

In the Sixth and Fifth they discussed it; and as dusk fell over High Coombe and blotted out the green moors and the blue Atlantic, excitement grew. The juniors, of course, got hold of it. Ferguson of the Fourth carried the news to the Burrow, and spread it among the fags.

"Compton's asking for it!" said Ferguson. "Sitting up and begging for it, you men!"

"Cheeking McCann again?" asked Fatty Pye.

"More'n that!" said Ferguson.

"Not another booby trap?" grinned Loom. "He caught Chard in the last one. Peter was shirty for days."

"More'n that!" said Ferg.

"Well, what?" asked a dozen voices.

"Breaking out to-night to go down to Okeham!" said Ferguson impressively. "I heard it from Carter and Raymond—they were jawing in the

quad. Lots of fellows know! Just as if the Venerable Beak was still here, you know."

"Oh, I say!" said Donkin, otherwise the Donkey.

They knew of Compton's plan in the Shell. Babbie declared that old Compton was a sportsman, and that he only wished he'd asked him to go. The dandy of the Fifth was certainly not likely to ask for the company of a junior in the Shell. Had he done so, however, it was probable that Babbie would have changed his mind.

For though all High Coombe agreed that this was frightfully daring and sporting of Aubrey, not a man, senior or junior, wanted to break out with him. In this matter, the rebel of High Coombe had to plough a lonely furrow. Which showed how great a change James McCann had already wrought in the School for Slackers!

Bob Darrell was deeply worried. Like Ferguson, he knew that McCann was not a man to be trifled with. At tea-time in Study No. 3, Bob's rugged face was almost as long as a fiddle, while Teddy Seymour looked unusually grave. Aubrey was cheery and smiling. He was enjoying the excitement that was thrilling the school. Common prudence would have dictated a little more caution.

The superb Aubrey disdained prudence and caution. He liked to be looked at and admired as the one fellow who had the nerve to stand up to the McCann man and treat a dashed usher as a dashed usher ought to be treated.

"You're a silly ass, old man!" Bob said, for about the tenth time. "What's the good of playing the giddy ox? The man's headmaster, and he means business. And it's a silly, rotten game breaking out at night."

"No harm in goin' to a theatre, Bob!" Teddy pointed out.

"I know that!" grunted Bob. "But fellows who break out don't generally go to theatres. It's against the rule to go out at night, and what's the good

of pretending it's not a necessary and good rule? McCann's bound to enforce it—he would deserve to be booted out if he didn't! You're doing wrong, Aubrey, and you know it!"

"Quite!" agreed Aubrey. "That's the attraction in it!"

"Oh, don't be a silly ass!" retorted Bob.

"Which of you fellows is comin' with me?" asked Aubrey calmly.

"I'm not," growled Bob. "Nor Teddy, either."

Compton raised his eyebrows.

"Are you Teddy's fag-master, by any chance?" he inquired.

"Don't be a silly ass!"

"You're repeatin' yourself, old bean! You're comin', Teddy? Be a pal!"

Teddy hesitated, looking from one to the other. As usual, he was pulled two ways — between Bob's steady common sense and the attraction of Aubrey's recklessness. After all, where was the harm in going to a theatre? It was not as if it was an excursion to some shady place where they played cards or billiards—Teddy drew the line at that, though some High Coombe men did not. It was only breaking a rule, after all! True, it was rather an important rule. Even Compton did not maintain that it would be a good thing, generally, for schoolboys to keep all hours and roam about at midnight at their own sweet will!

"You're not going, Teddy!" growled Bob. "Don't be a fool!"

"Teddy's not lettin' a pal down," said Aubrey. "Teddy's not goin' to grease up to McCannr."

Bob crimsoned.

"Who's greasing up to McCann?" he bawled.

Aubrey raised a well-manicured hand.

"Dear man, Ohard will hear you across the quad at that rate!" he said.

"You're comin', Teddy?"

"Well, I'd like to," said Teddy, "but —"

"You're not!" growled Bob.

"Well, you see——" said the uncertain and unhappy Teddy.



"I'll book two seats!" drawled Aubrey, rising from the table.

They stared at him.

"How the thump are you going to book seats?" stuttered Bob. "Asking leave to go down to Okeham from McCann?"

"I'm going to 'phone!" said Aubrey calmly. "The Blighter has a telephone in his study."

"You—you—you're going to book seats for to-night and use McCann's telephone?" articulated Bob.

"Why not?"

"Aubrey!" gasped Bob. "You mad ass——"

The dandy of the Fifth strolled out of No. 3. Darrell and Seymour looked at one another.

"By Jove!" said Teddy. "Old Aubrey's a card!"

Bob went after his reckless chum. He found Aubrey in the passage, chatting with some of the Fifth.

"Just six!" Aubrey was saying. "The Blighter always leaves his study at six! He's as regular as clockwork. But I'll give him five minutes."

"You're really——" exclaimed Carter.

The Fifth Form men were buzzing with it! This was the climax!

If Aubrey had desired to add one more thrill to the excitement already reigning, this would have done it! Not only was he going to break out that night, in spite of McCann, but he was going to use the Blighter's own telephone to book the seats at Okeham Theatre. It was the limit!

"Aubrey, old man——" Bob's voice was almost beseeching.

"Fathead!" was Aubrey's reply.

From a window many eyes spotted the stocky figure of Mr. James McCann leaving the House for his usual walk on the Beak's Grind, down the coombe to the banks of the Clovey. Aubrey waited till the Head was out of sight, then sauntered along to the Head's study. Fellows followed him there—they watched from the corridor window for the possible reappearance of McCann. They heard Aubrey in the study ask

for his number—the number of the box-office of Okeham Theatre.

Bob Darrell, torn between a friendly anxiety for Aubrey, and an unfriendly desire to kick him hard, lurked in the half-open doorway.

"For goodness' sake be quick!" he breathed. "You utter ass, suppose McCann came back!"

Compton glanced round from the telephone.

"The bergee always walks out for an hour. But I'm not botherin' about ushers, anyhow."

Bob shook a fist at him.

Aubrey turned to the telephone again. Calm and unhurried, he talked to the Okeham box-office. A dozen fellows heard him book two stalls for that evening. When he rang off Bob yapped from the door:

"Now come out, you fathead!"

But Aubrey was not finished yet.

He rang up another Okeham number. The group of fellows in the doorway looked at him, and at one another, as he coolly and calmly ordered a taxi to pick him up in Coombe Lane at nine-thirty.

"Isn't he a card?" breathed the admiring Teddy.

"Isn't he a silly ass, and isn't he asking for the sack!" hissed Bob.

Aubrey put up the receiver and strolled out of the study. All eyes were on him. The Fifth Form men regarded him almost with awe.

"That's that!" drawled Aubrey, with superb calm. "If you'd like to come, Bob, I'll ring up and book a third seat."

"Idiot!" was Bob's answer.

Aubrey laughed, and sauntered away. Breathless admiration from the Fifth was the reward of his superb nerve.

## CHAPTER 27.

At the Foot of the Steps:

**S**TUDY No. 3 became, at night, Dorm No. 3. After prep that useful creature, the boys' maid—of which species there were many at High Coombe—wrought magic changes. Beds

appeared from nowhere, and a luxurious study became a handsome and well-appointed bed-room for three. In the morning, during the first school, a similar magic change was wrought, and the bed-room became a study again.

Last roll was at nine, taken personally by Mr. McCann in Big Hall. It was therefore impossible for the most daring breaker of bounds to get out before that hour. Cutting roll was now a thing of the past at High Coombe, though in the dear old days the fellows had cut roll as often as they pleased. Chard, in those days, had generally taken call-over, the Venerable Beak being much too venerable for such duties. The finest excuses had been good enough for Popularity Peter.

No excuse whatever was good enough for Mr. McCann. Even those great and glorious beings, prefects of the Sixth Form, were not allowed to cut roll; even Corkran, head prefect, had to be there to say "sum" to his name. It was sickening, of course, but then everything was sickening under the rule of the Blighter McCann!

Not till the fellows went to their various dormitories, therefore, could Aubrey carry on with his own little game.

This meant cutting all the early part of the show at Okeham Theatre, a sad change from the times when a fellow could do as he liked, and Popularity Peter would pretend to know nothing about it. Still, a show was a show, even if a fellow saw only half of it. Above all, it was a defiance of McCann—it was a glorious example set to a hesitating school, by a determined rebel who had no use for dashed ushers!

In Dorm No. 3 Compton did not change into his silk pyjamas. He changed into evening clothes, under Bob's scowl and Teddy's admiring eyes. Undoubtedly he looked very elegant and handsome, in well-cut evening clothes, with a tiny diamond gleaming in his spotless shirt, the dinner jacket that fitted him like a glove, the trousers that would have delighted a tailor's heart,

the natty shoes that would have been the pride of a bootmaker. His tie was tied as only Compton of the Fifth could tie a tie. Carefully he polished his silk hat.

Bob's scowl grew even more savage.

He was angry with Aubrey, but much more anxious about him. Fellows breaking out at night did not generally get themselves up in evening clothes and a topper. It was like Aubrey! Okeham Theatre was not, perhaps, a fearfully posh place. Still, he was going into the best seats, and he was going to dress the part. His taxi was already waiting at the corner of the lane a hundred yards from the school. He had not far to walk in his handsome outfit.

"Aren't you changin', Teddy?" he asked.

Teddy looked at Bob and looked at Aubrey. Long had Teddy been undecided. Having practically no will of his own, Teddy always did either what Bob did or what Aubrey did. Now the balance was inclining in Aubrey's favour.

Looking so handsome and debonair, he certainly seemed more attractive company than the gloomy, worried, scowling Bob. Teddy had got so far as removing his outer garments. He hardly knew whether he was going to get into his pyjamas or into posh clothes.

"Be a pal!" urged Aubrey. "I'm not sayin' there's no risk! I'm askin' you to share it."

That settled it for Teddy! He made a dive for his evening bags. Bob gave an angry snort.

"You're a fool, Teddy!"

"You come, too, old chap!" urged Teddy.

"Idiot!" said Bob.

"Oh, leave Bob here!" drawled Aubrey. "If the Blighter comes spyin' about, Darrell can tell him what a good boy he is, and how he loves obeying his kind teachers!"

Teddy chuckled.

Bob became crimson.

Aubrey's handsome face, his beautiful shirt-front, and his incomparable he had a narrow escape! Bob was his pal, but he was a very angry pal at that moment, and he looked like mopping up Dorm Three with the dandy of the Fifth. Teddy, bags in hand, pushed between.

"No rags!" said Teddy. "We don't want the Blighter nosing round here! Shut up, Aubrey—let old Bob do as he likes. Every man to his taste."

Aubrey shrugged his shoulders. The mocking smile on his face was hard to tolerate, and it was as well that Teddy stood between them as he shoved his legs into his bags.

"If you think I funk it——" hissed Bob.

Aubrey raised his eyebrows.

"Don't you?" he asked.

"You know I don't!" roared Bob furiously, his face flushing and his fists clenching.

"My mistake!" said Aubrey gracefully. "I thought you did!"

"Do shut up, old man!" urged Teddy. With one leg in and one leg out, Teddy prepared to separate his two friends. It was really awkward for a fellow trying to get his trousers on.

But Bob controlled his wrath. He gave a savage grunt, and put on again the collar and tie he had already taken off for bed. Compton's eyes gleamed with triumph. He knew what that meant.

Bob was coming, too!

Bob could have kicked himself! He knew that he was playing the fool. He knew that Aubrey had taunted him merely for the purpose of making him play the fool. Nevertheless, his mind was made up. That goat, Compton, was running the risk—that ass, Teddy, was sharing it—and he was their pal, and was not going to stand out. If disaster came—and he knew that it was very likely—he was not going to be found in bed like a good boy, while his friends were up for the sack. It was idiotic, and he knew it; but there it was—Bob was going, too!

"Changin'?" asked Aubrey sweetly. "No!" snorted Bob.

Having dressed their parts, so to speak, the next step was to get out of the House. No prefect's key being available, as in the happy old days, a window had to serve their turn.

It was easy enough. High Coombe was a rambling old place, with endless passages and staircases that seemed to lead nowhere in particular. From a dark passage, where a window opened on the Sixth Form green, the three made their exit.

Everybody knew in the Fifth that they were gone. Heads were put out of doorways, as they quietly passed other studies. Fellows stared to see Bob in the party.

"You, too, Darrell!" said Burke, from No. 4.

"Don't yell, you idiot!" was Bob's grunted reply; and the three passed on.

They stepped quietly across the Sixth Form green. Bob grunted again as he caught his legs in the chain by which that sacred precinct was surrounded to keep off common mortals.

"Quiet!" breathed Teddy. "The Blighter's still up!"

Light gleamed through the blinds of the Head's study. Across the quad, light gleamed from the windows of Chard's room under the clock-tower. Penge, master of the Shell, was actually standing at his window, looking out into the fine night.

If Penge detected three shadowy figures silently stealing through shadows, Penge said nothing. High Coombe masters on such occasions were not accustomed to saying anything. Least said, soonest mended—a policy which made for ease and repose, if not edification, at the School for Slackers.

"The brute'll be asleep before we come back!" drawled Aubrey. "Early to bed, early to rise, you know—usher all over!"

Getting out without a prefect's key

to the gate was another little difficulty to be surmounted. The ancient walls overgrown with ivy, were easy enough to climb. But no fellow—no High Coombe fellow, at all events—wanted to make his bags dusty! However, this was one of the things that could not be helped; and Aubrey manfully risked his bags.

Outside the wall he dusted them carefully with his handkerchief. Then a short walk down the lane brought them to a waiting taxi. The taxi ran them swiftly over the mile or so to Okeham. The theatre was not crowded, and it was easy enough to book a third stall for Bob.

They sat down to the show—Teddy Seymour fully enjoying it in his volatile way, and banishing other matters from his mind; Bob, blind and deaf to what went on on the stage, and wishing from the bottom of his heart that he hadn't come; Aubrey, superbly calm, rather patronising than enjoying the show, and wishing chiefly that Bob was in evening clothes!

It was over at eleven. Bob would have rushed out to the taxi, which had orders to be waiting ready. But it seemed that it was essential for coffee and cigarettes in the lounge to come first. Aubrey had coffee and cigarettes; Teddy had coffee; Bob, who had neither, sat and scowled at them. It could not be denied that Bob was rather a wet blanket.

"Are you ever coming?" he growled at last. "The place is empty—we should be turned out soon."

"Might stagger along!" assented Aubrey.

And they staggered along.

As they came down the steps of the theatre in the glimmer of the lights, a waiting figure detached itself from a pillar and stepped to meet them. But it was not the expected taxi-man. It was quite another person.

"I hope," said Mr. McCann gravely, "that you have had a pleasant evening?"

## CHAPTER 23.

Whacked to the Wide!

JAMES McCANN, as Ferguson of the Fourth had remarked in the Burrow, was no fool.

Whatever he was—blighter, bargee, bounder, or whatnot—it was absolutely certain that he was no fool. And, really, a headmaster would have to be a bit of a fool not to have noticed that there was something "on" that day at the School for Slackers.

It pleased Aubrey to let everybody know about it and wonder at his nerve and his dashing recklessness; but that, of course, was not the way to keep it dark. What Mr. McCann may have noticed, he mentioned to nobody; what he thought, he kept to himself. But he did not go to bed at his usual early hour. Instead of doing that, he made a round of the senior dormitories.

That was really Chard's duty, and Chard had done it in his usual way. Chard's system was to lean his portly form on a massive oaken newel post at the foot of the stair, chat a few minutes with some of his Form, smile benignly at one of Carter's little jokes, and then his duty was done, and he would roll off to his rooms; not sure, by any means, that all the Fifth were in their dorms, but sure, at least, of popularity in his Form!

Jimmy McCann was more thorough. But his round of the senior dormitories was brief—for he started with Dorm Three. Compton was the man on whom Jimmy had a special eye, so he began and ended with Dorm Three. Tapping on the door, he opened it and switched on the light—hoping, but not expecting, to see three fellows asleep in bed. And when he saw three vacant beds, Jimmy's face became very grave indeed.

He had expected this of Compton. He was not surprised at it in Seymour, a fellow easily led. But he had not expected it of Bob Darrell—a fellow of whom he had great hopes—in whom, in his mind's eye, he saw a future cap-

tain of High Coombe—captain of a school no longer slack!

Jimmy had had a lot of knocks and worries since he had become headmaster of High Coombe, but this was a real blow to him. He stood staring at Bob's empty bed as if he could not believe his eyes.

If there was one thing Jimmy was determined to stamp out at High Coombe, with a ruthless heel, it was breaking out at night—a game carried to great lengths under the Venerable Beak. He hated the thought of expelling any fellow—he hoped and trusted to be able to pull things round at the School for Slackers without any such drastic step as that. But there was a limit—and this looked like the limit. Three of the Fifth were out of bounds, late at night—one of them a fellow whom he liked and trusted.

For fully five minutes Jimmy McCann stood in the empty dorm, thinking. He had trusted Darrell, and Darrell had gone with the others—where to, and for what? Slowly a smile dawned on Jimmy's face, relaxing its grimness. If he had been mistaken in Darrell, it was the biggest mistake of his life. But he was sure that he had not been mistaken.

The escapade did not mean that Compton had dragged a better fellow into anything shady. Whatever the three had gone out for, it was nothing dingy or rotten, or Darrell would not have joined up in it. It was a reckless and rebellious act, but it was not a matter that would drive him to expelling a High Coombe man.

Which was a greater relief to Mr. McCann than any High Coombe man could have imagined.

Compton, of course, was the leader, and Seymour followed him like a sheep. But Darrell? There was nothing sheep-like about Darrell, that was certain. A taunt about funking might have done it—it was not so very long since Jimmy had been a boy himself, and he knew boy-nature. Five minutes of quiet thinking gave Jimmy a pretty

clear view of the whole thing. And he smiled. He guessed where the three had gone.

Among the endless mysterious whispers that had floated about the school that day there had been mention of Okeham Theatre. This was not a sample of dingy blackguardism that required drastic action; it was a reckless lark, to be dealt with much less severely—though with sufficient severity.

Jimmy went back to his study and got on the telephone. He guessed where they were, but he had to be sure. In a couple of minutes he was sure. Then he put on coat and hat and walked down the lane to Okeham. It was a fine, starry night, and Jimmy enjoyed the walk. He was a great walker!

Outside the Okeham Theatre Royal he waited with cheerful patience, his keen eyes on the leaving crowd till the three he wanted came out.

The three stopped dead as McCann greeted them.

Bob Darrell caught his breath, his face crimsoning. Teddy Seymour looked blankly dismayed. Even the superb Aubrey was taken aback, and for a moment lost his accustomed aplomb. They blinked at the Blighter.

Teddy was the first to speak.

"Snaffled!" he said dismally.

"Quite!" said Mr. McCann.

Aubrey recovered at once.

"These fellows came with me, sir," he said coolly. "I—"

"You need not," said Mr. McCann quietly, "tell me what I know already, Compton."

Bob broke out with an angry snort.

"Don't be a silly ass, Aubrey! We're all in this together!"

"I think," said Mr. McCann, "that that taxi is waiting for you. Please tell the man he will not be wanted."

The taxi was dismissed.

"Now come with me!" said Mr. McCann.

Why he chose to walk back to the school, instead of taking the taxi, the

delinquents did not know. But they were soon to know.

Once outside Okeham Mr. McCann turned from the lane. The three, staring, stopped at the corner.

"Excuse me, sir," Aubrey said politely, "that's not the way! We keep right on for High Coombe."

"Straight up the lane, sir!" said Teddy.

Bob did not speak. He caught a faint, fleeting smile on McCann's face, and wondered what it meant.

"You will be kind enough to follow me," said Mr. McCann. "It is a beautiful night for a walk."

"We're not exactly fixed for a walk, sir," said Aubrey.

"Indeed!" said Mr. McCann.

They walked on.

The way led them to the open moor. There was bright starlight, and a keen wind from the Atlantic. Certainly it was, as McCann said, a beautiful night for a walk. But fellows in light evening shoes were not, as Aubrey had remarked, fixed for walking on rugged moorland tracks.

Bob Darrell thanked his lucky stars that he had not changed, and that he still had his usual shoes on—good, stout shoes. Likewise was he thankful that he was not in a boiled shirt and a topper.

But what did the man mean? A headmaster who caught three fellows out of bounds, at half-past eleven at night, might do, or say, all sorts of things—except what McCann did and said. Not a word about punishment—not even a word of censure—only a remark that it was a beautiful night for a walk. Was the man mad?

By the direction McCann was taking, circling round the wide moor, they had about ten miles to cover to get back to High Coombe. Was he as mad as a hatter?

Teddy really wondered whether McCann had gone cracked. Aubrey Compton very soon discerned that there was, at least, method in his mad-

ness. And a grin dawned on Bob's face.

They walked—and walked!

McCann was tireless. That thick-set, stocky young man seemed impervious to anything in the nature of fatigue. Bob stood it pretty well. But Aubrey's face was pale with fury, and Teddy mumbled and grunted dismally. After four miles McCann had to slacken his elastic stride, or his companions would have talled off behind him. Another mile and he had to slacken still more. But he did not seem to mind. He was, apparently, prepared to make a night of it.

Bob, breathing hard, tramped on doggedly. Aubrey and Teddy limped on with aching legs and painful feet. On the slopes of High Tor they almost broke down.

But there was nothing for it but to keep on. They were five miles from the school now, and those miles had to be covered to get back to bed. Bed haunted their thoughts like a fascinating mirage. They could and should have been asleep in bed, like the rest of the Fifth. They had chosen to take a night out. Now they were getting it—with a vengeance!

Bob Darrell, strongest and sturdiest of the Fifth Form, was tired to the very bone. Compton and Seymour were not merely tired—they sagged as they crawled. They almost doubled up, like penknives. The pace slackened till it resembled the rate of progress of a snail.

Teddy Seymour began to think he would finish on his hands and knees, crawling. Aubrey limped on, too fearfully fatigued even to hate McCann. He was hardly conscious of anything but a desire to rest. *Beb—bed—bed—* if only a fellow could get to bed!

Breaking out at night, defying the Blighter, winning the wondering admiration of every fellow at High Coombe—these were things of little worth compared with going to bed and going to sleep! Was that frightful walk ever going to end?

It did end, and it seemed almost too good to be true when Mr. McCann unlocked his private gate and let them into the school. The breakers of bounds felt then that it was beyond their remaining powers to totter across to the House. However, they tottered. McCann let them into the House, and saw them into Dorm Three.

In the doorway the headmaster bade them a pleasant good-night. There was no sign of fatigue about the Blighter. He was very pleasant and cheerful.

"Good-night, my boys!" said Jimmy genially. "Next time I meet you out of bounds after lights out we will have another pleasant walk together—what?"

He closed the door and went.

Bob Darrell managed to get his things off and turn in. Aubrey and Teddy threw themselves on their beds just as they were. Their toppers fell on the floor and lay unheeded. Bob was asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow. Teddy gasped out one remark to Aubrey:

"You fool! You silly, idiotic, blithering, blethering jackass!"

Then there was silence and slumber. Three fellows had to be excused first school the following morning. In second school they sat through the lesson like fellows benumbed. No, it was not a happy day for the breakers of bounds!

#### CHAPTER 29.

It's a Dog's Life!

"WHAT utter rot!" growled Bob Darrell.

"Thanks for your opinion!" yawned Aubrey Compton.

"Well," growled Bob, "I think——"

"Draw it mild!" interposed Carter.

"What do you mean, you ass?" grunted Bob.

"I mean what I say, old bean!" answered Carter. He glanced round at the Fifth Form fellows. "I put it to you men—can Darrell's mental pro-

cesses be described as thinking? Isn't he exaggeratin'?"

Whereupon there was a chuckle in the Fifth Form at High Coombe.

That chuckle reached the ears of Mr. Chard. He coughed. Far was it from Peter Chard—Popularity Peter—to bother his Form in any way, if he could help it. He was not wont to barge in when they were enjoying a little conversation in class. But Chard, like all High Coombe boys and masters, had been made to sit up and take notice since James McCann had become headmaster of the School for Slackers.

But the conversation went on, though in more subdued tones. It was exasperating to have to make such a concession to the meddling Blighter. But what were fellows to do? McCann was headmaster and ruled with an iron hand. Aubrey Compton, the most reckless rebel in the School for Slackers, went on:

"If my pater knew how the brute was carryin' on here there would be ructions at the next meetin' of the Governin' Board," said Aubrey. "Well, he's goin' to know. I've given him a few hints in my letters, an' asked him to come down and see for himself. He's comin'."

This was good news!

There was only one power greater than the Head—the Board of Governors, and Aubrey's pater, Colonel Compton, was a very prominent and influential member of that body. If old Aubrey succeeded in setting his governor against the Blighter, surely the Blighter's number would be up.

The colonel was an Old Boy of High Coombe. The old school and its old traditions were dear to him. He could never approve of this new man upsetting traditions, and everything else. Once he saw how McCann was handling High Coombe all would—or should—be well! He would consult the staff—and every Beak in the school would let him know that McCann was ruining High Coombe. Except, perhaps,

Goggs, the science master, who was known to have a sneaking admiration for the new Head.

"Aubrey, old nut, I believe you've done it!" said Peverill. "I say, when is your governor coming?"

"May blow in any day this week," answered Compton. "I had his letter this mornin'. He's fearfully annoyed at some things I've told him. He can hardly believe that Fifth Form seniors are whopped like fags. I can tell you that when my governor comes down, he's comin' on the war-path!"

"McCann's not the man to take much criticism, even from a governor!" grunted Bob Darrell.

"Exactly!" agreed Aubrey. "I'm countin' on that. McCann's the man to give him backchat, and lots of it. That's all that's needed to set my governor goin'!"

"It's a rotten idea!" growled Bob. "A row between the Head and the governors won't do the school any good."

"If there's a row they'll make him resign," said Aubrey. "And I fancy that that's what we want."

"Hear, hear!"

The prospect of McCann's resignation and departure caused a happy grin to dawn on nearly every face in the Fifth. If McCann went it was ten to one that Chard would step into his shoes. Days of happy slacking, evenings of breaking out of bounds, formed a delightful vista. Only it seemed too good to be true!

"Hem!" came from Mr. Chard again. The Fifth were forgetting caution—the hum of talk was rising once more. There was a continual chatting till break.

"Poor old Peter!" sighed Carter, when the Fifth were dismissed. "The Blighter's leadin' him a dog's life—and he's passin' it on to us!"

"Wait till my governor blows in!" said Compton between his teeth.

The Fifth pinned their faith to that. It was the only gleam of sunshine in a murky sky.

## CHAPTER 30.

### Ructions in the Fourth!

CAPES, master of the Fourth, could have kicked himself. In a careless moment he had delivered himself, as it were, bound hand and foot, into the hands of the enemy. Capes was a younger man than most of the High Coombe masters, but like nearly every other member of the staff, he loathed McCann. In his Form-room, Capes submitted to the new rule that something in the nature of work had to be done. The Fourth did not like it, and Capes let them see that he liked it no more than they did. Being younger, he was less cautious than the older Beaks, and a careless moment found him out.

It had been Capes' happy custom to set his Form a paper and then stroll out of the Form-room leaving them to it. What the juniors put on their papers did not matter very much, so long as they did not worry Capes. If there was a "rag" during his absence, that did not matter, either—in the days of the Venerable Beak, the late Head. It mattered a lot now!

Capes set the Fourth a paper that morning and sauntered out. McCann was with the Sixth, booked for an hour, and not likely to come barking along. Besides, Capes intended to be absent for only about ten minutes. It was sheer ill-luck that he was absent for over half an hour. He happened to fall in with Mace, who had no class just then, and chat. Meanwhile, the Fourth were enjoying life.

For ten minutes they kept in their places and even gave some attention to their Latin papers. But as Capes did not return, the Fourth followed the example of the mice when the cat is away. If Capes had temporarily forgotten McCann, surely his Form might be excused for also forgetting that obnoxious young man!

Ferguson was the first out of his place. Loom and Bunn followed him, and they pelted Donkin with school books. Driven to desperation, the



Donkey hurled a Latin grammar, which caught Fatty Pye on the side of the head, missing the raggers by yards.

Fatty, at the moment, was negotiating a large chunk of toffee. Bowled off his Form by the Latin grammar, Fatty rolled on the floor, and the chunk of toffee slipped down his throat. Horrible gurgles came from him as he struggled for breath. Ferg rushed up to him, and thumped him on the back. Several other fellows came to the rescue in a similar way, till the wretched Fatty felt like a carpet that was being well beaten. He struggled and gurgled and gobbled.

"Urrrggh! Leave off! Wurrgh! I'm chook-chook-choking! Gurrgh!"

Pye got rid of the toffee at last. With crimson face and watery eyes, he yelled:

"Who threw that book at me?"

"Oh, I say!" brayed the poor Donkey. "I did, you know, but I meant it for Ferguson!"

"Well, I don't mean this for Ferguson—I mean this for you!" roared Fatty, hurling himself on Donkin.

Clasped in a deadly embrace, they rolled over on the Form-room floor. The Fourth crowded round them, cheering. This was better than Latin papers. This was like old times—the good old times—the jolly old times!

"Go it, Donkey—punch him!" roared Ferguson.

"Give him beans, Fatty!" yelled Loom.

The Donkey, with a streaming nose, broke away. Fatty, flushed with victory, rushed after him. Donkin fled among the desks, with Pye in fierce pursuit. Loud cheers and shouts encouraged both the hunter and the hunted. The din, deafening as it was, did not reach across the quad to Capes. It reached all the other Form-rooms, however—among them the Sixth Form Room, where the Sixth were suffering under McCann.

A form went over with a crash. Warming to the rag, Ferguson and his friends pelted both Pye and Donkin

with books, eliciting wild yells from both of them as the missiles landed. Another Form crashed. The Donkey sprawled over it, Pye sprawled over the Donkey, and a terrific roar of laughter went up.

In the Sixth, Tredegar winked at Corkran. He fancied that the Sixth were going to get a rest. He was right. Leaving the seniors to enjoy a much-needed respite, James McCann walked away to see what was happening in the Fourth.

He arrived at an exciting moment. Two forms were over, two juniors were scrapping on the floor, and the rest of the Fourth were pelting both of them. A dog-eared Virgil, recklessly hurled, landed on the chin of James McCann as he opened the door and stepped in. McCann gave a jump as the volume fell at his feet.

"Boys!" James McCann's voice was not loud, but it was deep.

"Oh, scissors!" gasped Ferguson. "The Beak!"

Instantly the din was stilled. Some of the juniors made a wild rush for the desks. Others stood spellbound where they were. Fatty Pye's arm, drawn back for a punch on Donkin's already damaged nose, was arrested in transit. The Donkey sat up, blinking.

James McCann, rubbing his chin, walked in.

"Go to your places!"

"Where is Mr. Capes?"

"He—he—he's not here, sir!" stammered Ferguson fatuously.

James McCann walked to the Form-room window and put his head out into the sunlight. Across the quad two figures were in view—silver-haired old Mace and Capes.

Between finger and thumb Capes held a cigarette, half smoked. His back being partly turned towards the House, he remained quite unconscious of a grim face looking from his Form-room window. But Mace, looking past him, spotted that face, and started violently.

Mace was speaking, but he was so

startled by the sight of James McCann's face in the distance, and its fixed, grim gaze, that he broke off, suddenly silent, his mouth still open. Capes, surprised, stared at him, wondering what was the matter with him. Then he saw McCann.

The cigarette dropped from Capes' fingers. He caught his breath, the red flushing into his face. He glanced up at the clock-tower over Chard's rooms, and realised what he had done. He had been half an hour out of his Form-room, and McCann had butted in—or had something drawn him there? Knowing his Form—especially the festive Ferg—Capes dreaded what might have drawn McCann there. Breathing hard, he walked quickly back to the House.

James McCann turned from the window as Capes came into the Fourth Form Room. His first glance showed Capes that his worst anticipations were more than realised. There had been a rag—a tremendous rag. Two overturned forms, books scattered all over the shop, Donkin wiping a crimson nose with a much-spotted handkerchief. Pye blinking with a half-closed eye, and all the Form red and conscious and apprehensive. One glance was enough for Capes.

"I—I—I——" Capes stammered. "I—I stepped out for a few minutes, sir."

"I observe," said Mr. McCann, "that you did!" And he walked back to the Sixth Form Room.

The Fourth looked at Capes. Capes looked at the Fourth. Jimmy McCann was not the man to rag a master in the presence of his boys. But all the Fourth knew that Capes was going to have a bad quarter of an hour, later, on the carpet in the Head's study.

Capes could have kicked himself! To give that cad, that rotter, that bargee, a handle against him! Why, the man was capable of dismissing him. And Capes did not want to go. Like all the other Beaks, he had talked

of going since McCann had come. But nobody had gone—nobody really meant to go if he could help it. Capes, in a cold perspiration, wondered whether he would be able to help it!

"Awfully sorry, sir!" stammered Ferguson. Ferg's keen brain read the master like a book. He was really sorry. He knew that Capes, on his own, would have pretended not to notice that there had been a rag at all in his absence. The Fourth, unintentionally, had landed their Beak in a fearful row.

Capes' reply was unexpected. He picked up the cane from his desk.

The Fourth eyed that unusual proceeding with alarm.

"Ferguson," said Mr. Capes, "I think you were the ringleader in this! You will stand up, Ferguson, and bend over your desk."

"But, sir——" gasped the dismayed Ferg.

"Bend over your desk!" rapped Capes, in a voice that made Ferguson jump to obey.

Six whacks rang like six pistol-shots through the Fourth Form Room. Ferg went through it manfully, though he had to grit his teeth to keep back wild howls. The rest of the Fourth looked on in consternation. Was this Capes—old Capers that they knew, or thought they knew?

Capes laid down the cane.

The rest of that "school" passed dismally enough for the Fourth. Capes was worried and angry and snappish. The Fourth were worried and angry and resentful. The trustful confidence between master and boy, so long and so happily established at High Coombe, seemed to be gone. Thrice Capes handed out imposts; and looked as if he meant to ask for them to be shown up—a very unpleasant novelty. When the hour struck, the Form were as glad to get away from Capes as he was to be rid of them.

## CHAPTER 31.

## Capes Drops a Hint!

AUBREY COMPTON smiled, and his smile was reflected on other faces in Big Study—a number of the Sixth and Fifth were there. Capes, leaning in at the window, was telling a story of his own schooldays. It was "after three" when High Coombe rested from the labours of the day and slacked out of Form instead of slacking in Form. Capes, sauntering in the sunny quad, had stopped at the big bay window to speak to the fellows lounging in Big Study. He affected a sort of hail-fellow-well-met attitude towards senior men, as if he were almost one of themselves. He prided himself on having nothing of the Beak about him.

On this occasion, every man in Big Study wanted to be nice to Capes. Everybody knew that he had "had his hair combed" by the Blighter for a shindy in his Form-room that morning. Corkran of the Sixth had seen him leave the Head's study, looking quite pale, and everybody knew that he had been through it. A man who suffered under the Blighter was a man whom all High Coombe delighted to honour. The seniors in Big Study made this clear by a pleasant and flattering politeness when Capes stopped at the window. They made it clear that Capes had their moral support, for what that was worth.

But there was something slightly sarcastic in Aubrey's smile, all the same. Capes was telling a story of a rag. An obnoxious master had been screwed up in his study. Windows and door had been screwed, and the hapless man had been a prisoner for hours before he got released. Big Study smiled at the story, but there was a tincture of sarcasm in Aubrey's smile, and Carter winked at Seymour. If Capes supposed that any man there was going to play catspaw and pull his chestnuts out of the fire, Capes was in error!

Having told his entertaining story, Capes strolled away—hoping that the seed had fallen in fertile soil.

It had! For he had had another listener as well as the seniors in Big Study. Ferguson, of his own Form, leaning on an adjacent oak, had been drinking in every word. Ferg's eyes gleamed as he listened. When Capes went, Ferg headed for the Burrow to discuss matters with his pals.

"Who's goin' to screw up the Beak?" asked Carter of the Fifth, in Big Study, when Capes had gone.

There was a laugh.

"The man's an ass!" said Corkran. "Talkin' that rot before a prefect. Nobody here's goin' to take Capes' hint," he said firmly. "The man's an ass! We're all sorry he's had his hair combed by the Blighter, but if he wants McCann screwed up, he can jolly well do it himself. Aubrey, old man, if you're fool enough to think of it, take my tip, and don't!"

"No fear!" Aubrey Compton laughed. "Capes is an ass! Besides, I'm expectin' my governor to blow in to-morrow, and I'm hopin' he will put paid to the Blighter. No screwin'-up for me."

Capes' hint had fallen on stony ground in Big Study. But in the Burrow the soil was more fertile. In that apartment, Ferguson was in deep consultation with Pye and Loom and Bunn. Ferg did not mention that he had got the hint from Capes. He elaborated it in the Burrow as his own idea—his very own. He was not going to lose any of the credit and the glory.

"It's jolly risky!" remarked Pye.

"Who's afraid?" demanded Ferg.

Pye and Loom and Bunn were, but nothing would have induced them to admit as much.

"Besides, it's not so jolly risky," went on Ferg. "We've got the run of the carpenter's shop, and can bag all the things we want, and nobody the wiser. McCann goes for his walk at six every day, regular as clockwork."

Who's going to worry us while the Blighter's hoofing it on the Beaks' Grind?" Ferg chuckled. "Not Capes, you bet."

"But we can't screw the Blighter up in his study while he's out of his study," argued Fatty Pye.

Ferg gave him a pitying look.

"If you use your ears instead of your chin, Fatty, you'd learn more sense and talk less tosh!" he said. "We've got to get ready, and it will take time! You try driving a gimlet into hard oak—makes you sweat, I can tell you! And think McCann wouldn't spot us if he was in the room? Of course he would. He's a frightful beast, but he's no fool!"

"Then what——" asked Bunn.

"We get the holes all ready for the screws," said the astute Ferg. "Then, when the time comes, we simply have to drive the screws in."

"Suppose he spots the gimlet-holes," objected Fatty, the dense.

"Suppose you shut up and listen to your Uncle Ferg! We plug the gimlet-holes with putty or something, so that they don't show."

Pye and Loom and Bunn gazed at John Andrew Ferguson in almost breathless admiration. Brain, if you like!

"Wait till six," said Ferg, settling it.

Eagerly they waited till six.

Jimmy McCann was as regular in his movements as the big clock in the tower over Chard's rooms. From five to six he worked in his study. At six he left and tramped down the rugged path into the coombe—the Beaks' Grind, or the Masters' Walk, as it was called. The last stroke of six had hardly died away when the Head was seen to leave the House.

Four members of the Fourth Form were already provided with the strongest gimlets they could root out of the carpenter's shop. McCann safely off the scene, they weighed in.

McCann's study door, like most study doors, opened inwards. This might have presented difficulties to a

less astute brain than Ferg's. Ferg took it in his stride, so to speak.

Big, strong screw-eyes could be screwed into the solid oak of the door, then screws could be passed through them, screwed deep into the floor. Once that was done, no human force exerted on the door from within would pull it open.

The enterprising four had the corridor to themselves. If any man at High Coombe, boy or master, suspected that a trick was going to be played on the Blighter, that man was only likely to wish the japers good hunting.

The holes were duly bored and plugged. It was, as Ferg had warned his comrades, hard work. But they stuck to it manfully. Having finished with the door, they went out into the quad and attended to the window. Happily, the big oak-tree near the Head's window screened them to a great extent. But Penge, master of the Shell, certainly noticed that something was going on when he passed, and Randal of the Sixth, strolling in the quad, lazily wondered what the young beggars were up to. Neither Penge nor Randal cared to look into the matter, however. Even the majestic Chard, rolling by, after a stare of astonishment at the busy imps, went on unregarding, a flicker of a smile on his face. Some of the Fifth actually came to look on, and walked away laughing.

Once more, holes were plugged. Everything was ready now for screwing up the Head. It would be quick work to drive the screws into the holes already prepared. Tired, with palms a little blistered, but feeling that they deserved well of their comrades, Ferg & Co. finished their task, put the gimlets back in their places, and grinned joyously when they saw McCann come in from his walk, unsuspecting.

Jimmy McCann had keen eyes—very keen indeed. But he noticed nothing. Gimlet-holes plugged with putty

daubed over with dark stain did not show up on dark oak in a rather dusky corridor. Neither did they show up on the outside of the window frames—had the head dreamed of looking there. All was going well—couldn't be better! The only doubtful point was just when the Blighter should be screwed in. That point had to be settled very carefully. Ferg conned over the time-table, and settled it.

"The Sixth are up to Mace for history in second school to-morrow," he told his fellow-conspirators. "The Blighter won't be with the Sixth; ten to one, in his study—the brute's always working. That's where we come in."

"But we shall be in Form with Capers," objected Fatty Pye.

"Haven't you ever forgotten a book or a map?" asked Ferg sarcastically. "Easy enough to get out of the Form-room, with Capers! Now that the holes are ready for the screws, it's a one-man job, and easy. I shall have the screws in one pocket and the screwdriver in another when we go into Form for second school. I forget a map, and get leave to fetch it—what?"

Again his comrades regarded him with breathless admiration.

"If he's in his study, I shall hear him," continued Ferg. "I drive in the screws and leave him to it. He will hammer and bang to be let out—what? We may hear him from the Form-room! What larks!"

And the conspirators chuckled joyously.

Quite a number of fellows at High Coombe were anticipating the morrow keenly. Aubrey Compton and his friends in the Fifth looked forward to the coming of Colonel Compton with high hope. Sixth Form men shared their hope. Mr. Chard, who, of course, knew, trusted that good might come of it. But in the Fourth they weren't thinking about any old school governor. They were thinking

of Ferg's bold plan for screwing-up the Head in his study.

Did Capes know or suspect anything? Certainly he stared very hard when two or three screws dropped from one of Ferguson's pockets in the Fourth Form-room in the morning. But after staring he averted his eyes and made no remark. And when, in second school Ferg discovered that he had forgotten to bring in a map, and asked leave to go and fetch it, Capes gave him leave at once. And the Fourth found Capes in a particularly good humour after Ferg had gone.

## CHAPTER 32.

### A Prisoner in the Study!

JIMMY McCANN was far from satisfied with Mace. Mr. Mace, at seventy, had doubtless accumulated vast stores of knowledge. If so, he had long forgotten the art of communicating the same to a younger generation. Mace, in history, was taken as a joke at the School for Slackers. Nobody ever thought of listening to him. Generally, he dozed through a class. When the Sixth were with Mace they thought and talked of all sorts of things—except history. They would have considered it rather a nerve if Mace had interrupted them.

Jimmy had come to High Coombe with tremendous changes and reforms in his head. But he did not want to sack anybody; he hated the thought of any man at High Coombe having real cause to wish that he had never come. Jimmy was in the position of a craftsman with a very poor set of tools. But the tools being human, and Jimmy being very human indeed, his idea was to make the best of them and not to throw them aside unless they proved absolutely hopeless. Jimmy had a far kinder heart than High Coombe gave him credit for. Bucking up a master of Mace's over-ripe years was no

easy task, even for the energetic Jimmy; but he was going to do his best. And assuredly he was not going to let Mace snooze in the Sixth Form-room.

Thus it came to pass that in second school that morning, when Jimmy handed over the Sixth to Mace, he did not leave the Form-room.

The idea, as he politely told Mace, was to study a change of method; for even Mace could hardly deny that the Sixth were woefully deficient in his subject. Mace was displeased, but submissive. The Sixth were enraged.

They considered it luck when an interruption came.

Liggins, the house-porter, put his head into the Form-room, while an unhappy Mace was dealing with a discontented Form.

"Do not interrupt class!" barked Jimmy. "Go away at once!"

"Colonel Compton, sir——"

There was a stir in the Sixth. This meant that old Aubrey's governor had trickled in. They exchanged joyful glances. They were going to get a happy rest, with an unassisted Mace, while the Blighter was having his hair combed by old Aubrey's governor!

"Colonel Compton has called, sir, and wishes to see you," stammered Liggins. "I've showed him into your study, sir."

"Inform Colonel Compton that I am now engaged with the Sixth Form, Liggins," said Jimmy McCann, "and that I shall be glad to see him, if he cares to wait till I am at leisure. And do not return here."

"Yessir!" gasped Liggins. He almost tottered away.

The Sixth did not know whether to believe their ears. McCann was Head, certainly. But keeping a governor of the school waiting—and such a tremendous big gun as Colonel Compton. Had he really the nerve?

Evidently he had. It was plain that he had dismissed Colonel Compton entirely from his mind. It was Jimmy's way to concentrate on the matter in hand—and the matter in hand now was

history with the Sixth. Corkran & Co. drew consolation from the reflection that the longer the colonel had to wait, the madder he would get, making things all the worse for the Blighter in the long run.

Liggins hardly dared to convey Jimmy's message to the great man waiting in the Head's study. However, he had to do it, and he did. Colonel Compton, standing on Jimmy's hearth-rug, was a commanding figure—tall, grim, stiff as a ramrod, with a bristly white moustache and knitted white brows—knitted a little more on the right than on the left to keep his eyeglass in position. He glared at Liggins, as the house-porter told him.

Colonel Compton did not, perhaps, like his son, regard the new Head as a "dashed usher." But he had arrived without notification, at a time convenient to himself, undoubtedly expecting to see the headmaster on the spot. He had to wait! He was not accustomed to being kept waiting. He threw himself into an armchair, crossed his long legs, and waited, frowning. Liggins drew the door shut and went.

The colonel picked up a newspaper. He rather glared at it than perused it. The rustling of the paper reached a keen ear which, about ten minutes later, was bent at the Head's door.

Ferguson grinned. He was fairly certain that the Blighter would be in his study in second school. But, of course, he had to be sure before he screwed him in. Now he was sure. Somebody was in the study, handling papers. Who but McCann?

Ferg got busy. Nobody else was out of Form. He had the corridor to himself. Screw-eyes were screwed into the gimlet holes already prepared along the bottom of the door. Screws were driven into the holes already prepared in the floor, through the eyelets of the screw-eyes. The door was now safe from anything but a battering-ram.

Ferg slipped out into the quad and ducked as he approached the Head's

window. But there was no sign of anyone looking out from within.

Screw after screw was driven into the holes ready in the casement frames. The window was now as safe as the door.

Ducking low, Ferg scuttled along the wall and vanished. A few minutes later he walked back into the Fourth Form Room, with the map he had so conveniently forgotten. Capes made no remark on the length of time that he had been gone.

Ferg exchanged a look of intelligence with his friends. Joyous grins ran along the Fourth.

Meanwhile, the colonel waited, his irritation growing.

He threw down the paper at last and paced to and fro in the study, his brows knitted more and more. He had been kept waiting half an hour!

All that Aubrey had said in his letters about this new man was doubtless well founded. The man was a bounder—a bargee—not the man for High Coombe. And his taxi from Okeham, which he had kept, was ticking off cash all this time! Grimmer and grimmer grew the colonel's brow.

He had come to see McCann—to hear what the man had to say for himself, if anything! Well, by Jove, if the man did not choose to see him, that was that! He was waiting no longer. When the fellow chose to come, he would find him gone. And he would have something to say, by Jove, at the next meeting of the governors. In exactly the mood in which Aubrey would have been delighted to see him, Colonel Compton strode to the door, grasped the knob, and dragged. The door did not open.

He wrenched. Still it did not open. Exerting himself, he wrenched again.

It was useless. The door did not budge. Breathing hard, Colonel Compton stood back and stared at it.

What was the matter with the dashed thing? It was not locked. The key was on the inside. But it would not open. Jammed, somehow. He went

to the bell and pressed it, keeping his thumb on it to make it ring continuously. He was nearly boiling by this time.

There was a tap at the door. He heard the door-handle turn. Old Liggins' voice piped from the corridor, "You rang, sir?"

"Open this door!" roared Colonel Compton. "What dashed trick is being played here? Open this door!"

"Please unlock it, sir!" gasped old Liggins. As the door would not yield to a push, Liggins could only conclude that it was locked on the inside.

"It is not locked!" roared the colonel. "But—but it won't open, sir!" gasped Liggins.

"Fool! Open it!"

"I—I can't!"

"Idiot!" Colonel Compton wrenched from within. Liggins pushed from without. The door did not budge.

The colonel gave it up at last. He crossed to the window and stared out. It was easy enough to step out that way. He dragged at the window.

It did not open. There were several small casements in the big window and only one large enough to admit the passage of a man. That was the one that would not open. With a purple face, the colonel wrenched and shoved, pulled and pushed. A loud crack rewarded him. A pane had gone. But the window remained as fast as the door.

Colonel Compton desisted at last. He realised that he was a prisoner in the study. He realised, too, that all this jamming of window and door could not be accidental. It was trickery of some sort. Trickery—schoolboy japing—perpetrated on him, Colonel Compton, an important member of the Governing Board! The dashed young scoundrels who had done this should be flogged till they howled! He tramped across to the door again.

"Here, you!" he barked.

"Yes, sir!" piped old Liggins.

"Go and fetch the headmaster! Tell

him I've been fastened up in his dashed study! Do you hear? Go!"

Liggins went. But he did not go to the Sixth Form Room. He dared not, after McCann had told him not to.

Colonel Compton waited. It was still a quarter of an hour to the end of second school. He waited three minutes—then, spluttering, he began to bang on the door with his walking-stick.

Bang, bang, bang!

The din rang through the House.

In the Fourth Form Room they heard it, and Ferg & Co. grinned joyously, and Capes smiled. In the Fifth they guessed that somebody had taken Capes' hint and screwed up the Head. Chard paid no heed to the banging. If McCann was a prisoner in his study it was no business of Chard's!

Bang, bang, bang!

In the Sixth they started and stared. They, at all events, knew that the Blighter had not been screwed in, for he was there! They could only wonder. Mr. McCann frowned. The uproar was puzzling and annoying. But McCann carried on till the end of the lesson. Then he went to investigate.

Bang, bang, bang!

The terrific din guided him to his own study.

"It's Colonel Compton, sir!" stuttered Liggins. "Locked 'isself in your study, sir, and banging and shouting to be let out, sir!"

Bang, bang, bang!

The banging was followed by a ferocious roar:

"Will you let me out of this room?"

"Colonel Compton!" gasped Mr. McCann.

"Is that McCann? Let me out!" bawled the colonel. "What the dickens do you mean, sir, by letting your boys play such monkey-tricks?"

Mr. McCann stood for one moment transfixed. Then he investigated—and called to Liggins:

"Fetch a screwdriver, Liggins, and remove these screws. Colonel Compton, I very much regret that some foolish boy must have screwed the door—

a matter of minutes, sir, to release you."

It was more than a matter of minutes. Long, strong screws, driven in to the head, wanted some shifting. Liggins laboured with the screwdriver while the colonel foamed within. Both ends of the corridor were packed with staring faces.

Ferguson almost fell down when he saw McCann standing outside the door. Who, then, had he screwed up? When he learned, Ferg crept away, looking quite sick. Aubrey Compton was there—his face a picture! What effect was this going to have on his governor?

The door opened at last, and Colonel Compton strode out. His voice echoed like thunder down the corridor:

"Mr. McCann! I demand instant investigation—the severest punishment—a flogging, sir, the severest flogging!"

The crowd faded away!

It was absolutely rotten luck.

Colonel Compton had been dragged in as a help against the iron rule of the Blighter, and so far from regarding McCann's as an iron rule he emphatically expressed his opinion that that rule was too gentle and easy-going for High Coombe when the young scoundrels ventured to play such dashed tricks on a governor of the school!

When he departed in his taxi he was still snorting and convinced that the old school wanted a strong man to pull it together—his only doubt being whether James McCann was sufficiently strong!

## CHAPTER 33.

### Turning the Tables!

**F**ERGUSON of the Fourth had made up his mind.

He was tired of being cuffed by the lordly Aubrey, and had determined on retaliation. He felt that he had McCann on his side, for had not the Head stood up for the fags against the Fifth?



Thus it came about that Ferguson, with a fives bat gripped in his hand, was stalking Compton. His idea was to creep up to him and give him a couple of hefty swipes and then bolt!

He followed Compton down the passage and saw him slip into the Fifth Form Room and walk across to the open window.

Breathing hard, but very silent, Ferg opened the Form-room door and slipped in on tiptoe. Equally silently he closed the door behind him, lest it should bang and alarm Compton. He tiptoed past the desk, towards the dandy of the Fifth. Compton did not look round. Clearly, he had no suspicion that anyone had followed him into the room. Ferg gripped the fives bat tightly by the handle. Another step and—

There was a voice under the open window from the quad—the voice of Seymour of the Fifth:

"Here you are, Aubrey!"

"Good!"

A bundle was passed up, and Aubrey lifted it in. In doing so he turned, and Ferguson had just time to pop down under the desks, and keep out of sight, before he had turned round.

The chance had gone! Swiping Compton on the bags was no longer practical. Indeed, it was Ferg who would get the swiping if Compton spotted him there and guessed what he was after. Ferg, bitterly disappointed, and at the same time very curious, crouched under a desk in deep cover and stilled his breathing. Another chance might come!

Compton laid the bundle on the floor, and turned to the window again. Something else was passed up, and Ferg, peering, saw with amazement that it was a can, apparently containing water. Compton laid it beside the bundle, and closed the window.

In Ferguson's breast deadly vengeance was now giving place to amazed curiosity. What in the name of wonder was Compton up to? Ferg could guess that the bundle and

the can had been passed in at the window because Compton wanted them in the Form-room, and did not want to draw attention by carrying them there. That was easy enough. But what did he want them there for? And what was the game?

Taking up the bundle in one hand and the can in the other, Compton went to a corner of the Form-room, where he set them down. Eager eyes—unsuspected by Aubrey—watched him from under the desk where Ferguson crouched.

In the corner Compton knelt down—almost regardless of the knees of his precious trousers—and prised up a section of the old oak planking of the floor.

Everybody who used the Fifth Form Room—excepting Mr. Chard, the Form-master—knew that that board was unfixed and could be prised off the joists below.

Ferg was puzzled. As Compton's fag, in the old days, he knew all about the Glory Hole, as the Fifth Form men called it.

Ferguson wondered whether he was dreaming when Aubrey lowered himself through the cavity, and lifted down the bundle and the can, then, stooping his head, disappeared under the floor.

"My only hat!" breathed Ferg, and he rubbed his eyes.

He crept towards the aperture in the corner of the Form-room floor. Compton was gone. Looking down, Ferg could see a winking light—obviously that of an electric torch carried by Compton to light his way in those shadowy and spidery recesses. There was a space of about five feet between the ancient oak floors and the equally ancient stone paving on the earth below. By stooping his head, even a tall fellow could walk about under the floors with ease. But why any fellow should want to do so was a mystery.

Certainly Ferguson himself and other fags had once or twice explored those dim recesses. They had discovered nothing but dust and spiders. Compton, perhaps, as a fag in the Fourth, might

have done so; but it was unimaginable that the superb dandy of the Fifth had any fancy for such dusty and dismal explorations. Yet there he was—with a light, a bundle, and a can. Ferg would have been much less keen than he was if he had not guessed that something very deep and mysterious was on!

What it was he could not imagine, but he hoped that it was something that would give him a chance of putting a spoke in Compton's wheel. This might turn out better than swiping the beast with a bat on his bags and then running for it.

Ferguson dropped through the aperture.

It was easy enough to follow Compton by the winking light, and to keep in cover among the vast pillars and buttresses that supported the great fabric of High Coombe School. Ferg had been over the ground before more than once, and when Compton stopped, Ferg knew where he was—directly under the Head's study. He was not surprised at that, for it was already dawning on him that this mysterious expedition was not unconnected with the feud against McCann.

Peering from behind a stone pillar, Ferg watched.

He saw Compton lay down the bundle and the can, and fix the torch on a buttress so that it showed him light. Then he unpacked the bundle, turning out a number of tins. From each tin he prised off the lid, then arranged them in rows on the stone. And into each of them he tipped water from the can.

Ferg sniffed. An old, familiar scent came to his nostrils. He might almost have fancied himself back in the bike-shed, cleaning that dreadful old acetylene lamp of his!

He grinned. He understood!

The floor of the Head's study was of oak, thick and strong and old. Here and there, of course, would be little crevices in it—more than sufficient to allow the passage of that evil scent.

It was already rumoured in the Burrow that Compton of the Fifth had bragged that he was going to turn the Blighter out of the old Head's study. This was how he was going to do it! They would never guess that it was damped carbide that was reeking under the floor. They would think of drains, dead cats—anything and everything else. Why, by morning the Head's study would be niffing as if a dozen stink-bombs had exploded there!

Ferg suppressed a chuckle, and crouched behind the pillar as Compton came back, carrying the light. The Fifth Former passed within six feet of him, never dreaming that he was there. A minute later Ferg heard the sound of the loose board in the Fifth Form Room dropping into place. He was left in darkness—and an uncharitably smell!

Ferg stopped his nose and then reflected.

"The dangerous ass!" was his first reflection. "Suppose a fellow had struck a match and it had caught the calcium?" Ferg shuddered at the thought.

Not for ten minutes did he follow Compton. He had to grope his way in the dark. He pushed up, at last, the loose board in the Fifth Form Room and put his head out, and then lost no time in scudding.

Compton was gone for good. Ferguson was not! Ferguson had simply gone to borrow Fatty Pye's electric torch. A quarter of an hour later, Ferguson was stepping down into the Glory Hole again.

Lighting his way with Pye's torch, he arrived under the Head's study.

Then for some time Ferguson was busily occupied in carrying those evil-smelling tins of carbide from where Compton had left them to the space under the Fifth Form Room.

It was a dusty, dirty, disagreeable, and evil-smelling task. But Ferg stuck to it like a man till the whole supply of evil-scented chemical was parked under the middle of the Fifth Form

floor! Then, tired but satisfied, he clambered out into the Fifth Form Room, thankful to get away from such close contact with the awful stench of the carbide.

He was not quite finished yet! Having replaced the loose board, Ferg set to work with gimlet, screw-driver, and screws. He screwed down that board very securely. Anybody who wanted to step down into the Glory Hole again had a disappointment ahead of him. That portion of the Form-room floor was as immovable as the rest, or more so, when the patient Ferg was finished.

#### CHAPTER 34.

"They don't wash!"

**C**HARD sniffed. All the Fifth were sniffing.

It was most unpleasant. An odour, difficult to trace, but distinctly disagreeable, hung about the Fifth Form that morning.

It was a bright, fresh, sunny morning. The breeze that blew up the coombe from the Atlantic was keen and invigorating. It was so fresh and pleasant that Peter Chard was feeling quite bucked and cheerful—feeling almost as if he could endure McCann—till he came into his Form-room to take the Fifth.

Chard was puzzled. He asked Bob Darrell to set the windows wide open, which Bob gladly did. But that did not seem to improve matters very much.

The strange scent, instead of diminishing, seemed to intensify. Where it came from was a mystery. It did not seem possible that there was anything in the Form-room from which it could emanate. But after a time Chard asked the fellows to look round to ascertain whether any such thing was possibly there. They found nothing.

Teddy Seymour gave Aubrey Compton rather worried looks. Indefinable as that horrid scent was, Teddy having the clue, fancied that he could

identify it. Compton was frankly puzzled.

He had gone to the Head's study before Form with Teddy, expecting to find that apartment smelling most horribly. But there had not been the faintest whiff of scent in the Head's study. McCann had given them both lines for being out after gates the previous day. Little enough Aubrey cared for that if he could have seen the Blighter driven out of his study by an invisible enemy. But nothing had happened, and he could only conclude that the scent had not yet found its way through.

It was simply amazing to find it so strong in the Fifth Form Room. That room was at quite a distance from the Head's study. It seemed incredible that the scent could travel so far and then find a way upward. Apparently, however, it had.

"I say, this is pretty awful, old chap!" Teddy whispered, in second lesson.

Aubrey shrugged his shoulders.

"Think what it must be like in the Blighter's study!" he answered.

Teddy drew what comfort he could from that.

All the windows were wide open. The door was set wide, too, in the hope that a through draught would clear the atmosphere a little. It did not!

Peverill stood up at last. He was looking quite pale.

"If you please, sir," said Peverill, "I—I think there must be something wrong with the drains! I don't think we ought to stay here, sir."

"It's too thick, sir!" said Carter.

"It is most singular!" said Mr. Chard. "It is very singular indeed! I fail to understand it! I—I will ascertain whether this—this disagreeable odour is perceptible in the other Form-rooms." Chard went to the door. "Keep your places!" he added.

Chard did not want McCann to come barging in and find his Form-room in disorder.

He went along the passage and spoke

to Capes, master of the Fourth, and Penge, master of the Shell, in turn. Both were surprised. Neither had noticed any unusual scent in his Form-room that morning. They came along and looked into the Fifth Form Room, sniffed, and backed away hurriedly.

"Extraordinary!" said Penge.

"Very odd!" said Capes.

They retreated.

Chard went along to the Sixth. His Form, regardless of his order to keep their places, crowded out into the passage. It was getting altogether too thick in the Form-room. Chard or no Chard, Blighter or no Blighter, the Fifth could not stand it.

"It's drains!" said Raymond.

"Scandalous, I call it."

"Sickenin'!" said Burke.

"Horrible!"

"Here comes Chard!"

Chard came back—unaccompanied. Mr. McCann, busy with the Sixth, had declined to come with him.

"Boys—what!" trumpeted Chard, staring at his Form in the corridor.

"We can't stand it, sir!" gasped Peverill. "We really can't, sir! There must be a dead cat under the floor, or something."

"You must go back into the Form-room at once!" trumpeted Chard. "It is not long now to break!"

"It's awful, sir!" wailed Peverill.

"Horrible, sir!"

"Really, sir—"

Every voice in the Fifth was raised in protest. It was a trying moment for Popularity Peter. He liked to stand well with his Form. Gladly he would have given them leave from class. In the days of the Venerable Beak he would not have hesitated for a moment. But in the days of McCann he dared not. The scent in the Fifth Form Room was horrible, but the Fifth had to endure it!

Chard shepherded them back into the Form-room.

"You utter ass, Aubrey!" groaned Teddy Seymour, with his handkerchief to his nose. "You idiot!"

Aubrey shrugged. The most fastidious fellow in the Fifth was not enjoying this. He was puzzled, perplexed, and angry. How the Dickens had that ferocious scent travelled in the wrong direction?

The bell rang for break.

Never had the Fifth been so glad to hear that bell. Never had Chard been so glad to hear it. They almost tumbled over one another getting out of the Form-room. They sniffed, gasped, coughed. Chard was quite pale. It was a race to the fresh air of the quad.

Compton slipped away, and put his head into McCann's study for a moment—the Blighter was not there. His sole comfort was that if the smell was so fearful so far off as the Fifth Form Room, it must be thick enough to cut with a knife in the Head's study. He gasped in sheer amazement, scarcely able to believe his nose! There was no scent whatever in the Head's study.

Had he made a mistake the previous day and landed his cargo in the wrong place? He was sure he had not—yet—Braving that deadly scent, Aubrey hurried back to the Fifth Form Room, now deserted, and ran across to the Glory Hole in the corner. But he strove in vain to prise up the loose board. It was no longer loose. It was fast. Gazing at it blankly, he saw that it was screwed down. He also discerned that the heads of the screws had been hammered, so that there were no longer slots for a screwdriver to be inserted—which meant that the screws could not be withdrawn.

Aubrey almost tottered from the Form-room. Somebody had been up to something—but who? And what? As he went out of the House a voice reached his ears:

"They don't wash in the Fifth! Chard ought to make them wash!" It was the voice of Ferguson.

Aubrey glared at a group of the Fourth, intently discussing this strange phenomenon.

"What else can it be?" demanded Ferg. "Talk about drains! All rot! Dead cats—piffle! They don't wash! Chard doesn't make 'em wash! They do anything they like with Chard! McCann ought to make 'em wash!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Not till the following day was the mystery revealed, when a search under the flooring for possible dead cats or rats revealed neither cats nor rats, but a numerous array of carbide tins.

Jimmy McCann never knew who had put them there, but the Fifth knew, or thought they did, and every man in the Form told Aubrey Compton with great emphasis and at great length what they thought of his asinine blundering and bungling.

It is said that great is truth and it must prevail. But even after that discovery under the Fifth Form floor quite a number of fellows preferred to adhere to the original explanation of that odoriferous outbreak.

"They can say what they like," declared Ferguson of the Fourth, "but the fact is, you men, that the Fifth don't wash!"

#### CHAPTER 35.

Pale with Rage!

**C**ORKRAN of the Sixth was pale with rage.

He was a great man at High Coombe—slack, no doubt; but then everybody was slack at the School for Slackers. He was not great at games, neither did he shine in class.

Nevertheless, Corky was a great man—head prefect—and much admired and liked in his Form, and in the Fifth. But if he had been the least-liked fellow at High Coombe, he would have jumped into popularity at a bound as soon as it was known that McCann had a down on him.

The fiat had gone forth! Corkran, head prefect, was no longer head prefect—no longer a prefect at all! He had fallen from his high estate, and great was the fall thereof.

High Coombe could hardly believe it at first.

Of course, McCann pretended to have reasons; indeed, Darrell of the Fifth declared boldly in Big Study that his reasons were jolly good. Darrell's arguments did not convince the other seniors. They had not a convincing but an intensely exasperating effect.

They caused a mob of Sixth and Fifth to collar Darrell and hurl him forth from Big Study on his neck. How gladly the incensed High Coombes would have served McCann with the same measure! But that, alas! was impossible.

McCann's reasons, which seemed good to Bob Darrell but to nobody else, might have seemed good to quite a lot of fellows at any school but the School for Slackers. Corky was slack—as if that mattered! He cut roll—as if that mattered, either; prefects had always been privileged to cut roll, if they liked, before McCann came. He smoked cigarettes in his study—most of the seniors did. It was admitted that it was unfortunate that McCann, coming to Corky's study to speak to him on some matter of prefectorial business, had found him smoking a cigarette.

Corky, fairly caught, had been overwhelmed with confusion. But even then he had hardly expected so drastic a sentence. Corky could hardly believe that he was no longer head prefect—no longer a prefect at all. The power of the ashplant had departed from him. Not that he ever used the ashplant—or hardly ever—but it was the symbol of greatness. And now it was gone! Corky was now an ordinary common or garden member of the Sixth Form—merely that and nothing more.

To a man, the Sixth breathed wrath and indignation. Tredegar, captain of the school, declared that something had to be done. Coffin, Laçy, Carew, all prefects, fully agreed. Randal, the laziest man at High Coombe, was almost energetic in taking the same

view. Randal was a prefect, and if a prefect was to be dropped on for slacking, the prospect for Randal was rather dubious.

### CHAPTER 36.

#### The Brainsy Man!

"SAFE?" queried Corkran dubiously. "Safe as houses," said Aubrey Compton.

"Um!" said Corky.

They were in Corkran's study—half a dozen of the Sixth and Compton of the Fifth. It was a large, handsome room, like all the Sixth Form studies at High Coombe. Corkran stood before the fireplace, his hands driven deep into his trousers pockets. A tall, rather handsome figure, Corky was as tall as the new Head—though he had felt fearfully small when McCann last interviewed him—rather like a Pom in the presence of a mastiff.

Corky was not looking good-tempered and cheery, as usual. His disgrace, his fall from his high and palmy state of head prefect, weighed on Corkran's mind and ruffled his temper.

Coffin, Carew and Lacy sat in a row on the edge of the bed in the alcove. Randal sat in the armchair—or, rather, sprawled in it.

Tredegar, captain of the school, sat in the window-seat. Aubrey Compton sat on the study table, swinging his elegant legs, encased in the most beautiful trousers at High Coombe.

It was a sort of indignation meeting in Corkran's study. The Sixth Form men had met there to tell one another what they thought of the Blighter McCann and to compare notes about what they would like to do to him—in a word, to blow off steam. But when Compton of the Fifth came in the discussion took a more serious turn.

Blowing off steam was a relief in its way, but they would have been glad of a chance of getting down to brass tacks. Aubrey was showing them

a way, but his words seemed to awaken as much dubiety as enthusiasm.

"Handling the Head" was so fearfully serious a matter that the most reckless spirit blanched a little at the idea. And it was nothing short of handling the Head that Compton coolly proposed.

"The fact is," said Corkran, "I'd like to give him jip! I'd like to duck him, or punch him, or bump him, or whop him with his own cane, or any old thing you like. But I don't want to be sacked from High Coombe, Aubrey, old man. Nor does any other fellow here."

Tredegar nodded slowly.

"That's the jolly old rub!" he remarked. "The brute can sack a man if he likes. And—he would!"

"I believe," said Randal, from the depths of the armchair, "that he would think twice or three times before he sacked a man, especially a Sixth Form man. But a man who handled him wouldn't leave him much choice in the matter. See?"

There was a general nodding of Sixth Form heads.

Aubrey smiled sarcastically.

"If you'd let a fellow speak——" he suggested.

"Fire away, old chap!" said Corkran. "Any old thing—only don't tip us to go like lambs to the slaughter. We're not giving that rotter a chance to turn a man out of the school. I'm feelin' pretty savage, as you know, but I'm not lettin' any of my pals in for that!"

"Is McCann a cat?" asked Compton.

"Eh?"

"I mean, can he see in the dark?" went on Aubrey.

"I suppose not!" said Corkran.

"Well, then, listen! Suppose the Blighter was bagged in the Sixth Form Room and a bag shoved over his head so quick that he hadn't time to let out a yelp! Five or six fellows can handle him all right, tough as he is. He's left tied to a desk——"

"Oh, my hat!"

"To wriggle till morning!"

"Great pip!"

"Think that would be a warning to him to draw in his horns?" asked the dandy of the Fifth casually.

There was a chuckle in Corkran's study. It was impossible, of course—old Aubrey was simply talking out of his hat! It was unthinkable! But how glorious, if it had only been possible and thinkable! What a whop back at the unspeakable Blihter! What a lesson to him that High Coombe was fed-up with his rot! McCann, with a bag over his objectionable head, tied to a desk, wriggling—they chuckled at the dazzling idea!

"Well, what about it?" asked Aubrey.

"Nothing about it, fathead!" said Corkran. "Every man who laid a finger on him would be kicked out of the school so quick it would make his head swim."

"A delightful vision!" murmured Randal. "Too delightful ever to come true, old bean. Forget it!"

"I've mentioned that McCann isn't a cat, to see in the dark," said Aubrey Compton. "We get him to the Sixth Form Room after dark. Somebody takes the lamps out in the Form-room and the passage—in case anybody should touch the switch. He won't recognise anybody in the dark."

"Um!" said Corkran. "But why should the Blihter go to a Form-room after dark? He never does."

"Randal wangles that!" said Aubrey.

"Do I?" said Randal very dubiously.

"You're a prefect, though Corkran isn't. If you find that fags have been larking in the passages and Form-rooms, putting out the electric lights, it's your duty to take the matter up," explained Compton. "Naturally, you report it to the Head!"

"Catch Randal takin' the trouble!" grinned Coffin.

"On this occasion Randal does take

the trouble. As a dutiful prefect—McCann likes dutiful prefects——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"As a dutiful prefect, Randal reports what's going on to McCann. McCann, a thousand to one, walks along to see what's up."

"I suppose he would!" assented Corkran reflectively. "He's that sort of energetic hound. McCann will barge in. He's a bargee."

"He walks into what's waitin' for him," went on Aubrey. "Nobody says a word, of course—he's as keen on recognising a voice as a face."

"If he gives one howl, the whole house will be on the scene!" said Carew. "I can see the fags turnin' out of the Burrow in their myriads."

"He won't give one howl!" said Aubrey coolly. "A fellow will have a bag ready and bung it over his head first thing. And a few dusters tied round it——"

"Old Aubrey thinks of everything!" said Lacy.

There were eager looks now. But Corkran slowly and regretfully shook his head.

"There's one thing you forget, old top!" he remarked.

"Cough it up!"

"McCann knows he's made me wild and made the Sixth wild! Admitted, he won't see a face in the dark or hear a voice if no fellow speaks. But he will know that my friends have handled him—he will know that I was there, and that my pals were there."

"Yes, that rather washes it out!" said Coffin sadly. "As soon as it happens McCann will as good as know our names."

"Suppose you're in Big Study at the time?" suggested Aubrey.

They stared.

"How can we be in Big study, ass, if we're handlin' the Blihter in the Form-room?" demanded Corkran.

Compton smiled, the smile of superior sagacity.

"You haven't got it yet!" he explained. "As you say, McCann will jump to it that the Sixth handled him."

"Of course he will!"

"Led by you, Corky——"

"Naturally."

"He won't have a doubt of it."

"Not the slightest."

"For which reason," said Compton slowly and distinctly, "not a Sixth Form man will be on the spot. All the Sixth will be able to prove, if necessary, that they weren't near the spot."

"Then how—what——"

"Half a dozen of the Fifth will do the trick, with me leading them," said Compton coolly. "That's the beauty of it. McCann will see nobody—hear nobody—only he'll be certain that the Sixth did it. And no Sixth Form man is goin' to have a finger in the pie at all."

"Oh!" gasped the Sixth Formers.

"Randal will have to do his bit—but that's his duty as a prefect! Even the Blighter can't worry a man for doin' his duty. Isn't he a whale on duty? All prefects keep clear of the spot—carefully clear! They don't hear anythin' goin' on. They keep an eye open to see that nobody wanders in that direction by accident and leave us a clear field with the Blighter. How's that?" asked Aubrey.

Corkran breathed hard and deep.

"Aubrey, old man," he said, with feeling, "you're a pal, if ever there was one. Standin' by a fellow like this!"

"Old Aubrey's the brainy man, there's no doubt about that!" said Carew. "Why, it will work like a charm! Fancy the Blighter rootin' through the Sixth afterwards, searchin' for the jolly old ragers and findin' out man after man who never had anythin' to do with it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a roar of laughter in Corkran's study. Tredegar got off the window-seat and smacked Compton on the shoulder. Corky gazed at him with undisguised admiration. There

had been many plans for putting paid to the Blighter—many schemes for making him sit up. But this, undoubtedly, was the winner. He had disgraced Corkran and enraged the Sixth—was he not certain to jump to it that Corkran and his friends in the Sixth had done this? He was!

And all they would have to do with it was seeing that Compton & Co. had a clear field, uninterrupted. When the Blighter came down on the Sixth, like a wolf on the fold, they would be able to prove that they had been nowhere near the spot! McCann would have the whole school to choose from in picking out five or six fellows whose faces he had not seen and whose voices he had not heard!

No wonder Corkran & Co. chortled and regarded old Aubrey with delighted admiration—and no wonder Aubrey, thus lauded, felt like the classical gentleman of olden time, ready to strike the stars with his sublime head. All High Coombe wanted to make the Blighter squirm.

There was no doubt that he would squirm when he was tied to a desk in a deserted Form-room with a bag over his head! The School for Slackers had suffered under McCann—and now his turn was coming!

#### CHAPTER 37.

#### A Gurgling Gasp!

**B**OB DARRELL was worried at prep in Study No. 3. It was not preparation that worried him—though since James McCann had taken the place of the Venerable Beak, prep had to be taken more seriously than of old. Bob was worried about Aubrey and Teddy. That something was "on," he hardly needed telling. Teddy Seymour was "in it"—Bob wasn't!

Bob, of course, would never have dreamed of giving his friends away, little as he liked the campaign against McCann. But if he had known what Aubrey was planning that night, he would hardly have remained idle.



Bob knew, if Aubrey did not, that in tackling McCann, the dandy of the Fifth was taking on a man far above his weight. Some new move against the Blighter was on, and Bob was worried—not for McCann, but for Aubrey. Several times during prep he gave his friends troubled and inquiring glances. Aubrey was smiling cheerily—Teddy every now and then gave a chuckle.

"Look here, what's on?" demanded Bob at last.

Aubrey glanced at him.

"Is anythin' on?" he asked.

"Oh, don't be an ass! What's on, Teddy?"

Seymour chuckled.

"You'd better not know, Bob! Nothin' in your line!"

Bob grunted and resumed prep. He was out of sympathy with his friends on the subject of McCann, and they did not tell him things as of old. In point of fact, had Bob known that Aubrey was planning so exceedingly risky a proceeding as "handling the Head," it was very probable that he would have intervened, if only to save Aubrey from his own recklessness. But though Darrell knew that "something" was on, he was far from dreaming how frightfully serious that something was.

After prep Compton and Seymour went along to Carter's study. Carter and Burke and Raymond were there. Warren joined them.

Bob went down to Big Study, troubled in mind. He was rather relieved to find Tredegar, Corkran, Randal and most of the Sixth there. He knew, of course, that the Sixth were fearfully enraged with McCann, and he suspected that Aubrey was joining up with them in some wild scheme of vengeance on the Blighter. Still, here were the Sixth, evidently not on the warpath, which relieved his mind.

But Bob found the atmosphere of Big Study rather chilly that evening. Corkran gave him a glare, an example followed by other Sixth Form men.

Any man who did not believe that Jimmy McCann was the last word in blighters, the outside edge in rotters, was not popular in Big Study.

That chill in the atmosphere drove Bob back to Study No. 3. Neither Aubrey nor Teddy was there, and Bob sat down to write a letter home. He supposed that his friends were still in Carter's study.

They weren't!

Compton, Seymour, Carter, Raymond, Burke, and Warren were nowhere near the Fifth Form studies. They were by that time gathered in a bunch in the doorway of the Sixth Form Room. In that room, and in the passage, lamps had been taken out of their sockets and laid aside. Anyone who had tried to switch on the light would be disappointed. Darkness reigned.

Aubrey Compton had a bag in his hands. There was a cord round the neck of it, to be drawn tight when re-

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**FOR THE MONTH OF MARCH!**

**Three More Tip-top School Tales**

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Nos. 292, 293, and 294.

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**"THE 'SWOT' OF THE REMOVE!"**

By FRANK RICHARDS.

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**"THE BOY WHO BOUGHT A SCHOOL!"**

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**THURSDAY, MARCH 4th.**

*Give Your Order To-day!*

quired. Teddy Seymour had a rope. The other fellows had dusters. All were ready for the Blighter—when he happened! Hearts were beating rather fast. The scheme had been laid so carefully that it seemed that nothing could possibly go wrong with it.

The worst that could happen was that the Head would not fall into the trap—he was such a wary Blighter that you never could tell! But that was the only danger. It was, as Compton had decided in Corkran's study, safe as houses!

Nevertheless, handling the Head was so fearfully serious a thing that the heroes of the Fifth felt their hearts beat faster. If he had a chance to yell for help— But he was going to have no chance!

As soon as they heard him groping along in the dark they were going to bag him, and the bag over his head, reinforced by the dusters rapidly applied, would muffle all sound. Strong as he was, he would be powerless in six pairs of sturdy hands. They would get him, silence him, have him where they wanted him, before he knew what was happening. It was all right—right as rain!

Neither was there any danger of a mistake in the dark—of some silly ass coming along and getting the Head's medicine. Corkran was going to keep an eye open, to see that nobody wandered in that direction. Everything, in fact, was planned—all was cut and dried—the Blighter was going to get the lesson of his life, and nobody—excepting the Blighter—would be a penny the worse.

If only the Blighter came! The brute was so keen, so wary, so much of a blighter, in fact, that they could not feel sure that he was going to walk into the trap till he had walked into it.

Intently, with beating hearts, they listened for a footstep. Dark as it was, their eyes, accustomed to the darkness by that time, could dimly make out the walls—they would have a faint

glimpse of their victim. McCann, coming from a lighted room, would not have that advantage. Was it possible to deny that old Aubrey was a born leader—that he thought of everything?

Compton was cool as ice. But even his heart gave a little jump as there was a footstep, and the dimmest of dim figures—dim, but obviously the height of McCann—loomed in the passage. He was coming quickly, too—as if in a hurry—and they heard his breathing. It would have guided them even if they had not glimpsed him, a shadow among shadows.

Action was prompt, swift, drastic. The bag, in Aubrey's hands, whipped over a head and shoulders—in the same second the cord was drawn, closing it round the neck of the victim. One startled, gurgling gasp—that was all—no yell to alarm the House.

Instantly arms and legs were gripped and held, and folded dusters tied round the bag enclosing the face, specially tight over the mouth. In the darkness, Aubrey Compton's eyes gleamed almost like a cat's with triumph.

Six pairs of hands held the prisoner—helpless. It had worked like a charm.

#### CHAPTER 35.

##### Frantic Wiggles!

RANDAL of the Sixth sighed as he detached himself from the most comfortable armchair in Big Study. It was time for action—and action did not appeal to the laziest man at the laziest school ever. But Randal made an effort. And amid encouraging murmurs from other Sixth Form men he ambled out of Big Study. Corkran was in the passage outside—leaning on the wall, with his hands in his pockets and a cheery smile on his face.

Thinking of the ambush laid for the Blighter, and of the Blighter about to walk into it, had a cheering effect

on the fallen head prefect of High Coombe.

From where he stood he could keep an eye on the passage leading to the Form-rooms, and see that nobody wandered by chance in that dangerous direction. At the same time, he was full in view himself—obviously nowhere near the Form-rooms—nowhere near the ambush. His alibi was complete, if McCann wanted to know afterwards.

A fag had come along—Ferguson of the Fourth—who wanted to fetch something he had left in the Fourth Form Room, and Corkran curtly ordered him back. Ferg repressed his desire to tell Corkran that, being no longer a prefect, he had no right to yap at a Fourth Form man with his blessed orders. But Corkran, if he had no longer an ash-plant, had a boot—and Ferg grunted and went back to the Burrow.

After which Corky remained leaning on the wall, lost in blissful visions of a Blighter tied up and wriggling, till Randal came out of Big Study.

Randal passed him with a grin.

"Aubrey's ready, I suppose?" he asked, as he passed, in a low voice.

"You bet!"

"Right!"

Randal of the Sixth proceeded to the Head's study. He tapped at the door, and the deep, pleasant voice of James McCann bade him enter.

Jimmy was seated at his table, at work. The Blighter was a demon for work. But he laid down his pen and gave the prefect a kindly glance. Jimmy was sorry that he had had to be so severe with Corkran, but he entertained a hope that it would have the effect of bucking up other prefects, and making it unnecessary for him to hand out similar measure to more of them.

Randal's visit to his study, after prep, really looked like it. It was the first time a High Coombe prefect had come to the new headmaster's study of his own accord.

"Yes, what is it, Randal?" asked Jimmy, with his pleasant smile.

"I think I ought to report to you,

sir, that something seems to be going on in the Form-rooms," said Randal.

"At this hour!" ejaculated Jimmy.

"Well, somebody seems to have been larking with the electric light, sir," said Randal. "Can't turn on the light! Of course, sir, before you came, the fags used to buzz in and out of the Form-rooms pretty well as they liked—but you've given orders for that to stop!"

"Quite!" said Jimmy McCann.

Leaning his elbow on the table, the new Beak looked at Randal.

His first impulse was to feel pleased. The heavy hand with Corkran had apparently produced its effect. For the first time, a High Coombe prefect was taking his duties with some seriousness. Never till now had a prefect cared two straws whether fags larked in the Form-rooms after prep or whether they played tricks with the electric light, or dreamed of calling Mr. McCann's attention to such an infraction of the rules.

And Randal was the laziest prefect in the Sixth; Jimmy had not failed to note that fact, and to wonder why even old Dr. Chetwode—the Venerable Beak—had fancied that he was any use as a prefect. If Randal was bucking up, it was a sign of grace, very welcome to the new Head of High Coombe.

But Jimmy McCann was not unaware of the state of fierce commotion in the Sixth Form, caused by the disgrace of Corkran. His first impulse was to feel pleased with Randal. His second was not. With one moment's rapid thought, Jimmy saw himself going along a dark passage, to see what was happening in the Form-rooms. He smiled—rather grimly.

Jimmy did not want to sack any of the Sixth if he could help it. But he had a strong suspicion that if he went along that dark passage somebody would have to be sacked afterwards.

"Thank you, Randal!" he said.

"I thought I'd better report to you, sir——"

"Quite!" said Jimmy. He half-rose

and spotted the sudden gleam in Randal's eyes. He sat down again, and spotted the fall of Randal's face. He felt inclined to laugh.

Had Jimmy been the unspeakable Blighter that all High Coombe believed him to be, no doubt he would have rooted into this matter. But Jimmy did not want exasperated and unthinking fellows to make fools of themselves, and drive him into turning them out of High Coombe.

"I am rather busy at the moment," said Jimmy, watching with a glimmer in his eyes the lengthening of Randal's face as he spoke. "Please ask Mr. Chard to look into the matter."

Randal made one more effort.

"Mr. Chard's gone over to his rooms, sir—"

"Quite! Then speak to Mr. Penge; he has rooms in the House, I think."

Randal gave it up. Evidently there was nothing doing.

"Very well, sir," he said disparitely.

He left the study, and Jimmy McCann smiled at the closing door, before he took up his pen again.

Randal, with a glum brow, went back to Corkran.

Corky eyed him eagerly.

"Nothing doing!" said Randal. "The brute's too wary! I—I believe he guesses there's something on! It's a rotten fizzle."

And Randal, tired after his uncommon exertions went back into Big Study, and his armchair.

Corkran breathed hard.

Nothing doing—the brute was too wary! He might have expected it, from that barge. It was rotten—too rotten for words! All that elaborate plan laid for nothing—his Fifth-Form supporters waiting in the dark, waiting in vain! Corkran set his lips hard. The disappointment was bitter.

Then Randal's words recurred to his mind. If the Beak guessed something—if he suspected something—he might look into it—taking a light with

him, perhaps. Compton & Co. could not be off the scene too rapidly, in that case.

Anyway, the game was up, and they might as well go back to their studies.

Corkran hurried along the passage, realising that no time was to be lost.

He hurried down the Form-room passage. Coming from the light into the dark, he could see nothing, and he did not venture to call out, lest other ears should hear. He hurried on towards the Sixth Form Room.

What happened next was as surprising to Corkran as an earthquake could have been. That he was the same height as McCann—that in the dim darkness one shadowy figure did not differ from another—might have occurred to him, if he had thought of it—which he did not. After the bag was over his head it was too late.

Not a word was spoken. Six Fifth Form men, gripping the figure that wriggled and wriggled and wriggled, with the bag over its head, were grimly silent. There was no need for speech; the whole thing was cut and dried. Silently they bore the wriggling figure into the Sixth Form Room.

His frantic wriggles did not worry them in the least; there were plenty of strong hands to hold the prisoner.

They jammed it against a desk, and held it while Teddy got busy with the rope.

Hand and foot the wretched victim was tied to the legs of the desk. Lots of rope was used; Aubrey was leaving nothing to chance.

Silently, leaving the victim tied to the desk, they trod out of the Form-room, and Aubrey closed the door.

Still silent, on tiptoe, they departed.

Five fellows sought their own quarters at once. Chard was already rolling into the House, to see lights out for his Form. But Aubrey Compton strolled along to Big Study and glanced in, with a smiling face.

Many eyes turned on him, doubtfully, expectantly. Randal had already told the dismayed Sixth that he feared that there was nothing doing. But Aubrey looked as if something was doing—in fact, done. He winked at the Sixth—a wicked wink!

"You've——" breathed Carew.

A nod.

"But Randal thought——" said Coffin.

Aubrey smiled.

"Well, my lad!" said Randal. "I thought—and I told Corky——"

"Mum's the word!" drawled Aubrey.

Aubrey strolled away, leaving a rejoicing Sixth in Big Study. In Dorm No. 3, Teddy greeted him with a joyous grin—Bob Darrell with a grim stare of inquiry.

"Well?" grunted Bob.

"Quite well!" said Aubrey. "Right as rain, old bean!"

And Teddy chuckled.

Corkran of the Sixth was not missed that night. As the Sixth Form men had rooms to themselves, and as it was close on bed-time when that glorious rag was carried out so successfully, the other fellows, naturally, only supposed that Corky had gone to bed. Afterwards, it was quite unpleasant for Corky's friends to think of the sort of night that Corky must have passed!

Nobody knew till the morning! It was old Liggins, the house-porter, who made the discovery, after ringing the rising-bell. Sounds of wriggling and muffled mumblings caused old Liggins to peer into the Sixth Form Room—and he nearly fell down at the sight of a fellow tied to the legs of a desk, with a bag fastened over his head, encircled by dusters.

Liggins, like a man in a trance, gazed at that amazing sight, then rushed away to call the Head. Mr. McCann arrived promptly at such startling news—and promptly released the unhappy prisoner.

Corkran's face came red and furious from the bag. The night had seemed

endless to him—but it had ended at last. For hours and hours and hours he had been thinking less of horrid discomfort than of his fierce desire to get at that idiot—that dummy—that fooling chump—Compton of the Fifth! That fierce desire was to be gratified at last.

Jimmy learned nothing from Corkran. Perhaps he guessed a good deal, for there was a faint smile on his face as he walked away from the Sixth Form Room.

There was no smile on Corkran's. And he did not walk—he rushed. He burst into Dorm No. 3 like a hurricane, and he hurled himself at Aubrey Compton.

"You hopeless ass! You fooling idiot!" yelled Corkran, punching away at Aubrey for all he was worth. "I'll teach you to clap a bag over my head and tie me up for the night! Take that—and that!"

"You!" gasped Aubrey, too astounded to make any attempt to ward off Corkran's blows.

"Yes, me, you howling dummy!" roared the enraged Sixth Former, punching away vigorously. "You collared me instead of the Blighter!"

The combined efforts of Bob Darrell and Teddy Seymour hardly dragged him off. Aubrey's nose was streaming crimson when at last Corkran was hurled forth from Dorm No. 3.

Aubrey seemed a little discouraged by his latest failure, and during the short remainder of the term carried no further his campaign against McCann. But when High Coombe broke up for the holidays he remarked in the coach as they went to the station:

"The Blighter may have had rather the best of it this term. But we'll put paid to him next term!"

"I don't think!" grinned Bob Darrell.

And it remained to be seen which was right!

## BLACK GOLD!

**I**F anyone asks you—but they won't, of course—whether you would rather they gave you all the gold in the world, or all the oil, don't be a "sap" and ask for the gold. Choose the oil, when you will be able, if you want to, to buy up all the gold that's going, and still have a few hundred million pounds left.

### A Valuable Discovery.

It's odd to think that only just over a hundred years ago the oil that oozes out of the earth in some parts of the world was looked upon as a nuisance, and not, as now, a precious find. In fact, it was through the owner of a coal-mine in Yorkshire calling in experts to discover how to get rid of a trickle of rock-oil that seeped into his mine that the real value of the oil was discovered.

A scientist who came to be known as "Paraffin" Young analysed a sample of the oil, and made from it two paraffin candles at a cost of about four pounds apiece. This was the first time paraffin wax had been used in candles; hitherto, they were always made from animal fats.

Young's discovery of paraffin, which he made by refining the thick, black, treacly crude oil, led to the discovery of petrol, and it is petrol which makes crude oil so valuable to-day. Since 1859, when the first pipe well was bored in America, the world's oil thirst has grown to 200,000,000 tons a year, and the experts say that even if we go on using up the natural supplies at this rate, there is enough in the world to last for at least seven centuries.

Oil is found in vast underground pools, sometimes thousands of feet under the earth's surface. To get at it engineers bore down into the ground for months, maybe years, until their

boring tool reaches the pool. Then, released after centuries of pressure from the millions of tons of rock on top of it, the oil shoots up the bore-hole, blowing out the boring tool high into the air, and gushing 300 feet or more.

When oil was first found at Baku, near the Caspian Sea, the gusher was so strong that nothing could control it. A million pounds' worth of oil ran to waste before the well could be capped and got under control.

### The Dangers of Drilling.

Drilling for oil is a dangerous business. Day by day, the drill bites a foot or two lower into the earth, and, as the well is sunk, lengths of piping are screwed together and lowered into the hole to line its sides. Then, when at last the oil is struck, comes a mighty explosion. The only warning the engineers get is a low rumble deep under the earth. That is the signal for them to race for their lives.

Within a couple of seconds, drills and everything are flung out of the well into the air, and the great spout of oil rushes forth, with a roar like a thousand mighty sirens at full blast.

Sometimes deadly gases are released at the same time as the oil. In a well that was sunk near Baghdad this gas collected in low-lying parts of the countryside for miles around, and three of the engineers, crouching behind earthen embankments to shield themselves from the flood of oil, were suffocated.

Even worse is the risk of fire. The steel drill, flung from the well, may hit a rock and make a spark that ignites the gases. Then—*Whoosh!* A sheet of flame that may cover a square mile of country, and the oil-geyser becomes a solid pillar of flame, raining fire on everything around.

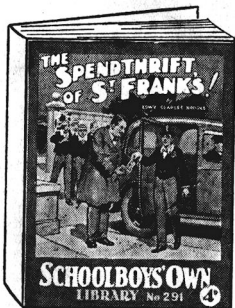
A new way of putting out such a fire was discovered a few years ago. A dynamite bomb is flung into the heart of the flames, and the rush of air from its explosion blows out the fire like a puff of breath extinguishing a candle!

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By FRANK RICHARDS.

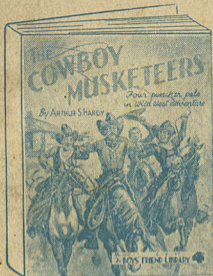


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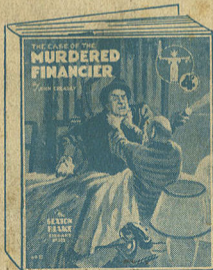
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