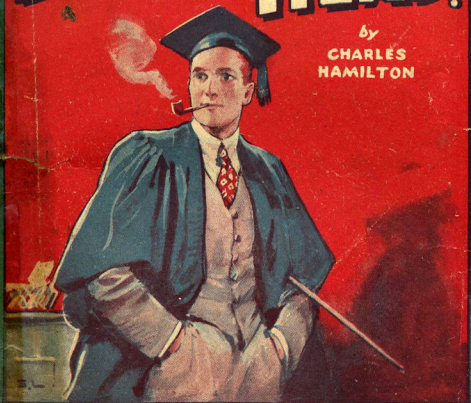


THE LIVE-WIRE HEAD!

by
CHARLES
HAMILTON



SCHOOLBOYS' OWN
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WONDERS IN WAX

EVERY year, hundreds of thrill-seekers among the visitors to Madame Tussaud's famous waxworks exhibition in Marylebone Road, London, ask to be allowed to stay the night in the exhibition's famous Chamber of Horrors. But the answer is always a firm "No!" The effigies there are so real that the candidates would probably get far more "jitters" than they expected, and might easily lose their reason by daylight.

Famous Figures.

There is no other exhibition like Madame Tussaud's in the world, though there are many other waxworks shows. All the famous and the notorious figures of the ages are on show there—in wax—from Hitler to Crippen, from cricketer Jack Hobbs to Haile Selassie.

Bernard Tussaud, who founded the museum in 1835, passed on his skill at modelling wax figures to his family, who in turn have been making effigies to keep the exhibition up-to-date ever since.

The models are all made by hand, based on photographs. First the head is modelled in clay, then a plaster-of-paris cast is taken, and from this is formed the mould into which the wax is poured and allowed to harden. Glass eyes are inserted in the wax portrait through a hole in the back, and every hair—eyebrows and eyelashes included—is added by hand. The result is always an amazingly life-like reproduction.

Fooling Visitors!

On one of the seats in the exhibition hall sits a tired-looking woman with a newspaper lying on the floor beside her. She looks as if she has dozed off, and

every day dozens of visitors pick up the paper and replace it on the "woman's" lap—only to discover they have been fooled by the Tussauds' skill.

Even more embarrassing is the plight of the people who, seeing a policeman standing near one of the staircases, go up to him and ask a question. A cold stare is the only answer, for the "copper," like the nodding figure of the woman, is only another model in wax.

The models are always clad in exactly the same type of clothes as worn by the figures they represent. In some cases, the actual garments of a dead person are used. But, underneath, the body is a light framework of papier-mache, skilfully modelled.

How Models Were First Made.

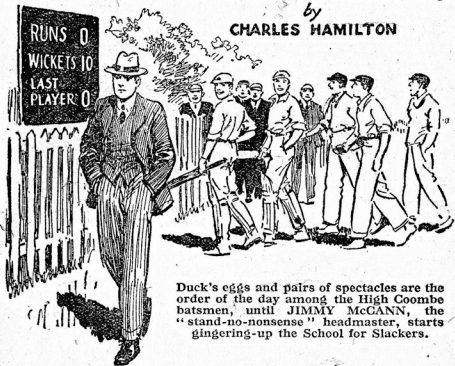
It's interesting to recall how the museum was started. The original Madame Tussaud used to make her models from the heads of friends guillotined during the French Revolution, and there is still a life-like model of the guillotine, complete with executioner and victim about to be beheaded, in the Chamber of Horrors.

Not all visitors go to the museum just to inspect the waxworks. The officials in charge always have to be on the look-out against visitors who think they have a grievance against the people portrayed. One man wanted to knock over the model of King Charles I because he thought him such a bad king. More recently, anti-Nazi demonstrators daubed the effigy of Hitler with red paint.

But Hitler also has an admirer—an old German woman who puts a wreath of flowers by his waxwork "twin" on the dictator's birthday.

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Duck's eggs and pairs of spectacles are the order of the day among the High Coombe batsmen, until JIMMY McCANN, the "stand-no-nonsense" headmaster, starts gingering-up the School for Slackers.

CHAPTER 1.

"I'm backing McCann!"

THE cricket matches—— Bob Darrell paused. There was silence and a sort of chill in the atmosphere. It was not encouraging.

Bob Darrell was the keenest cricketer at High Coombe—or, to be more exact, he was the only senior man at the school who was keen on cricket or any other game. During the holidays, Bob had thought a good deal about the coming term, about the new headmaster

McCann—known as the Blighter—and the great summer game, nourishing a hope, if only a faint one, that under Jimmy McCann's invigorating influence the School for Slackers might pull itself together and do something to wash out its long and lamentable record of defeats on the playing fields. Bob, at least, was ready to go all out in backing up the new Head to bring about a change of that kind.

Fellows going back to school might have been expected to take some interest in the subject. Instead of

which the other five fellows with Bob in the carriage of the train booming on to Okeham registered boredom and disapprobation.

Aubrey Compton, in the corner, was smoking a cigarette and talking in low tones to Teddy Seymour, who was nodding and grinning. Peverill was half-asleep, indicating now and then by a deep yawn that he was not quite asleep. Carter was silent and thoughtful. Warren was pulling up the knees of his trousers. He had forgotten them when he sat down in the train, and now he regarded them with a slightly anxious eye, dreading that they might bag. With a matter of such import on his mind, Warren was hardly likely to think about cricket.

They were all Fifth Form men in the carriage and friends of Bob. Aubrey and Teddy were his bosom pals. But between his ways and their ways there was a great gulf fixed. Bob hoped that it might be bridged, and that Jimmy McCann might help to bridge it. The prospect was doubtful. But everybody knew, at least, that there was going to be liveliness in the School for Slackers that term. The struggle between the school, bent on following the old ways, and the new Head, determined on gingering up High Coombe, had been interrupted by the holidays. Now it was going to recommence in full force.

Peverill opened his eyes.

"Did Darrell say cricket?" asked Pev, in a plaintive tone.

"I did!" grunted Bob.

"Well," said Peverill, "don't!" He closed his eyes again.

"My belief is," said Bob, "that McCann means to give an eye to games this term. Our record's enough to make anybody weep. If McCann wants to push us on, why not meet him half-way?"

Peverill reopened his eyes.

"Is Darrell still talkin' cricket?" he asked. "Kick him, somebody."

"If McCann makes up his mind he will have his way," said Bob. "He's that sort of man. And——"

"And you'll back him?" asked Aubrey Compton.

"All along the line!" answered Bob unhesitatingly. "I'll back him in lugging High Coombe out of the rut, if I'm the only man in the school that does!"

"You'll be the only man in the school that does, all right," said Aubrey. "And you'll be barred by the school for it."

Bob snorted.

"Chuck it, Aubrey!" said Teddy Seymour. "Nobody's goin' to bar old Bob—you least of all! And you chuck it, too, Bob—you're not going to back up the Blighter against all your friends. The man's ruinin' High Coombe——"

"Rot!"

"Look at the changes he made last term——"

Another snort from Bob Darrell.

"Yes, look at them," he said. "Fellows actually turned out at rising-bell before the end of the term; they came into the class on time, and they actually did some prep, instead of loafing about. And even the prefects gave up playing bridge in their studies!"

Teddy chuckled.

"You're an old ass, Bob!" he said. "Chuck it! We're goin' back this term to make the McCann man sorry he ever blew in at High Coombe, and make him glad to blow out again. Old Aubrey's been thinkin' out a scheme already for makin' him sit up first day of term——"

"It's the big idea!" said Compton, with a nod.

"Cough it up, Aubrey!" said Peverill, opening his eyes once more and this time keeping them open. There was a general movement of interest in the carriage. The boredom and disapprobation which had greeted Bob's introduction of the obnoxious subject of cricket had quite vanished. This was a subject that interested the High Coombers. The Fifth were the slackest Form in the School for Slackers, but they could display keenness when it was a question of hitting back at Jimmy

McCann. Only Bob's face expressed disapprobation now.

"Keep it to yourself!" growled Bob. "Whatever it is, I'm against it. Leave me out of it!"

Aubrey Compton smiled.

"Then you're goin' to know nothing about it," he remarked. "You're my pal, Bob, and I like you no end, but you're not standin' between me and McCann. We came to punchin' noses on that subject last term. We're not comin' to that again. But I'm goin' to make you tired of standin' up for McCann. This term we've got to down him, and we've got to stand in together, and you're goin' to line up with the rest."

"Rot!" said Bob.

"Wait an' see!" smiled Aubrey. "I've got it all cut an' dried, old bean. If you weren't a pal of mine I'd just bar you and send you to Coventry—and you know best whether High Coombe would follow my lead."

"Let them—and do as you dashed well choose!" roared Bob.

"Now you're getting shirty!" said Teddy. "Look here, Bob, chuck up this rot of backin' the Blighter and line up with your friends."

"I'm backing McCann!"

"You're an obstinate old ass, Bob, and you're asking for it!" said Teddy.

"For what?" snorted Bob.

"For what's comin' to you," said Aubrey lightly. "We're not goin' to lose you, Bob! But you're for it if you stick to that rot about backin' up McCann!"

"I'm sticking to it!" growled Bob.

Compton laughed and said no more. The train boomed into Okeham and the carriage disgorged its passengers, to mingle with the swarm of other High Coombe fellows bound for the school.

Bob, in a ruffled mood, stalked away to the school bus by himself.

He did not care to admit it, but he was rather worried and troubled by Aubrey's words on the train. Compton, it was clear, had come back to High Coombe as fiercely on the war-path

against James McCann as ever, and had thought out a new move against the Blighter even before reaching the school. Whatever it was he would have the hearty support of all the Fifth, excepting Bob—Darrell knew that.

But if it was a jape of some sort, how was it going to make Darrell fed-up with backing McCann? That, according to Aubrey, was to be the result. It was rather a puzzle, and a worrying puzzle, and Bob's face was a little glum as he rolled on to High Coombe.

He missed his two friends on the school bus. Compton and Seymour had stayed behind in Okeham, to come on later. Why? Bob wondered whether it had anything to do with that new move against McCann. On reflection, he had no doubt that it had. But he was quite in the dark, and it was not in a happy mood that he arrived at High Coombe. He had hoped for better things this term, but it was plain that this hope was ill-founded. The interval of the holidays had not damped down the feud against McCann—it burned as fiercely as ever, and the term at the School for Slackers was going to be a fighting term!

CHAPTER 2.

An Obstinate Ass!

JIMMY McCANN was a busy man that day. An endless stream poured in and out of his study, and for every fellow Jimmy had a word or two—generally a kind word. The stocky young man who was now headmaster of High Coombe in the place of Dr. Chetwode, the Venerable Beak, had come back for the new term fresh and cheery, fit as a fiddle, with a bright eye and a bright smile. Jimmy had had only a few weeks at the School for Slackers last term, but he knew every fellow, and remembered everyone's name—and, more than that, he knew most of their characters and dispositions, and what he had to expect from them.

Many who liked him least were rather

disarmed by his cheery greeting. Corkran of the Sixth, who had been head prefect, and had been pushed out of that high position for good reasons, came in stiff and formal. But he melted under Jimmy's smile and Jimmy's remark that they were going to try again, with Corky in his old position for the summer term. Corky could not help feeling elated as he left the Head's study, and he told Randal and Tredegar of his Form that the Blighter wasn't such an absolute blighter as he made himself out to be.

Tredegar, too, had five minutes with the Head which melted him considerably. The captain of High Coombe was not wholly indifferent to the school's appalling record in games, though in the general atmosphere of slackness at the school, effort had never seemed worth while.

Tred had always had a sort of surreptitious sympathy with Bob Darrell's views, though his easy nature made him go with the majority. He did not, at least, feel disposed to sigh and groan at the mere mention of cricket matches, like the hardened slackers in the Fifth.

A few words on the subject from McCann—a hint that High Coombe were going to beat Okeham in that fixture when it came along—really interested old Tred, and he looked very thoughtful when he left Jimmy. Coming into Big Study, and finding Randal there in his usual happy attitude, with his back in the seat of an armchair, and his long legs across another, Tred frowned at Randal.

"Oh, buck up, Randy!" he said. "Is that how you're beginning the term?"

Randal, without moving, gazed at him. The journey down, it seemed, had tired Randy. Later, he was going to find sufficient energy to unpack. For the moment he needed rest, and lots of it. Randy, indeed, was glad to find himself back in the calm repose of Big Study after the exertions of the holidays! He thanked goodness that that energetic blighter McCann couldn't worry Sixth Form prefects as he did

Fifth Form men and juniors! He had seen the Head, and the interview, even more than the journey, had tired him—the brute was so full of pep and go.

"Seen the Blighter?" he asked.

"I've seen McCann," said Tredegar, rather curtly. His talk with the Head, and the vision of beating Okeham at cricket, had indisposed him for the moment to talk of Jimmy as a blighter.

"The brute's as full of pep as ever!" said Randal. "What a change from the old Beak!" Randal of the Sixth sighed for the happy days that were gone!

"It was about time we had a bit of a change," said Tredegar.

Randal sat up at that.

"Seen Darrell in the hols?" he asked.

"Darrell? No."

"Oh! I thought he might have been talking to you. I say, I hear that Compton's come back on the war-path! Some lad, old Aubrey—what? I don't know the details, but there's some big stunt on—someh'n' that's goin' to make the Blighter cringe!"

"You're a prefect!" said Tredegar.

"Yes; the chopper hasn't come down on me yet, as it did on poor old Corky! What about it?"

"You ought to stop Compton."

Randal could only stare. He almost forgot that he was tired in his amazement. This from old Tred!

When Corkran came into Big Study a little later Tredegar was gone, and Randal told him. He had another surprise.

"That man Compton's an ass!" said Corkran. "If I hear anythin' about it I shall jolly well stop it."

Randal gazed at him.

"Mad?" he asked.

"Well, head prefect, you know!" said Corky, rather apologetically.

"Who's head prefect?"

"The Blighter—I mean McCann's reinstated me."

"Gratters, old bean!" said Randal amiably. "But I say, you're not goin' to row with the Fifth, are you? Don't let the Blighter pull your leg to that extent."

Corky was silent. He was not, if he could help it, going to row with the Fifth. At the same time, McCann's trust that he might do better this term had awakened something like a sense of duty in Corky. He decided that at least he would carefully know nothing about the intended rag; certainly he was not going to approve.

But if some of the Sixth were beginning to get new ideas about McCann, there was nothing of that kind in the Fifth Form. In the Fifth, Aubrey Compton was undisputed leader. Not only was the superb Aubrey the glass of fashion and the mould of form, but he had personality and character. Indeed, Darrell suspected that his slackness was rather a pose than anything else. Certainly in his campaign against McCann there was no sign of slacking.

So far as the Blighter was concerned, at least, Aubrey had come back full of beans.

Bob was in Study No. 3 unpacking books, when Compton and Seymour came in. Compton slammed a parcel on the table.

"Seen the Head?" asked Bob. After the argument in the train, Bob made it a point to speak cheerfully and cordially, as if there had been no dispute. The chums of Study No. 3 were almost inseparable, but all of them had to exercise tact at times to keep the friendship in repair.

"I've seen the Blighter," answered Aubrey. "He's bursting with pep! Sickenin' to see him!"

Teddy Seymour held up a warning finger.

"Don't you two begin again!" he said. "Peace, my children, peace!"

"What have you got there, Aubrey?" asked Bob, indicating the parcel, to change the thorny subject.

"Red paint."

Bob stared at him blankly.

"What on earth for?" he demanded.

"What is paint usually for?" asked

Compton. "Decorative purposes, of course."

"But what's the idea?" exclaimed the astonished Darrell. Fellows at High Combe decorated their studies according to their own tastes—but a line was drawn at painting them! And the idea of painting ancient oak with red paint was rather startling.

"The idea," explained Aubrey, "is to please McCann! That red-headed blighter will naturally be pleased at seeing paint the same colour as his mop! Naturally we want to please him! Don't we all love him?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Teddy.

Bob grasped it.

"That's the rag you were talking about in the train?"

"What a brain!" said Aubrey admiringly. "The holidays have bucked you, Bob—you're gettin' fearfully bright!"

"But what—" asked Bob, puzzled. He could guess that the red paint had something to do with the planned rag on McCann. Still, it was not easy to spot the connection.

"You'll know later, old boy," assured Aubrey. He unfasted the parcel. Two cans of red paint were revealed—a large one and a small one. Bob stared at them.

Some more of the Fifth came into Study No. 3—Carter, Burke, Peverill, Raymond, Durance, Warren. All of them grinned gleefully at the cans of paint. All of them evidently knew the secret whatever it was, and rejoiced in the prospect—whatever that was!

Bob had an uncomfortable feeling of being left out of it. Certainly he did not want to be in it if it was a rag on McCann. But he had always been liked and trusted in the Fifth, and this was a rather unpleasant change; they made him feel like a stranger in his own study.

He left his unpacking to be finished later, and went out of Study No. 3. He heard a loud laugh as he went down the steps to the Fifth Form passage. Then Teddy's voice:

"I wish old Bob would join up! What an obstinate ass the man is!"

"He will join up later," said Aubrey. "McCann will see to that!"

And there was another laugh.

Bob shoved his hands deep into his pockets and tramped away, ruffled and worried. He did not know what to make of it, and it troubled him—and certainly he was not likely to guess the ramifications of that deep scheme evolved in Aubrey's brain!

CHAPTER 3.

"I've got to stop him!"

FERGUSON of the Fourth was honoured and rather pleased—but at the same time a little dubious and even alarmed. Anything in the nature of a lark appealed to Ferg—especially a jape on the Blighter. And, as Compton pointed out, there was no risk in it for Ferg. That was rather an important point, for Ferguson knew, from painful experience, that McCann had a heavy hand with a cane.

Ferguson had been Compton's fag till the new Head abolished fagging for the Fifth. Compton had been fearfully enraged by that ordinance. Ferg, on the other hand, found it grateful and comforting. This difference of opinion between Ferg and his late fag master had led to certain kickings and cuffs which had not endeared the dandy of the Fifth to his former fag.

But schoolboy memories are short, and undoubtedly Ferg was rather bucked when so great a man as Compton of the Fifth called him out of the Burrow for a "jaw" in the most friendly way. Ferg left his friends, Fatty Pye, and Loom and Bunn and Donkin and the rest, staring. Compton seemed quite to have forgotten the ill-feeling of last term. He was appealing to Ferg as a kindred spirit—as a High Coombe man who was, of course, up against the Blighter and all his works.

"You're a clever kid!" Compton explained. "That's why I've picked you out. And the Blighter will never dream that it was a junior who pulled his leg. That makes it quite safe. You've got to take care that he doesn't spot your voice on the telephone; but that's easy enough."

"But what's the game?" asked Ferguson. "Just to give the Blighter a trot down to Okeham?"

"Somethin' may happen while he's gone," said Compton. "But the less you know about that before it happens, the better for you!"

Ferguson chuckled.

"I'm game!" he said.

Ferg was game—game as pie! Moreover, as Aubrey pointed out, the Blighter would never dream that it was a Fourth Form junior who had pulled his leg. Most likely he would suspect Compton of the Fifth—for which reason it was judicious for Compton to seek the company of his Form-master, Mr. Chard, while Ferg was getting to work. An alibi would be useful, for in dealing with James McCann a fellow couldn't be too careful.

Behold, therefore, Ferguson slipping out over an ivied wall in strictest secrecy; leaving his pals in the Burrow to wonder what had become of him. It was yet far from lock-up, and fellows were coming in or going out, but Ferg was taking no risk of old Judd spotting the fact that he had been out. Ferg, with all the caution of a conspirator, dropped from the school wall and scudded.

Compton walked across to Chard's rooms under the clock tower, taking Teddy Seymour with him, for a chat with his Form-master. Chard liked men of his Form to come into his rooms and chat.

Chard took a pessimistic view of the prospects of High Coombe under McCann, and he talked on that subject far more freely than a Form-master should have done, especially to boys of his Form. And while he trumpeted to Compton and Teddy, Chard had no

suspicion that he was being made use of to prove an alibi, if required, for these respectful and attentive youths.

Listening to Chard, Aubrey had one eye on the window, from which he had a view of the House. He was watching to see the Head emerge. Other Fifth Form men sauntering in the quad also had an eye open for McCann. Bob Darrell, in fact, was the only man in the Fifth who was not in the secret. Carter lounged near enough to McCann's study window to catch the buzz of the telephone bell when it rang.

Mr. McCann, in happy ignorance of the deep interest that the Fifth Form took in his proceedings, lifted the receiver. The rush of returning High Combers had slackened now, and the Head was a little at leisure. They were not all back yet; fellows from distances often came by late trains. But the bulk of them had joined up.

"Hallo!" said Mr. McCann into the telephone.

A husky voice, which sounded as if the speaker had a bad cold, came through. James McCann was keen and wary, but he was no wizard, and he did not know that that husky voice was the skilfully disguised voice of a junior in his own Fourth Form. He had not the remotest suspicion of that fact.

"Is that High Coombe—Mr. McCann?"

"Speaking!" said Jimmy briefly.

"Stationmaster at Okeham speaking. A boy named Babbie—fallen in a faint—seems to be ill—in the waiting-room now."

Jimmy knew that Babbie of the Shell had not yet come. He came a long way, and was not expected till later than most.

"If you could come, sir—I hardly know what to do!"

"Immediately," said Jimmy, and rang off.

Aubrey, watching from Chard's rooms, saw the Head step into his car and shoot away to the gates.

The car had hardly vanished with

McCann in it when Compton excused himself to Mr. Chard, leaving Teddy to carry on. Aubrey went back to the House with a crowd of the Fifth at his heels. They followed him up to Study No. 3, where Bob Darrell was getting on again with his unpacking. Bob glanced at them as they crowded in.

"What's up?" he asked. "I've just seen McCann buzz off in his car."

Aubrey, laughing, picked up the larger can of paint and the brush.

"Buck up, old man!" said Carter. "The Blighter isn't letting the grass grow under his feet!"

"Ten minutes will be enough!" drawled Aubrey. "You coming to lend a hand, Bob?"

"At what?"

"Painting the Blighter's study!"

Bob jumped.

"You ass!" he roared. "You fat-head! Is that it? Give me that can of paint, you howling ass!"

He jumped at Compton. Five pairs of hands were laid on him at the same moment, and he bumped down on the carpet. Aubrey grinned down at him as he struggled.

"Hold the silly ass!" he said.

Carter, Peverill, Raymond, Burke, and Warren held him. Bob struggled frantically.

"Aubrey!" he panted. "You silly ass! For goodness' sake, chuck it! You're mad to think of it! Painting the Head's study—you awful idiot! Why, a man might be sacked for it!"

"Hardly!" smiled Aubrey. "The Blighter isn't keen on sackin' men!"

"It's a flogging, at least!"

"I know!"

"You'll be found out!" panted Bob. He was intensely anxious for his chum. "Aubrey, he'll know who did it! He may come back any minute—he may catch you in the very act."

"He could hardly be back from Okeham under the half-hour."

"I think he had a 'phone-call."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the fellows who were pinning Bob on the carpet.

"You—you've wangled it!" gasped Bob. "Aubrey, I tell you he will know who mucked-up his study! I tell you

"I'm seein' to that!" said Aubrey, amid another yell of laughter from his friends.

"You're seeing to it!" stuttered Bob. "Exactly!"

Aubrey Compton walked out of the study, with the can of paint under his arm, the brush in his pocket. Bob made a terrific effort, and the five fellows rocked—but they held on! They grinned down at him quite good-naturedly, but there was no escape for the Fifth Form man who had declared his intention of backing-up the Blighter.

CHAPTER 4.

Decorations by Aubrey!

AUBREY COMPTON was perhaps the last fellow at High Coombe who might have been expected to handle willingly such sticky and smelly stuff as paint. Aubrey painted a little, but it was elegantly, in water colours. Probably it was the first time in his life that he had handled such stuff as house painters use. Neither did he relish handling it. And he was very careful how he did it. Spots of paint on his elegant clothes would have pained him deeply, likewise, they might have led to his detection as the culprit.

It was fairly certain that any High Coombe man who was found in a painty state, when McCann began to investigate, would be booked for grim reprisals unless he could give a very good explanation. But Aubrey had already borrowed a big apron belonging to Liggins—without mentioning it to the house porter. He donned a pair of rubber gloves, and was perfectly cool as he set to work in his headmaster's study.

McCann was safe off the scene. Three or four of the Fifth were keeping cave in the passage, ready to whistle a warning if required. But there was really no danger. Everybody knew that the Head

had gone out, so no one was likely to come to his study to see him. Sixth Form prefects, some of them having an inkling that something was "on," sedulously avoided knowing anything about it.

With a large brush and three pounds of red paint, Aubrey got in a lot of decoration in a very short time. He painted the Head's chair, and his writing-table, and clock in streaks and criss-cross strokes. He drew lines and circles on the walls. He passed the brush along the backs of books on the shelves. He dripped paint into the ink-pot and over papers. Finally, he poured what remained on to the middle of the Head's rug.

Durance, creeping along to peer in at the door and see how he was getting on, almost fell down as he gazed into the Head's study, glaring red on all sides, reeking with the smell of paint.

"My hat!" gasped Durance.

Aubrey smiled cheerily.

"Some surprise for the Blighter when he blows in—what?" he asked.

"Ha, ha, ha! My hat, this room is a scent packet!" Durance retreated.

Aubrey followed him out. The can and brush, rolled in the apron, were passed out of a window to Hadden of the Fifth, who was waiting, and duly disposed of in a dustbin. Aubrey walked away to a bath-room, where a trace or two of paint was carefully removed.

Then he went back to Study No. 3, where his friends were still sitting on Bob Darrell. Teddy Seymour was there now, arguing with Bob. Teddy was in this game up to the neck, but he seemed to be suffering from scruples. Compton had convinced him, but he was rather remorseful.

"You see, Bob, old man, it's your own fault," Teddy was explaining. "You can't stand out against the Form and the whole school. You've got to line-up with us against the Blighter, and if you won't do it of your own accord we've got to make you!"

"You'll never make me, fathead!" hooted Bob. He glared at Aubrey when

the latter came in. "You've done it?" he asked.

Aubrey nodded and smiled.

"Oh, you ass—you priceless ass!" groaned Bob. "This means a flogging! McCann'll never rest till he's got the man."

"Quite!" agreed Aubrey. "Hold him!"

He proceeded to open the second, smaller, can of paint, which had been left in the study. Taking Bob's pocket handkerchief, he twisted it into a spill and dipped it into the can.

Bob watched him. Teddy looked dubious and remorseful, but the other fellows grinned as Aubrey proceeded to dab the paint on Bob's clothes—a dab here and a dab there.

It was impossible to resist—Darrell was too safely held for that. And he was too astounded to stir.

What this meant was a mystery to him.

"Are you mad, Aubrey?" gasped Bob at last, as Aubrey pushed the reeking handkerchief into his pocket. "What do you mean by this? Will you let me go, you rotters?"

"Keep him safe!" drawled Aubrey; and he sat down in the window-seat to wait and watch for Mr. McCann's return.

Bob was still a prisoner. He was, at first, merely amazed at what Aubrey had done. But slowly and surely the truth forced itself into his mind. The moment McCann discovered what had happened in his study there would be an investigation. And what sort of a clue was McCann likely to look for? A fellow who had traces of red paint on his clothes!

"Aubrey! You rotter—you awful rotter!" he panted. "Oh, you unspeakable rotter!"

Aubrey smiled at him from the window-seat.

"Gettin' on to it now?" he asked agreeably. "No good gettin' excited—you're not goin' to be let loose till the McCann man begins to howl! When you've had your floggin' you mayn't be

so fond of him as you are now—what?"

Bob struggled wildly.

"McCann will think I did it!" he panted.

"What else is he goin' to think?" smiled Aubrey.

"I say, it's too rough on old Bob!" Teddy was suffering from pangs of remorse. "It's too jolly rough—"

"Shut up, Seymour!"

"Bob, old man," said Teddy, almost tearfully. "Stop playing the giddy ox! Tell us you'll stand in with us, your pals, and—"

"I'll see you blowed first!" roared Bob furiously.

"That's all right, Teddy." Compton was smiling, cool, implacable. "Bob will line up all right after the Blighter's through with him! Nothin' like a floggin'—"

"Do you think I'll take the flogging?" bawled Bob. "Can't I tell McCann exactly what you've done, you plotting rotter?"

Aubrey shook his head gently.

"No, old man," he answered, soft as a cooing dove, "you can't! If the Blighter found this out it would be the sack for Teddy and me. You wouldn't find it easy to prove, either."

"Rot!" roared Bob. "Teddy wouldn't tell lies about it, and you wouldn't, either, if it came to the pinch."

Aubrey reflected calmly.

"Perhaps you're right," he agreed. "I should hate to let myself down to the extent of tellin' lies to a rotter like McCann. No! Tell him anythin' you like, old bean!"

"It's your own fault, Bob, old man!" urged Teddy. "Even now, if you'll come round—"

"Let me go!" roared Bob, and he wrenched. But it was futile. He remained on the carpet, safely held.

There was the sound of a car below. Aubrey glanced out of the window and smiled.

"The Blighter!" he said. "He looks cross!" There was a chuckle in Study No. 3.

Mr. McCann's brows were knitted as

he alighted and entered the House. There was no doubt that he was deeply annoyed.

He had arrived at Okeham Station to discover that his leg had been pulled. So far from Babbie of the Shell being ill in the waiting-room, Babs had not arrived at Okeham at all. On the way back to the school Jimmy thought it out grimly. Someone had spoofed him on the telephone, and his suspicions ran to Compton of the Fifth. He had gone on a fool's errand, and wasted his time. He resolved to make a very careful inquiry as to where Compton of the Fifth had been at the time the telephone bell rang in his study. He did not know yet that Chard would be able to tell him exactly!

Striding to his study, Mr. McCann threw open the door—and then he almost staggered at the reeking smell of wet paint that greeted him.

Jimmy did not enter the study. He stood looking into it, his face setting like iron. And the look on his face might have scared even Aubrey had he seen it.

This was why he had been spoofed on the telephone—to get him out of the way while his study was daubed with red paint! It smelt—it reeked—it glared—it was hideous, offensive, uninhabitable. Much labour, in the way of cleaning, was required before the Head could use that study again. So this was how the new term was beginning! Jimmy McCann's face grew grimmer and grimmer. Three minutes later, High Coombe was summoned to Hall.

CHAPTER 5.

Just Like Jimmy!

PREPECTS of the Sixth, with their ashplants under their arms, stood in their places in Hall, keeping—or trying to keep—order among the juniors, who were buzzing with excitement. Everyone knew that something fearful had happened, and there were

whispers that somebody was going to be sacked—on the first day of term!

Ferguson of the Fourth—safe back before the Head returned—felt a twinge of uneasiness. All this awful fuss couldn't be about that spoof 'phone call, Ferg told himself.

The Fifth Form were in their places to a man, one of them looking very red and worried and breathless. Only in time to walk down to Hall had Bob Darrell been released—and even then his friends had walked with him, two of them arm-in-arm with him, till the very door of Hall was reached. Teddy was still remorseful, but every other man in the Fifth was implacable, Compton the most implacable of all. He liked old Bob better than any other fellow at High Coombe, but Bob was not going to back up the Blighter! Bob was going to be landed in the Blighter's black books—with a flogging to start the term with. If Bob would not come round, he was going to be brought round, and this was the way.

The excited buzz died away as Mr. McCann entered by the upper door. Few knew, as yet, what had happened. But everybody knew it was something very much out of the common—some awful knock at the Blighter. And the whole school gasped when McCann, in a few brief words, told.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Ferguson. Ferg knew now why he had been put up to spoofing the Blighter on the 'phone. He could make a very accurate guess at the name of the painter of the Head's study. He stole a glance at Compton, in the ranks of the Fifth, and admired his nerve.

Every boy wondered whether McCann would be able to pick out the unknown painter. That, it was clear, was what they were assembled for.

"The boy who disfigured my study with paint is here present," said McCann, his quiet voice penetrating to every corner of the crowded Hall. "I command him to stand forward."

Compton winked at Teddy Seymour, who barely suppressed a giggle.

James McCann did not miss either the wink or the suppressed giggle.

"I think it probable," went on Mr. McCann, "that the boy in question may have some trace of paint about his person, after what he has done in my study. I shall now ascertain."

"Beginning with the Fifth, you bet!" Ferguson whispered to Pye.

The sagacious Ferg was right. As the mysterious painter declined to stand forward—which Mr. McCann, probably, hardly expected him to do—Jimmy proceeded to ascertain, beginning with the Fifth. That he suspected Aubrey Compton he gave no sign; but all High Coombe knew it. Aubrey, spotless as ever, met his inspection with superb calm.

But a whiff of paint did not escape Mr. McCann, and he knew that his man was in the Fifth. The next moment he knew who it was.

"Darrell!"

Bob's face was burning.

"Step out!"

Bob stepped out.

In spite of the awe-inspiring presence of the Head, there was a general buzz. All eyes were on Darrell of the Fifth; all eyes could see that his clothes were smeared with red paint in several places.

"Darrell!" gasped Corkran. "Who'd have thought it!"

"Darrell!" murmured Tredegar. "What a priceless idiot not to change! He might have known——"

"Darrell!" gurgled Ferguson. So it wasn't Compton, after all, but his pal Darrell! Ferg stood amazed.

"Silence!" Mr. McCann had only to speak once. Then a pin might have been heard to drop in Hall.

"There is paint on your clothes, Darrell—the same paint that has been used in disfiguring my study," said Mr. McCann quietly. "What have you to say, Darrell?"

The hapless Bob's face was crimson, and his eyes fell before McCann's. But he did not speak. What had he to say?

To accuse his friends—to get Aubrey

sacked, Teddy flogged, and the rest of the Fifth down on him with undying hatred and leaching! That was what McCann was asking him to do, though he did not know it. Bob was conscious of anger, too. The very evidence that McCann was searching for was against him and condemned him, and yet—and yet—McCann might have known that he hadn't done this!

"Have you anything to say, Darrell?"

Bob's burning face set doggedly.

"No, sir!"

"I find on you," said Mr. McCann, "unmistakable evidence that you were the boy who disfigured my study with paint—an outrage for which I am bound to administer a most severe flogging to the culprit. And you have nothing to say?"

"Nothing, sir!" answered Bob.

High Coombe hardly breathed.

The next item on the programme, of course, was the flogging. Why did not the Head send for the birch?

It was only a moment, but it seemed an age before the Blighter spoke again.

"You may go back to your place, Darrell."

Bob blinked at him.

High Coombe hung on McCann's next words.

"This matter," said Mr. McCann, "will be investigated with the greatest thoroughness, and I have every hope that the inquiry will lead to the discovery of the culprit, of whose identity I have, at present, no knowledge. Dismiss!"

Gasping, they went.

"The rotter!" Aubrey Compton walked about Study No. 3, unable to keep still, pale with rage. "The rotter! The blighter! The—the—the dashed usher! How did he know—how could he know? Oh, the rotter!"

"Well, it was jolly thick," said Teddy. "I'm rather glad——"

"Oh, don't be a fool!"

Teddy had a flash of spirit.

"I'm not the fool here! I don't know how McCann knew, it wasn't Bob—but he did know! You can't fool McCann!"

Bob Darrell, sitting in the window-seat, laughed. His faith in Jimmy had been justified. He had said to himself that the man might have known—and the man did know! Wasn't it just like Jimmy?

"Teddy's right, Aubrey!" chuckled Bob. "You can't fool McCann. I've a jolly good mind to punch your head—"

"Get on with it!" snarled Aubrey.

"No fear!" laughed Bob. "You've got enough coming to you when McCann finds out who painted his study. Take it from me, he will!"

The new term at High Coombe did not begin with a Blighter's flogging for Bob Darrell.

CHAPTER 6.

Aubrey Toes the Line!

BULLOCK, the games master at High Coombe, scowled blackly. He did not seem to care whether Mr. McCann, the new young Head, noticed it or not; indeed, McCann could hardly have helped noticing it unless he was as blind as an owl—which Jimmy McCann certainly was not.

Podgy, with a red face and jutting eyes of a light blue, Bullock drove large hands into the pockets of immense flannel bags, and stood staring and scowling at McCann as he came. Fellows on Big Side, spotless, in beautiful flannels, glanced at one another and smiled. If there was one man on the staff of the School for Slackers who was man enough to tell the Blighter McCann where he got off, it was Bullock. He looked as if he was going to do it.

Even Chard, Form-master of the Fifth, did not loathe Jimmy McCann quite so much as the games master did. Everybody knew that Jimmy had

had several talks with Bullock—talks which "Bully" hadn't enjoyed the least bit. If Bullock was satisfied with the way they played cricket at High Coombe, Jimmy McCann was not. And among the many changes he was making, the new Head was aiming to make a change in that direction also. He was going, as Peverill of the Fifth said with breathless indignation, to make them work at games as he had started to make them work in class.

"But the brute can't rag us in games," Aubrey Compton told his friends; and the Fifth hoped that he was right.

Bob Darrell doubted it, and hoped that he was wrong. Elegant sauntering on the playing-fields might look the thing from the point of view of sisters and cousins and aunts, but Bob at least had no use for a collection of duck's eggs. Duck's eggs and pair of spectacles were the frequent reward of High Coombe batsmen. If Jimmy McCann could work a change, Bob wished more power to his elbow. But he had to be careful about expressing that view in Big Study. It was frightfully unpopular there—less popular still at nets!

It was games practice—a "compulsory" day. "After three" every High Coombe man considered himself entitled to do exactly as he pleased, and if he had to turn up to games practice it certainly did not please him to exert himself when he got there.

Bob Darrell put beef into cricket, as he put it into everything else. Teddy Seymour sometimes followed his example, and sometimes the example of the elegant Aubrey, who made a science of slacking. Peverill, if he turned up, would put in cricket practice on his back in the grass, provided with a bag of cherries instead of a bat.

If fellows did not choose to turn up at all, Bullock never ragged them, even

if he missed them. As for whopping men who cut games, that would no more have occurred to Bullock than to Tredegar, the school captain.

And here was the Blighter, walking on to the field, looking as he always did, fit as a fiddle, strong as a horse, good-humoured, yet with a quiet manner of authority. And there was Bullock, standing with his hands driven into his pockets, facing him. If looks could have petrified, James McCann would have stopped dead, turned to stone.

"Cheeky cad!" breathed Aubrey Compton.

"Bully will tell him off!" whispered Teddy Seymour.

"Bully hasn't a leg to stand on!" grunted Bob Darrell. "Half the men aren't here—and you know the Head's orders."

The Head's fiat had gone forth that every man who could not show a medical certificate of unfitness had to turn up for regular games practice.

There were many misgivings, mingled with rage and defiance. For the Blighter had had his way in other matters. Was he going to make them work at games also, slogging at rotten nets?

Bullock could not openly resist, but he could disregard and forget. Several talks with the new Head only added to his resentment and obstinacy. He was encouraged by the fact that McCann, so far, had taken no action. If it were left at that, Bullock did not mind. He thought that the Blighter probably realised that he had better not go too far.

But there he was, apparently taking action at last! Bullock was not very bright, and he did not read the Head's motives. Jimmy McCann had resolved, if he could, to pull High Coombe out of the rut, without sacking a High Coombe man or dismissing a High Coombe master. He was loathed, but he did not want to give anyone real reason for loathing him. Nobody, if he

could help it, was going to be the worse for his coming.

Black looks had no effect on the equanimity of James McCann. He did not seem to see the expressions of the cricketers, neither did he appear to observe the glare of Bullock. Arriving on the spot, he gave that portly sportsman an amiable nod.

"Are we all here?" asked Mr. McCann pleasantly.

He knew, of course, that they weren't. It was his way to make things as easy as he could, even for his opponents.

Bullock breathed hard. Several times he had toyed with the idea of flinging in his resignation—hurling it, as it were, like a gage of battle at the feet of this bargee. On the other hand, McCann might have accepted it! So Bullock had only toyed with that idea! If the Blighter had the neck to dismiss him, there was an appeal to the governors—the Blighter would not like that. Bullock's plan—so far as his fat head could form a plan—was to stand up on his rights and, in short, tell the Blighter McCann where he got off! But here arose difficulties.

How could a man stand up for his rights when he was openly in the wrong? For it was Bullock's duty to see that the men did not cut games, Head's order or no Head's order. And he was not doing his duty!

Instead, therefore, as Compton & Co. hoped, of pointing out to McCann that on the cricket ground a games master was monarch of all he surveyed and his right there was none to dispute, Bullock stammered. The Blighter had him at a disadvantage.

"I—I—I think—not!"

That, to the disgust of Compton & Co., was what Bullock said!

"The time, I think, has been posted?" said McCann.

"Oh! Certainly!"

"Well, well! We must round-up the

forgetful ones," said Mr. McCann, good-humouredly. "I will see to that! Don't let me interrupt you—I must not waste your time."

If that was sarcasm, McCann's face showed no sign of it. Until Jimmy appeared in the offing Bullock had been chatting with Compton and some other fellows; and Bob Darrell had been wondering whether he was ever going to shut up!

Now, at all events, he shut up!

Slogging at the nets had no appeal for the High Coomers. Slack in games, they were slacker still at practice. Aubrey Compton could bowl when he liked—which was seldom. Still, he rather prided himself on the fact that he could, if he jolly well chose! He sometimes gave Bob some very good bowling at the nets—sacrificing his lofty attitude of slacking on the altar of friendship.

"Look here, Aubrey, old man, let him see we're not the gang of duds he thinks us!" Bob whispered to him.

"He's taken the wind out of Bullock!" muttered Aubrey.

"Never mind Bullock! Send me down a few that wouldn't disgrace a new kid in the Fourth!" said Bob. "You can if you like."

"Good egg!" chimed in Teddy. "Look here, we've all got to go through it—the Blighter won't let a man dodge. And Bully can't, while he's on the spot! Look here, let's show him we're not all foolzers."

Aubrey smiled contemptuously.

"I'd rather show him that you can take a horse to water but can't make him drink," he answered.

"Chad's come over to play us next week!" growled Bob. "Do you want them to beat us by an innings and a bagful of runs?"

"I'd rather beat the Blighter than Chad's."

"Look here, will you give me a few, fathead?"

Aubrey nodded and smiled. He knew that McCann's eyes were on him as he

gave Bob the bowling. He proceeded to trundle down balls like a boy of six bowling at skittles. Bob's face grew red—Teddy stared—other fellows began to grin.

McCann gave no heed. But unexpectedly Bullock weighed in.

Bullock—angry, resentful, feeling at a loss—would at least have been glad to show that meddling brute, McCann, that his men were not a set of hopeless slackers and duds and foolzers. Aubrey's present performance, as a jest on McCann and an entertainment for his friends, was no doubt good, but it did not reflect credit on the games master. Bullock did not want Jimmy to be justified in barging in by the evidence of his own eyes!

He strode over to Aubrey.

"Compton! What are you doing?" he said angrily. "Do you call that bowling? A Fourth Form boy would be ashamed of it! You are not here to play the fool, Compton!"

Aubrey jumped, and stared at him. This from old Bully—who only ten minutes ago had been chatting about the hols like an old pal! Bob Darrell grinned. The very fact that old Bully resented McCann's presence was spurring him on to do his job. Aubrey crimsoned.

"What did you say?" he inquired haughtily.

But Bullock was angry and annoyed, and had no use for haughtiness.

"You heard what I said, Compton! Don't be impertinent!"

"Look here!" breathed Aubrey.

"That is enough! You are not here to chatter!"

Aubrey looked at him with flashing eyes. Then he flung down the ball, shrugged his shoulders, and walked off.

Bullock stared after him. Now was the time to assert his authority, if he was, as he fancied, capable of carrying on without any help from McCann. Instead of which, Bullock stared at Aubrey's back as he went, evidently completely at a loss.

A cool, quiet voice spoke:

"Compton!"

Aubrey, as if in spite of himself, stopped and looked round at the voice of Mr. McCann. In his anger he had for the moment forgotten that the Blighter was there.

"Come back at once, Compton," said Mr. McCann quietly, "and apologise to Mr. Bullock!"

There was a breathless pause. Compton stood as if rooted, with many eyes on him. Gladly he would have treated McCann as he had treated Bullock, but he knew that it would not do. McCann was capable of making him bend over in sight of all High Coombe and giving him six with a cricket-stump—and then another six if he did not toe the line! For a long moment Aubrey stood still, white with rage. Then slowly he came back.

CHAPTER 7.

Champion of the Oppressed!

RANDAL had hearty, if somewhat surreptitious, support from Bullock, and the fervent good wishes of every slacker at High Coombe. He regarded himself as the champion of the oppressed—the defender of ancient rights and privileges. He was absolutely determined—though smitten with some inward doubts. Plenty of fellows knew that it was Aubrey who pulled the strings. Indeed, Randal's new and resolute attitude was called, in the Fifth Form studies, "Compton's latest." It was old Aubrey who was hitting back at the Head, and Arthur Randal was just wax in his hands.

If Aubrey had loathed the Blighter before, he loathed him with a double and triple loathing after that scene at nets. Humble pie is palatable to nobody. It was fearfully unpalatable to the dandy of the Fifth, and he had had to eat thereof! The Bullock, goaded by McCann; had ragged him—and, having turned his back in lofty disdain on Bullock, he had had to climb right down—at the Head's command!

Even worse, if possible, was the fact that Bullock was determined that McCann should not have the advantage of him again—which meant that he was going to carry out the Head's orders; there was no other way! The indignant Peverill no longer took his turn at the nets with a bag of cherries! The Bullock himself gave fellows warning that they had better not cut. Openly, the Bullock took the Head's line—inwardly, he chafed; and he gave Randal of the Sixth very clearly to understand that he had his blessing.

And what was Randal going to do? Nothing! That was the great point! If Randal of the Sixth succeeded in doing nothing on Thursday, Randy had beaten the Head—and a victory for one High Coomber was a victory for all High Coombe! It would be the first setback for the Blighter—the beginning, Aubrey hoped, of many defeats.

For the matter stood in this wise. They were playing a Form match, for practice, on Thursday. It was Sixth against Fifth. The Head and the games master had arranged this—the Bullock sullenly giving McCann his head. Tredegar of the Sixth was, marvellous to relate, rather keen on it. Old Tred, captain of High Coombe, had always gone with the crowd—but now his friends bitterly deplored signs of a change in him.

Talks with McCann seemed to be undermining his character! He had an idea that they might beat Okeham—a tremendous opponent. He had got that idea, of course, from McCann. There might be a chance, if they beat St. Chad's, a much easier proposition—so Tred talked in Big Study about beating St. Chad's.

The team to play St. Chad's were going to be picked after the practice match—and Tred began to talk cricket in Big Study, almost as if he were another Bob Darrell! Which rejoiced Bob's heart, but made the other men look on Tred as little better than a renegade. And the name of

A. Randal was in the list that Tred put up on the board.

Now it had already been demonstrated, even to Aubrey's satisfaction, that it was useless for Fifth Form men to kick. Even the Bullock, goaded by McCann, would gore them, so to speak, if they kicked. The Fifth had to grin and bear it. But the Sixth were on a different footing. Randal was a Sixth Form man and a prefect, and though McCann would whop a Fifth Form man as soon as he would whop Babbie of the Shell or Ferguson of the Fourth, was it possible that even he could dream of whopping a Sixth Form prefect?

Of course it wasn't!

Randal was in the First Eleven. He was the laziest man at High Coombe, and made both a science and an art of laziness. Nevertheless, he liked to be in the First Eleven, and he was nobly prepared to exert himself to the extent of capturing a pair of spectacles in the St. Chad's match. More than that, Randal felt, could not be reasonably expected of a High Coombe man. Thus far would Randy go—but no farther! He would not play in the practice match on Thursday! Wild horses should not drag him down to Big Side that day.

He said so, out plain, in Big Study—after a chat with Aubrey Compton in his own study.

"Wash my name out, Tred," he said. "I can't play on Thursday."

"Every First Eleven man has got to play!" was Tredegar's answer. "I've had that—from the Head, through Bullock."

"I know," assented Randy gently.

"Well, then——" said Tred.

"Wash it out, all the same."

"I can't!" said Tred, and he added more forcibly: "I won't!"

"Well, I shan't be there!" said Randal calmly.

And there was a murmur of applause in Big Study. Tredegar was worried. He did not want to row with Randy. An old pal—he did not want to row with his other friends. He looked

round over many faces and read encouragement in only one—Bob Darrell's. But it was not for Darrell, a Fifth Form man, to speak.

"Look here——" said Tredegar weakly.

"The Blighter's goin' too far," said Corkran, who was also a prefect. "We've given him his head in the Form-rooms, and now he's bargin' into the games and makin' himself a general nuisance. Stick to it, Randy!"

"Good old Randy!"

"Stand up to him, old bean!"

Randal, who was in his favourite attitude, with his back in the seat of an armchair, and his long legs stretched out to a hassock, did not look much like standing up to anybody or anything. Had resistance to the decrees of the Blighter taken a form of exertion Randy would not have been the man for it. But resistance that took the form of doing nothing just suited Randy. He was a great man at doing nothing!

"There'll be a row!" said Tredegar.

"And the Blighter will get the worst of it!" said Aubrey Compton.

"It's time somebody gave him a fall," remarked Teddy Seymour. "You needn't snort, Bob! The Blighter is going to get a fall this time."

"Is he?" said Bob.

"Well, what can the man do?" argued Corkran. "Even McCann can't cane the Sixth—and I suppose he can't sack a man for not playing cricket! Randy's on absolutely safe ground."

There was a general nodding of heads. The High Coombe seniors felt that Corky had put it well. In the Form-rooms McCann reigned supreme—Forms and Form-masters had to toe the line there. Butting into games was a more delicate matter. There he was on a much more uncertain footing. There he could be "put paid" to by a fellow who was in a position to resist—like a Sixth Form prefect.

All High Coombe, of course, knew Randy's attitude before Thursday,

Chard trumpeted on the subject in Common-room, the other masters murmuring applause. Was this nobody from nowhere to carry his meddling into the games—the last sacred resort of High Coombe tradition—Chard asked, after making sure that the door was shut. Any stick was good enough for Popularity Peter to beat McCann with; and every man on the staff hoped that Randal would score over the Head.

Laziness, probably, was at the bottom of Randal's resistance. He simply did not want to turn out and exert himself on Thursday. But he preferred to think of himself as standing up for rights and privileges against a meddling Blighter. And the keen enthusiasm of the other fellows had a tremendously bucking effect on Randy. He was now the cynosure of all eyes, as the man who was standing—or going to stand—up to McCann!

Aubrey had a secret dread that he might weaken at the last minute and turn up in flannels. Possibly Randal might have done so, but he was saved from that base surrender by his laziness. It was a lot of trouble to change, and a lot more to slog about in summer sunshine. Better chance it with the Blighter! Besides, a fellow couldn't eat his words—words that had been repeated breathlessly all over High Coombe. Between obstinacy and laziness Randy chanced it with the Blighter.

And so it came to pass that when the teams gathered on Big Side for the Form match, Aubrey smiled exultantly to see that a man was missing from the ranks of the Sixth. Teddy Seymour winked at Carter, who grinned. Bob Darrell felt apprehensive—for Randy! What McCann would do he did not know, but he did not think that the Head was a man to swallow defiance like a pill. Tredegar was worried and troubled. Gladly he would have put in another man in Randal's place had not the Head been present to spot him. But McCann was going to umpire at one end, Bullock at the other.

On the Bullock's red face some watchful eyes detected a stealthy smile. The Bullock would have given much to see McCann taken down a peg under the staring eyes of all High Coombe. The whole school had turned up for that match—a thing they seldom did. Even the masters came to look on—either at the cricket or at the defeat of McCann. For, trifling as the matter might be, it was in the nature of a test; if Randal got away with it, it was a defeat for McCann. All the School for Slackers knew it; and all had turned up to see what was to be seen.

"Your men are not all here, Tredegar!"

There had been a hum of voices, but it died away instantly as McCann spoke. Everyone was anxious to hear what he said. And they did, for McCann's voice, though not loud, was very clear, and had great carrying powers.

Tredegar coloured uncomfortably.

"No, sir! Randal—" he stammered. "I—I think I'd better put another man in, sir."

"I think not, Tredegar," said McCann. "Randal may have forgotten. I have noticed that he is a little forgetful at times. Go and fetch him, Tredegar!"

"Don't go!" called out a voice.

McCann spun round.

"Who spoke?"

McCann, perhaps, was not certain that he had recognised Aubrey's voice. His eyes gleamed like steel for a second at the dandy of the Fifth—handsome and graceful in his flannels, and with all his nerve Aubrey dropped his eyes before that flash of steel, and coloured faintly.

However, McCann let that little matter drop. He turned back to the captain of High Coombe. Tred was hesitating; but he hesitated no longer. He walked off the field—and all High Coombe waited breathlessly for his return.

CHAPTER 8.

"Let him wait!"

"RANDY, old man!"
"Go away!" murmured
Randal.

"I say, old fellow——"

Randy did not tell Tredegar to go away a second time. It was too much trouble. Why waste effort? Randy, silent, sprawled; and Tred looked at him with deep worry on his brow.

There was a comfortable window-seat in Randal's study in the Sixth. It was handsomely and softly cushioned. Randy was long of limb, but there was room in that window-seat for Randy to stretch at full length, with his hands clasped behind his lazy head. From the window he had a view of the playing fields—if he chose to look that way—and beyond a glimpse of green fields and the blue summer sky over the Atlantic.

It was rather warm, and Randy was tired—he had been in the Sixth Form Room that morning with McCann, which was more than enough to tire any man. True, it had only been an hour—but an hour with McCann was more strenuous than a week with any other master.

Never had Randy felt less inclined for exertion—and never in consequence had he felt keener on defying the tyranny of the Blighter who expected him to turn out and slog at games. Randy was as angry and indignant as his laziness permitted him to be.

Tred liked Randy. A fellow couldn't help liking him—he was so good-tempered, so lazy, and such an old ass. Even McCann, though nobody suspected it, liked Randy—and perhaps that very liking was one of his reasons for stirring poor Randy out of his slack serenity.

For it was clear to McCann, if not to Randy, that a fellow couldn't go through life on cushioned seats with his hands clasped behind his head. Some time or other Randy would have to put in a little exertion of some kind,

and he was not getting much training for it at present. He did not want any; but it was the Blighter's way to give fellows what they needed, not what they wanted.

Tredegar stood silent, worried. Ordinarily he would have dropped the subject at that point and left Randy to graceful repose. But with the teams waiting on the cricket field, above all with the keen-eyed, strenuous Blighter waiting, Tred couldn't let it drop. Much against the grain, Tred started again on Randy.

"You've got to come, old chap," he said apologetically. "I'd let you off like a shot—you know that! You know how I hate raggin' a man! Do get a move on and change, old fellow, and save trouble!"

"Blow away!" said Randy.

"Look here, McCann's waiting!" groaned Tred. "He's on the field—he's a dashed umpire! It's no good talking about the Bullock—he's got the wind up, and daren't open his mouth under McCann's eye. I tell you, Randy, McCann's there, and he's sent me for you—and he's waiting!"

"Let him wait!"

"What am I to tell him?" asked the captain in despair. It was plain that Randal wasn't coming, and Tredegar dreaded returning without him. What sort of a cricket captain was McCann going to think him if he came back without his man?

Randal considered.

"Well, tell him what he ought to know already—that prefects can't be fagged at games like Fourth Form kids. Tell him to mind his own business!"

Tred was not likely to carry that message to James McCann!

"Look here, don't talk out of your hat, Randy," he said. "I've got to face the man, dash him! Think of something that will do."

"I'm working!" said Randy, with dignity.

"Working?" gasped Tred.

"I'm doing history for Mace. I've

got a paper for Mace, though goodness knows where I've put it! I've promised Mace that paper for dog's ages. It's more'n time I had a squint at it. Tell McCann I'm working for Mace—he knows I specialise in history."

Tred gazed at him. To tell anybody that Randy was working was to raise a laugh. It was true that Randal "specialised" in history—that was a well-known game at High Coombe. You "specialised" in history and "stopped out" of school for that reason, reducing work to a minimum. Even McCann had not yet come down on this—he did not want to resemble too closely a bull in a china-shop in his reforming work at High Coombe. One thing at a time was his system—one after another. So far, Randy had got away with his precious specialising in history—enjoying happy hours in his study window-seat, while less happy mortals were grinding with McCann. Mace never asked him to show anything up, so that was all right.

"It will make all the men snigger, Randy, but it won't make McCann snigger," said Tredegar, shaking his head. "For the love o' Mike, think of a better one than that!"

"You think of a better one, then," said Randal, exhausted with his mental efforts. "Do let a fellow alone. You're growin' unpleasant, Tred."

Tredegar slowly turned and left him. He had an uncomfortable consciousness that he was growing "unpleasant" in the eyes of many of his friends, and he hated the idea. Yet there was something attractive in the prospect of keeping High Coombe's end up at cricket—if it could be done without a lot of trouble and without making oneself unpleasant to one's friends!

Tred had seen young Ferguson of the Fourth, who was as keen as mustard, actually grinning at First Eleven cricket! That was not nice! Tred even suspected that Ferg could have played the heads off half his men—a fag in the Fourth! Really, there was something to be said for McCann. Still, a man

did not want to be unpleasant to his friends.

It was a worried Tred that walked back slowly to Big Side—and there was a deep murmur through the thronging crowd as it was seen that he came alone.

Mr. McCann gave him an inquiring look. Aubrey Compton smiled, and made it a point to yawn.

"Where is Randal, Tredegar?" the Head asked.

Tred's face was pink.

"Working in his study, sir. He can't come out for this practice, as he's working for Mr. Mace."

There was a gasp from everybody who heard. Working for Mace, even in a history class, was a joke. Working in a study for Mace was a real shriek! And Randy—working! Randy and work were as far as the poles asunder. If McCann let this get by, anything was good enough for him in the future! On the other hand, what could he do? Bullock would have admitted such an excuse as a matter of course.

McCann did not answer for a moment or two—he was never in a hurry. In an unfortunate moment for himself, Bullock saw fit to barge in. This, it seemed to Bullock, was an opportunity for him to reveal unto McCann the fact that a games master was, in point of fact, a games master—not a worm to be trodden on.

"We are losing time," said Bullock. "You had better put in Lacy, Tredegar."

"Very well, sir!" said Tredegar, with a doubtful eye on McCann.

Lacy of the Sixth was ready—and willing; willing, at least, to help in the great work of dishing the Blighter. He was not in the First; but he was a time-honoured member of the Second. He had, in fact, changed for the game—all ready for McCann's defeat at the hands of that champion of the oppressed, Randy. McCann glanced at Bullock—a quiet glance, which caused old Bully's red face to grow a little redder.

"I think," said McCann—

Coombe hanging on his words—"I think Randal must play, Tredegar."

The Bullock felt impelled to stick to his guns. He had the moral support of every man on the field.

"It is a Sixth Form privilege, sir——"

Sixth Form "privs" were sacred things at High Coombe. One of these valued "privs" was the right—or supposed right—to cut games practice in favour of work! And this Form match was only a practice. Surely Randal had the Head there? Surely the Bullock had him? Was nothing sacred to McCann?

Apparently nothing was. He interrupted the Bullock:

"Even Sixth Form privileges, Mr. Bullock, must not be made a pretext for slacking. Please come with me; and you, also, Tredegar."

"We are wasting time, sir!" It was the Bullock's last shot.

"I am sorry," said McCann gravely, "that time should be wasted—a novel experience here, doubtless." This, evidently, was "sarc." "Nevertheless, please come with me, and we will see Randal, who is so unfortunate in choosing this precise moment for his labours."

McCann, Bullock and Tredegar walked off—two of them very unwillingly. Tred, knowing what the Head would see when he arrived at Randal's study, was worried and apprehensive; Bullock as red as a turkey-cock with helpless resentment. The field was left in a buzz behind them.

"After all, what can the brute do?" asked Aubrey Compton.

"Plenty!" said Bob Darrell flip-pantly.

"Oh, shut up!"

CHAPTER 9.

Randy Gets Six!

AUBREY said afterwards that unmitigated ass, Randal, might have had the sense to play up. He might, at least, have put in some faint pretence of work in his study, in

case the Blighter looked in. He might have had a book propped open against his inkstand, or a paper lying ready on the table—he might have been sitting up with a pen in his hand, even!

Randy, of course, thought of none of these things. When McCann knocked at his door, and opened it, Randal was still where Tred had left him—extended at full length in the window-seat, his hands clasped behind his head, his gaze on the blue sky in happy contentment. A book lay open beside him, it was true, which he was too lazy to read—but it was not a school-book; it was a novel. This was how Randy did history for Mace!

But as the door opened and three faces looked in—one calm and urbane, one distressed, one red as a turkey-cock's, Randal woke to locomotion. He jumped. Probably it was the first time Randy had jumped since he had been a junior in the Shell. But he did jump—in fact, he bounded! On his feet, he stared at the intruders.

"Oh!" he said, or rather gasped.

"I am new here," said Mr. McCann with grave irony, "and you, Mr. Bullock, are doubtless better informed than I as to the exact extent of Sixth-Form privileges. It is not, I think, one of those privileges to sprawl in a window-seat when required for games."

The Bullock was dumb. He could only give Randy a furious look. Randy looked at Tred; Tred only looked helpless. He did not believe that Randy would have got away with it, even had he had the foresight to be pretending to work. As it was, he had not even that feeble leg to stand on.

Still, it was not clear what McCann could do. Obviously he could not cane Randal. Realising that, Randy recovered from the shock, and pulled himself together. Defiance was still practical politics—at least, he hoped so. What was McCann going to do?

Without loss of time, McCann proceeded to do what he was going to do. He turned to Tredegar.

"This matter," he said, "is in your

hands, Tredegar, as captain of the school and head of the games. You will give Randal six for slacking."

Randal, for the second time in history, jumped! Tredegar gasped. All of them had fancied that they had McCann. But that was an error! McCann had them!

For there was no doubt, not the shadow of a doubt, that it was not merely the right, but the duty of the head of the games to give any man six for slacking at games. Prefects whopped for other offences; for that offence, the head of the games whopped!

Not that Tred would ever have dreamed of doing it. Occasionally, perhaps, he whopped some young "rotter" in the Fourth or the Shell. Never a Fifth Form man—much less a Sixth Form man—and a prefect, too! Tred felt almost dizzy at the idea. Nevertheless, there it was—any man at High Coombe was liable to whopping if he cut a practice without satisfactory reason given—and the fact that the easy-going Tred never enforced the rule, did not alter it—neither did the fact that Randal was a prefect of the Sixth.

Tred had his duty to do—unless he was going to explain to McCann that he was a fellow who never did his duty, and jolly well wasn't going to. Which explanation was hardly one that could be given.

There was a brief silence in Randal's study. Mr. McCann stood waiting. Tred looked at Randy, and Randy looked at Tred. The Bullock, speechless, faded out of the doorway.

"I think," said Mr. McCann casually, "that I see a fives bat on that shelf, Tredegar."

Tred, with a shaking hand, took the fives bat.

There was no help for it. He stole a glance at McCann—who was quiet, but with a steely gleam in his eyes. Not a man to whom Tred could say that he was jolly well going to let Randy off because he was a pal! Not

at all! They would rag Tred for this, afterwards, in Big Study—he would be the most unpopular man at High Coombe—fellows would reproach him, cut him in the quad! Nevertheless—

"Bend over, Randal!" Tred could hardly believe that it was his own voice speaking. Randal could hardly believe it.

Randal caught his breath. Then he bent over.

This was some horrid dream, Randy thought, from which he would awaken presently, with his head on the cushions of the window-seat. Was he, Randal, actually going over a chair, and was Tred actually wielding a fives bat—under the eyes of McCann? Alas—he was!

Whack! Never since he had been in the Lower School had Randy's trousers been dusted by a fives bat. And now—Whack, whack, whack!

It was no horrid dream. It was hideous reality. Randy was getting six. Whack, whack!

Certainly Tred did not lay them on hard. But that mattered not a jot. It was the whopping that mattered. Randal, crimson, rose after the whopping, and the fives bat fell from Tred's nerveless hand.

"And now," said Mr. McCann, in the most matter-of-fact tone, "now please get changed at once, Randal."

Randal got changed at once.

"Randy's coming!" exclaimed Teddy Seymour.

Aubrey gritted his teeth. Bob Darrell grinned.

"I fancied he would!" Bob remarked.

Randy came—changed for cricket, his bat under his arm. His look was not that of a fellow who was going to enjoy a game—far from it. But he came! Tred, looking still less as if this was an enjoyable occasion, came with him. They did not speak as they came. And when Randy, later, had spoken to some of the others, they gave Tred the cold, grim, marble eye.

Tred wondered, indignantly, what they imagined he could have done? What could any man have done? From being the most popular man in the school, Tred had dropped, at one fell swoop, to the very lowest point of unpopularity. If he was the man to stand it, and pull through it, he was going to be the captain of High Coombe that Jimmy McCann wanted—but was he?

That Form match was rotten cricket. Ferguson of the Fourth, watching it, had more occasion than ever to grin at the Big Side game.

The Sixth Form went in first, and their innings lasted nearly twenty minutes. Tredegar, who could in ordinary circumstances be depended upon to play a fair game, was too disturbed by all that had taken place to concentrate properly, and scored only one. The rest of the side were too indignant to worry. Taking all in all, Randy was the only man among them who did everything that was expected of him. That is to say, he scored his usual duck with his usual rapidity, and returned, fully satisfied with his effort, to the pavilion.

The Fifth Form innings lasted rather longer. But that was mainly due to Bob Darrell, who carried his bat for an easy twenty-five, giving his side victory without the two runs and a bye which the other ten men had scored.

One thing was certain. High Coombe cricket had a very long way to go before it could be classed with other schools!

But Rome was not built in a day—and Jimmy McCann was a patient builder!

CHAPTER 10.

"We'll beat McCann!"

WHAT was booked to happen at the High Coombe versus St. Chad's match was, of course, Aubrey Compton's idea. The dandy of the Fifth pondered over it in Study No. 3, and saw that it was good! Then he communicated it to the men in Big

Study somewhat warily. He was not quite sure how some of them would take it. For it was "thick"—and even at the School for Slackers there was some sort of a limit.

Even to his own pal, Teddy Seymour, Aubrey breathed it cautiously; and Teddy stared at him with goggling eyes. To Bob Darrell he did not venture to breathe it. Pals as they were, Bob might have punched Aubrey's handsome nose. Nobody told Bob about it. He could see that there was something on, but he was left in the dark, for it was an absolute certainty that if Bob heard he would go off at the deep end.

One by one the first eleven men were let into it. They gasped at the idea. It was enough to make any fellow gasp. But Aubrey carried his point. Any stick, he pointed out, was good enough to beat the new Head with. What did a cricket match matter in comparison with making him, James McCann, sit up and learn where he got off? Nothing at all!

Tredegar, captain of High Coombe, was the last to be told. It was rather a delicate matter dealing with old Tred. McCann had influenced him a lot. This term Tred was talking drivel about keenness at games, sticking to practice, and beating St. Chad's as a preliminary to beating Okeham—as if the High Coombe men could possibly beat Okeham!

Tred, so far, found only one sympathetic hearer for this sort of drivel—Darrell of the Fifth—though Teddy sometimes lent a more or less sympathetic ear. The rest of the Fifth gave Tred the marble eye. His old friends in the Sixth regarded him, perhaps, more with sorrow than with anger. Randal cut him dead. Under the blighting influence of the Blighter, Jimmy McCann, Tred had "whopped" Randal, Sixth Form man and prefect as he was, for slacking at games. High Coombe had thrilled with the outrage. Tred, it seemed, was setting himself up as a sort of secondary Blighter, and all the seniors at the School for Slackers

had agreed that Tred was going to find out that it wouldn't wash.

Tredegear, always popular and respected, now found himself something of an outcast—and it was frightfully uncomfortable. Fellows would stop talking if he joined a group—and resume when he left. Fellows would walk out of Big Study when Tred walked in. No fellow dropped into his study for a jaw. If he dropped into another fellow's study he was quickly frozen out again.

Tred had never quite made up his mind to back McCann, although he had made a sort of move in that direction. But if backing McCann meant cold and averted looks from all his friends, and an atmosphere constantly below zero, Tred was hardly the man for it. Aubrey had no doubt that Tred would come into line before the St. Chad's date. And he did!

Cricket practice was the order of the day at High Coombe now. Bullock, the games master, after a feeble resistance to the overpowering Blighter, seemed to have settled down to feed from his hand. He jumped when McCann pulled the strings, as Aubrey described it. Fellows did not venture to cut Nets. They had to bat, bowl, and field—slogging about in the sun! Worse than that, there were Early Nets now—turning out before brekker!

And in spite of themselves, as it were, they were improving. Fellows could not keep on slogging, even unwillingly, without showing signs of improvement. And every sign of improvement was noted with satisfaction by Jimmy McCann.

Jimmy was even entertaining a hope that Tredegear's team would be good enough to beat St. Chad's when they came over, and that the unaccustomed zest of victory would help on the good work and put High Coombe cricket on its feet. He little knew!

Aubrey was well aware of Jimmy's hopes, and he had very coolly planned to put paid to them.

"You can take a horse to water," Aubrey declared in Big Study, "but can you make him drink?"

"Not even the Blighter!" agreed Randall, from an armchair.

"Life's hardly worth livin' at High Coombe now," said Coffin of the Sixth. "Nets before brekker—grooogh!"

"Britons never shall be slaves!" said Randall.

"Which, being construed, means High Coombe men never shall be cricketers!" said Carter, who could not help being funny.

"We're all in this." Aubrey Compton glanced round Big Study. All the first eleven men were there, excepting Tredegear and Darrell. "We're all agreed—"

"Yes, and Tred will come round," said Coffin.

"He's comin' round," agreed Aubrey. "He's pretty sick of bein' cut. Tred's all right, only McCann has been talkin' him over. Tred will play up and we shall beat—"

"St. Chad's?" grinned Carter.

"Don't be an ass, Carter! We shall beat McCann. He can make us slog at games practice—but he can't make us keep our wickets up if we don't choose!"

"Even if we could, anyhow," said Carter.

"Will you shut up, you ass? He can't make us take wickets—"

"He's no miracle-worker!" said Carter.

Aubrey hurled a cushion at the funny man of the Fifth.

"Now shut up! We're all agreed—and when St. Chad's come over the Blighter will see exactly how far he can drive us. He won't be so fearfully keen on the next fixture, I fancy."

"We shall look awful asses to the St. Chad's men!" said Teddy Seymour uneasily.

"Who cares?"

"And Bob will go all out, anyhow—he always does."

"Let him! If Darrell can win a cricket match on his own I'll be glad

to see him do it. Besides, when Tred comes round, he can chuck Bob."

"Chuck Darrell!"

Randal very nearly sat up in his armchair at the idea.

"McCann has been advising Tred to make some changes in the team. Well, that will be a change, and may please him."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Big Study.

The idea of pleasing McCann by chucking the only good cricketer in the Upper School took Big Study by storm. They roared.

"Aubrey, old man, you're a card!" gurgled Randal. "After the St. Chad's match the Blighter may give up driving us at games. Even that brute will see that it's no good."

"Bound to," said Aubrey. "The fact is we've got him on toast. If any man in the team takes a St. Chad's wicket we'll scalp him afterwards. Any man who doesn't go down for a duck will be cut by the school. Fancy the Blighter's face watchin'—"

And Big Study roared again. The mental picture of McCann's face, when he beheld such a sight as the reward of his labours, was fearfully entertaining.

That was the big idea—to score no runs and take no wickets!

It was worthy of the School for Slackers! The beauty of it was that when it came off, McCann could do nothing. Bowlers who failed to take wickets, fieldsmen who dropped "sitters," batsmen who did not keep their sticks up—what could be done to them? Nothing! It was overwhelming defeat for McCann—the Blighter, at long last, would see where he got off! If Tred came round, and dropped Darrell, there was nothing in the way of success—and Aubrey counted on that as a certainty.

And he was right, for Tred, fed up with being an outcast among his old friends, did come round. His position was intolerable—at least to an easy-going fellow like Tred—and he was angry and irritated with McCann

for having placed him in it. Between annoyance with McCann, the love of popularity and an easy life, and the gentle persuasion of Aubrey, Tred came round—and everything in the garden was lovely.

CHAPTER 11.

"Well done, Ferguson!"

FERGUSON of the Fourth took a businesslike grip on the handle of his bat and faced the bowling. The Head was coming along by the nets, walking with the games master, and if the Head was going to give the juniors a look in, Ferg wanted him to see that there was one man at High Coombe, at least, who could handle a bat.

Ferg, of course, hated the new Head. Everybody at High Coombe—Bob Darrell excepted—made it a point of honour to hate him fearfully. Nevertheless, Ferg knew that McCann had forgotten more than anybody at High Coombe had ever known about the game of cricket. On that subject he valued McCann's judgment and praise, and was eager to catch his eye.

"Pull up your socks, Fatty!" he called out to Pye. "The Blighter's got an eye on us!"

Fatty Pye was chiefly noted for his immense consumption of jam-tarts and doughnuts. But he could bowl. There was quite keen cricket in the Fourth, as Jimmy McCann had been glad to note. And though the Head was a busy man, and gave up a good deal of his time to coaching senior men, he had an eye on the juniors, and took quite a flattering interest in their game. Keeness was a passport to Jimmy's esteem; and he had noted Ferg's keeness with a very approving eye. Now, as he stopped near the first-eleven net with Bullock, the corner of his eye was on Ferg, and Ferg knew it, and was greatly bucked.

Bob Darrell was in the first-eleven net, and Bob was always worth looking at when he handled a bat. Like Ferg,

Bob liked to show up well under the Head's eye. He, too, wanted McCann to see that cricket was not altogether a lost art at High Coombe. Teddy Seymour was giving him some bowling, and other men stood round to field. Somehow or other, they hardly knew why, all the men on the spot pulled themselves up when McCann came along, and looked a little less like stuffed figures especially manufactured to advertise well-cut cricket flannels. Aubrey Compton, indeed, looked very alert—with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Teddy sent the ball down, and Bob hit it away. Aubrey, moving for once as if he was really alive, went after it, and returned it to the bowler—or did he? McCann and Bullock were standing quite clear—McCann the nearer of the two to Aubrey. How the clumsiest fieldsman could have whizzed the ball at them instead of back to Teddy was a mystery—or perhaps it was not a mystery in this case.

Bullock had a sour expression on his face. He was, so to speak, feeding from McCann's hand—having no choice about that—but he was not enjoying the meals. Bullock had some suspicion of what was "on" in the first eleven for St. Chad's day, but he was very careful to affect complete ignorance, and he was not likely to take any steps to prevent McCann getting a fall.

If this barging outsider chose to overrule him in his own special domain, let him get on with it—and get the results! That was the Bullock's sour reflection. The results might have the effect of keeping him clear of Bullock's domain afterwards.

Bullock was watching Aubrey, and a faint grin dawned on his red face. Perhaps he noted the gleam in Aubrey's eyes—perhaps he guessed what was coming. Certainly he shifted his position a little so that McCann's stocky figure was more completely between him and the fieldsman with the ball. If that fieldsman was going to play tricks with the cricket ball, Bullock did not want to get the benefit of it.

Did McCann observe that faint grin dawning on the red face, and the slight movement into closer cover? Possibly—for the keen-eyed Blighter had a way of observing everything. It was certain that McCann made a movement as the ball left Compton's hand—though his eyes were not on Aubrey.

Hot from Aubrey's palm came the whizzing ball, and as the other fellows saw its direction—nowhere near Teddy—they stared, in the excited and happy expectation of hearing it crack on McCann. McCann, moving to stroll on towards the junior nets, whether by accident or design, left the Bullock in the line of fire.

It all happened in a second. The ball was coming hot and strong, but McCann was out of the way exactly in time; and before Bullock knew anything, the ball jarred on his plump chin. Crack!

The roar that the Bullock gave could have been heard in the House and down the coombe.

He staggered and sat down, his hand clapping his chin.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Teddy, his eyes nearly starting from his head. "Oh, Aubrey, you ass!"

Aubrey stood petrified.

Mr. McCann glanced round at the sitting Bullock.

"My dear fellow!" he exclaimed. He gave Bullock a hand to rise, and the games master staggered to his feet, gasping, gurgling, rubbing his chin. "Compton, did you throw that ball?"

"An accident, sir!" Aubrey gasped. "My foot slipped—"

"A very unfortunate accident for Mr. Bullock," said the Head, frowning. "You had better get something for that bruise, Bullock!"

Bullock nodded; he could not speak. Still with his hand to his chin, he tottered away—after giving Aubrey one black look. Mr. McCann walked on.

Ferguson of the Fourth had the wish of his heart at last. Jimmy McCann stopped again at the junior nets.

"Well hit!" came the Head's deep

voice, as Ferg sent the ball whizzing. Ferg felt a glow of satisfaction. After all, the man knew good cricket when he saw it!

Ferg proceeded to excel himself. The Head stood looking on, evidently interested. Fatty Pye sent down some good balls, but Ferg put paid to all of them. Loom and Bunn took turns—even Donkin had a go—but the bowling could not damage Ferg. He sent it anywhere and everywhere. Suddenly the Head's hand went up. Smack!

"How's that?" asked Mr. McCann, laughing.

Ferg laughed with glee. Caught out by the Head—the man whose own cricket record was a tale of glory had condescended to catch Ferg out! Ferg's face glowed. Was this man a blighter—a bounder? He could see that Ferg was a cricketer anyhow!

"You shape well, my boy!" said Mr. McCann. He did not add what was in his mind—that he wished that some of the first eleven men shaped as well. "I shall send you down a few myself."

The cup of Ferg's glory was full!

The man who had played for the M.C.C., and captained Leamshire, was actually taking the ball from Donkin to bowl to him! Ferg wondered if this was a happy dream.

The fags stood round, staring. Ferg braced himself for the supreme effort of his life. If he stopped that bowling—if he kept up his sticks—greatness greater than this was not within human imagination. And Ferg did! Perhaps the Head did not go all out, but he tested Ferg hard. Once, twice, thrice came the ball—such bowling as Ferg had never stood up to before—and once he stopped it dead—twice he knocked it away. Not till the fourth ball did Ferg's bails fly.

Then the Head, smiling, tossed the ball back to Donkin.

"Catch!" he said cheerily, just like a Fourth Form fellow. And the Donkey, celebrated for dropping the easiest of sitters, caught it. Somehow, under McCann's eye, fellows could do things.

"Well done, Ferguson!" said the Head, and walked away.

Later, when Babbie of the Shell spoke of the Blighter McCann, Ferguson came over to him.

"Did you say Blighter?" he asked.

"Didn't you hear me?" answered Babs.

"Did you mean McCann?"

"Yes, you know I did."

"Then you can jolly well take that!" said Ferguson—and Babbie took it right on the nose.

Besides Darrell of the Fifth, Jimmy McCann had now one more loyal and enthusiastic supporter in the School for Slackers!

CHAPTER 12.

"Toe the line, or—"

BOB DARRELL was not dropped from the first eleven for the St. Chad's game. Tred had come round, and he entered into the spirit of the plot to make the Head look silly. Tred was tired of being hectoring and overridden by McCann—at least, his friends made him believe that he was—and all the Sixth, all the Fifth, well, came him back as a wandering sheep into the fold.

Once more Tred sat in Big Study in a happy atmosphere of esteem and popularity.

But, as Tred pointed out, he simply could not chuck Darrell. A thing had to be plausible. Even Bullock would jib at chucking a man like Darrell; and the Head was certain to barge in. And if the Head wanted to know, what was Tred to say? He couldn't explain that he was chucking a cricketer because that cricketer was a man to take wickets and make runs—and Big Study agreed that he couldn't.

The list was going up on Tuesday, and Darrell's name had to be in it. Bob himself would rage if he was left out—indeed; it would put him wise to what was going on, which would never do. Bob was certain to give no end of trouble if he learned of the big idea.

And Bob had to be got rid of. Aubrey rose to the occasion—he was equal to that emergency as to all others. Having got the whole thing in apple-pie order, Aubrey was not likely to be beaten by a trifle like this.

On Tuesday, therefore, when the list was posted, Darrell's name was in it. James McCann was seen to give that list a glance—and if he was not wholly satisfied with it, at least he was satisfied to see the name of R. Darrell there. Had it not been there, certainly there would have been awkward questions. But it was there, and that was all right. Only Bob was not going to be there when St. Chad's came—but that, as yet, was a card up Aubrey's sleeve.

Bob was Aubrey's pal, and he would feel it deeply getting left out of the cricket. But that could not be helped. Friendship could not be allowed to interfere with business—the great and important business of giving McCann a fall. Teddy Seymour said that it was too bad; but, as usual, he followed Aubrey's lead. Plenty of fellows were willing and ready to help. They liked old Bob, but they weren't standing any of his nonsense. If he had "come round" like Tred, they would have welcomed him with open arms and hearts. But there was not the remotest prospect of that—so other measures had to be taken. Bob, like McCann, had to learn where he got off!

St. Chad's were not expected before half-past ten in the morning, but there was no school for fellows in the eleven. Less happy mortals had to grind as usual—and in these dismal days at the School for Slackers it was real grinding. No longer did the school slack in the Form-rooms while the cricketers slacked in the field!

Bob's idea, after brekker, was to put in a spell at the nets, by way of getting his hand in. But Compton proposed a walk down the coombe and a bathe on the sand-ridge, where the Atlantic rollers came sweeping in. And Bob gladly agreed. They made up a

party—Darrell and Compton and Seymour and Carter, who were all in the eleven, and Raymond and Peverill and Lacy, who were not.

Bob was in great spirits, looking forward to the day's match—hoping that after all McCann's efforts, the eleven would put up a decent show for once, and perhaps beat St. Chad's. He could not help noticing that his companions seemed in cheery spirits also—with the exception of Teddy, who had rather a hangdog look. They were in a state of happy anticipation—though not of cricket!

"Stop here," said Aubrey, coming to a halt. Down the steep, wooded coombe, near where it opened out on the wide beach, a hut stood. It was used by boating men and fishing men from the school, and for the parking of boating gear. It was very strongly built, as it had to stand the Atlantic wind that sometimes roared up the coombe with almost the force of a hurricane, and the waves which in wild weather dashed on its walls. The door was locked, but Aubrey produced a key and unlocked it.

"Want something out?" asked Bob.

"No; somethin' in, old chap!" answered Compton.

Bob did not understand that reply—till he received a sudden barge from Lacy and Carter which sent him spinning headlong into the fishing-hut, where he sat up, tangled in a net.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the fellows outside, excepting Teddy. Teddy murmured inaudibly that it was too bad!

Bob scrambled up, and turned a face red with wrath to the doorway packed with grinning faces. Bob could take a joke—even a rough joke—but this seemed to him rather more than one.

"Look here," he bawled, "what's the game?"

"Stay there, old bean, while I talk to you," said Aubrey. "Listen to the words of wisdom from the jolly old oracle."

"Yes, be a sensible chap, Bob," implored Teddy. "Why the thump do you make your pals have to handle you? Why can't you line up with the rest, like a good chap? That's all we want."

Bob began to realise that he had been drawn down the coombe with ulterior motives!

"Put it to him plainly, Aubrey," said Carter. "Don't jaw, Darrell—this is where you listen-in!"

"We're playing St. Chad's to-day, Bob," said Compton, "and we've got a game on to dish the Blighter. He's made us all work at cricket—he's driven us like a lot of galley-slaves, and bully-ragged old Bullock, and bullied Tred—and he thinks he's got us where he wants us. Well, we're goin' to open his eyes when St. Chad's hop along. If you'll back us up, we want you. If not, you cut the game."

"I'd like to see any man make me cut the game!" Bob roared.

"Glad you'd like to see it—for you will shortly, if you don't toe the line," drawled Aubrey. "We're goin' to leave you locked in here—the window's screwed up ready—and you'll kick your heels till we send somebody to let you out."

"Why, you—you——" gasped Bob. "You dare to keep a fellow out of the cricket—do you think even Tred will stand that?"

There was a chuckle from Aubrey & Co.

"Tred's in this," explained Compton. "He's droppin' you out of the team unless you agree to play up. Now, this is the game—we're goin' to let St. Chad's walk off with the match. They can make as many runs as they like for no wickets, and High Coombe's score will be two big nougts."

"One in each innings," explained Peverill. "Every man lets his sticks go down at the first ball."

"Got that, Bob?" asked Aubrey, as Darrell stared at him open-mouthed.

"You're joking!" gasped Bob. "You can't mean it! Even a born slacker like you, Aubrey, wouldn't play such a rotten trick as that!"

"It's all cut and dried, old chap, and every man in the eleven is backin' up! Are you doin' the same?"

Bob's face flamed.

"Am I?" he roared. "No! If I'm the

only man on the ground that plays the game, I'm going to play it—and hard! Hard as I can!"

"Bob, old fellow——" pleaded Teddy. "Shut up, Seymour!" said Peverill. "Where's that key, Aubrey?"

"Just think a minute, Bob!" urged Aubrey. "Nobody wants to treat you like this! But we've got to dish McCann. After all his slave-drivin' he's going to see the rottenest show ever. It will be somethin' for him to chew on! Will you back up, old bean?"

"Tred will never——"
"Tred's leadin' us to the jolly old victory!" grinned Compton. "We've got Tred all right!"

"Glorious victory over McCann, under Tred's leadership!" said Carter.

"Well, Bob—— Stop him!" yelled Compton, as Bob, by way of answer, charged. He came at the doorway like a bull.

It was not easy to stop Bob. But six fellows packed the doorway and their combined efforts were too much for him. There was a brief, but terrific struggle, and Bob went hurtling back into the hut.

The door slammed. The key turned, and Aubrey slipped it into his pocket. Bob, on his feet again, raged in the hut like a lion in a cage.

But he raged in vain. Strong walls, a screwed window, and a locked door were too much for Bob. He thumped, he shouted. He heard Aubrey's cool voice without.

"Changed your mind, Bob?"
"You rotter!" roared Darrell. "You cad!"

"Is that the lot?"
"I'll smash you for this!"
"Dear old Bob!" said Aubrey, unmoved. "Peverill and Lacy, you hang on here and make sure that he doesn't get out! You'll have to cut school, but it's for a good cause."

Tramping feet receded up the coombe. From a chink in the shutter screwed down over the window, Bob had a view of departing backs. For the next ten minutes he was yelling alternate threats and beseechings to Peverill and Lacy.

CHAPTER 13.

The St. Chad's Match!

HIGH COOMBE, in break, saw the St. Chad's men arrive, and the gathering on Big Side. They were not a great team, and had Fred and his merry men shared such keenness as Ferguson's, and pulled up their socks, they might very well have started the season by beating the Chaddies.

Jimmy McCann nourished a hope that they were going to do it—at the very least, that they were going to put up a respectable show and not to be beaten by an innings and a sackful of runs.

Bullock, in his white umpire's coat, had a sort of stealthy smile on his face. He knew nothing officially, of course, but he had a very clear idea that that slave-driver McCann was going to meet with the surprise of his life—he was going to see a show worse, much worse, than it would ever have been had he left matters entirely in the hands of the games master. Bullock wished him joy of it—though, as a cricketer, he felt, perhaps, a twinge or two.

Jimmy, it was clear, had no suspicion that there was anything in the wind. He was there in company with Chard and Penge, and there was a cheery smile on his healthy, tanned face.

The bell not having yet rung, all High Coombe crowded round—eager! For, though the secret of the big idea had been well kept, all the School for Slackers knew that something was on—something besides cricket! Whispers and hints had got abroad that the Blighter was going to get the knock—somehow. Everybody wanted to see him get it. And Jimmy, in the innocence of his heart, was glad to see the fellows crowding up—he took it as a sign of new keenness.

But one thing caught Jimmy's keen eyes at once. Darrell was not to be seen. He spoke to Tredegar.

"Where is Darrell?" he asked.

Tred had the grace to blush.

"He hasn't come in, sir."

"Hasn't come in!" repeated Mr. McCann blankly. "Do you mean that Darrell has gone out of gates?"

"He went out some time ago. I shall have to play another man," said Tredegar. "In fact, I've told Wall. He's here."

"Compton," said McCann, "do you know where Darrell is?"

"He told me he was going down to bathe this morning, sir."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the puzzled headmaster. "But surely Darrell cannot have forgotten that stumps are pitched at ten-forty-five—he cannot have forgotten the match." He glanced round in the expectation of seeing Bob scudding down to the field at the last moment. But there was no sign of a late-comer.

Aubrey gave Tredegar a meaningful look. Ted gulped, and explained:

"The fact is, sir, I'm not keen on playing Darrell. You advised me not to hesitate about making changes in the team—" Tred gulped again.

"What?" McCann almost hooted.

"I think that Wall—"

"Don't talk nonsense, Tredegar!" McCann, for once, was irritated out of his usual urbanity. "You are very well aware that Darrell is the best man in your team. You cannot spare him."

Tred looked sulky.

"I can't play a man who's not here," he said, and there was a snap in his voice. "If Darrell chooses to clear off—"

"I cannot understand it," said Mr. McCann. "I thought that Darrell, at least, was keen." He set his lips, revising his opinion of Bob Darrell. His keen eye had not failed to spot the recent weakening of Tredegar. Was Darrell going the same way? It looked like it. He had had hopes of Tred—and Tred had failed him. He had had greater hopes of Darrell—had Darrell failed him, too?

Even if he had been given a hint that his room was preferred to his

company in the eleven, he might, at least, have been on the ground when even fags of the Fourth and the Shell were swarming there. McCann was disappointed and angry.

"You are sure Darrell is not in the House, Tredegar?" he asked.

"Quite, sir! Some fellows have looked for him," answered the captain, with a wooden face.

"I cannot understand it," said Mr. McCann again.

"Of course, he ought to be here," said Randal gravely. "You whopped me for slacking last week, Tred. I shall expect to see you whop Darrell. Fair play all round!"

McCann glanced towards the House. If Darrell was there he did not choose to come out. McCann had chiefly relied on Darrell that day—he wanted to see Bob go in first and give heart to the team by a good show. And the fellow had gone out—and did not choose to come in. Slack—slack, like all the rest. For once, Jimmy McCann was unjust; but he could only judge by what he saw.

The Bullock bustled up.

"What are we waiting for?" he inquired.

"Darrell, sir!" said Aubrey, with silky smoothness. "I'm afraid he rather got his back up when he heard that Tred wasn't keen on playing him—didn't you think so, Teddy?"

"Sort of!" gasped Seymour.

"Anyhow, he's not turned up," said Aubrey. "He went out of gates some time ago and he hasn't come in."

The Bullock grunted. He did not like Darrell, because Darrell was said to like McCann.

"I shall speak to Darrell about this!" he yapped. "I suppose we are not waiting till Darrell chooses to come—if he does choose, sir?"

"No!" said McCann.

Jimmy seemed to swallow something. His disappointment in Darrell was bitter. But it was necessary to get down to business—and they got down to it—minus Darrell.

Tred won the toss and took first knock. He opened the innings for High Coombe with Randal at the other end.

"Pair of duds!" Ferguson whispered to Donkin. "Randal's half-asleep. Wonder if he'll wake up when his sticks go down?"

Tredegar, at the pavilion end, took the bowling. Tred's face was almost crimson. He was, no doubt, rather ashamed of himself and the big idea. But it was too late to back out now. And McCann had told him not to talk nonsense.

Tred tried as hard as he could to feel offended with McCann, as a sort of salve to his conscience. He hoped the Chaddie could send down a difficult ball to play and give him a decent excuse. Instead of which, the bowler trundled down an easy one which the Donkey could have played. High Coomers were accustomed to see High Coombe wickets go down easily, but they rubbed their eyes when the captain of the school was out to that ball.

"Idiot!" said Ferguson.

Tred came away from the wicket with a crimson face. McCann, not yet wise to the game, felt for him.

"Hard luck, Tredegar!" he said; and the wretched Tred felt like kicking himself and kicking Compton. He sneaked away to hide his burning face in the pavilion.

Compton was next man in. He had his pads buckled already. He gave Mr. McCann a smile as he lounged away to the wicket—a smile that Jimmy remembered afterwards. Compton sent up an easy catch and was out—first ball.

Seymour followed him in—and out. The Chaddies cheered their man for the hat-trick. Hat-tricks, however, were going to be cheap that day.

Corkran of the Sixth went in. It was an almost perfect wicket, and Corky suppressed a sigh. He would have liked to hit a few. But the Big

Idea had to be carried out. Corkran let a straight ball trundle by, and the wicketkeeper gazed at him in wonder. Corky crept back to the pavilion. McCann looked at him as he came, and Corky did not meet his eyes.

Carter winked at his friends before he took Corky's place. He left a smiling group at the pavilion—and one face on which thunder was gathering. That one was McCann's. Round the field the High Coombe crowd gazed in wonder and in amusement—Ferguson in angry wrath. Fellows might be rabbits at cricket—but the veriest team of rabbits did not let their sticks go down like this. Four wickets down for nil—what the dickens were they thinking of?

Another minute or two it was five wickets for no runs. Carter, true to his own suggestion, introduced a little variety by getting out leg-before. He made no mistake about it, either—Carter was born funny. Having deliberately legged the ball, Carter looked round like a performer for applause, and was rewarded by a ripple of laughter from the pavilion.

Wall, the new man in the eleven, took the last ball of the over. Probably he could not have stopped it. At all events, he didn't, and the wicketkeeper chuckled as he replaced the balls. St. Chad's might have cheered the double hat-trick—but they seemed too astonished to cheer. Some of them were laughing. It was, as Ferg confided to Donkin and Pye, enough to make a cat laugh. At this rate of progress the fellows booked for the Form-rooms would be able to see the home innings out before the bell rang—an unprecedented occurrence, even at the School for Slackers!

McCann's face, by this time, was a study. It was dawning on him. It was a "rag"!

It was dawning upon the spectators, too. Grinning looks were exchanged among them. It was a rag on the Blihter—a terrific rag! A gorgeous

rag! The kind of rag that made history in a school. Everybody knew now what was going to happen when the field crossed.

CHAPTER 14.

Fiasco!

THEY watched it happen. Randal, as Ferg had foreseen, woke up to find his wicket in bits. Seven down for nil! Randy walked back to the pavilion with the air of a man who was glad that his day's work was done. He had exerted himself more than the other men. He had had to stand there in the sunshine while six wickets went down at the other end.

But he was out himself now, and able to take the rest to which he was entitled. The expression on McCann's face was sheer joy to Randy. This was the blighter who had made old Tred whop him for slacking. Randy felt that this day had been worth living for.

Coffin and Carew were partners now. Jimmy McCann's jaw shut like a vice as he watched them. Carew had the bowling in Randal's place, and by this time Jimmy was not surprised to see a middle stump hooked out undefended. He opened his lips to speak to Burke, next on the list, but closed them again. What was the use of speaking?

Burke went in, and there was quite a murmur of surprise when he hit the ball. But, as he dropped a beautiful sitter into the hands of point, it cut no ice.

Last man in! It was Tunstall of the Sixth. The bell was ringing for class now, and the pack of onlookers round the field should have cleared off to the Form-rooms. But not a man heeded the bell. Since Jimmy McCann had become headmaster of High Coombe, fellows had learned to be prompt and early, lest worse should befall them. But on this occasion they paid no heed to the bell.

They simply had to see that remark-

able innings out. Obviously, it wasn't going to take long. There was a ripple of laughter in anticipation round the field. This was some rag! Last wicket lasted just long enough for the bowler to send the ball down. Tunstall watched it knock his leg stump over, and came away.

Coffin, at the other end, had the glory of being "not out"—a thing that couldn't be helped! But he was not out for—nil!

The crowd broke away, roaring with laughter as they made for the House. Grinning faces at the pavilion surrounded Mr. McCann. Some fellows said that the Bullock winked at Mr. Chad; certainly the Fifth Form master had a wide smile on his plump face as he walked away. There was no smile on Jimmy McCann's.

Everybody else was smiling or laughing—especially the St. Chad's men. The Chaddies were looking forward to telling about this when they got back—and setting St. Chad's in a roar with the story. A score of eleven noughts was really a tale worth telling.

Aubrey, cool and disdainful, watched McCann, wondering whether the Blighter would break out. Some of the others felt a little uneasy. It was a great rag. But how was the Blighter going to take it? After all, what could he do? He could do nothing—absolutely nothing—and Aubrey would have been glad to see him break out into impotent anger. That would have been another score for the cheery Aubrey.

McCann did not break out. He walked away to the House, leaving a grinning and rejoicing mob behind him. What he was feeling and thinking they could only guess, and he did not tell them. The Bullock smiled when he was gone. He thought it possible that the meddling bargee had learned now that it was wiser not to meddle!

that remarkable fixture, it was only from a window. Aubrey hoped that he gave it an occasional squint! Really, in its own way, it was worth watching. As an entertainment it could have had few equals. The St. Chad's innings was as good, in its way, as the home innings. Not a wicket fell.

The two men who went in stayed in as long as they liked and hit up runs off bowling which would have been easy stuff for a blind man. They could have batted all day if they had liked; nobody was going to get them out. But when the score stood at a hundred for no wicket St. Chad's declared.

There was still time before lunch for High Coombe to bat again—and to complete their innings, too! For the second innings was a repetition of the first. Eleven duck's eggs were changed into eleven pairs of spectacles! St. Chad's enjoyed their lunch—though some of them were laughing almost too much to eat. Happy grins adorned High Coombe faces—with the exception of Bob Darrell's.

Teddy had cut down to the coombe to let Bob out—and he came back too dismal and miserable even to find solace in punching Aubrey's head.

After the St. Chad's men were gone—unexpectedly early—the School for Slackers rejoiced in their remarkable victory over the Blighter McCann.

Just before tea, a happy crowd in Big Study was still bubbling with victorious satisfaction—Tred, stifling twinges of conscience, happy in unbounded popularity among his old friends. Carter came and opened the door of Big Study and looked in—with so startled a face that the buzz of cheery talk broke off, and all the men in the room stared at him. He seemed unable to speak.

"What—" began half a dozen fellows. Aubrey Compton felt his heart beat! Had the Blighter somehow done something?

"Come and see!" gasped Carter at last.

If Jimmy McCann saw any more of

They came—and saw! They packed in front of the school notice-board, where there was a new notice up, in the headmaster's hand. They gazed at it—unbelieving, dumbfounded. It was brief, but fearfully to the point:

“J. A. Ferguson, Fourth Form, is appointed Captain of Cricket.

“J. McCANN, Headmaster.”

“Ferguson captain of Cricket!” exclaimed Aubrey. “A fag given authority over us! What utter bosh! I'm not standin' for that!” And his hand reached to tear the Head's notice from the board.

Corkran, the head prefect, shot out a hand and caught Aubrey's arm.

“Don't be an ass, Compton!” he said. “It's no use tearing the notice down. It won't get rid of Ferguson as Captain of Cricket, but it will land you in for a licking.”

“But—but, dash it all,” stammered Aubrey, “the man's gone too far! He's mad! We can't take this lying down—we've got to show him that we don't intend to put up with this nonsense. A fag runnin' the cricket—it's unthinkable! We shall be a laughing-stock!”

“Serves you jolly well right!” said Bob Darrell, who had just arrived on the scene. “You would make a fool of the Head, and now he's going to get his own back. Why the dickens don't you admit he's top dog, and that it's useless to kick against him and his ways? He's got his own way in the long run, and beats you every time!”

“We're not beaten yet!” retorted Aubrey. “The Blighter can make a fag Captain of Cricket, but he can't jolly well make us play under the kid. You leave it to me—I'll find a way of dishing him!”

CHAPTER 15.

Whops for Slackers—and Side!

IT was incredible—or would have been incredible in any headmaster but James McCann.

Carter of the Fifth even suggested

that it was a hoax—that the Blighter McCann had taken to jesting, and was working a practical joke on High Coombe.

But, alas, it was no jest. It was grim and ghastly reality! It was sheer, high-handed tyranny; all the School for Slackers agreed on that. Ferguson, of the Fourth Form, had been appointed by the Head to be Captain of Cricket at High Coombe!

Even Bob Darrell was a little dismayed. Bob was keen on seeing McCann wake up the School for Slackers and infuse a little life into it. But he had never looked for such drastic methods as these. Darrell, as a Fifth Form man, was not keen on taking orders from a junior in the Fourth. And that, if McCann's order stood, was what Bob had to do—and all the rest of the Fifth, and even the great and glorious Sixth as well—so far as games were concerned.

There was the Head's order on the board for all High Coombe to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. Fifth and Sixth Form men gazed at it, and went away dazed—and came back to gaze again, to assure themselves that their eyes had not deceived them.

Ferguson of the Fourth gazed at it, and gazed and gazed. Ferg's remark was:

“What a lark!”

Other fags regarded Ferg with envy, awe, and admiration. John Andrew Ferguson that day seemed to have grown three inches taller. His mere look in the passages and the quad would have caused any prefect to whop him for side—but for one awful consideration: Ferg, who last term had fagged for Compton of the Fifth, was now a power in the land, and could whop! When a Fourth Form junior was given whopping privs, it seemed to all the seniors at High Coombe that it was time for the skies to fall.

Aubrey Compton gritted his teeth over it. Tredegar of the Sixth, Captain of High Coombe, looked like a man

in a trance. Big Study hummed and seethed with indignation. Chard trumpeted in Common-room, and the rest of the staff agreed that it was ridiculous, revolutionary, unimaginable. Capes, master of the Fourth, said it was rotten; the youngest master on the staff, he rather played the part of a boy among boys, called Sixth Form men by their names, and talked school-boy slang—and did not know that this was described in Big Study as "greasing."

"We're not standing it, of course," said Aubrey Compton to an indignant crowd in Big Study.

"Aren't we?" growled Bob Darrell. "And how are we going to stop McCann doing as he jolly well likes?"

"Bullock will have to interfere!" said Teddy Seymour.

"Old Bully doesn't seem to dare to call his soul his own since McCann blew in!" sighed Corkran.

"He's games master," said Aubrey. "He hates McCann like poison! Let's go and see Bully!"

"What are you goin' to do, Tred?" asked Carter.

Tred shook his head hopelessly.

"What can I do?" he asked. "It's in McCann's hands if he chooses to use his power! Of course, he's an unspeakable hound—"

"Oh, chuck it!" grunted Bob Darrell. "It's rotten enough; but you've asked for it. You fancied it was one up against the Blighter to let St. Chad's walk over us at cricket. You chucked away a match just to bait him, because he's keen! What did you expect?"

"You're a lot of slacking rotters!" went on Bob, with rising indignation. "You've made McCann think me a rotten slacker, too! Sticking me in that boating hut and keeping me out of the game! I can't give you away to McCann, so I've got to let him think —"

"What the dickens does it matter what McCann thinks?" asked Aubrey.

"Well, I care what he thinks!" roared Bob. "He thinks I cut the

game like a rotten slacker—as slack as the rest of you! And the rest of you chucked it away to worry him. You might have expected something of this sort! And it serves you jolly well right!"

"That little beast Ferguson," said Corkran, "spoke to me in the passage. He told me not to be late for Early Nets—me!"

Big Study gasped.

"Didn't you whop him for side?" demanded Tunstall.

Corky shook his head.

"What's the good? He could whop me at the nets if he liked!"

"Whop you!" said Peverill dazedly.

"Yes — according to McCann's latest!"

"Ye gods!" said Randal.

"Last term," said Aubrey, "I was whopping that young cad for burnin' my toast! This term he can whop the head prefect of High Coombe if he likes. That's what McCann's brought us to. Come and see Bullock. He's got to chip in. Let's go and put it to old Bully."

A dozen angry and excited fellows followed Compton of the Fifth to see old Bully about it. Something had to be done, that was clear—but unless the games master could do something, it was not clear what!

Mr. Bullock lived outside the school; and Aubrey & Co. marched down Coombe Lane to the house where Bullock dwelt. They found him in his garden with his lawn-mower, but he was not mowing. It was easy to see that Bullock knew of Ferguson's appointment as Captain of Cricket. He had quite a dazed expression on his red face.

"You know about that rotter's latest piece of dashed impudence?" asked Aubrey Compton. That was how the dandy of the Fifth alluded to his headmaster and his headmaster's edict.

Bullock nodded his massive head slowly.

"He's appointed Ferguson, of the Fourth Form, Captain of Cricket at

High Coombe! Might as well have made him captain of the school while he was about it! A putrid fag——"

"What are you going to do, Bullock?"

"I can do nothing," said Bullock—"nothing! The Head discussed it with me—he did me that favour!" Bullock sneered ponderously. "I protested—I objected—I pointed out——" He paused. "I can do nothing! I have thought of throwing in my resignation! I am considering it now. But—I can do nothing!"

"A Fourth Form fag givin' orders to senior men!" hooted Aubrey.

"Only in games, of course," said Bullock. "In all other matters, Ferguson is under the authority of the prefects, as heretofore. Possibly that circumstance will keep him within bounds." He gave Corkran of the Sixth a meaning look. "As Captain of Cricket, he has whopping priv, so far as games are concerned. But he may be made to understand that it would be wiser not to exercise them."

Corky nodded. This was a valuable hint!. He thought it over as he walked back to the school with Aubrey and the rest.

"Give the young cad a tip, to begin with!" suggested Aubrey. "Old Bully's no fool, though he looks one!"

Corkran decided that it was a good idea.

It was easy to find Ferguson. They found him standing in front of the notice-board, reading over again for the umpteenth time the order of the Head, which had drawn him so suddenly and unexpectedly from his chrysalis state and turned him into a glorious butterfly. Half a dozen seniors pushed into him and barged him against the board.

Ferg's eyes flashed round. Captain of Cricket was not to be barged like a common-or-garden fag!

"Here, chuck that!" rapped Ferg.

Corkran smiled pleasantly. He had slipped his ash under his arm, all ready for Ferguson.

"Did you speak to me, Ferguson?" he asked.

"I jolly well did!" retorted Ferg. Corky slipped his ash down into his hand.

"That's six for side!" he remarked. "Go over!"

Aubrey & Co. stood round, grinning. This was Jimmy McCann's new Captain of Cricket, empowered to whop any man for slacking, even the captain of the school. Nevertheless, he was a fag of the Fourth and could be whopped for "side"—any prefect could whop any junior for side, and the prefect was judge and jury in the case. And to tell the truth, Ferg had rather put on roll since McCann's order had appeared on the board.

Ferg eyed Corky and the rest uncertainly. But he realised that they had him. He went over.

Corkran laid on that six with scientific skill. Bullock's hint was fresh in his mind. Ferguson had to be taught manners to begin with. At Early Nets, irresistible power would be in his hands. It was an awful prospect, unless he had been taught manners in time. Corky took six shots, and every shot rang.

Aubrey & Co. walked away, grinning. Ferg departed from the spot wriggling, and looking as if he was trying to fold himself up like a penknife. But while he wriggled, Ferg's eyes gleamed.

"Let 'em wait!" said Ferg.

The blood of MacFheargus, founder of the mighty clan of Ferguson, was boiling in his veins. Ferg, at the moment, was an inconsiderable fag, whopped for side. But let 'em wait. At Early Nets they were jolly well going to see who was who and what was what!

Whopping for slacking was a rule at High Coombe—more honoured in the breach than the observance. But it was going to be enforced now. Under the reign of John Andrew Ferguson, High Coombe seniors might or might not become good cricketers—but one thing was certain; if whopping could do it, there would be no lack of whopping!

CHAPTER 16.

A Poser for Ferg!

BOB DARRELL grinned. John Andrew Ferguson frowned.

They met on the cricket ground at half-past six on a bright, invigorating morning. They had met one another—and nobody else. Ferg was first. Not only was Ferg keen to carry out the duties entrusted to him by James McCann, but he was keen, anyhow.

Like Jimmy McCann, Ferg had a spot of ginger in his hair and also in his nature. Ferg was ready to turn out an hour before rising-bell for fielding practice—ready and willing and keen.

Bob Darrell had turned out. He was second on the ground—and last! He was keen enough, so far as cricket went, but it could not be said that he was keen on jumping to the orders of a fag. However, he jumped. Rotten as it undoubtedly was, High Coombe had asked for it, and got it—and that was that!

"Where are the others?" asked Ferguson.

Bob shook his head.

"Shall we get going?" he asked.

Ferg's blue eyes glistened.

"Do you think they will get by with this?" he demanded.

"Not knowing, can't say," answered Bob. "Did you tell Bullock to turn up?" This was sarcasm. Even Ferg, in his new glory, was not likely to issue commands to the games master.

"Don't be an ass!" said Ferg.

"What?"

"An ass—a silly ass!" explained Ferguson.

Bob breathed hard. Such a remark from a Fourth Form fag to a Fifth Form man, a member of the Eleven, called for kicking.

But— There was a but—a tremendous "but." At the present moment, Ferg of the Fourth could no more be kicked than could James McCann, or the Chairman of the Board of Governors. From 6.30 to 7.15 Ferg was monarch of all he surveyed. For

on the board, among the other notices, was that paper, written in the rather scrawling round-hand of John Andrew Ferguson, and it ran:

"EARLY NETS.

Vth and Vith Forms, for Fielding.
6.30 to 7.15.

J. A. FERGUSON, Capt. of Cricket."

That notice had caused even a greater sensation at High Coombe than James McCann's own.

It was cheek—unparalleled cheek! But it was not cheek for which J. A. Ferguson could be whopped. It was his business in his new position—mere routine; that, and nothing more. If J. A. Ferguson had ordered them to turn out at 5.30 or 4.30, it was difficult to see how the order could have been disputed.

But only Darrell of the Fifth had turned out. This was not the way to treat a Captain of Cricket; but it was, seemingly, the way the Fifth and Sixth Forms chose to treat that particular Captain of Cricket. Perhaps they hoped that the six administered by Corkran would have a deterrent effect on John Andrew. If he had the audacity to rouse them from their balmy slumbers, it was certain that he would be whopped for side at very frequent intervals during the day.

No doubt Ferg knew that. But Ferg did not worry. He was going to carry on and exercise just authority from six-thirty to seven-fifteen, regardless of possible consequences. Jimmy McCann had not mistaken his man. He seldom did!

Bob Darrell waited. He did not kick Ferg, and Ferg, for forty-five minutes that morning, was unkickable. Ferg had a cricket stump under his arm. Horrifying as it was, Ferg, if he saw good, could tell Darrell of the Fifth to "go over." "Lip" at games practice was a good and sufficient reason. Bob suppressed his feelings and gave Ferg no lip.

Ferguson stared towards the House. There was no sign of life. Old Liggins had not yet turned out to clang the rising-bell. The Head was an early riser. But if he was up, he had gone down for his usual bathe on the sand-ridge fronting the Atlantic. Ferg stared—but, he could not stare the slackers out of their beds. It was a time for action, or else throwing up the sponge. Almost any junior in Ferg's peculiar position would have backed out. Not so the fiery descendant of the great Mac-Fheargus!

"Wait here!" said Ferguson to Darrell. He threw the words over his shoulder like a Sixth Form man speaking to a fag. Darrell suppressed his feelings again and waited. He was half-vexed, half-amused, and he was certainly very curious indeed to see how Ferg would handle this.

Ferguson walked off to the House. He had given the slackers five minutes' grace, and not a man had turned up. Obviously, nobody but Darrell had any intention of turning up.

In the House, Ferg reflected, Aubrey Compton, once his fag-master, was at the bottom of it, of course—he was at the bottom of every defiance of the Blighter. Once upon a time Ferg had been as keen as anybody in taking the same side. But he had learned to know Jimmy better since. And now he was Captain of Cricket!

Ferg's loathing for McCann had changed into something like hero-worship. Even Darrell was lukewarm in his enthusiasm for the new Head compared with Ferguson. Ferg's footsteps led him in the direction of Dormitory No. 3, where Compton and Seymour slept on after Darrell had turned out and left them.

But he paused. Changing his direction, Ferguson headed for the Sixth Form studies. Aubrey, no doubt, was pulling the strings, as usual, but the chief offender was the man who should have set an example to the school—Tredegar of the Sixth, Captain of High Coombe. Tred was still captain of the

school, though the games had been taken out of his hands. Tred was the man of whom an example ought to be made.

Ferguson knew that if he funked it he was unworthy of the trust Mr. McCann placed in him; that if he let the Captain of High Coombe off he might as well let the rest off and go back to the Fourth Form dormitory for another snooze and chuck the whole thing. And let McCann think him a slacker, a funk, a weakling. Never! He paused as he arrived at Tredegar's door, then turned the handle and threw the door open.

"Tredegar!" he shouted.

Tred, in bed in the alcove, was fast asleep. If he awakened at that shout in the doorway he gave no sign of it.

"Turn out!" shouted Ferguson. "Hear me, Tredegar?"

Other Sixth Form men, in adjoining rooms, heard him. Some of them sat up to listen. Corkran realised that that "six" had done no good whatever. The cheeky little beast was carrying on as if he had never had six at all. Well, later in the day he would be sorry for it, unless he had a hide like a rhinoceros. With that comforting thought, Corky put his head on the pillow again.

Tredegar's head was still on the pillow. He had not moved. For a third time Ferguson shouted in vain.

Then he stepped into the study and dragged back the blinds, letting in a flood of bright sunlight. He stepped across to the bed-alcove.

"Tredegar, you rotten slacker!" bawled Ferg.

Tred's eyes opened and gave the new Captain of Cricket a look that might have withered any fag. It did not wither Ferg.

"Get out!" rapped Ferguson.

The Captain of High Coombe breathed hard and deep.

"You cheeky little beast!" he said. "Get out of my room! I give you two seconds before I get up and kick you out!"

Ferg reached for the bedclothes, grabbed them, and jerked them off. Tredegar was out of bed with a bound.

Ferguson slipped the stump from under his arm into his hand. Almost his heart failed him as the enraged Captain of High Coombe towered over him like a giant, red with rage. But not quite. The heart of J. A. Ferguson was stout—and it needed to be at that moment.

He swished the stump under the nose of the towering Sixth Form man.

"Go over, Tredegar!" said Ferguson.

CHAPTER 17.

Turning 'Em Out!

"Go over!" Tredegar of the Sixth repeated the words like a fellow in a dream. He refrained for the moment from grasping Ferg and annihilating him. This imp, this shrimp, was telling him, Tredegar of the Sixth, to go over! And he said it as if he meant it, and flourished a cricket stump—evidently with the intention of applying the same to Tred's pyjamas when he went over!

Tred refrained from stamping him out of existence. He looked at his determined, freckled face and the brandished stump. Then Tred's mighty grasp fell on Ferguson.

A stump—indeed, a whole cricket outfit—could not help Ferg then. He was swept off the floor in that giant grasp and whizzed through the doorway of the study like a stone from a catapult.

He crashed on the opposite wall, slid to the floor, and gasped:

"Urrrrg-gugggh!"

"Go over!" said Tred, repeating it once more. "Go over, you little blighter! I'll teach you something!"

Tred was not finished yet. Slingsing Ferg out of his study was not enough. Indeed, boiling in oil would hardly have been enough. Tred strode out of the study after him.

Fortunately for Ferg, he did not

linger to put on his shoes, or even slippers. Still, Tred's feet were fairly large, and rather heavy—and even with bare toes he was able to do considerable execution. Ferg, sprawling, received the first one in the ribs—he rolled over and got the next on the other side—then he bounded up, and the third kick almost lifted him along the passage.

His stump had dropped somewhere in Tred's study, when Ferg dropped in the passage. Ferg did not run—as a fag of the Fourth he might naturally have done so; as Captain of Cricket he could not run from a rebellious slacker, who turned on him mutinously instead of taking six, as in duty bound. Ferg disdained to run.

Nevertheless, he retreated down the passage. That was inevitable, with the biggest and heaviest fellow at High Coombe kicking him just as hard as he could kick with bare feet. A door opened and Corkran looked out; another door opened and Coffin looked out. Both grinned.

They were annoyed at being awakened early, but they were entertained by the sight of J. A. Ferguson going along the passage in a series of kangaroo-like bounds, urged by the busy and incessant foot of the Captain of High Coombe.

"Give him one for me, Ted!" grinned Corky.

"And a few for me!" yawned Coffin.

Tred was already giving as many as he could pack into the time. His leg, long and powerful, seemed to work automatically. At the end of the passage Ferg flew from a final kick and landed on hands and knees, roaring. In the scanty state of his attire, Tred did not care to pursue him farther. Leaving him for dead, as it were, he walked back to his study—limping a little. He had hurt his big toe on the little beast.

Not till he got back to his room did reflection come. Tred, so far, had acted entirely without thinking, in the natural wrath and indignation of a Sixth Form man cheeked by a pernici-

ous little beast of a fag. But when he got back he did not turn in again—he sat on the edge of the bed, wondering.

Was anything going to happen?

Properly speaking, the affair should have finished at that. A fag had cheeked him and had been kicked. There was an end! But was there? McCann, of course, was mad to dream of appointing a junior Captain of Cricket and giving him whopping privs. But if he happened to be in earnest—and Tred knew only too surely and sadly what an earnest Blighter it was! He sat in his pyjamas, with a wrinkled brow, uneasily wondering.

Meanwhile, Ferguson found solace in roaring. He was damaged—he felt like a Soccer ball after a hard game. He picked himself up at last. Then he noticed that a shadow barred the morning sunlight in the open doorway.

The stocky figure of James McCann stood there; the blue-grey eyes were on Ferguson. Ferg, blushing scarlet, wished that he had not roared, and wondered whether the Head had heard him. He hoped that the Head hadn't; he would have given a great deal to recall those anguished roars. Now he assumed a detached, almost jaunty manner to show that he was all right. How the thump did McCann happen to be there? He must have cut out his usual bathe on the sand ridge that morning.

How much had he seen? How much did he know? It was greatly to the credit of Ferg that even while feeling like an overworked football he did not want to get old Tred into a row with the Head. He blinked almost guiltily at James McCann, hoping that the Head hadn't seen him kicked.

"Good-morning, Ferguson!" said Jimmy. "I have given the field a look-in, and find only one man there."

"Oh! Yes, sir!" stammered Ferg.

Was the Blighter going to sack him from his new position?

Nothing was farther from Jimmy's

thoughts. Jimmy had beheld the final kick that had landed Ferg, sprawling and roaring, in front of the doorway. Jimmy knew what he was going to do.

"Follow me, Ferguson."

Jimmy walked up past the Sixth Form studies. Corkran and Coffin were still at their doors, and Lacy also was looking out. All three popped back, like rabbits into burrows, at the sight of the stocky figure advancing. They closed their doors very softly. They decided not to go back to bed, but to dress—and by a coincidence they decided to get into flannels. Mr. McCann's footsteps passed on to Tredegar's room, Ferg trailing after him.

Tred had not shut his door yet. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he was reflecting—and he jumped, as a stocky figure dawned on his eyes. He rose from the bed and stood staring at Mr. McCann.

McCann gave him a nod. Then his eyes fell on the cricket stump, lying on Tred's carpet. He made a gesture towards it.

"Pick that up, Ferguson!"

Ferg picked it up.

"Tredegar, you have seen the notice on the board?"

"I've seen the paper stuck up by Ferguson, sir!"

"Exactly! The time given was six-thirty, I think," said Mr. McCann. "It is now a quarter to seven. Why are you not at the nets?"

Tred did not speak. How to deal with this situation now that it had arisen, poor Tred did not know. He wondered what Aubrey Compton would have done. Old Aubrey might have been able to handle it. Tred couldn't! He simply blinked at the Head.

"Ferguson, I conclude that you came here to give Tredegar six for slacking?" McCann was able to deduce that from the stump and from what had happened to Ferg.

"Yes, sir!" gasped Ferg.

"Proceed to do so."

Now, Ferg liked old Tred, as everybody did, and admired him, too, though not his cricket! But Ferg had an official position to keep up—till a quarter-past seven, at least—and Ferg was aching and paining all over from hefty kicks. Ferg took a businesslike grip on the stump.

Once more he pronounced the words: "Go over, Tredegar!"

Tredegar did not stir. He looked at McCann. Mr. McCann's face was quiet and serious. Tred found his voice.

"You don't mean that, sir!"

McCann looked at him, raising his eyebrows.

"I generally mean what I say, Tredegar! Why should you suppose that; in this instance, I am speaking idly?"

"You can't mean it!" panted the Captain of High Coombe. "Look here, sir—"

"You are wasting time, Tredegar, which should be better spent in fielding practice!"

"It can't be done!" Tred took his courage in both hands, as it were—he had to resist this. "I'm a Sixth Form man, a four-yearer, and Captain of the School! And I can't—"

"You are a Sixth Form man, a four-yearer, and Captain of the School," conceded James McCann. "You are also a slacker! The slacker is going to have six from that stump; and the Sixth Form man, the four-yearer, and Captain of the School must make the best of it. Go over!"

"I'll go over for you, sir, if you like!" Tred choked.

"Impossible!" said Mr. McCann gravely. "The Sixth Form are not caned, and I should be very sorry indeed to have to break with that rule. I do not think of caning you, Tredegar. I am here to see you obey the order of the Captain of Cricket of High Coombe, who is entitled to give you six for slacking. And I cannot wait!"

"I won't!" said Tred, with a deep breath.

"I am sorry," said James McCann re-

gretfully. "I shall be very sorry indeed, Tredegar, to see you leave."

"Leave!" stuttered Tredegar.

"Dress yourself now! You need not put on flannels, as you will be leaving High Coombe immediately after breakfast, and that, of course, washes out fielding practice for you. Pack your box, Tredegar; you will be catching the nine o'clock train, at Okeham. I will drive you to the station."

The room seemed to be spinning round Tredegar. He gazed almost wildly at the Blighter. McCann spoke quietly, with real regret in his look and voice, but with iron decision. Sacked! McCann stepped out of the room. It appeared that he regarded the matter as finished.

"One moment, sir!" Tred gasped.

Mr. McCann glanced back.

"Have you anything further to say, Tredegar?"

"I—I—I—" Tred seemed to be afflicted with stuttering. "I—I—I'll go over!"

And he did!

Ferguson of the Fourth wielded the cricket stump scientifically. Six loud whacks echoed along the passage—echoed in other studies and made Sixth Form men jump! It was all the worse for Tred, because he was still in pyjamas—poor protection against a cricket stump wielded in a determined hand.

The humiliation of it was worse than the pain, no doubt; still, there was no doubt that it was painful. Sixth Form man, four-yearer, and Captain of the School as he was, Tred found it hard to keep from yelping like a fag under a prefect's ash.

McCann mercifully walked away, and made it a point not to see the infliction.

Tred rose, after the whopping, with a burning face. Ferg tucked the stump under his arm in quite the manner of a Blood who had whopped a slacker.

"Get into your flannels!" he said, over his shoulder, as he left the study.

Tred did not answer. He was past speech. He got into his flannels.

CHAPTER 18.

Out of the Frying-Pan!

CAPES, master of the Fourth, came to the rescue. That afternoon he put Ferguson in Extra.

Early Nets that morning had been well attended, after all, in spite of the determination of Sixth and Fifth to pass the new Captain of Cricket by, like the idle wind which they regarded not.

The whopping of Tredegar had worked the oracle. The news of that whopping spread like wildfire. Ferguson sent Coffin of the Sixth—a prefect—round to call the men who were required to turn out! A prefect of the Sixth—running about at the orders of a fag of the Fourth! It was too staggering—yet Coffin went!

He was more inclined to take Ferguson by the scruff of the neck and bang his head on the wall of the pavilion. He very nearly did it—but not quite! Instead of obeying his own inclinations, he obeyed Ferg's directions. If the Captain of the School had been whopped, it was not much use for any other man to hope to escape whopping if he asked for it. And Coffin, no more than Tred, wanted to catch that train at Okeham.

The men turned up—most of them late; all of them savage and sulky—Aubrey Compton, indeed, looking rather like a demon in a pantomime. Ferg wondered afterwards how he had escaped being mobbed at Early Nets by that crowd of disgruntled and infuriated seniors.

Gratifying as his new power and authority were, he was rather glad at seven-fifteen when he had to discard it; and when the quarter struck Ferg cut rather promptly. But in break that morning he put a new paper on the board: "Senior Nets at four."

"After three" was the end of school, unless a fellow was put in Extra. Fellows seldom or never were put in Extra at High Coombe. After three was a happy time of slacking—at games or anything else that pleased a fellow's

fancy. When Tredegar had put up such a notice, fellows had been accustomed to turn up or not as they jolly well pleased.

But every man who read Ferg's paper, "Senior Nets at four," knew that Ferg meant business.

Slogging at the nets in the sun, under the cheeky eye of a cocky junior, it was intolerable and unendurable—had not the alternative been worse.

Thus it was that Capes came to the rescue. In his role of a boy among boys, Capes was keen on the side of the injured seniors of High Coombe. As a Form-master, he could put a fellow in Extra School if he liked.

He had to have a reason, of course. That was easy enough. Ferg had "skewed his con"! Every other fellow in the Fourth Form, as well as Ferguson, had skewed his con. But Capes did not put them in Extra. Ferg was landed in Extra. And if McCann had been curious to know why, Capes was ready to tell him. He reflected sardonically that a Blighter who had found serious fault with the state of knowledge in the Fourth Form could hardly complain if the master of the Fourth put a boy in Extra for skewing his con. He had the Blighter there!

In Big Study they rejoiced, and blessed the name of Capes.

In Extra, Ferguson did not rejoice.

He resolved, savagely, to put in some hard swotting that term, and give Capes no more pretexts for shoving him in Extra. So out of evil was likely to come good! Meanwhile, however, he was stuck in Extra; and he thought dismally of his notice on the board, and the seniors grinning at it. He knew, of course, why Capes had shoved him in Extra; all High Coombe knew; and probably the Blighter himself would guess—but what could even the Head do? It was an undoubted fact that Ferg had skewed his con!

And so it came to pass that when Jimmy McCann glanced from his study window at four he did not behold the expected scene of activity at the nets.

At ten minutes past four he glanced again. He saw fellows in flannels gathering there. Bullock did not appear. Bullock, suffering under a severe sense of injury and grievance, was sulking. But Sixth and Fifth Form men turned up—even Aubrey. It seemed rather safer to turn up; also, they knew that the Blighter's eye would be on them, and that he would not see what he expected to see.

It was one in the eye for the Blighter—and his precious new Captain of Cricket! When word passed round that McCann could be seen at his study window in the distance, a joyous grin was reflected from face to face.

"We've got the rotter on toast!" said Aubrey. "He can't say we haven't turned up! We're not exertin' ourselves fearfully, perhaps—but here we are! What?"

"What-ho!" chuckled Teddy.

"Well, what about doing something now we're here?" grunted Bob.

"Don't be an ass, Darrell!"

Capes walked down with Tredegar. Capes was smiling. Tred looked rather glum; he could not help remembering that he had had to "go over" that morning. Still, he drew comfort from the fact that McCann was getting "one in the eye." Likely enough, he would come along to inquire why Ferguson wasn't there. Let him! What could he do? Not a thing! Capes, realising that, smiled, and most of the seniors smiled.

Jimmy's face disappeared from his study window.

Five minutes later he appeared in sight, walking down to the field. He was in flannels. Why the deuce the Blighter had changed into flannels no man knew. Not that they cared.

"Darrell!" he called. "Where is Ferguson?"

"I've heard that he's in Extra, sir."

Jimmy turned to Mr. Capes, who smiled a respectful smile.

"Ferguson's construe this morning was so very bad, sir, I had to give him an Extra School," explained Capes.

There was a pause. Jimmy's face was hard to read; but Bob at least knew that he had guessed already that Ferguson had been wangled off the scene somehow. Was that why he had come out in flannels? Bob wondered.

Aubrey winked at Teddy Seymour. The wind was taken out of the Blighter's sails this time! Even if he divined exactly and precisely how the matter stood—as very likely he did—what could he do? Rag a master for putting a man in Extra for a skewed con? Impossible!

"For how long is Ferguson in Extra, Mr. Capes?" McCann asked.

"From four to five-thirty, sir." Capes was beautifully respectful, with quite a cat-like softness in his manner. He had the winning cards. "I was sorry to have to give a boy of my Form an Extra School, sir, but you remember speaking to me on the subject of undue leniency —"

"Quite!" said Mr. McCann. He dismissed the subject. "Ferguson not being available, I will take this practice personally," he said. "Let us lose no more time."

Bob Darrell grinned. He could not help it. The expression on the faces round him might have made a stone image grin.

That practice was timed for four to five-thirty; precisely the time that the call of duty had compelled Mr. Capes to put Ferg in Extra! Ferg sat in Extra, making new resolves about swotting. On the cricket ground, the seniors of High Coombe suffered under McCann as certainly they never would have suffered under Ferguson.

He kept them at it! He drove them, as Peverill said afterwards, almost with tears in his eyes, like a dashed slave-driver! McCann himself was tireless. Aubrey & Co. were not! If the High Coombe cricketers were rottener in one branch of the game than another, it was in fielding. McCann took them specially in hand in that branch. Impervious to fatigue, McCann kept them on the go.

Fellows who dropped catches received scaring remarks from him! Fellows who dawdled and slacked were bucked up by a voice that took no denial. When Aubrey, perspiring, tired, sulky, enraged, and reckless, flatly refused to go after a ball, the Blighter made him go over, and gave him six with a stump; after which even the infuriated Aubrey did not kick over the traces any more.

Leather-hunting, as a pastime, had never appealed to the High Coombers; but never had they hated it and loathed it so fearfully as now. Before half-past five rang out from the clock-tower they were wondering whether their legs were going to drop off; wishing frantically that Ferguson had come instead of McCann; and longing wildly to kick Capes for greasing up to them by shoving Ferg in Extra.

Even Bob Darrell was fed-up by the time the clock struck—and when it did strike it seemed to the suffering seniors almost too good to be true.

"I'll make the Blighter sit up for this!" groaned Aubrey, tenderly feeling his bruised and tingling palms. "Look at him!" he added, as the Head left the field. "He's half-killed us, and he hasn't even turned a hair himself!"

Ferguson, coming out of Extra stared at the sight of a crowd of seniors, crawling in like snails.

Ferguson grinned. But Ferg had the grin all to himself. In the Fifth and the Sixth there was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth!

CHAPTER 19.

A Job for a Donkey!

DONKIN of the Fourth looked startled and dismayed when Bob Darrell came into Study No. 3. His jaw dropped, and he blinked at Bob, with his mouth open, like a fish out of water.

Aubrey Compton frowned. Teddy Seymour, sitting on the radiogram in the corner of the study, grinned.

Bob stared round the study. It was his own study, which he shared with Compton and Seymour, and he did not understand why his sudden entrance should have caused such dismay. Neither did he understand why Donkin was there.

Since McCann had abolished fagging for the Fifth, Fourth Form juniors had no business in Fifth Form studies.

Bob was in flannels and had his bat under his arm. He looked ruddy and cheerful, after strenuous slogging at the nets. Even the fact that McCann had appointed a junior—Ferguson of the Fourth—Captain of Cricket had not fed Bob up with the game, though it had fed-up every other High Coombe senior to the chin!

Fed-up or not, however, they had learned to heed the notices concerning games practice which Ferguson posted on the board. Ferg, backed by the Head, saw to that!

After "three" that day there had been Senior Nets from 4 p.m. to 5.15 p.m., presided over by the cheery Ferg. Not a man had ventured to cut. But when the quarter chimed from the clock tower, they had vanished like ghosts. Only Bob had remained on the cricket ground, with Ferguson, when the exact stipulated time had expired.

Ferg, junior as he was, was developing great powers as a bowler, and Darrell was the best bat in the Fifth, so they had enjoyed quite a happy half-hour after they were left with the nets to themselves. Then Bob came cheerily in to tea, and was surprised to find that his coming had rather the effect of a bombshell in his own study.

There was no sign of tea, so far, in Study No. 3. Whatever Donkin was there for, it was not for fagging. Aubrey Compton looked annoyed, and gave the Donkey a swift glance of warning. Donkin had a letter in his hand, which he had been about to transfer to his pocket. Startled by Bob's sudden appearance, he stood with it still in his hand, gaping at Bob.

Glances of warning were wasted on

Donkin; he was not quick on the uptake. He was called the Donkey not without reason.

"Well, what's up?" asked Bob Darrell, rather gruffly. It was plain that something was up.

"Cut, Donkin!" said Aubrey curtly.

"Yes, Compton!" stammered the Donkey. "I—I say, did you say the back door at the Okeham Arms?"

"Cut, you little idiot!"

Donkin made an uneasy movement towards the door, with a doubtful eye on Darrell.

Bob Darrell, setting his lips, shut the door and put his back to it. There was a gleam in his blue eyes.

"Stick where you are, kid!" he said.

"You're not going yet."

"Let that kid pass, Bob!" said Aubrey quietly, his own eyes gleaming, too.

"He's taking a message for me——"

"To the back door of the Okeham Arms!" said Bob scornfully. "Well, he's jolly well doing nothing of the kind, see? If McCann spotted him it would mean a flogging for the poor little beast. You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself, Aubrey!"

"Sermon may be taken as read," drawled Aubrey. "Get away from the door!"

"Go and eat coke!"

Donkin blinked from one to the other, quite at a loss. The hapless Donkey was by no means keen on carrying Aubrey's message to a bookie at the Okeham Arms. He dared not object—but he would have been rather relieved if Darrell's objection had been made good. On the other hand, he was in dread of Aubrey's elegant and well-fitting shoe being planted on his trousers. Anyhow, he could not get out of Study No. 3 with Bob's hefty figure guarding the door. So he stood where he was, in dismay.

Aubrey rose from his armchair. His well-cut lips were set and his brow knitted.

"Will you get away from that door, old bean?" he asked.

"No!" answered Bob.

"I shall shift you!"

"Get on with it!"

Teddy Seymour made a bound from his seat on the radiogram. He rushed between just in time. The peace-maker of Study No. 3 often had strenuous times keeping the peace in that study. He shoved Bob back against the door, with one hand, Aubrey back against the table with the other.

"Now, chuck it!" urged Teddy. "What's the good of raggin'? There's been nothing but raggin' and rowin' in this study ever since the Blighter blew into High Coombe. Can't you mind your own bizney, Bob?"

"No!" said Bob.

"Well, look here, Aubrey, chuck it, then! After all, very likely Snoozle will lose——"

"Shut up, you ass!"

"You know what those dead certs are!" argued Teddy. "I dare say you'd be glad in a day or two if your bet never got to Garger. See?"

"Fathead!"

Teddy, realising that there was nothing doing so far as Aubrey was concerned, turned to Bob again. Really, it was a hard life for a peacemaker in Study No. 3 at High Coombe.

"Look here, Bob, you chuck it!" urged Teddy, beseechingly. "What do you want to barge in for? Aubrey's got a tip for the two o'clock at Okeham on Wednesday—sort of thing you put your shirt on! He can get four to one against Snoozle, if he gets on to-day! See?"

"Rot!" said Bob briefly.

"Look here, you ass, we always used to have somethin' on the races when Dr. Chetwode was here!" said Teddy, indignantly. "Think we're goin' to change all our manners and customs because that bargee McCann is Head?"

"We've changed some of them," said Bob sarcastically. "We do some work in the Form-rooms now, and we even play cricket after a fashion. And it's time we changed a few more. That fag isn't going to be sent to the Okeham Arms! He's not going out of this room

till that note's had a match put to it!"

Aubrey pushed back his spotless cuffs. Considering how unlike they were in ways and tastes, it was surprising that Compton and Darrell were friends at all. But it was a chequered friendship.

"Will you stand aside, Darrell?" asked Aubrey.

"No!"

The next moment Compton's grasp was on Bob Darrell, and they were struggling fiercely.

CHAPTER 20.

In the Wrong Hands!

BOB, sinewy and hefty, was more than a match for the elegant Aubrey. But Aubrey had plenty of muscle, lots of determination, and an unyielding temper. Nothing would have induced him to give way—not so much because he was fearfully keen to back Snoodle for the two o'clock on Wednesday as because such transactions were strictly and severely forbidden by the Blighter.

Anything that was forbidden by James McCann had an irresistible attraction for Compton of the Fifth.

Aubrey, to tell the truth, liked Mr. Garger, the bookmaker at the Okeham Arms, no more than Bob did. With his fat, red face, his odour of tobacco and spirits, his red-spotted tie, his bowler hat a little on one side, Mr. Garger offended all Aubrey's fastidious nerves. It would have made the dandy of the Fifth shudder to be seen in public with Mr. Garger.

Even in his betting transactions with him, Aubrey preferred to send messages by fags, instead of seeing the man himself. But backing his fancy with Mr. Garger was part and parcel of the resistance to McCann. It was Aubrey's fixed determination to carry on just the same as in the days of the sleepy old headmaster, whom the fellows had called Rip van Winkle, and to treat James McCann as an undesirable inter-

loper not to be seriously regarded. And Darrell was not going to stop him!

But Aubrey suddenly landed on his back and sprawled, gasping.

"Oh, I say!" murmured the Donkey. Bob, panting for breath, turned to the fag.

"Give me that note!" he snapped.

"Don't!" panted Aubrey, sitting up, breathlessly.

Bob grasped the fag by the collar. Aubrey bounded up and rushed at him again. Bob, grasped by the shoulder, had to let go the fag. He grasped Aubrey again, and they struggled.

"For goodness' sake!" gasped Teddy.

"You men, for goodness sake— Oh, my hat! Oh scissors! Whcoop!"

The struggling pair crashed into him and sent him spinning. Teddy crashed on the radiogram and slid to the floor, spluttering, and Bob stumbled over him and landed on him with a bump. There was an agonised gasp from Teddy as all the wind was driven out of him.

Aubrey rolled over on Bob. Teddy, under the two, realised what it was like to be a pancake. Bob struggled, but Aubrey, for the moment, had the upper hand. Pinning Bob down on the wriggling Teddy, Compton shouted over his shoulder to Donkin:

"Cut, you silly little idiot! I'll jolly well boot you if you don't cut!"

The door slammed; pattering feet raced down the steps and along the passage. The Donkey was gone!

"You rotter, Aubrey!" roared Bob.

"You silly ass, Darrell!" snarled Aubrey.

"Ooogh!" came from Teddy, in tones like those of an expiring frog.

The door reopened. Carter, Peverill, Haddon, Warren, and several other Fifth Form men stared in. The uproar in Study No. 3 had reached other studies.

"What's the name of this game?" asked Carter.

"Ooogh!" — from Teddy. "Drag-emoff! Ooogh!"

Darrell and Compton got off the suffering Teddy. They separated.

glaring at one another. Teddy lay gurgling for breath on the carpet.

Aubrey was cool again at once. He was dusty, untidy, dishevelled—a very disagreeable state to the dandy of the Fifth. But he had gained his point. The Donkey was gone. By that time he was out of the House, cutting down to the gates. Aubrey smiled.

"Chuck it, old man!" he said. "You can't help being a fool, Bob, but you jolly well know that you shouldn't have barged in."

Bob, scowling, gave Seymour a hand up and landed him in an armchair. Then he stepped to the window and looked out.

Aubrey grinned. If Bob was thinking of cutting after Donkin and recapturing that note to Mr. Garger, there was nothing in it. Donkin was well on his way to the gates; and even Darrell could hardly have thought of running him down in the quadrangle and making a scene under the eyes of all High Coombe.

But Aubrey's grin faded away as he saw the expression gathering on Bob's face at the window. Darrell gazed down into the quad with a fixed expression of alarm and horror. The colour faded from his ruddy cheeks.

"Aubrey! You ass, you've done it now!" he groaned. "Look!"

Aubrey Compton ran to the window. The other Fifth Form men joined him there, to stare down. Even the breathless Teddy heaved himself out of the armchair to join the crowd at the study window. And what they saw fully accounted for the horror in Bob's dismayed face.

Donkin was half-way to the gates, running—till he was stopped suddenly by a stocky figure in his path. It was the figure of the headmaster—the Blighter McCann!

He held up his hand to Donkin, and the fag stopped. What the headmaster said was, of course, inaudible to the bunch of fellows at an upper window

at a distance. But they could see the dismay and terror in the Donkey's face.

Aubrey caught his breath. Did the Blighter know? The masters were against him, so far as they could venture; the boys were against him; his supporters in the school numbered only two—Darrell of the Fifth and Ferguson of the Fourth. Yet, somehow, the keen-witted Blighter seemed to know everything that went on at the School for Slackers.

But even if he had known nothing, a less keen-witted man than Jimmy McCann might have read much in the terror and dismay of the Donkey. Guilt was written all over him.

If ever a fellow's face showed that he was up to something that he shouldn't be up to it was Donkin's!

Watching from the window, dumb with horror, the Fifth Form men saw Donkin slip his hand into his pocket and draw therefrom a note. That note he handed over to the headmaster.

Aubrey's teeth came together hard. He knew that it was his note to Mr. Garger that had been handed over. The Blighter, evidently, had suspected something. Now he knew!

Donkin limped away—not towards the gates now. James McCann put the note into his pocket and walked towards the House. He did not look up, and his face was expressionless; yet Darrell had an impression that he knew that a bunch of eager faces watched him from the window of Study No. 3. He disappeared into the House.

"Aubrey, old man——" Bob muttered. Anger and hostility were forgotten now. All Bob thought of was that his pal was "for it."

"I say, what was in that note?" asked Carter.

Aubrey was conscious of a cold chill down his back. But he was superbly calm. Whatever might be coming to him, it should never be said that he lacked the nerve to face the music

"Only a note from me to Garger,"

he said lightly. "I want him to put a fiver on Snoodle for me to-morrow."

There was a general gasp.

"And McCann's got hold of it!" gasped Peverill.

"Looks like it. I'll boot Donkin!"

"Oh, you ass!" groaned Bob. "You won't be here to boot anybody! It's the sack, you ass—it's the sack, you fathead!"

Aubrey shrugged his shoulders.

"Was your name on the note?" asked Carter.

"Only my initials. But, of course, the Blighter will know my fist," said Aubrey, still with superb calm. "If the cad's lookin' for an excuse to sack a man, he's got me!"

"Oh, Aubrey, old man!" mumbled Teddy. "If—if you'd listened to old Bob——"

Aubrey smiled. It was not easy, in the circumstances, to smile, but Aubrey smiled!

"What about tea?" he asked.

"Tea!" repeated Bob and Teddy blankly.

"It's tea-time!" Aubrey pointed out.

"Well, you're a card, Aubrey, old man," said Carter; and the Fifth Form men left the study—to spread the news that Compton was in all probability up for the sack, and that he was taking it as calmly as if getting sacked from school was a trifling everyday experience.

When they were gone, Study No. 3 sat down to tea. Bob and Teddy had little appetite. They were dismal and worried. But Aubrey, as usual, was superb.

"If may not be the sack!" said Bob hopefully. "I know jolly well that McCann wants to get through without sackin' if he can. He's had lots of cause already. But—but this is so awfully thick—backing horses with a putrid tick like that man Garger——"

"Who's butterin' the toast?" inquired Aubrey.

His chums could almost have wept. But Aubrey refused to be shaken. If, in his heart of hearts, he was in dread

of what was coming, he gave no sign of it.

What was coming? That was the question. In less than an hour nearly everybody at High Coombe knew what had happened—and was wondering, with intense eagerness and excitement, what was going to happen next. In Study No. 3 from moment to moment, they expected Liggins with a message from the Head.

But there was no message from the Head. And as another hour and another ticked away, excitement grew more intense. What was the Head waiting for? What was going to happen?

CHAPTER 21.

A Ripe Old Excuse!

WHAT was to happen? Nothing! High Coombe fellows could not believe it—least of all Aubrey. Yet nothing happened.

The Blighter had in his hands a note written by a High Coombe senior to a bookmaker—a particularly disreputable bookmaker, so very disreputable that he was in bad odour even with other racing men. It was more than enough to get a fellow sacked! And he was doing—nothing!

It was amazing.

Corkran of the Sixth suggested in Big Study that he hadn't, perhaps, recognised the writing and didn't know the initials. But that suggestion would not hold water for a moment. More than once, the Blighter had "barged" into Chard's Form-room and taken the Fifth in class—he knew the "fist" of every fellow in that Form.

Moreover, the miserable Donkey, duly and thoroughly kicked, was questioned, and he admitted that he had let out to McCann that Compton of the Fifth had handed him that note. What else, wailed the suffering Donkey, could a fellow do with McCann's eye boring into him, and the danger of a flogging overhanging him? Never had a fag been so conscientiously booted as the

Donkey was booted, if that could have done any good!

The whole school, of course, sympathised with Aubrey, and many expressed their sympathy by giving Donkin a booting. They felt that it was the least they could do! What Donkin admitted under the bootings set all doubts at rest—McCann knew that that note was Compton's.

Yet he did—nothing!

Bob Darrell had a fixed belief that James McCann was trying to carry through the reform of the School for Slackers without sacking a single man from High Coombe. Aubrey, on the other hand, held a view that the Blighter dared not sack a man—especially such a man as himself, son of an influential member of the governing body.

But if one or both of them was right, though that accounted for no expulsion, it did not account for McCann dropping the matter entirely. Before McCann's coming there had been a tradition that the Fifth were not whopped. That was one of the many traditions in the School for Slackers that McCann had coolly and cheerfully disregarded. Since his coming, Fifth Form men had been whopped, when it was for their good. Even if the new Head did not care, or did not dare, to sack the superb Aubrey, he certainly did dare to whop him, for he had done so more than once! A flogging or a whopping instead of the sack—that might reasonably have been looked for. But the Blighter did nothing at all!

At prep that evening Aubrey was smiling—with less effort than previously. Bob was puzzled, but relieved. The volatile Teddy was in great spirits. It seemed that it had blown over—how and why nobody could say—but facts were facts. Even Aubrey did not suspect McCann of playing with him, like a cat with a mouse. If he had been going to act, he would have acted before this—and he had not acted.

turned on Mr. McCann, at the head of the prefects' table, at breakfast.

Jimmy always breakfasted with the school—one of the new institutions! And fellows no longer lounged in when the meal was half over. McCann, that morning, chatted with some of the prefects in his usual urbane manner—Corkran and Randal and Coffin. He seemed unaware of the general interest with which he was regarded, especially from the Fifth Form table.

He did not even glance at Compton. Aubrey undoubtedly felt bucked when the Fifth went to Mr. Chard's Form-room. It was all right, after all—the Blighter, it seemed to Aubrey, had funked it. He told his friends so in the low-voiced conversation that went on in Form-room during class. Teddy nodded assent; he could make nothing else of it. Bob Darrell grunted scornfully.

"You're an ass, Aubrey!" he growled. "I can't get on to why McCann hasn't dropped on you—he's got a reason, though goodness knows what it is. But that man funk it—rot!"

"Why hasn't he done something, then?" asked Teddy.

"Goodness knows! May be letting Aubrey off with the fright!" said Bob.

Aubrey's lip curled.

"I'm not exactly frightened of a dashed usher!" he drawled. "The man's bothered me rather by inter-captin' that note. It's givin' me the trouble of goin' to see Garger myself. That's all!"

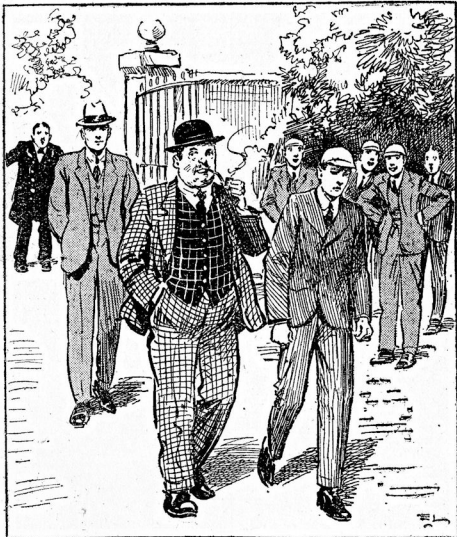
"You can't be mad enough!" breathed Bob. "Even you, Aubrey! Now he knows he will keep his eye on you! If you're nailed you can't expect him to let you off a second time. Have a little sense."

"Yes, old man," said Teddy, always the follower of the last speaker. "Don't risk it, Aubrey!"

"McCann barks, but he won't bite!" said Aubrey disdainfully. "I'm goin' to see Garger in break."

"You're not!" hissed Bob. "Fellows

In Hall in the morning many eyes



Startled and laughing eyes were centred on the dandy of the Fifth as he walked in at the school gates with the frowy Garger. Behind them stalked Jimmy McCann, the Head of High Oombe, with a grave face! "What does it mean?" articulated Bob Darrell.

aren't allowed out of gates in break, for one thing—"

"I can get leave from Chard to go down to Bullock's." Mr. Bullock, the games master, lived outside the school. Going down to speak to Bullock was a ripe old excuse for getting out of gates.

"You'd never get to Okeham and back before the third school—"

"Garger's goin' to wait for me at the corner by the barn," drawled Aubrey. "He's doing the walkin'."

"Then you've got word to him?" said Bob, aghast.

"How did you get word to him, old chap?" asked Teddy.

"Chard's got a telephone. He lets me use his 'phone—I had to ring up about gettin' a new hat. Somehow they gave the Okeham Arms number, and I got Garger.

"I wasn't ass enough to talk gee-gees on the 'phone, of course. But Garger's walkin' up to the old barn this mornin', and I'm seein' him there in break. Why not?"

"Why-not?" said Bob dazedly. "Are you trying to make it impossible for McCann to keep from turfing you out of High Coombe?"

"He doesn't dare turf a man out," said Aubrey coolly. "And I'm not mentionin' to him that I'm goin' out to see Garger. One doesn't confide these little matters to a headmaster."

"There's nothing McCann doesn't dare," retorted Bob. "I tell you he'll turf you out quickly enough if you carry on with this mad idea. Give it up!"

But Aubrey was not to be moved.

When the Fifth were dismissed in break, Bob Darrell's face was dark and clouded. He was intensely angry with his heedless chum, and intensely anxious about him. Why McCann had spared him he did not know, but he knew that Aubrey was mistaken as to the Head's motives. The dandy of the Fifth was asking for it—sitting up and begging for it. Chard willingly gave him leave to go down to Bullock's, but though the Head was not to be seen Bob

did not believe that Aubrey would escape his eye. McCann could hardly fail to keep that keen eye open after the note that had fallen into his hands the previous day.

It was in Bob's mind to collar his chum by force and drag him off to the study, and sit on his head there till the bell rang for third school. But while he was considering that drastic measure Aubrey slipped away and disappeared.

CHAPTER 22.

Compton's Friend!

MR. GARGER touched his shiny bowler hat very respectfully to Aubrey Compton. His red nose shone back the sunrays, and he breathed an aroma of spirits and cigars. These little details, added to his crimson, beer-stained waistcoat, his spotted tie, his rolled gold ring, his baggy trousers, and the rest of his get-up, offended every fastidious nerve in Compton's system. Undoubtedly, Mr. Garger was a blot on the landscape.

It required all Aubrey's self-restraint to keep from betraying his repulsion in his face. Never, Aubrey thought, had he beheld so absolutely offensive an outsider as Joe Garger. But Joe had his uses—a schoolboy who wanted to back his fancy could not do so through any respectable medium—it was Garger or nobody. Aubrey was glad that it was a quiet and secluded spot behind the old barn, at the corner of Coombe Lane, and that no eye was likely to fall on them there.

"Four to one, certainly, sir," said Mr. Garger. "And you got a good 'orse in Snoodle, sir! The bloke what told you about Snoodle knew something! That 'orse—"

Mr. Garger got no farther. He stopped and gave a husky gasp as a stocky figure stepped round the corner of the barn.

His fishy eyes widened till they seemed about to fall out of his greasy

face at the sight of the headmaster of High Coombe.

Aubrey Compton, facing him, had his back to Mr. McCann. But the look on Joe Garger's face was enough. He spun round.

For a moment the Devon moors, the green tors, the coombes, and the blue sky seemed to spin round Aubrey. He was caught! If ever there was a fair catch this was it! Standing there, in conversation with the beery bookmaker, he faced his headmaster, and for once Aubrey's superb nerve deserted him.

Garger stood speechless. Apart from his awe of the High Coombe headmaster, apart from his uncomfortable knowledge that that hefty young man could have knocked him out with a single punch, there were certain legal penalties attached to Mr. Garger's way of carrying on the betting business. Mr. Garger would have given at that moment all that he had ever gained by welshing to be safe away from that spot.

Aubrey crimsoned.

What was the Head going to do? Sack him? He had a moment of clear vision, and knew very clearly that McCann would sack him as soon as look at him if the spirit moved him to do so. But was old Bob right—was McCann trying to get through without expelling any High Coombe man? From the bottom of his heart Aubrey hoped that Bob was right!

It was only for a moment or two, but it seemed an age before the Head spoke. And when he did speak what he said was unexpected. Jimmy McCann often said, and did, unexpected things.

"Good-morning, Mr. Garger!" he said quietly.

Mr. Garger would not have been surprised if Jimmy had scarified him with his tongue, if he had reported him to the local police—even if he had knocked him down. But that polite greeting flummoxed him. He could only blink.

"A friend of yours, Compton?" asked Mr. McCann, in the same urbane tone.

Aubrey could not speak; he managed to nod. For a dizzy moment he wondered whether McCann knew who and what Garger was. Perhaps he didn't! If he did, his line of action was simply a mystery.

"No doubt you have leave out of gates in break, Compton?" said Mr. McCann.

Aubrey managed to nod again.

"Mr. Chard, no doubt, gave you leave?"

Another nod. Words simply would not come.

"To meet this friend of yours?"

"To go down to Bullock's, sir," Aubrey managed to articulate. "I—I met Garger by—by—"

He was about to say by accident. But the quiet contempt in Mr. McCann's face stopped him. He set his lips. He would not lie to this bargee! He would take what was coming to him, but he would not lower himself in the eyes of the man he loathed. He did not finish the sentence.

"I think you deluded Mr. Chard, Compton, and came out specially to meet this friend of yours," said Mr. McCann.

"Yes, I did," answered Aubrey sullenly. The Blighter should see that he was not going to skulk behind a lie, at any rate.

"I disapprove of this," said Mr. McCann gravely. "High Coombe boys should not meet their friends in this secret and surreptitious way. Why not bring your friend into the school, Compton?"

Compton only stared.

"That," said Mr. McCann, "I must insist upon! You have walked from Okeham, I presume, Mr. Garger?"

"Urrrrr—yes!" gasped Mr. Garger.

"Probably you will be glad of a rest and a spot of lunch before you walk back in this hot weather," said McCann considerably. "Compton, take your friend into the school."

Mr. Garger wondered whether this was an extraordinary dream. He had always had a lurking dread of uncomfortable results if his dealings with High Coombe boys became known to the headmaster. Instead of which, this amazing young man was asking him into the school—to stop to lunch.

Compton's face from red had become white. He hated the idea of anyone seeing him in company with Mr. Garger. Now he was bidden to walk this frowsy gentleman into High Coombe, as a friend to stay to lunch. He stood rooted.

"Do you hear me, Compton?" Mr. McCann's voice was still urbane, but there was a note in it not to be mistaken—or disobeyed. "I cannot allow you to meet your friend in this surreptitious manner, out of gates, but I allow you—in fact, order you—to take him into the school. Proceed!"

He, Aubrey Compton, the dandy of the Fifth, the glass of fashion and the mould of form at High Coombe, the most fastidious fellow in the School for Slackers—he was to take this blot on the landscape into the school, as a friend, and let all the fellows see them together! Aubrey felt that he would rather perish!

He stood glued to the ground behind the old barn.

"I am waiting, Compton!" said McCann, in an ominous voice.

He did not need to say more. So far from not daring to sack a High Coombe man, it was not even necessary for him to mention that if Compton disobeyed him now Compton would catch the next train for home! Aubrey knew it without being told.

Sacked! And for consorting with disreputable characters outside the school—what an explanation to give at home! His father, Colonel Compton, was quite a tremendous man on the Governing Board. But he could not help him, sacked on such a charge! Indeed, the fierce old colonel was more likely to reach for his stick when he heard how and why his son had been sacked.

Compton moved. His face was colour-

less with rage. His eyes burned. But he obeyed. He almost tottered towards the lane.

"You are forgetting your friend, Compton!" said Mr. McCann, with grave irony. "You must not forget to take your friend's arm, Compton, and walk in at the gates."

"My eye!" said Mr. Garger, addressing space. He was in quite a bemused state with overwhelming astonishment by this time.

"I—I——" Compton panted. Silently, white with fury, he walked Mr. Garger down to the school gates.

CHAPTER 23.

Awful for Aubrey!

FERGUSON of the Fourth spotted them first, and howled:

"Look!"

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Tredegar, Captain of High Coombe. "Compton and—and—who—what——"

Old Judd, the porter, looked, and almost fell down. Bob Darrell stood transfixed. Teddy Seymour gasped. The quad was crowded with fellows. Startled eyes were on the dandy of the Fifth as he walked in at the school gates with the frowsy Garger.

"Is he mad?" gasped Corkran.

"It's Garger!" shrieked Ferguson. "Garger the bookie—the man who was run in for scrapping with a bobby in Okeham!"

"There's the Head!" articulated Bob Darrell. "What does it mean? He's caught Aubrey, but what——"

"Who's your friend, Compton?" called out Babbie of the Shell.

The Head followed them in with a grave face. Mr. Chard could scarcely believe his protruding eyes.

"Compton!" he gasped.

Compton could not speak. His white face was scarlet now, under the amazed stare of all High Coombe.

Mr. McCann answered the Fifth Form master:

"This man is a friend of Compton,

Mr. Chard! I fear that Compton deduced you in asking for leave to go down to Mr. Bullock's. In fact, he went out to meet this friend.

"He is staying to lunch with Compton, Mr. Chard. A place will be laid for him at the Fifth Form table. I cannot allow Compton to meet his friends surreptitiously out of gates, Mr. Chard!"

The bell rang for Third School, and High Coombe trooped into the Form-rooms in a buzz of excitement and laughter. Even the stately prefects of the Sixth were grinning.

There was something dramatic, at least about the "sack"—and a fellow could carry off a flogging by a display of cool hardihood. But ridicule and humiliation cut deeper. Walking across the quad, under the eyes of the school, in company with that beery, frowsy loafer from a public-house, made the hapless dandy of the Fifth writhe with shame.

In the Fifth Form Room in Third School he sat with a burning face. Chard glared at him, so intensely angry and irritated that he quite forgot that Compton was his favourite in the Form.

"Compton," he trumpeted, "you are a disgrace to this Form! I am ashamed of you! How dare you associate with such—such—such— Pah! You are a disgrace to High Coombe, Compton!"

Compton very nearly told him to shut up!

Seldom had High Coombe been so eager for dismissal from class. Everybody wanted to see whether "Compton's friend" was still about the school.

He was! Possibly it had dawned on Mr. Garger's muddled brain that he would best please his young patron by performing the vanishing trick. But James McCann saw to that. Mr. Garger was put in charge of the Head's butler—left till called for, as it were. After Third School he was wanted again. When the Fifth came out, Mr. McCann called to Aubrey:

"You will walk in the quadrangle with your friend till dinner, Compton."

Aubrey hesitated. The sack was better

than this! But was it? A moment's reflection convinced Aubrey that it wasn't. He walked in the quad with his friend!

How Aubrey got through that hour alive he hardly knew. Mr. Garger, perhaps, was a little embarrassed. Seldom or never had he been the centre of such attention. Aubrey's face was red and white by turns. He writhed with shame and fury. He wished that the solid quad would open and swallow him up. He thought, with longing, of boiling James McCann in oil!

But plenty of fellows seemed to find it amusing. Juniors of the Fourth and the Shell howled with merriment. Fifth and Sixth Form men grinned. Some fellows turned their faces away in sheer pity for the unhappy Aubrey. But to most of them the amazing sight of the dandy of the Fifth parading the quad in company with that frowsy and disreputable loafer seemed an irresistible attraction. They gazed—they stared—they grinned.

The bell for dinner came as a relief to Aubrey. But it was rather worse, if possible, in Hall!

Mr. Garger's place was laid next to Aubrey's. The dandy of the Fifth sat beside his "friend." He ate little. But Mr. Garger ate a great meal, and gobbled what he ate—his table manners undoubtedly left a great deal to be desired. Mr. McCann, at the top table, had a grave and serious face; but nearly every other face in Hall wore a grin.

Fellows hardly noticed what they ate, they were so busily occupied in looking at Aubrey and his friend.

After dinner, the school wondered what was coming next. Aubrey at the very limit of endurance, wondered if the Blihter meant this to go on all day. But Jimmy McCann could be merciful; and doubtless he realised that the dandy of the Fifth had had enough.

"Compton!" said the Head. "Please see your friend off at the gates!"

For once Compton was keen and eager to obey an order of the Head's!

Possibly Jimmy McCann guessed what was likely to happen when Aubrey saw

his friend off at the gates. Compton's long-suppressed fury had to be wreaked on something or somebody! He led Mr. Garger down to the gates. Had Aubrey ever kicked a footer as he kicked the squat form in the gateway, he might have sent it from one goal to the other! That kick, with all Aubrey's rage and fury in it, fairly lifted Mr. Garger, and he shot out of the gateway and landed on his hands and knees in the road. He rolled there and roared.

Compton rushed out after him. One kick did not satisfy him. One, no doubt, would have satisfied Mr. Garger, but he had no choice in the matter. How many he captured before he squirmed away and took to his heels Mr. Garger never knew!

Aubrey Compton stamped savagely into Study No. 3.

"Seen your friend off, Aubrey?" asked Bob Darrell.

"Having him in to lunch again?" asked Teddy Seymour.

Aubrey departed from the study again, slamming the door violently after him. He went down to Big Study.

"Hallo, here's old Aubrey!" said Corkran. "Got your friend with you, Aubrey?"

Again a door slammed behind Aubrey. He went into the quad.

"Here he is!" shouted Ferguson. "Where's your pal, Compton?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Aubrey wondered whether he would ever hear the end of it. Judging by appearances, he never would!

CHAPTER 24.

One for Jimmy!

"FIFTEEN—LOVE!" said Teddy Seymour.

James McCann, headmaster of High Coombe School, heard him as he came strolling along by the courts, and stopped to look on, rather pleased by what he saw. Compton of the Fifth,

though he prided himself on being the slackest slacker in the School for Slackers, could play tennis. He could, indeed, have played a good game of cricket if he had chosen; but simply because McCann wanted to buck up High Coombe cricket, Aubrey didn't choose!

When McCann came nosy-Parkering, as Aubrey called it, at Senior Nets, Aubrey loved to let his sticks go down or to drop a perfect sitter under the Head's disapproving eyes. The more McCann disapproved, the more Aubrey and the rest of the school approved. Cricket might or might not be a great game, but what was any game in comparison with annoying and irritating the Blighter McCann?

Now, for, once, Jimmy McCann's glance at Aubrey Compton was approving. Aubrey made a handsome figure in spotless white, with a pink flush in his good-looking face. And he was keen! True, it was against all the traditions of High Coombe to be keen on anything, but Aubrey seemed to have forgotten for the moment that he was the glass of fashion and the mould of form in the School for Slackers.

Aubrey really did want to beat Bob Darrell in that singles, and he was going all out to beat him. And so, for once, he looked as if he was really alive, and could not possibly have been mistaken for a tailor's dummy.

Bob Darrell, of course, was playing hard, though he lacked Aubrey's graceful style. Teddy Seymour was keeping the score for his friends; other fellows were looking on, most of them recumbent in the grass round the court.

They were not pleased to see McCann blow along. Tredegar, captain of High Coombe, stood up instead of sitting; Corkran, head prefect, sat up instead of sprawling. Other fellows stirred from various attitudes of lazy abandon. Somehow, Jimmy McCann's eagle eye had that effect on them, and they did not like it. Only Randal of the Sixth—the laziest man ever—did not stir.

Randy remained on his back with his hands clasped under his head, affecting

not to notice that the Blighter was there.

However, McCann, gave no attention to Randy. He stopped beside Teddy, and watched. Aubrey was serving again—it was Aubrey who had scored fifteen to Bob's love. Randy was quite near Teddy—McCann might almost have trodden on his long, lazy limbs.

McCann's eyes were on Compton. The ball sped from the racket, and Bob sent it back. Aubrey shot it to the baseline, and Bob volleyed it, and then Aubrey smashed it just over the net, with Bob yards away, and Teddy sang out:

"Thirty—love!"

Ferguson of the Fourth gathered scattered balls. Aubrey, as he went back to the baseline, glanced at McCann. What the dickens was the Blighter doing there—barging in, as usual? On this occasion Aubrey could not play his usual fumbling game to annoy the Blighter—he wanted to win that singles. It was Aubrey who was annoyed. But it came into Aubrey's active brain that there was a way of making the Blighter sorry that he had blown in, even if it cost him a point in the game he wanted to win. Aubrey's eyes gleamed.

"How does it stand, Seymour?" asked Mr. McCann genially.

"Game all, sir," answered Teddy.

"Compton seems in great form," said McCann.

"Topping, sir," said Teddy, pleased to hear a word of commendation from the Blighter for his pal. Teddy, of course, hated the Blighter—for was it not a point of honour at the School for Slackers to hate the new Head? But Teddy's hate was very mild, and sometimes he almost agreed with old Bob that McCann wasn't such a bargee and bounder and blighter as the school supposed. Aubrey, whose bitter feud with the new Head never slept, found it hard at times to keep Teddy up to the proper pitch of hate!

Aubrey served again, still with that wicked gleam in his eyes. Back came the ball, and there was a hard and fast rally—two figures flashing to and fro

on either side of the net. McCann's gaze grew more approving.

But that wicked gleam was still in Aubrey's eyes. At thirty—love he could afford to lose a point, he considered, without too much risk—for the benefit of the unsuspecting McCann.

It happened suddenly.

The ball leaped up, and Aubrey's racket smacked it—not back over the net! Aubrey, who could land a tennis ball where he chose, chose to land that one on James McCann.

Smack! Jimmy McCann was completely taken by surprise. A hard-driven tennis ball, landing on the third waistcoat button, might have startled any man!

Feeling for the moment as if he had been shot, Mr. McCann staggered back—and fell.

It was then that Randal of the Sixth, lazy as he was, had reason to wish that he had risen when the Head arrived.

Crash! The smack of the racket on the ball, the crack of the ball on Jimmy McCann, and the crash of Jimmy McCann on Randal followed one another in swift succession.

"Oh!" gasped the Head.

"Urrrrrrrrrggh!" gurgled Randal, flattened and squashed, and dizzily wondering if it was an earthquake.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Teddy.

Exclamations sounded on all sides. Bob Darrell stood as if turned to stone, petrified. Aubrey Compton smiled.

"Oh!" repeated McCann, sprawling over Randal.

"Wurrrrrrrrggh!" gurgled the hapless Randal, winded to the wide.

Tredegan and Corkran rushed up to give the Head a hand to rise. But Jimmy was on his feet before they could reach him. Randy sprawled and spluttered. Compton, with a hovering smile, came to the side-line.

"Sorry, sir! Quite an accident!" he drawled.

He did not really expect the Blighter to believe it. And Jimmy didn't.

CHAPTER 25.

Six on the Bags!

"YOU ass, Aubrey!" breathed Bob Darrel.
 "Oh, crumbs!" moaned Teddy.

Consternation was depicted on every face. Randal wriggled and gurgled unheeded. All eyes were on McCann—and Compton. Accidents will happen, of course. But nobody believed that this was an accident—least of all James McCann. Aubrey himself rather doubted whether he could get by with it. But he was cool as a cucumber.

"Thirty—fifteen, Teddy!" he remarked. But Teddy Seymour could only gaze at him, his jaw dropping, his mouth open.

Mr. McCann must have been hurt. A bang like that on the waistcoat must have done some damage. But Jimmy McCann was hard as nails. He did not even press a hand to the painful spot where the ball had smitten. But he showed very plain signs of wrath. He was calm, of course; McCann was always calm. But the grim set of his square jaw, the glint in his blue-grey eyes, told of trouble coming.

"Compton!" A man might have been expected to speak in a gasping voice after such a bang. But Jimmy's voice was as even as usual.

"Yes, sir! I'm sorry——"

"I doubt that statement, Compton." Aubrey raised his eyebrows.

"Really, sir——"

"But if you assure me that it was an accident, Compton——"

"Oh, quite, sir!"

Aubrey had no scruple whatever in departing from the straight and narrow path of veracity in dealing with the Blighter McCann. Did the man expect him to own up that he had bashed that ball at him intentionally?

"Very good," said Mr. McCann. "But such accidents must not happen, Compton."

"Yes, sir! May we go on, sir?"

"For the moment, no," said Mr. McCann. "Kindly hand me your racket."

Aubrey hesitated a moment, and then handed his racket to the Head. The High Coomers looked on in breathless silence, wondering what was coming.

McCann gripped the racket.

"Now," he said, "bend over the net, Compton!"

Aubrey might have expected something of the sort—experience might have taught him that McCann was not the man to be scored over with impunity. This episode, left where it was, would have furnished food for merriment in Big Study, would have caused an explosion of mirth among the fags. That happy effect would be quite spoiled by Aubrey bending over the net, and taking a whopping on his beautiful bags from his own racket!

"I don't think a fellow ought to be punished for an accident, sir!" said Compton, breathing hard.

"That," said McCann, "is where we differ, Compton! We will take it that it was an accident; but we must take it also that such accidents must not be allowed to occur. I am waiting, Compton."

Aubrey shut his teeth hard.

He was tempted to refuse obedience to this bargee. But what was the use? Bargee, and blighter, and bounder, and whatnot, McCann was still Head, and had to be obeyed. It was not merely that he could sack a fellow for disobedience. He could take a fellow by the back of the neck in a grip as resistless as that of a steel vice—he could, and he would! Aubrey Compton went to the net and bent over it.

McCann wielded the racket. Whack! Aubrey's cheeks were burning. He was the centre of all eyes. He rather liked to be the centre of all eyes—but not on this occasion. Fellows came running up from different directions, hearing that something was on, and stared. Whack! Never since the

Blighter had blown in at High Coombe had the dandy of the Fifth been so fearfully humiliated.

He heard a yell and a scampering of feet. It was Babbie of the Shell who yelled. Innumerable fags scampered.

"It's Compton! Getting six! On the tennis court!"

"Oh, I say!" gasped Donkin of the Fourth.

Whack! Jimmy McCann ladled out the whacks with slow precision. It seemed to the infuriated Aubrey that the brute wanted all High Coombe to arrive on the spot before the whopping was over.

Whack! Many of the onlookers were grinning. Some of them chuckled aloud. Ferguson of the Fourth chortled.

Most of the High Coombes, of course, sympathised with Aubrey. It was rough luck! But there was something supremely ridiculous in the sight of the dandy of the Fifth bending over the net and being whacked on his bags with a tennis racket. Fellows sympathised—but grinned. From the bottom of his heart, Aubrey wished that he had never thought of scoring over McCann in that extraordinary way. Doubtless that was what James McCann wanted him to wish!

The final whack rang like a pistol-shot. A hundred pairs of eyes, at least, watched Aubrey rise from the net with crimson, burning face. McCann handed the racket back to him.

"Thank you, Compton!" he said politely—in courteous acknowledgment of the loan of the racket.

He walked away. Aubrey barely refrained from hurling the racket at his head.

"Finishing the set, Aubrey?" asked Bob, breaking into a painful silence.

Aubrey gave him a black look, and walked off the court. His face, as he went, made some of the fellows exchange glances. At a distance he heard a sound behind him that made him grit his teeth. It was a sound of

laughter. So they thought it funny, did they?

He went into the House, tramped up to Study No. 3, and slammed the door after him. His brow was still black when Bob and Teddy came in to tea. At tea he did not speak a word. His mind, concentrated and brooding, fixed on one thought—and one thought alone—somehow, anyhow, he was going to get back on McCann! By fair means or foul—and in his present frame of mind, he had rather a preference for foul!

CHAPTER 26.

Mystery of the Night!

BOB DARRELL was horribly worried. So was Teddy Seymour. But there was a distinction between the natures of their worries. Teddy was worried because he was in Aubrey's confidence. Bob was worried because he was not.

Bob admired McCann — Aubrey loathed him with a fierce loathing—yet they remained friendly, Teddy often putting in some hefty pacificatory work! Hardly a term ago Bob had known all Aubrey's thoughts, almost as well as his own or Teddy's. But now there were secrets in that study—hushed voices, whispers!

It hurt Bob hard that his best pals no longer trusted him. But he realised that it could not be helped when they were so opposed in the dispute that was shaking the School for Slackers to its ancient foundations. He did not, indeed, want to know when, and how, Aubrey planned fresh hostilities against McCann. He was fed up with Aubrey's feud. Still, he felt a pang if, when he came into the study, Compton and Seymour ceased to converse—or changed the talk to a new topic. It made him feel like an intruder in his own quarters.

Bob was getting used to that—but now he had a feeling that things were getting serious. The passage of days

had not cooled Aubrey's bitter wrath. Rather had time intensified it. Bob knew, as well as if his pal had told him, that Aubrey was now planning revenge, and he dreaded that it was taking a more serious shape than a jest or jape on McCann.

He heard Teddy say, as he came up, one afternoon:

"You can't do it, Aubrey! You're mad! For the love o' Mike, old man, shut it right out of your head!"

"I'm not goin' to do it!" came Aubrey's cool drawl. "Bunchy Bligh's goin' to do it."

"You're mad!" groaned Teddy. "Absolutely mad!"

Bob stamped on the landing, to let them know he was coming. When he came in, Aubrey was cool and smiling—Teddy red and uncomfortable, Bob eyed them both.

"What's the game?" he snapped.

"You don't want to know!" smiled Aubrey.

That was true—Bob did not want to know if it was a move in the campaign against McCann. But he was alarmed and worried.

"What's that about Bunchy Bligh?" he demanded.

"Oh, nothing!" stammered Teddy.

Bob knew Bunchy by sight—not a nice character by any means. Bunchy had been a boxer, and had retired with a broken nose, half his teeth, and an unquenchable thirst. He lived at Okeham, did something in the line of training local boxers, and something in the line of selling sporting requisites at a little dark shop next to the Okeham Arms.

Some of the sporting set at High Coombe rather affected to regard the old pug as a sort of hero in his way. He was still able to put up quite a hefty scrap, as he proved sometimes on a Saturday night. The inside of Okeham gaol was not unknown to him in consequence. What the dickens could Compton possibly have to do with Bunchy?

Teddy, who knew, was as worried as Bob, who did not. He was too much under Aubrey's influence to kick; but Bob could see that it was a weight on his mind. Neither of them told Bob anything; and he was left to grope in the dark.

Neither, he soon learned, did they know anything in Big Study about what Compton was planning. Generally, all Big Study knew what was on—even prefects of the Sixth were not above entering into anything against the obnoxious Blighter. But nothing was known in Big Study now, which added to Bob's dread that his reckless pal was going over the limit this time. It must be something awfully serious, if he was keeping it dark from fellows who backed him up enthusiastically in his campaign against the Head. But it was clear that Tredegar and Randal and Corkran and the rest knew nothing.

"Wash it out of your mind, Aubrey, old chap!" Bob pleaded, in the Fifth Form-room. "You jolly well asked for what McCann gave you! You know it was a dirty trick buzzing a tennis ball at a man! All the fellows think it was too thick!"

"It was thick, Aubrey!" murmured Teddy. Hand-in-glove as he was with his dominating pal, Teddy would have been glad to see him yield to Bob's arguments.

"Don't nurse a grudge, old chap!" urged Bob.

"Who's nursin' a grudge?" inquired Aubrey.

"Aren't you?"

"Not at all! I should disdain to nurse a grudge against a dashed usher!" drawled Aubrey. "But a low cad who hands out whoppings may be all the better for a whopping himself!"

"Shut up, Aubrey!" breathed Teddy. "For goodness' sake don't tell Bob!"

"I'm not goin' to."

"Aubrey, you unspeakable idiot!" almost groaned Bob. "You're not mad

enough to think of lifting a finger against your headmaster! Aubrey, old man——"

"Hardly! It would soil my fingers!" explained Aubrey. "I'm rather particular whom I touch."

"Idiot!" said Bob.

"Silence, please!" came from Mr. Chard's desk. Chard seemed to have become aware that some members of his Form were devoting more attention to conversation than to Latin prose.

That night, in Dorm Three, Bob lay in uneasy half-slumber—too worried about his pal to be able to drop into his usual healthy sound sleep. Thus it was that he became aware that Aubrey and Teddy turned out of bed quietly.

Bob sat up. A glimmer of starlight from the window showed him his two friends dressing. He put a leg out of bed.

Teddy gave a startled squeak.

"You awake, Bob?"

"Yes!" growled Bob.

He got out of bed. Teddy blinked at him uneasily. Aubrey gave his superb shrug of the shoulders. Bob felt that this was not a case of "breaking out" after lights out. It was not an excursion out of bounds that was intended. That was serious enough; but this was something more serious. He was not going to let Aubrey out of his sight that night. Half-past ten chimed from the clock-tower. All High Coombe was, or ought to have been, asleep. Never had Bob been more wakeful!

"Comin'?" asked Aubrey, with a slight laugh.

"Yes!" said Bob savagely. "If you're going to play the mad ass, I'm going to stop you, see?"

"It's all right, Bob!" said Teddy hastily.

"I'm going to see that for myself!" said Bob gruffly.

"Dear man!" said Aubrey lightly. "And suppose McCann spots you out

of the House at this time of night? You'll be as deep in the mud as I am!"

"I'll chance that!"

"I think it's chiefly because you're such a howlin' ass that I like you so much, old chap!" said Aubrey affably. "Come on!"

They left Dorm Three together, in rubber shoes, and dropped, one after another, out of a little obscure window on the ground floor, and found themselves under the stars, the fresh wind from the Atlantic blowing up the coombe, fanning their faces.

Some windows glimmered with light through the curtains. Chard's, under the clock-tower; Penge's, near Big Study; Cape's, over by the library. And the Head's.

A shadow on the blind told that Mr. McCann was moving in his study. Aubrey glanced towards that window, and the starlight showed his handsome face, so set and hard and bitter that Bob was deeply glad that he had come. What was that mad ass thinking of?

The light went out in McCann's study.

"This way!" murmured Aubrey.

He led his comrades to the Head's garden. They stopped under a big oak close by the Masters' Walk—which the High Coomers called the Beaks' Grind—which led down to the Clovey, rippling down the coombe. Bob fancied that he understood, and was gladder than ever that he had come. He had heard that it was McCann's custom to take a walk down the Beaks' Grind before going to bed. Was that Aubrey's game?

They stood blotted from sight in the black shadow of the oak. Every moment Bob expected to hear the Head's footsteps. He stood ready to grab Aubrey, careless if the Head spotted the three of them, so long as he prevented Compton from making a fool of himself. Aubrey, reading his thoughts, smiled.

"You howlin' ass, Bob!" he said. "Do you think I'd have let you come if that was my game?"

"What's your game, then?"

"Nature study!" said Aubrey.

"Wha-a-at?"

"Studying the nocturnal habits of certain animals!" explained Aubrey airily, and there was a faint chuckle from Teddy. "At the present moment the McCann animal interests me, and I'm studyin' his nocturnal habits."

Another faint giggle from Teddy.

Footsteps were audible. In the glimmer of summer stars a sturdy, stocky figure loomed up. Bob's grab was ready for Aubrey, but it was not needed.

Mr. McCann approached them, and was walking on, when suddenly he pulled up in his stride and peered into the bushes, as though he had heard something.

"He's seen us," whispered Bob. But McCann, apparently satisfied, passed on, and his footsteps died away down the coombe.

"What about bed?" said Aubrey, with a yawn. "Unless you want to make a night of it!"

"Come on, Bob!" said Teddy.

They trod back to the House. Bob had a lurking suspicion that Aubrey was pulling his leg—trying to quieten his suspicions and shake him off, intending to return and wait for McCann when he came back. But it was not so. Aubrey was first in at the window; the other two followed. They got back to Dorm Three. Aubrey and Teddy threw off their clothes and turned in, and Bob, utterly mystified, did the same.

It was some time before he slept—not till he knew that McCann must be back from his walk. Before that, Aubrey and Teddy were fast asleep. Bob slept at last, and did not waken till old Liggins was clanging the rising-bell in the morning.

"What the thump did you get out

for last night, Aubrey?" Bob demanded, when they went down.

Aubrey raised his eyebrows.

"I told you—studyin' the nocturnal habits of the animal McCann!" he answered.

"Silly ass!" growled Bob. It had to remain a mystery.

CHAPTER 27.

A Rush to the Rescue!

IT was "after three," and Compton & Co. were walking in the quad, when Aubrey mentioned, with airy carelessness, that he had leave, and asked his friends whether they would like to see him off in the train for Exeter.

Bob had been sorely worried all that morning. The mysterious excursion of the night before haunted him. That Aubrey was nursing some dark and deadly scheme for vengeance on McCann he was certain. And on reflection, Bob drew one conclusion from his airy persiflage about studying the nocturnal habits of the animal McCann. Had Aubrey wanted to ascertain, beyond doubt, that it was McCann's habit to take that nightly walk on the Beaks' Grind?

It looked like it to Bob. And if Aubrey wanted to ascertain that fact, why? Only because he had some mad scheme for something to happen to McCann in that dark, shadowy, secluded spot. That was how it looked to Bob. So he was relieved to hear that Aubrey had a night's leave from school to stay with a relative at Exeter. That night, at all events, Bob would be able to sleep in peace, unworried by haunting dread of what Aubrey might be up to.

"You've got leave from the Head?" asked Bob.

Shrug from Aubrey.

"I shouldn't be likely to ask that bargee for leave, or anythin' else," he answered. "I've asked Chard."

Bob smiled. Mr. Chard could not have given Aubrey leave to spend the night at his relative's at Exeter without acquainting Mr. McCann with the matter and getting his assent. But Aubrey had saved his lofty pride by asking Chard instead of McCann.

"Have a good time, old chap!" said Bob. "I suppose you'll be going to a show?"

"Yes, I believe there's a show of sorts," drawled Aubrey. "I hope you won't miss me fearfully this evenin'. You don't look as if you're goin' to mourn my absence."

"I'm glad." Bob laughed. "I was afraid you had some potty rot on for to-night, and I'm jolly glad you're going to be at your uncle's at Exeter."

"What an idea!" said Aubrey; and Teddy gave a snigger. But Teddy was very grave during the walk down to Okeham.

Once, when Bob dropped behind to speak to Carter of the Fifth, who passed in the lane, and overtook his friends again at a run, he saw Teddy speaking very earnestly to Compton, and caught a strange word—the word "alibi." Teddy reddened and shut up like an oyster as Bob rejoined them.

In Okeham High Street, Compton left his friends for a few minutes. He explained that he had to drop into Bligh's shop to pay for some boxing-gloves. During these few minutes Teddy Seymour shifted from one leg to the other, and could not keep still for a moment.

Aubrey came out again with a smile on his face, and they walked on to the station. His friends saw him into the train, and chatted with him at the carriage door till it steamed out—or rather, Bob chatted—Teddy, usually with plenty to say, standing silent and moody. Aubrey's smiling face looked back as the train went. Bob started walking back to the school in a very cheery humour—Teddy

hardly uttering a word all the way to High Coombe.

"Coming down to the nets?" asked Bob when they got in.

"No!"

"Doing anything?"

"Oh! Yes! No!" said Teddy vaguely.

Bob put in cricket practice till tea. He came up to Study No. 3 in great spirits. With the worry of Aubrey off his mind, he had recovered his spirits at a bound. To his surprise, he found the usually volatile Teddy in the deepest depths of pessimism.

They missed old Aubrey from his usual place in the study. Still, he was only away for the night; he was coming back in time for second school in the morning. It could hardly be that that made Teddy so dismal—looking as if he was enjoying life about as much as a man going to execution.

At prep that evening he hardly looked at his books. Several times he wandered to the study window and looked out. Bob noticed that every time he looked out it was in the direction of the Head's garden, beyond which lay the Beaks' Grind and the coombe. There was some Latin prep for Chard and some maths for Goggs. Teddy hardly looked at either. Bob wondered more and more, and reasoned with him at last.

"Look here, Teddy, bite on it, old chap!" he urged. "You can't play the fool with prep as you did when old Rip van Winkle was Head. Chard has to see that the fellows do some work now."

"Bother Chard!" muttered Teddy.

"Chard put a man in Extra yesterday," said Bob. "McCann's bucking him up, whether we like it or not. You don't want to be put in Extra after three to-morrow, Teddy."

"I don't care."

"Look here, what's the matter?" demanded Bob.

"Nothing!" groaned Teddy.

Bob Darrell gave it up. He only

hoped that his friend would not be called on to construe in the Fifth Form Room next morning. The happy days when Chard let any fellow hand out any "con" he jolly well liked were over. Teddy really was asking for Extra! Bob, having worried about Aubrey for whole days, now worried about Teddy!

They went down to Big Study after prep. The talk was on the usual topics—the iniquities of McCann; the horrid bore of compulsory cricket; and—as Compton was not present—jesting remarks about the absurd figure he had cut, hanging over the tennis net with McCann smacking him on the bags with his own racket. None of these topics amused Bob Darrell, and when Teddy lounged out of Big Study he very willingly followed him. But Teddy seemed to have disappeared, and Bob did not see him again till dorm.

When he went up to No. 3—now transformed from Study No. 3 into Dormitory No. 3—Teddy was already there. Bob heard his voice as he pushed open the door.

"The mad ass! Oh, the mad ass!"

Nobody was there with Teddy when Bob entered. Apparently he had been talking to himself—uttering his thoughts aloud.

"Who's a mad ass?" asked Bob.

Teddy gave him a quick, guilty look.

"Oh! Nobody!"

"Look here, Teddy, what's up?"

"Nothing."

Bob grunted. Chard made his round; lights were out in the Fifth Form dormitories. Bob lay awake wondering and worrying. He knew that Teddy was not asleep. When ten chimed he heard Teddy get out of bed.

But Seymour did not leave the dorm. He went to the window and stood there in his pyjamas, staring out into the summer night.

Bob lay and watched him for some time. He sat up at last. At the creak of the bed Teddy turned his head, and his face was white as chalk

in the starlight. Darrell stepped out of bed and joined him at the window. as half-past ten chimed out.

"Look here, Teddy," said Bob quietly. "What is it? What have you got on your mind? Has Aubrey got anything to do with it?"

Teddy mumbled.

"Cough it up, you ass!" said Bob. "Can't you see you've got me fearfully worried?"

"That mad ass!" breathed Teddy.

"Aubrey? He's all right—he's at Exeter——"

"I know! He's safe enough—if they fancied he had anything to do with it they couldn't get round an alibi like that! But——" groaned Teddy.

"But what?" Bob came at the truth with one jump—that leave for Exeter had been fixed up as an alibi, to prove beyond all doubt that Compton had nothing to do with what was to happen that night! But what was to happen? What could happen—with Compton away?

Bob's heart was like lead. He gripped Seymour's arm—so hard in his intense anxiety that Teddy gave a little yelp of pain.

"It's too late now!" groaned Teddy. "Too late! Look—you can see that the Blighter's light's gone out—he's gone——"

"Tell me, you fool!"

"He's gone down the Beaks' Grind. and——"

"What does that matter, with Aubrey thirty miles away?"

"Bunchy Bligh's waiting for him in the dark, to get him as he comes back!" It came from Teddy in a rush. He could bear the weight of his secret no more. "Aubrey's mad—McCann made him look such a fool—he's fixed it up with Bunchy to thrash the Head. Tipped him a couple of quid, and—and—McCann's for it! As he comes up from the Clove——"

Bob for one second stood transfixed. Then he bounded for his clothes. Half-dressed, he rushed out of Dormitory No. 3.

"Bob!" panted Teddy.

Bob did not hear him. He was racing down the stairs two at a time in the dark. He did not care if he was heard—he did not care for anything, except to stop that awful happening.

He hurled open a casement and leaped out. He ran for the Head's garden as he had never run on the cinder-path. Teddy, staring with white, scared face from the window above, had a glimpse of him in the starshine as he ran.

Bob panted on. Before him lay the deep, dusky path—the Masters' Walk—deep and dark under overarching boughs. Down that path James McCann must have gone—and somewhere there, in the darkness, lurked a brawny hooligan, waiting and watching for him to come back. That was why Aubrey had wanted to "study the nocturnal habits of the animal McCann"—to pass the information on to his hireling.

Was Bunchy already on the spot? Most likely he had waited in cover to watch the Head go down the path, to make sure of his prey. That secluded walk was seldom trodden at night—but the ruffian would not risk making a mistake—he had to be sure of his man. Bob's thoughts raced as fast as his feet.

If the brute was there Bob had to risk running into him—he was ready to risk anything to save McCann—to save Aubrey. Only to get to McCann before he turned to walk back—to warn him in time—that was all Bob asked. He tore on in the dark.

Crash! He bumped into a tree. Bob reeled from the shock. The next moment a brawny hand grasped him and he was flung down.

Someone lurking in the darkness had heard him, though not seen him. Bunchy, in the dark, was listening for a sound—and at a sound he groped and grasped, and the figure he grasped went crashing to the ground. And a rain of blows descended on Bob Darrell

as he lay—blow after blow from a thick cane, scattering his senses under the painful shower.

Half senseless, he heard a footstep, a calling voice—the voice of McCann then the rapid pattering of the retreating ruffian.

A match scratched, a startled face looked down at him, and then Bob knew no more.

CHAPTER 28.

"Pull yourself together!"

AUBREY COMPTON smiled as he stepped from his taxi in the sunny morning. Second school was on at High Coombe, and all the fellows were in the Form-rooms. Aubrey had noticed that old Judd, the porter, had an extremely serious and solemn expression on his face—but he had carefully refrained from making an inquiry. He could guess from old Judd's look that something had happened during his absence from the school—but he had to be very careful to appear not to expect to hear that anything had happened.

Besides, he did not need to inquire—he knew. What could have happened, except what he had planned to happen? Something, he had read in Juddy's face, had happened—and, of course, it was that. The Blighter had got his deserts, at long last. He only hoped that Bunchy had laid it out hard enough.

In a cheery mood Aubrey strode to the Fifth Form Room.

Mr. Chard nodded him to his place as he came in; he did not speak. Chard was looking serious and solemn, like old Judd. Aubrey was rather surprised to notice that all the faces in the Fifth Form were serious and solemn, too. What a fuss to make over McCann getting a whopping! Did any of the fellows guess that he was mixed up in it? Not likely—when he had planned and carried out as perfect an alibi as anyone could desire.

The Blighter, of course, would think of him at once, as he wriggled and writhed from the effects of a lashing cane in the dark. But he had spent the night at his uncle's house in Exeter—a fact easily proved if inquired into. Aubrey smiled.

He wondered why Darrell and Seymour were not in class. Neither of them was to be seen in the Form-room.

"Heard?" whispered Carter.

Aubrey assumed an expression of mild inquiry.

"Heard what?"

"On the Beaks' Grind—last night where McCann takes his trot—"

"Does he?" drawled Aubrey. "Yes, I believe I've heard he does. Where's Seymour?"

"Sitting with Bob."

"Sitting with Bob!" repeated Aubrey blankly. "What do you mean? Where's Darrell, then?"

"In Number Three."

"But what the dickens—"

The Form-room door opened. Chard glanced round as the Head entered. The Fifth rose to their feet—except Aubrey. Aubrey sat and stared at James McCann.

The man was tough—hard as nails; Aubrey knew that, but surely even a man who was hard as hickory would show some sign of having been through what James McCann must have been through the previous night.

James McCann showed no such sign. There was not the faintest trace of damage on him. His face was grave—like every other face at High Coombe that morning. But that was all. Was the man made of iron?

Mr. McCann bowed politely to Chard and turned to the Form. His eye singled out the petrified Aubrey.

"Compton!" he said.

Aubrey lifted himself mechanically to his feet. Had that fool Bunchy failed to carry out his contract? But, if so, what was everybody looking as solemn as a boiled owl about?

"You may go to your study if you desire, Compton," said Mr. McCann.

His voice was very kind. "Darrell, I believe, is a great friend of yours, and if you wish you may remain with him, as well as Seymour. Mr. Chard will give you leave from class!"

"Certainly!" said Chard.

Aubrey felt as if his head was turning round.

"Has anything happened to Darrell?" he gasped.

"Yes," answered Mr. McCann gravely. "For some reason I have not been able to ascertain, Darrell left the House last night and went down the Masters' Walk. He was attacked—"

"Attacked?"

"In the dark, by some tramp or ruffian at present quite unknown. He was beaten severely—"

"Darrell was?" gasped Aubrey.

"Luckily, I came up, and was able to help him back to the House," said Mr. McCann. "His injuries are not serious—but he has been very cruelly beaten and is remaining in bed to-day. The doctor has seen him—you need not be alarmed, Compton." Mr. McCann's voice was kinder than ever as he saw the ghastly pallor in Aubrey's face. "He will have to keep to his room for a day or two—go to him at once, my boy, if you wish."

Aubrey Compton tottered from the Fifth Form Room. There was a murmur of sympathy from the Fifth. Old Aubrey was taking this hard! Of course, everyone knew he was fond of Darrell, often as they rowed in No. 3. Nobody guessed what was in Aubrey's tortured mind—he would not have cared if they had. He would not have cared if McCann had guessed, and kicked him out of High Coombe. White as chalk, dumb with misery, he hardly knew how he got to No. 3.

Teddy Seymour, sitting by a bedside, turned his head and looked at him as he came in. He did not speak; he made a gesture towards the recumbent figure in the bed. Bob Darrell's face, pale and worn with pain, assumed a ghost of a grin.

"Hallo, Aubrey!" His voice was low. It cost him an effort to speak.

"Bob!" Compton choked. "Bob!"

"All right, old man!" whispered Bob. He stared in alarm at Aubrey's working face. "All right. Nobody knows—nobody will know—I got it instead of McCann, and thank goodness I did—thank goodness! Aubrey, old man, pull yourself together!"

High Coombe would not have known the Dandy of the Fifth if they could have seen him—kneeling beside the bed, his face buried in the coverlet, sobbing as if his heart would break!

CHAPTER 29.

Turns with the Cane!

JOHN ANDREW FERGUSON of the Fourth Form stood in the middle of Big Study, feeling rather like a rabbit in a trap.

All round him, in comfortable arm-chairs, sat the Sixth Form prefects; ten good men and true! Corkran, head prefect, had his official ash in his hand. He was swishing it gently. He was in no hurry to begin. He was willing to give Ferg the pleasure of anticipation.

In the window-seat sat Tredegar of the Sixth, captain of High Coombe. Tred, not being a prefect, was not really entitled to attend a prefects' meeting, so he sat apart. He was there in a purely honorary capacity—an interested onlooker. So was Aubrey Compton of the Fifth, who sat by his side. So was Teddy Seymour, who sat on his other side. They looked on—and smiled.

Ferguson looked round. On every face was a smile; but not quite a pleasant smile. Such smiles might have been on the faces of an audience in the ancient Roman arena when they turned their thumbs down.

Even James McCann, the new headmaster of High Coombe, could not help him now—as far as Ferg could

see. Mr. McCann had appointed him captain of cricket—with a view to shaming the slackers of High Coombe into bucking up a little. It had been quite effectual so far as the bucking-up was concerned. Captain of cricket had "whopping privs." Ferguson could—and did—whop any man who slacked at games—he had started by whopping Tredegar himself.

Even Aubrey Compton, his fag-master before McCann had abolished fagging for the Fifth, had had to take "six" from Ferg for cutting Nets. With all these tremendous powers had McCann been able to invest John Andrew Ferguson. But outside games he was merely Ferguson of the Fourth, liable to be whopped himself by any prefect who judged him deserving of the same.

It was quite a peculiar position; and Ferg had found it great and glorious in one way, extremely uncomfortable in another.

On the cricket field Ferg reigned supreme. Admiring fags clustered round to watch, had seen him dust the bags of prefects; had heard him shout "Move there, Tredegar!" or "For goodness' sake look alive, Randal!"

They wondered where Ferg found the nerve to do it. But Ferg had heaps and heaps of nerve.

He needed it all; for, off the cricket field, he became nobody again. Prefects whose bags he had dusted naturally looked for the first opportunity of dusting Ferg's. Opportunities were not wanting. Ferg, in these days, grew very circumspect; but circumspection could not save him. If any other excuse was lacking there was always "roll."

"Roll," otherwise "side," or "cheek," was a dire offence. Some of the rules, of course, every fellow knew. It was side to talk in the passages; for every fellow under the Fifth; it was side for a junior to walk in the quad with his hands in his pockets; it was side for any man not in the Sixth to

wear a coloured waistcoat—though Compton of the Fifth often did so unrebuked.

But it was side for a Fourth Form man to walk across the quad with his straw hat on the back of his head? Opinions differed on this important point.

That is to say, they had differed—till Ferguson the Fourth walked across the quad with his straw hat on the back of his head.

Then Compton, observing him, had remarked to Corkran that that young tick Ferguson was putting on roll again. It was decided, without a dissentient voice, that for a junior to walk across quad with his hat on the back of his head was side of the most pronounced kind. It was side of so serious an order that an ordinary whopping would not meet the case. It was, obviously a case for a prefects' beating.

A prefects' beating seldom happened at the School for Slackers. But when it did it was a very serious and solemn function. All the prefects gathered in Big Study; the culprit was brought before them, judged, sentenced, and executed on the spot. Every prefect took the cane in turn and administered a whop.

As ordinary lickings had had no effect on Ferguson, the seniors had decided on a prefects' beating—as a stronger hint to the new captain of cricket to draw in his horns. It was computed in the Fourth that Ferg had had an average of one licking per day since he had become captain of cricket. This had not had the effect of making him go easy with the senior slackers—rather had it made him go harder, with some idea of getting his own back. But a prefects' beating might, perhaps, produce the desired result.

So behold Ferguson—wriggling with uneasy forboding in the middle of Big Study, surrounded by pitiless, smiling faces.

"Look here——" said Ferguson.

Corkran gently swished the cane.

"Roll," he said, "is pretty serious in a kid in the Fourth! We can't have fags putting on roll as if the place belonged to them. I'm sorry, Ferguson; but you've been pretty cheeky all this term, and this is the limit. I think we're all agreed?" He glanced round.

There was a general nodding of heads.

Ferg's eyes gleamed.

"Look here," he said. "Chuck it! If I hadn't shoved my straw on the back of my head you'd have found something else. It's because McCann——"

"I think that's enough!" said Corkran, rising. "There's a chair, Ferguson. Go over it."

A cane chair stood in the middle of the room, ready for the victim. Ferguson hesitated one moment, and bent over the chair. Having placed himself in the required position, he waited with dismal apprehension. This was not going to be a flicking, he knew. This was going to be tough!

"Go it, Corky!" murmured Coffin.

Corky went it.

He laid on the first swipe with cool, calm, scientific precision. It cracked like a pistol shot. Anyone in the quad might have supposed they were letting off fireworks in Big Study. It rang loud and sharp, and louder still rang the yell of Ferguson of the Fourth.

"Yooo-hooop!"

Ferg was tough. He prided himself on being able to take a licking. But he was getting it uncommonly hard now. All his toughness could not keep back that yell.

And that was only the first. Corkran passed the cane to Coffin. Coffin laid on the next with a quiet, determined vim. Ferg, with another yell, gave a convulsive jump. Then came Lacy's turn—and the whop of the cane was followed by a fearful roar.

A shadow darkened the sunny open window, and Darrell of the Fifth stared in from the quad.

"What the dickens are you up to?" he asked. "Killing a pig, or what?"

Corkran glanced at him.

"Don't barge in, Darrell! It's a prefects' beating."

Wall of the Sixth took the cane from Lacy. Wall laid it on under Bob Darrell's staring eyes.

"Yoocoop!" roared Ferguson. Wall's whop was as hard as any that had gone before. It made the hapless Ferguson squirm.

Bob's brow darkened. He did not know, but he could guess, why Ferguson was up for a prefects' beating.

"Look here—" he began.

Wall passed the cane to Carew. Carew swished it and landed it on Ferguson. Another fearful howl.

"Buzz off, Bob, old man!" drawled Aubrey Compton. "Don't interrupt the judicial proceedin's."

Carew, with a cheery smile, passed the cane to Randal. Randal was stretched lazily in his chair, looking, as usual, too lazy to move. But Randy made an effort, detached himself from the armchair, summoned up all the energy he had, and whopped.

"Wow!" from Ferguson.

"Look here!" bawled Bob. "This is pretty rotten! I don't like that cheeky little tick being made captain of cricket any more than you do. But there's a limit, and I can jolly well tell you—"

"You might shut that window, Fred!" yawned Corkran.

Tredegar slammed the window on Bob's flushed face. Randal passed on the cane and sank back gracefully into his armchair. The whopping went on. If Ferguson for a moment had hoped that something might come of Bob Darrell's remonstrance, he was disappointed. Every prefect in turn took a whop with the cane, and by the time they had finished Ferguson was nearly "all in."

"That's that!" drawled Corkran. "Don't put on any more roll, Ferguson. You can cut!"

Ferguson went to the door. He went

back almost double, as if trying to shut himself up like a penknife, and Big Study smiled after him as he went. Ferguson had had the licking of his life.

And there was more to come if the captain of cricket did not mend his ways.

CHAPTER 30.

Asking for More!

"O H, I say!" gasped Donkin of the Fourth Form.

"Phew!" said Fatty Pye.

And other Fourth Form men uttered other surprised ejaculations. Half the Fourth and some of the Shell had gathered round John Andrew Ferguson as he went up to the big notice-board with a paper in his hand.

It was the day following the prefects' beating in Big Study. That morning there had been no Early Nets.

Whereat Corkran & Co. had rejoiced. Turning out to fielding practice at half-past six, even on a bright summer's morning, was an unspeakable infliction at the School for Slackers. That energetic brute Darrell did not mind, though as a Fifth Form man it irked him to turn out at the order of a fag. But Bob was the only man in either Fifth or Sixth who did not mind.

That day there had been cheery smiles among the seniors. Either Ferguson had forgotten to put up the usual notice, or he had made it a point to forget—or perhaps he had not sufficiently recovered from that terrific whopping to turn out early himself. Anyhow, there had been no Early Nets that day. Obviously, the prefects' beating had produced the desired effect.

But here was Ferguson recovered, or almost recovered, from that prefects' beating, coming along to the notice-board, followed by a mob of excited, wondering, admiring and alarmed fags. Ferguson, it was plain, was up to something.

Darrell of the Fifth, coming in from

cricket, spotted that unusual concourse of fags, and strolled over to see what was on.

Ferguson, with great calmness, pinned up his paper in a prominent spot, among a dozen others. But for the fact that he was captain of cricket he could have been wopped for roll, for sticking a notice on the board at all. But, as captain of cricket, he was within his rights and powers.

"Cheek!" said Babbie of the Shell. Babs, as a Shell man, thought it awful rot for a Fourth Form tick to put up over the heads of his elders and betters. He wondered at Ferg's nerve in daring to carry on as he did. And, indeed, Ferg was the only junior at High Coombe who had the nerve to use so drastically the high and mighty powers entrusted to him by Mr. McCann.

Jimmy McCann knew a man when he saw one—and Ferg was a man, though as yet on a small scale.

"Oh, I say!" repeated the Donkey, as he blinked at Ferg's paper. And there was a buzz of wild excitement.

"You'll get whopped again, old man," said Bunn. "I wouldn't like to be in your shoes when the pre's see this!"

Ferg sniffed.

Having cut Early Nets that morning, Corkran & Co. had no doubt that the captain of cricket had been intimidated by that prefects' beating. They agreed in blessing Compton, whose bright idea it was.

But it appeared from the notice on the board they had jumped rather too hastily to that happy conclusion. Bob Darrell, looking over the heads of the swarming fags, gasped as he read, and then grinned:

"FIELDING PRACTICE.

The following will turn out for Early Nets at 4.30 a.m., Wednesday.—
J. A. FERGUSON, Capt."

This brief notification was followed by a list of ten names, beginning with Corkran, head prefect. The other nine

were all prefects. The whole prefectorial body was named there! No wonder the fags buzzed with wonder and excitement.

If the slackers of High Coombe had raged at turning out at half-past six to Early Nets, what would they feel like turning out at half-past four?

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Bob Darrell.

It was unheard of! It was unthinkable! Six-thirty was early, but a fellow could turn out at six-thirty and no harm done—indeed, he might feel all the better for it. But not at four-thirty!

It was sheer tyranny—a ridiculous order, which a headmaster was certain to rescind as soon as he heard of it—unless, perhaps, he had special reasons for not doing so. Even McCann, early bird as he was, did not turn out at four-thirty—or anything like it.

"Do you think the men will turn out, young Ferguson?" asked Bob.

"I shall jolly well whop them if they don't," answered Ferguson coolly.

Bob, grinning, made his way to Study No. 3, where Teddy Seymour was making toast for tea. Aubrey Compton was spreading butter on toast in a very gingerly manner. If there was one of McCann's sins that Aubrey resented more deeply than any other it was the abolition of fagging in the Fifth. Feeding lost its charm when a man had to fag for himself.

"And to think," Aubrey was saying as Bob Darrell came in, "that that cheeky little beast Ferguson was my fag before the Blighter blew in. I used to bat him on his bags for burning my toast. And now—"

A scorching smell pervaded the study. Teddy jerked at the toasting-fork.

"And now I'm burning it!" he grunted. "Bother! That man McCann is a silly ass!"

"A meddlin', interferin', cheeky rotter!" said Aubrey. "A saucy usher who doesn't know his place! And a Fourth Form kid is captain of cricket!"

Well, I fancy we've put paid to that!" He glanced round at Bob's grinning face. "You seem fearfully amused about somethin', old bean! What's the giddy jest?"

Bob pitched his bat into a corner and chuckled.

"That kid Ferguson——" he said.

"Not askin' for more?" inquired Teddy, as he impaled a fresh slice on the toasting-fork.

"Early Nets——" said Bob.

Aubrey chuckled.

"I fancy we're done with that!" he remarked. "Ferguson's had it hot, and he doesn't want it hotter!"

"To-morrow," said Bob.

"Mean to say the little tick has had the cheek to begin again?" exclaimed Compton, in astonishment.

"At four-thirty a.m.," went on Bob, "all the pre's——"

"A.M.!" ejaculated Teddy Seymour. He stared round at Bob. The scorching smell intensified in Study No. 3; but Teddy, in his amazement, was regardless of burning toast. "Did you say a.m.? You mean p.m.!"

"A for Albert, M for Michael!" said Bob, in the manner of a telephone operator, to make it clear.

"Half-past four in the morning?" Teddy was dazed. "The kid's mad!"

"I believe a.m. means in the morning," agreed Bob. "We don't learn much from Chard in the Fifth, but I picked that up in the Fourth terms ago."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" roared Compton. "Are you pulling our leg, or has that putrid little tick had the cheek——"

Without waiting for an answer, or even finishing the question, Aubrey Compton cut out of Study No. 3. Teddy, seemingly petrified, squatted, gazing at Bob, while the slice of toast on his fork was gradually incinerated. Compton flew across the landing, and did the stairs three at a time. High Coombe would hardly have recognised the elegant, leisurely dandy of the Fifth.

Aubrey could not believe it—he had to see it with his own eyes. It had been Aubrey's idea to bring Ferg up in the way he should go—by means of a prefects' beating. The whole prefectorial body had welcomed it, enthused over it, and acted on it, with painful results to Ferg. Had it, after all, been a failure? Had it only made matters worse?

Compton, in the midst of buzzing fags, stared at Ferguson's paper on the board. Corkran was already staring, and his face was a study.

"My—my hat!" gasped Aubrey.

Corkran looked at him.

"You ass!" he said.

That was the head prefect's thanks to Compton for his bright idea—as it had turned out. Indeed, as it had turned out, that was all the thanks that the bright idea was worth. The last state of the slackers of High Coombe was worse than their first.

CHAPTER 31.

Compton's Plot!

JAMES McCANN smiled. Bullock snorted.

"Absolutely absurd!" said Bullock. "Un-heard of! Ridiculous!"

Bullock, the games master, felt that he had McCann there. Was it not, on the face of it, unheard-of, absurd and ridiculous? It was! Bullock, like the rest of the staff at High Coombe, had watched McCann's progress at the School for Slackers with a jaundiced eye. The new headmaster could not even walk on Big Side without annoying Bullock.

How many annoyances and irritations he had had to swallow since McCann had blown in old Bully could not have counted without going into very high figures. He would have thrown in his resignation, only he had a feeling that McCann would accept it. His position was, perhaps, a little weakened by the outstanding fact that

High Coombe cricket had improved out of all knowledge.

Still, surely he had McCann now! Early Nets at four-thirty—absurd and ridiculous! Power entrusted to a thoughtless fag had got into that fag's thoughtless head, and he was making a fool of himself. Of course, this nonsense must be washed out.

Only McCann did not look like washing it out. He smiled—but there was a hint of grimness in his smile.

Bullock stood before him in his study—a portly figure, his hands in the pockets of his flannel bags. It really might have seemed as if Bullock had an idea of overpowering that stocky young man, James McCann, by sheer size and weight.

But McCann was not in the least overpowered. He did not even seem to notice that Bullock looked aggressive.

"You will, of course, cancel this," said Bullock.

"I hardly think that I shall intervene," said Mr. McCann.

"You mean that you will leave it in my hands?"

"No, Mr. Bullock! I do not think it necessary for you to intervene, either!"

Bullock breathed hard.

"Four-thirty," he said. "Hardly light."

"At this time of the year, yes," said Mr. McCann.

"The health of the boys——" said Bullock. "The loss of sleep——"

"This is not, I imagine, intended as a permanent arrangement," explained Mr. McCann. "It appears that the captain of cricket has special reasons——"

"Captain of cricket!" The mere words, in connection with Ferguson of the Fourth, were like a red rag to a bull—to Mr. Bullock's hearing. "A foolish, inconsequent, unthinking, impertinent fag——"

Mr. McCann ceased to smile. His eyes took on that look of hard, cold steel that High Coombe had already learned to know.

"I am busy, Mr. Bullock!" Jimmy sat down and picked up his pen.

"The boys concerned have placed the matter before me, sir! They have asked me to represent to you——"

"You have done so," Jimmy pointed out. "There is nothing more to be said."

He began to write. Bullock gazed at the top of his bent head. He stood gazing at it for several long moments before he turned to the door. He was snubbed! Having described the Head's specially selected captain of cricket as foolish, inconsequent, and unthinking, he could hardly have expected anything else!

Bullock left the study, purple.

At the corner of the passage three or four anxious prefects were waiting for him. If they had hoped anything from Bullock's barging in, his purple look told them that their hopes were unfounded.

"Nothin' doin'?" asked Corkran.

"Puppy!" gasped Bullock.

Corky stared at him. For the moment he supposed that that compliment was addressed to himself. Then he realised that the games master was thinking of Mr. McCann.

"Then——" said Randal.

Bullock shook his head and walked away, and the seniors stared after him and then at one another.

"It's up to you, Corky," said Coffin. "Go in and speak to the brute! He's bound to listen to head prefect!"

"Make him!" groaned Randal. "Four-thirty in the mornin'—think of it!"

"Nobody will turn out!" muttered Coffin.

"You know that little beast! He will come round with a cricket stump and root us out!" said Wall.

"I'd smash him!" said Coffin, between his teeth.

"Easy enough—if the Head wasn't behind him!" groaned Randal. "But what's the good of talkin' about smashin' him, when the Blighter would

sack a man like a shot for layin' a single finger on him while he's playin' at being captain of cricket? Don't talk out of your hat!"

"Another prefects' beating—a bit stiffer!" muttered Wall. "Let him know that if we turn out at four-thirty to-morrow morning, he will be up in Big Study again to-morrow afternoon!"

Corkran shook his head slowly. He was losing faith in the efficacy of prefects' beatings, applied to that hardy young scoundrel Ferguson.

"I'll speak to the Blighter!" he said.

He went along to the Head's door, tapped, and went in. Jimmy McCann laid down his pen, and looked at him inquiringly.

"What is it, Corkran?"

"I think Mr. Bullock's mentioned to you, sir—"

"Quite!"

"Well, of course, it's quite absurd, sir," said Corkran. "Fielding practice at half-past four in the morning is—"

"Quite!" said Jimmy again.

"Then you'll rescind it, sir!"

"Well, no," said Mr. McCann, with a cheery smile. "I am giving the captain of cricket a free hand, Corkran, so long as he does not overstep the mark."

"Isn't this rather overstepping it, sir?"

"Not in view of the circumstances," explained Mr. McCann. "I am very unwilling, Corkran, to interfere with the constituted authority of my prefects. I have observed that this authority has been somewhat severely visited upon Ferguson of late. He has made no complaint, and I have not, therefore, felt called upon to intervene. It appears that he has his own methods for promoting a better understanding."

Corky opened his mouth—and shut it again.

"This better understanding," continued Mr. McCann, "will, I hope, soon come to pass. I shall not intervene unless compelled to do so. But if I inquire of Ferguson why he has fixed so extraordinary an hour for fielding

practice to-morrow, I shall be obliged to make a rigid inquiry into a prefects' beating which, I think, took place yesterday."

Corky wished he had not come into the study.

"Is there anything more?" asked Mr. McCann.

"N-n-no, I—I think not, sir."

"Very good!" said Mr. McCann.

Corkran was glad to get out. He told his friends at the corner of the passage the result. They did not seem in the least keen on the better understanding to which Mr. McCann had referred. Rather they would have liked to take the skin off Ferg's back. It was rather unfortunate that, as they moved away in a disconsolate body, they passed the big notice-board, and beheld Ferguson standing before it, grinning at his own paper.

Coffin breathed hard. He had his official ash under his arm. He made a stride towards Ferg.

"Hold on!" muttered Corky, uneasily.

Coffin did not heed. He tapped Ferguson on the shoulder, and the Fourth Former glanced round.

"Go over and touch your toes, Ferguson!" said Coffin.

"What for?" demanded Ferg.

"Siding in the passages!" said Coffin sweetly.

Grinning at his own notice on the board might, by a stretch of the imagination, be considered siding in the passages! It was good enough for Coffin, who was angry and annoyed. Ferg gave Coffin a long look—and went over and touched his toes! Coffin gave him three, all good ones.

Ferg wriggled as he rose. The prefects grinned. They ceased to grin as Ferguson took a stump of pencil from his pocket, stepped to the notice-board, and altered the time on his paper—from four-thirty to four, by crossing out the "30." He walked away, still wriggling; but Corky & Co. did not watch his wriggles. They stared at the altered notice.

"Four a.m.!" said Randal, in a hollow voice. "You ass, Coffin!"

Coffin breathed deep.

"I'll give him a few more——"

"And then he'll make it three!" moaned Randy.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Let the little beast alone!" growled Corkran.

It was clear that Ferg was a little beast who'd be better left alone! Leaving him alone, therefore, Corky & Co. proceeded to Study No. 3—partly to tell Aubrey Compton what they thought of him and his bright ideas, partly in the hope that old Aubrey might somehow be able to get them out of this. Old Aubrey, after all, was the brainy man.

"Look here, Compton, that cheeky little tick, Ferguson, has made it four in the morning, now, because Coffey whopped him," said Corkran. "Now, what's going to be done?"

"Looks to me as if you are!" grinned Bob Darrell.

And Teddy contributed a chuckle.

"Oh, shut up!" said Coffin. "Look here, Compton, you silly ass——"

"It was your rotten idea to whop that little beast for roll," said Randal. "Look how it's turned out! Four a.m.——"

Aubrey laughed.

"That's all right," he said. "Don't you worry! Stick in bed to-morrow morning till rising-bell—you'll be all right."

"You silly ass!" roared Corkran. "That little sweep will be glad of the chance of rooting us out and whopping us for slacking—he's got the power to do it, owing to that brute McCann—and think he won't jump at handing back what we gave him in Big Study!"

"No! Audrey shook his head. "Ferguson won't do any jumping at four o'clock to-morrow morning."

"And why won't he?" demanded Corkran.

"Because at three-thirty he will be

tied down to his own bed, in the Fourth Form dormitory, and he won't be let loose till rising-bell," said Compton coolly.

Corky & Co. stared at him, then roared.

Corky & Co. went away, chortling, to tell the other great men in Big Study. Aubrey Compton smiled at his friends.

"You men are lending me a hand in the early dewy morn?" he asked.

"Rot!" growled Bob Darrell. "I'm not ragging in the Fourth Form dorm!"

"Rather a jest on that cheeky little tick, though!" chuckled Teddy Seymour. "I'm on, Aubrey, old man."

"Look here——" said Bob restively.

"Bow-wow!" said Aubrey cheerily.

And that was that!

CHAPTER 32.

The End of a Lark!

B UZZZZZZZ went Ferg's alarm clock.

Ferguson sat up in bed, rubbed his eyes, blinked at the windows of the Fourth Form dormitory, and saw no light. In high summer it should have been fairly light at four in the morning—though as Ferg had never before been up at that unearthly hour, he could not have said it from experience.

But if there was any light it was the merest glimmer. Ferg had set the alarm clock for five minutes to four, and placed it at his bed-head. He gave himself five minutes to jump into his clothes. Finding it still so dark, he was tempted to turn over and go to sleep again.

But he heroically resisted that temptation. He was captain of cricket, and he had fixed the time for fielding practice. A precious ass he would look if the men turned out and he didn't! They wouldn't wait for him long, that was certain! Give them the slightest excuse, and they would bolt back to bed like rabbits to their

burrows. It would get to McCann's ears—and what would he think?

Ferg, it was true, rather wished that he had not repaid the prefects' beating in precisely that manner—for he was horribly sleepy, and he would have given anything—or almost anything—to turn over and go to sleep again.

But he knew that if he sat there arguing the matter out with himself, it would very probably end by his going to sleep again. So he made a bound from the bed, and got out before the buzzing of the alarm clock had died away.

Several other fellows had awakened, or half-awakened. One or two grumbling voices were audible. Even rising-bell came too early for most of the Fourth, and nobody wanted to awake earlier. Ferg did not heed. He plunged his sleepy face into cold water, and was wide-awake on the spot. He got into his flannels and shoes. The alarm clock gave a last spasmodic gurgle, and ceased. Fatty Pye sat up in the next bed, and growled.

"You blithering idiot, wharrer you getting up in the middle of the night for?"

"Four o'clock!" said Ferg.

"Tain't!" grunted Fatty.

"Tis!" retorted Ferg, with equal brevity.

"It's light at four!" snorted Fatty. "Idiot! Waking a fellow up! Middle of the night—urrgh!" Pye grunted, and laid his head on the pillow again.

Ferguson finished dressing. Naturally, a Fourth Form man who was captain of cricket was not going to argue the point with a fellow like Fatty. Still, he was struck by Pye's remark that it was light at four. That certainly had been his own impression. Yet it was not light—or only barely so. Ferg looked at his watch. Having looked at it, he glared at it.

The watch indicated three o'clock!

In silence, his feelings at the moment being too deep for words, Ferg looked

at the alarm clock. The clock also indicated three!

He was certain he had set the alarm for five minutes to four. It had gone off, and was now only too clear, at five minutes to three! It was not Ferg's own clock. He had borrowed it from a man in the Shell. It had gone off an hour too early—and Ferg was up at three instead of four. He had a whole hour that might have been spent in delightful slumber, to get through somehow before the time fixed for fielding practice.

Recovering his voice, Ferg murmured things about that clock and the man in the Shell who had lent it him. He considered going back to bed. But after that dip in cold water he had lost the sleepy feeling. Moreover, it was fairly certain that if he did go to sleep again he would not wake at four. Certainly he was not going to rely again on that treacherous clock. So he decided to put in some physical jerks till it was a bit lighter, and then go down to the ground. Bowling at a stump would pass the time till four.

For a quarter of an hour Ferg jerked physically. Then he went out of the dormitory, stepping softly and closing the door without a sound, so as not to awaken other fellows. He trod down the passage towards the stairs. It was getting quite light out of doors, but the staircase was a well of darkness.

Much to his amazement, Ferguson heard footsteps and a mutter of voices on the landing below, where the Fifth Form doors were. He stopped and stared over the banisters in wonder. Ten men of the Sixth were booked for fielding practice at four; but it was not yet half-past three. Besides, Sixth Form men would not come up to the Fifth Form quarters. It was Fifth Form men who were stirring. Why?

"You've got the rope, Teddy?"

"Here it is."

Amazed, Ferguson recognised the voices of Compton and Seymour of the Fifth.

"I've got the hanky to tie over his mouth! Mind, he's not to make a sound. If he wakes up the other little beasts we may have a hornets' nest about our ears."

"Yaw-aw-aw-aw!"

"You can yawn afterwards, fat-head!"

"Oh, all right! I'm sleepy!"

"You can go back to bed when we've fixed up that young scoundrel Ferguson! Got the string?"

"No. Haven't you?"

"We shall have to tie on the hanky. Wait while I get it."

The junior alluded to by Compton as that young scoundrel Ferguson stood transfixed on the upper staircase. He heard Compton's receding footsteps, and a series of yawns from Teddy Seymour. He could not see either of them, but he had heard enough to put him wise.

Ferguson, breathing hard, cut back to his dormitory. In a few minutes at the most, Compton and Seymour would be there—with the pleasant intention of tying him to his bed and fastening a hanky over his mouth to keep him quiet. Compton, evidently, had come to the rescue of the slackers of the Sixth in their extreme need!

Ferg hurriedly re-entered the Fourth Form dormitory, and shut the door. From the bottom of his heart he blessed that unreliable alarm clock! Had he been asleep in bed when the Fifth Form men arrived—

But he was wide awake—extremely wide awake! And in two minutes other Fourth Form men were equally wide awake, listening in amazement to Ferg's breathless whispers. Fatty ~~was~~ Bunn, Loom, Donkin, and a dozen others turned out. They grinned as they parked themselves in a bunch behind the door.

If Fifth Form men came ragging in their quarters, they were ready to deal with them. It would be, Ferg pointed out, no end of a lark to catch

Compton of the Fifth in his own trap! They waited breathlessly.

Soft footsteps came along the passage outside. With hardly a sound the dormitory door opened.

Aubrey Compton stepped in. Teddy Seymour followed him, both on tip-toe. There was not a sound; the open door hid the bunch of juniors from their sight. Early daylight was gleaming in the quad now, but the dormitory was dusky.

"Fast asleep!" whispered Aubrey. "Which is the little brute's bed? Look along the— Oh, my hat! What —"

Slam! The door banged behind the Fifth Form men. They spun round—and reeled over under a rush of a dozen juniors. Before they knew what was happening, Aubrey and Teddy were on the floor, and a swarm of breathless fags pinned them there. In amazement and rage, they struggled madly.

"Pin 'em!" gasped Ferguson.

"Got 'em!" panted Bunn.

"Urrghh!" gasped Teddy. "Oh crumbs! Oh—what—ow!"

"I'll—ooogh—oh! I'll—ooogh!" spluttered Aubrey.

Frantic were the struggles of the captured Fifth Form men. But struggling availed them not. Every junior in the dormitory was awake now. Every man turned out to lend a hand. Compton and Seymour, resisting wildly, breathless and panting, were dragged to Ferguson's bed. They were pitched across it, and the rope they had brought for tying Ferguson came in handy to secure them there. Ankles and wrists were tied to the bedstead.

Whether they would have ventured to shout and awaken the House, enraged as they were, was perhaps doubtful. But Ferg gave them no chance. Handkerchiefs were stuffed into their mouths and tied there with the string provided by Aubrey.

Grinning faces surrounded them as they sprawled on the bed, helpless, glaring with wild wrath.

"Let 'em loose at rising-bell," said Ferg. "They'll get into a row if they're found here."

Ferguson left the dormitory for a second time. His friends, chuckling, went back to bed. Chuckling died away in balmy slumber. But there was no slumber for Aubrey and Teddy.

While the Fourth Form slumbered, the Fifth Form men wriggled and wriggled. But they wriggled in vain—and they had to settle down to wriggle till rising-bell.

Corkran of the Sixth heard four chime from the clock-tower. Perhaps he had been dreaming of fielding practice at four—a horrid dream! Half-awake, he lay and listened to the chime, and turned his head luxuriously on his pillow to sleep again. No Early Nets; no fielding practice in the dewy morn—owing to the intervention of that brainy man, Compton of the Fifth!

Corky's last waking thought was of gratitude to Aubrey as he sank happily into peaceful slumber—which, alas, lasted only three minutes. Then it was rudely shattered by the hurling open of his door.

"Now then!"

It was a sharp voice.

Corkran sat up—and stared. Ferguson, captain of cricket, stood there, a stump in his hand. Corkran gazed at him as if he had been a ghost. Ferguson, at that moment, should have been on his own bed, tied there hand and foot, with a handkerchief stuffed in his cheeky mouth to keep him quiet—if Aubrey's masterly scheme had worked. It appeared that Aubrey's masterly scheme hadn't! Corky, taken utterly aback, gazed and gasped and almost gibbered.

"Why aren't you at nets?" Ferg was no longer Ferguson of the Fourth;

he was captain of cricket, invested—pro tem—with absolute powers over every man at High Coombe. His voice rang with authority. "You saw the notice. Four a.m. It's five past four! Why aren't you out?"

Corkran stuttered. He would have been out, certainly, had he not relied on Aubrey—as unreliable, it proved, as Ferg's alarm clock!

"Not a man on the ground!" continued Ferg. "Not a man! Get out!"

Swipe! The cricket stump came down across the bedclothes—and Corkran's legs. Corkran was out of bed with a bound. With another bound he would have been at Ferg, smiting him hip and thigh—but he stopped! Ferg, stump in hand, eyed him with perfect coolness. The position in Big Study of a couple of days ago was now reversed.

Captain of cricket had whopping privs to deal with slackers—and staying in bed, regardless of the order on the board, was slacking of the deepest dye. Behind Ferguson at the moment loomed the Head—probably fast asleep at that moment in his own House, but present in the spirit, as it were—the Head, and the "sack"! Corky did not bound at Ferguson.

He looked round for his trousers, instead.

"I give you five minutes!" said Ferguson. "Mind, it's six on the bags if you're later than that!"

Corky, breathing fury, was glad that Ferguson did not decide to give him six, anyhow! He would have had to take them. He did not answer.

"I'm going to stop this rotten slacking in the Sixth!" said Ferguson truculently. "Bear that in mind, Corkran!"

He walked out and went along the passage. Corkran, as he crammed himself hurriedly into flannels, heard him enter the next study. He heard the voice of Randal:

"What the dickens——"

"Randal, you rotten slacker, turn out!"

"I'll see you dashed first! I'll—yarooooooop!" Corkran heard the swiping of the stump and the roar of Randal.

Ferguson quite enjoyed his progress along the Sixth Form studies that dewy morn. It said much for the self-restraint of the High Coombe prefects that Ferg reached the end of the passage without being torn limb from limb! But what could a fellow do? Relying on Aubrey and his scheme, they had stayed in bed instead of turning up to Early Nets, and thus delivered themselves into the hands of the enemy.

Every prefect had had a swipe at Ferg when he took that prefects' beating in Big Study. Now every prefect had a swipe from Ferg when the captain of cricket had to rouse them out of bed. Ten infuriated Sixth Form men went trailing down to Early Nets, shepherded by the authoritative Ferguson.

Possibly the sight of Mr. McCann at his window, looking out into the fresh morning sunshine, helped to save Ferg from being massacred on the cricket ground.

There was a slight twinkle in Jimmy McCann's eyes—but every man there knew how that twinkle would change into a gleam of cold steel if a finger was laid on his captain of cricket!

Fielding practice lasted till rising-bell. Then the infuriated ten got back to the House—in time to meet two dishevelled, enraged Fifth Form men coming down from the Fourth Form dormitory. Aubrey barely escaped with his life!

Early Nets at six-thirty, twice a week, continued. But there were no more Early Nets at four a.m. That was a card Ferguson kept up his sleeve. He never needed to play it, for he was never called up in Big Study again.

Roll or no roll, Ferg was safe from being called up for a prefects' beating!

CHAPTER 33.

Taps on the Window!

"YOU shan't!" said Bob Darrell between his teeth. Aubrey Compton's eyes glinted.

"Stand back, Bob!" he said.

"I won't! And you shan't do it, you fathead!"

Instead of standing back, as bidden, Darrell of the Fifth grasped Aubrey by the shoulder with a grip like a steel vice, sadly crumpling the most elegantly cut jacket at High Coombe School.

"Now look here, Bob—" began Teddy Seymour, in plaintive tones.

"Shut up, Teddy!" rapped Bob.

"Let go my shoulder, Bob!" said Aubrey, with a dangerous quietness.

"Don't barge in here, you fool!"

And five or six voices chimed in:

"Let go!"

But Bob stood firm, and held on.

There were nearly a dozen of the Fifth Form on the spot. They were gathered at the window of the French master's class-room.

Monsieur Mouton, of course, was not there. He had gone to see the Head, Mr. James McCann, in his study, and there was no danger of him coming up.

The French class-room was directly over the Head's study. Leaning out of the window, a fellow could have talked to anyone looking up from the Head's window below.

That was why Aubrey Compton was there, and that was why a tin bucket full to the brim with a mixture of tar and feathers stood on the window-sill.

When Aubrey Compton had first talked of tarring and feathering the Blighter, James McCann, the Fifth Form men chuckled; but they had told Aubrey not to talk out of his hat. If ever a man deserved to be tarred and feathered it was the man who had introduced the unwelcome and painful element of work into the School for Slackers. That, of course, everyone admitted. But the thing was impossible.

But the brainy man of High Coombe

was going to demonstrate that it was not merely a delightful dream. Strategy, of course, was needed.

Across the quad, in cover of one of the ancient High Coombe oaks, was Fatty Pye, of the Fourth Form, catapult in hand. Fatty had been bribed with a bag of jam tarts to loose off, at regular intervals, a series of pellets at the window of the Head's study. A ceaseless tap, tap, tap on his window was certain, sooner or later, to cause James McCann to put his head out to ascertain what the dickens was going on.

And as soon as the Beak's head appeared below Aubrey was going to tip over the pail—and the thing was done!

What could be simpler?

With a pailful of tar, mixed with feathers, mopping his head, the Blighter would be hors de combat, giving the raggars plenty of time to get clear. Nobody would be spotted, which was rather important. For though it was known that the Blighter McCann hated the idea of sacking a High Coombe man, it was equally well known that he had a hard and heavy hand with a cane. But it was safe as houses—the Blighter would have no victim upon whom to wreak his wrath.

Quite a joyous mob had gathered in the French class-room to see old Aubrey pull it off. Unluckily, Bob Darrell, spotting that something was on, came, too, and now he was gripping his reckless chum by the shoulder, determined that Aubrey should not make such an ass of himself.

Aubrey did not want a row. Too much row over the Head's study might draw the Blighter's attention in that direction. And the Blighter was quick on the uptake, as keen as Sheffield steel. But Aubrey had waited and watched for this opportunity, and he was not going to miss it.

"Look here, Bob—chuck it!" urged Teddy, in his usual role of peacemaker. "If you don't want to have a hand in ragging the Blighter you can cut! Don't barge in, old chap."

Bob gave an angry grunt.

"It's over the limit," he said. "I'm not going to see Aubrey get himself sacked!"

"Rot!" said Peverill. "The Blighter don't dare sack a man!"

"He jolly well would if he got that awful muck on his napper! Aubrey, old man, don't be a fool!" pleaded Bob.

"Will you let go?"

"No; not till you come away and chuck up playing the goat."

Aubrey breathed hard.

"We've got no time to waste," he said. "Mouton may come up here after he's through with McCann. Any man who's spotted here will get it in the neck. Pye's going it already!"

Floating in at the open window came the sound of the sharp tap of a pellet on glass below. Fatty Pye, prompt to time, was beginning to loose off his catapult. Obviously, it would not require much of that tapping to cause the headmaster to open his window and look out. There was no time to waste.

Aubrey withdrew his hand from the bucket on the sill. Then he laid both hands on the anxious chum who was grasping his shoulder.

"Back up, you men!" breathed Aubrey.

The Fifth Formers backed up as one man. Peverill, Carter, Burke, Raymond, Seymour grasped at Bob. In the grip of many hands he was dragged off Compton.

Bob was the heftiest fellow in the High Coombe Fifth. But he had no chance against so many. And he was handicapped, too, by his reluctance to make a row that might draw McCann there. He was opposed to such a ghastly rag on McCann; but his chief concern was for his chum—he wanted to keep Aubrey out of trouble, not to land him in it. And if McCann came up and saw the bucket of tar and feathers, he would hardly need telling what the game was.

Darrell struggled hard but silently. They dragged him back from the window and held him back, panting.

Compton smoothed out his crumpled jacket. Then he turned to the window again and took hold of the tin bucket. Tap came again from below as another pellet knocked on the Head's window.

There was the sound of an opening window below. The tapping on the Head's window had caused the occupant of the study to take notice and open the window to look out.

Peering over the upper window-sill, Aubrey spotted a head coming out of McCann's window below, and tilted the bucket.

Downward swooped a stream of tar and feathers. Right on the back of the projected head it mopped! Up came a wild and startled howl.

Aubrey gave a breathless chuckle.

He spun from the window.

"Hook it!" he breathed.

The next item on the programme was a scamper across the class-room to the door, and a hurried retreat.

But that item had to be cut.

For just as the Fifth Form men started to scamper, a stocky figure appeared in the class-room doorway.

James McCann, clean and neat as usual, without a trace of tar or feathers, gazed at the dumbfounded men of the Fifth. They gasped, stared, gaped. In Aubrey's dismayed and horrified mind one question formed itself—on whose head had he dropped the bucketful of tar? Not on the Blighter's—that was only too fearfully clear! With a faint smile on his face Jimmy scanned the dismayed and flabbergasted crowd in the French master's class-room.

"What is going on here?" he asked.

The heroes of the Fifth did not answer. Speech failed them. They gazed at Jimmy McCann—gazed, and gaped, and almost gibbered!

CHAPTER 34.

A Blood-curdling Howl!

It was rough luck on Monsieur Mouton.

Everybody felt that—the victim himself most of all!

High Coombe was a solid old building, with stone walls and good oak floors. Nevertheless, sounds travelled. The new headmaster of High Coombe certainly would not have heeded footsteps in the class-room over his head but for the fact that the master to whom that class-room appertained was then and there in his presence.

Monsieur Mouton, being in Mr. McCann's study in conversation with Mr. McCann, it was obvious that he had no class in No. 10 just then: Jimmy McCann, as the School for Slackers had learned to know only too well, was extremely quick on the uptake. If a crowd of fellows went into the French master's class-room in the Form master's absence, it looked as if a "rag" was on. Only too often had monsieur found his class-room "shipped."

So Mr. McCann, politely excusing himself to the French master for a few minutes, stepped out of his study to go up to No. 10 and ascertain what the fellows were there for.

Monsieur Mouton, waiting for him to return to his study, was surprised and perplexed by an incessant tapping at the window. Had Mr. McCann been there he would no doubt have opened the window and looked out to ascertain the cause of that strange and mysterious tapping on the glass.

Mr. McCann, negotiating rambling old staircases, did not hear Fatty Pye's imitation of a woodpecker. Monsieur Mouton, in the study, did, and after a succession of mysterious taps, he opened the window and put out his head to look round and see what was up.

What happened next was the greatest surprise that had befallen Monsieur Mouton since he had quitted his own beautiful country to teach his beautiful language to the inhabitants of a barbarous island.

He uttered a bloodcurdling howl that rang all over High Coombe—that caused fellows in the quad to jump, and old Judd to blink out of his lodge by the gates, and Mr. Chard to stare

from his window in his rooms under the clock-tower.

Having startled all High Coombe with that fearful howl, Monsieur Mouton jerked a tarry and feathery head back into Mr. McCann's study, and, in a spluttering, gasping, and gurgling state, clawed at his hair.

In the class-room above, nobody spoke. The silence there might almost have been cut with a knife. Bob stood as overwhelmed with dismay as the rest. McCann had not got the tar and feathers! That, perhaps, was fortunate! But somebody had. And here was McCann!

The silence rather puzzled Mr. McCann. That these fellows were in No. 10 for a rag he did not doubt. But there were no signs of a rag in the class-room. Mossoo's desk was not upside down. The forms were not piled in a pyramid.

But he spotted the bucket, still dripping tar, with feathers clinging. He stepped to the window. There was a smear of tar on the sill. And from the open study window below strange, wild sounds floated out, and reached him. The Head's face set grimly.

Petrified, paralysed, the Fifth Formers watched him. It was useless to scamper now. They were fairly caught. That unspeakable bargee, somehow, had spotted them. Knowing him as they did they might almost have expected it. But they hadn't! Even Aubrey, with all his nerve, was utterly taken aback and dismayed. He lowered his eyes as the Head's keen glance fixed on him.

"This, I presume, was intended for me?" remarked Mr. McCann, in quite a casual tone.

No answer.

"You, I think, Compton——"

Bob broke the silence:

"We—we were all here, sir, and——"

"That will do, Darrell!" McCann's first glance into No. 10 had spotted Bob in the grasp of many hands, and he had a fairly clear idea of the state of affairs.

"Follow me, all of you!" said Mr. McCann.

They followed him—a dispirited crowd. They trailed down the stairs and after him into his study.

At a less apprehensive moment they might have smiled at what they beheld there. Monsieur Mouton was a striking sight. His unfortunate head was clouded with tar and sticky feathers. Tar was trickling down his neck and down his face, giving him an odd resemblance to a zebra. He clawed and clawed.

"C'est affreuse! Regardez moi, donc!" he shrieked, as Mr. McCann came gravely in. "I poke me ze head from ze window, and zis fall on ze head! Ze tar and ze fezzer! Ze fezzer and ze tar! How he happen? Mais regardez!"

He clawed with tarry fingers.

"I cannot sufficiently express my regret for this outrage, Monsieur Mouton!" said Mr. McCann gravely. "The perpetrator will be severely punished. Allow me to assist you!"

Carefully—for Mossoo was very sticky—Jimmy McCann took his arm to lead him away to a bath-room. The pressing necessity at the moment was hot water and soap. He made the Fifth Formers a sign to await his return, and led the tarry gentleman away. Mossoo's means floated back.

Left in the Head's study, the Fifth Form men looked at one another in eloquent silence. Aubrey was recovering his nerve. Bob was glum and dismal. Teddy almost whimpered. The other fellows wondered sorrowfully what was going to happen now.

"You ass, Aubrey!" said Peverill.

Aubrey shrugged his shoulders.

"How was I to know?"

"Poor old monsieur!" said Bob.

"How long will it take him to get that muck out of his hair?"

"The Sheep's wool will need clipping!" said Carter.

Monsieur Mouton was called the Sheep. It was an obvious nickname for him. But nobody smiled at Carter's

remark. It was no time for him to be funny.

"We're all in this!" said Bob. "If it's sacking, he can't sack the lot of us! If it's flogging, it will come easier for a crowd! We——"

"Don't be a silly ass!" cut in Aubrey. "It was my game, and I can stand for it!"

"Don't you be a silly ass, Aubrey!" said Teddy Seymour hotly. "Bob's right—whatever's coming, we whack it out all round!"

"Fathead!" said Aubrey. "Think the Blighter doesn't know?"

The mumble of dispirited voices died away as Mr. McCann came back into the study. He eyed the dismal group.

"Every boy here——" he began.

Aubrey interrupted him. Aubrey was cool again now—cool as ice. He might be a reckless ass—no doubt he was—but nobody had ever said that he lacked the nerve to face the music. He was not the man to land his friends in trouble.

"It was I who pitched down the tar, sir!" said Aubrey. "The others had nothing to do with it. One of them tried to stop me, in fact. I did the whole thing!"

"Look here——" began Bob.

"You will be silent, Darrell!" said Mr. McCann quietly. "I hardly needed to hear your confession, Compton. You must be well aware that you deserve to be expelled from the school for what you have done. I shall spare you that. But you will be flogged in Hall in the presence of all High Coombe to-morrow morning. It will be a public and most severe flogging. Now you may go!"

And they went.

CHAPTER 35.

Up for a Flogging!

"SILLY ass!" said Corkran, when they heard in Big Study.

The Sixth Form men nodded assent to that.

Of course, the Sixth loathed McCann

as much as the Fifth did. In the Sixth Form Room he had that Form right under his own eye, and they really came off worse than the Fifth. The Sixth—prefects and all—would have been glad to hear that the Blighter McCann had been tarred and feathered. But Compton had made a muck of it—and the verdict of the Sixth was "Silly ass!"

In the Burrow, where the fags most did congregate, there was chuckling.

Ferguson of the Fourth told them. Ferg had had the supreme happiness to see Monsieur Mouton tottering on the Head's arm on his way to the nearest bath-room. Ferg blew into the Burrow bursting with it.

"Thick with it!" said Ferg blissfully. "Sticky with it! Tar—feathers—all over the poor little ass. Believe me. He was using awful language, too—kept on saying 'goudon'—a French swear word, I suppose——"

"That's French for tar!" cut in Loom.

Loom was one of those fellows who knew things.

Ferguson gave him a cold look.

"I don't want you to teach me French, Loomiey. Keep it for the Sheep, if you know any; which you jolly well don't. I tell you, the poor old Sheep was fairly smothered—it'll take him days to get it out of his hair—lucky for him he hasn't got much. Reeking with it!"

"But who did it?" gasped Donkin.

Ferguson chuckled.

"Compton, of course! McCann's got the whole gang in his study. Compton is a card. Of course, he must have meant it for McCann. But the Sheep's got it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It seemed frightfully funny to the Fourth. And when they learned that Compton of the Fifth was up for a flogging the whole Burrow decided that he was getting off lightly. Most head-masters would have barked him.

Many of the juniors sympathised with Aubrey. It was true that he put on

a good deal of roll; but he was going to suffer in what they felt to be a good cause. It would have been a glorious rag—if it had come off. Ferg took a different view. Ferg had been Compton's fag last term, and he had no use for the superb Aubrey. Ferguson expressed the opinion that the flogging next morning would be a "corker," and the charitable hope that it would do Compton good!

Not that Compton cared what they thought, or said, in the Fourth or the Shell. As he sat in Study No. 3 after tea he was thinking of what was to come. He was thinking of it with a set face and glinting eyes. It was not the severity of the punishment that troubled him, though that was bad enough, he knew, for he had suffered under McCann and knew that that stocky young man packed a lot of muscle.

It was the humiliation—going through it under the staring eyes of the whole school. He, Aubrey Compton, the dandy of the Fifth, the great chief and leader of the resistance to the new Head—turned up and flogged like a miserable fag!

He felt that he would never be able to hold up his head again. The humiliation would linger long after the sting of the cane had faded.

Bob Darrell, looking gloomier than if he had been going to get the swiping himself, gave Aubrey uneasy glances. He did not like the look on his chum's face, and he wondered, with considerable disquietude, what was passing in Aubrey's mind, as he sat silent. Teddy, worried and miserable, had a suggestion to make that was worthy of his intellectual powers.

"What about packing?" asked Teddy.

Compton did not even look at him. Darrell made him a sign to shut up. But Teddy, who fancied that poor old Aubrey was thinking of the coming swipes of the birch, went on fatuously:

"Exercise books are no good! There was a man in the Fifth packed

exercise books, and they slid down his bags when he went over and bulged out at his ankles. But a double thickness of flannels——"

"Shut up, old man!" said Bob.

"A double thickness of flannels," persisted Teddy, "and a blazer folded under them!"

"Fool!" said Aubrey.

"If that's all you've got to say to a pal who's trying to help you, Aubrey, I'll cut!" Teddy said with dignity.

And he left Study No. 3.

Compton, leaning back in his chair, his elegant legs stretched out, his hands driven deep into his pockets, was silent again. Bob watched him more anxiously than before.

"It's rough luck, Aubrey, old man," he said at last. "But dash it all, you knew what to expect if McCann spotted you. It might have been the sack!"

"I'd rather it was!"

"Oh, that's rot!" said Bob. "It's sickening enough, but it's not so bad as that. Bite on the bullet."

"Flogged like a snivellin' fag!" said Aubrey Compton, between his teeth, his eyes gleaming. "I'd take anythin' the cur liked to give me, bendin' over in his study—and he knows it! But he wants to rub it in! He wants to make me look small before all High Coombe. He wants to make a fellow ridiculous. He wants——" Aubrey choked. "The rotter! The dashed usher! He may be disappointed, after all!"

"It can't be helped, old chap!" said Bob miserably.

"Perhaps it can!" said Aubrey.

"Chard can't do anything——"

"Bother Chard!"

"But what——"

"Oh, leave me alone! I'm tryin' to think."

Bob Darrell left him to think. But he resolved to keep a wary eye on him. What mad thoughts were passing through Aubrey's mind he could not guess. But he was deeply uneasy.

That evening Aubrey did not appear in Big Study. Tredegar, captain of

High Coombe, gave him a look-in in Study No. 3, out of sheer kindness of heart. But old Tred came down to Big Study looking flushed and huffed.

"How's Compton takin' it?" inquired Corkran.

"Pretty bad!" said Tred briefly. "He said he wouldn't stand it, and when I said that was all rot he buzzed a dictionary at me." Tredegar rubbed his chin. "He's in a rotten, bad temper. I'm leaving him alone!"

All High Coombe knew, before lights out, that Compton of the Fifth was taking it very badly indeed. All the school buzzed with the rumour that Compton said that he wouldn't stand it. That, of course, was utter rot—a hasty word uttered under the stress of excitement and anger.

On the other hand, Compton was the sort of fellow to stand by his word, even a hasty one. Some fellows wondered whether there would be some sort of a scene in Hall in the morning. Fatty Pye even mooted the idea, in the Burrow, that Compton might punch McCann—a suggestion that thrilled all the fags with a delicious excitement.

CHAPTER 36.

Missing!

"COMPTON!"

James McCann's voice was quiet, but it carried to the farthest corner of Great Hall at High Coombe.

The silence was deep.

Every fellow, every master, of High Coombe was present. The summer sunlight, glinting through stained-glass windows, glimmered on rank after rank of breathless faces. The headmaster stood on the dais at the upper end of Hall, with a grave face.

Liggins hovered with the birch ready for his use. Mr. Chard, master of the Fifth, looked as distressed as if he were going to get the swishing. But even Chard had not thought it advisable to put in a word for the culprit on this

occasion. What could he say in favour of a fellow who had planned to mop tar and feathers over the headmaster, and actually had mopped them over a member of the staff? Even Peter Chard had to admit that that graceless member of his Form was getting off cheaply.

Indeed, everyone appeared to think so, except Compton himself. The look on Aubrey's pale, handsome face alarmed other fellows as well as Bob Darrell. Everyone was looking at Aubrey, or trying to; fellows out of range craned their necks to look.

He made no signs of having heard the Head's quiet voice. Chard, worried and fussy, weighed in.

"Compton! Compton! Go to the Head! At once, Compton!"

Bob nudged his chum.

"Aubrey, old man!" he whispered.

Aubrey Compton stepped out of the ranks of the Fifth. Mr. McCann, at a distance, had his eyes curiously on him. Mr. McCann did not, as Aubrey bitterly believed, like this business. He loathed it. But he had his duty to do; and James McCann was not the man to sidestep duty, however disagreeable.

"Compton, come here!" said Mr. McCann in the same quiet tones. He took the birch from Liggins.

"You are going to flog me?" Compton spoke almost casually.

"I have told you so, Compton!"

"I'd rather be sacked!"

There was a buzz in Hall, immediately suppressed. Everyone wanted to hear what the Blighter had to say to that.

"That is not for you to decide, Compton. Come here at once!"

"I'm not goin' to be flogged!" said Aubrey.

"Compton!" gasped Mr. Chard. "Compton!"

"Oh, I say!" brayed the Donkey, in the ranks of the Fourth.

"Aubrey, you ass——" groaned Bob Darrell.

Murmurs rose like the tide. Mr. McCann's voice cut in:

"Silence!"

And there was silence.

"Mr. Chard, kindly conduct that boy to me!" said James McCann.

Chard rolled over to Aubrey and stretched out a hand.

Aubrey swung round, walked quickly down the Hall, flung the door open, and walked out!

So swift and so unexpected was that action that the whole school was taken by surprise. Chard remained, apparently petrified, with his arm extended, his hand grasping space. Again there was a murmur, which rose almost to a roar. Even McCann was taken aback.

He stood looking at the bar of sunlight that fell in at the door, left open by Aubrey Compton. But he quickly woke to action. His swift, elastic strides carried him down the gaping Hall, and he disappeared after Compton.

"Silence! Silence!" trumpeted Chard. "Silence!" hooted Corkran.

But neither master nor prefect was heeded. Hall was in a roar! Compton was gone—McCann was gone after him! What was happening out there in the quad? Excitement grew and intensified. There had been a good many surprising happenings at the School for Slackers since Jimmy McCann had arrived there to wake it up. But this was the most surprising of all.

"Oh, the ass!" groaned Bob.

Would McCann come back dragging Aubrey by the collar? Was the swiping going to take place after all, or was it off? Excited minute followed minute—and McCann did not come back. Fellows craned their ears to hear sounds from the quad—but they heard nothing.

It was full five minutes before Mr. McCann returned—alone.

But his face told nothing. To the disappointment of some of the fags, there were no signs of punching. Whatever had happened and whatever McCann was thinking, he was calm as usual.

"Dismiss!" said Mr. McCann.

The school streamed out.

Never, in the history of High Coombe, had it been so irksome to go into the

Form-rooms. Nobody knew what had happened—everybody wanted to know. One thing they knew in the Fifth—Aubrey was absent. His place in Chard's Form-room was empty. But in the other Form-rooms they did not even know that; and all was excitement and eager curiosity.

The Sixth had to wait for Mr. McCann. He seemed busy about other matters. Chard was called out of the Fifth Form Room for speech with him, and came back looking extremely perturbed, but he said nothing to his Form.

It was not till break that High Coombe learned.

Then the news came out.

Compton had cut!

He was no longer in the school! Judd, it was learned, had stopped him at the gate and had seen him climb over a wall. McCann, after him, had seen him also, glimpsing Aubrey's straw hat as he dropped on the outer side. Compton had told McCann that he would rather be sacked—and he was gone!

From various sources it was learned that McCann had been busy on the telephone. McCann was not the man to let a fellow decide for himself whether he would be sacked or not! Everyone knew, or guessed, that McCann would leave no stone unturned to round up the fugitive and march him back. Of course, he had phoned to Okeham—Compton would not be able to take a train there. Where was old Aubrey now?

It was the sensation of the term! High Coombe fellows could talk of nothing else. Third school was simply a buzz in all the Form-rooms. Goggs took the Sixth in maths, McCann being absent. Was he away hunting for Aubrey? Most fellows supposed so.

If so, it was clear that the hunt was futile. Mr. McCann was seen again at the school dinner. Compton was not. Had he gone home? Had McCann prevented him from getting home? If he got home would his people stand by him or send him back? If he hadn't,

was he wandering on the moors, or where was he?

If McCann had blocked the ways of escape close at hand, his only chance was to cut across the moors and pick up a car or train in some more distant place. As the day wore on, High Coombe thrilled more and more with wonder and excitement and surmise.

After three that day the one topic reigned supreme. Fellows meeting one another asked immediately: "Heard about Compton?" Even Ferguson did not think of cricket that afternoon; though there was a notice on the board, with a list of the names of the men for practice. Not a man turned up—neither did Ferguson! It was Compton first, and everything and everybody else nowhere!

Bob Darrell wandered about looking almost like a ghost. Where was his wayward chum? What had happened to him? What was going to happen to him? Bob could have kicked himself. Why hadn't he collared the ass and held him down by main force?

As the summer sun sank beyond the green coombes into the Atlantic it became known that he had not got home. Chard had been on the telephone to Colonel Compton, and nothing had been seen of Aubrey there. Where was he?

CHAPTER 37.

The Ghost of a Grin!

JAMES MCCANN stood with the straw hat in his hand, looking at it, in the gleam of the summer moon. His face was set and hard. He stood on the rugged slopes of High Tor, five miles from the school. Round him the lonely moor stretched, mile after mile, silent, solitary. Even the iron-limbed headmaster of High Coombe was tired after the exertions of that day.

But he did not think of that as he stood with the straw hat in his hands, the name in it clear in the moon-glimmer, an aching dread in his heart. What had happened to that wilful, way-

ward boy? By one faint clue after another, Jimmy McCann had picked up Aubrey's track over the moor. A shepherd had seen a schoolboy tramping—at a wayside inn he had bought bread and cheese.

It was clear that Compton was striking across the moor; and it was many hours later that Jimmy picked up the trail and followed. People had been lost on the trackless waste of Okeham Moor—and there were dangerous pitfalls for the unwary. Jimmy was angry—but he was anxious, too. And when he picked up the straw hat, with its band in the High Coombe colours, and the name of A. Compton written inside, anger vanished and gave place to anxiety.

He was close on the runaway—yet it was certain that many hours had passed since Compton had stood on that spot. What had happened? Before the headmaster of High Coombe stretched a deep rift in the moor, wide and deep, with crumbling edges. Compton had come on it, as he cut across the moor—jumped it, and the wind had taken off his hat as he jumped. So far, it was fairly clear. But it must have happened in the sun-blaze of early day. Had Compton gone on hatless, or—

Jimmy McCann laid down the hat and stepped to the edge of the rift. On the edge he dropped on hands and knees, and peered into deep shadows. From the dusky depths below came a sound, faint, but clear. It was a groan. Then Jimmy knew.

"Compton!" he called.

There was a faint, startled cry.

"Who's that? Is that you, Bob?"

"It is I, your headmaster, Compton! Are you hurt?"

"My leg—twisted!"

"I am coming down!"

"Don't! It's fifteen feet, at least—you'll get landed same as me."

Jimmy did not heed that. To go for help meant a tramp for miles, leaving the boy where he was—injured in the darkness. Jimmy McCann selected his spot carefully, swung over the edge,

and slid down a steep slope—in the midst of a shower of dislodged earth and stones.

With all his care, he landed bumping and sprawling at the bottom of the rift, and lay for a few moments panting before he picked himself up and moved along, looking for Compton. He had a flashlamp in his pocket, and he turned on the light. The light gleamed on Aubrey's face—a face so white that it seemed as if every vestige of colour had drained from it.

Aubrey Compton did not stir. He blinked in the light, staring up at his headmaster. In the grim solitude and silence of the moor—in the lonely shadows of night—in danger and in pain—even the Blighter's face was welcome. He had been there half a day—helpless. He would have remained there the night—but for the Blighter! He could not imagine how McCann had found him.

"I fell in," he stammered. "I jumped it, and the edge gave way where I landed, and—and——"

"Let me see the damage!" said McCann's quiet, matter-of-fact tones. He did not seem like a headmaster who had caught a reckless young rascal running away from school. He might have been an elder brother. His touch was gentle; but Aubrey winced as he touched the injured limb. "No bones broken," said Mr. McCann, after a minute. "You have been fortunate, Compton. Now about getting out of this."

"I can't stir, sir!" mumbled Aubrey. "I really can't! I've tried a hundred times, and——"

"I am going to carry you!"

Aubrey, though slimmer, was nearly as tall as the stocky young man who was headmaster of High Coombe. He did not believe that McCann could carry him out of the rift. Leaving him staring, Mr. McCann moved along the rugged bottom of the rift, flashing the light to and fro, seeking the most favourable spot for a climb. It was going to be hard—but Jimmy McCann's

view was that difficulties were only made to be overcome. He was the man to overcome them!

Having selected the most promising spot, he returned to Aubrey. The dandy of the Fifth looked at him with the ghost of a grin on his colourless face.

"You can't do it, sir!" he said.

Mr. McCann did not answer; he saw no object in wasting breath. He stooped over Aubrey and lifted him with an ease that surprised him. The dandy of the Fifth was swung on his back. He gave a yelp of pain as a twinge went through his twisted leg.

"Hold round my neck," said Mr. McCann.

He tramped along the rift to the spot he had selected for the climb. Aubrey held on like a limpet to a rock. The steep slope might have baffled any climber, even unburdened. But there was hand-hold and foot-hold for a strong, active, determined man. McCann climbed.

Once, twice, it seemed to Aubrey that they would go pitching back together. But they did not. How McCann stood the strain, Aubrey could only wonder. It seemed that his limbs were of iron, laced with muscles of steel. He was breathing hard through shut teeth.

Was it minutes or hours before the headmaster of High Coombe crawled out on the open moor and Aubrey slipped from his back into the grass? Minutes that seemed like hours!

In the moonlight he glimpsed the headmaster's face—white and drawn, beaded with perspiration, but calm. Mr. McCann stretched in the grass—to rest. Even he was exhausted. Aubrey, a few yards from him, was conscious for the first time since the Blighter had blown in at High Coombe of respect for him—even admiration, even—was it possible?—liking! Bob Darrell had said many a time that the Blighter was a man. And, by Jove, what a man he was—what a man!

Mr. McCann rose at last. The brief rest seemed to have restored him. He smiled faintly at Compton

"Now——" he said.

"I'm sorry, sir!" Aubrey blurted out the words, hardly knowing that he was saying them. "I'm sorry! I—I wish I'd taken that swiping! I'll take it like a shot—now——"

"I am afraid," said Mr. McCann, "that it will be some time, Compton, before you are in a fit state for swiping. And if, in the meantime, I can persuade Monsieur Mouton to forgive your offence, the swiping will not be administered. I think you have had a sufficient lesson, Compton—and I shall be as glad as you to cut out the swiping."

Aubrey could only wonder whether he was dreaming.

James McCann said no more; he needed all his breath for what was before him. He lifted Compton from the grass, placed him as comfortably as he could on broad, strong shoulders, and tramped. Miles of ragged moor lay between him and the school by the shortest possible cuts—mile on mile—till it seemed to Aubrey Compton that Jimmy McCann must sink to the earth from sheer utter weariness. But Jimmy McCann did not.

"Oh, I say!" brayed Donkin.

And everybody else at High Coombe expressed in various ways his amazement when he heard.

It was after lights out when James McCann came back with Compton.

Bob Darrell and Teddy Seymour, wide awake and worried, were in Dormitory No. 3, with the light still on in spite of rules. Only they knew what had happened that night, but in the morning all High Coombe knew. And all High Coombe wondered.

Ferguson of the Fourth was eloquent in the Burrow. Almost the only fellow in the Lower School to back the Blighter, Ferg felt himself justified and vindicated. Hadn't he told them that McCann was a man? He had—and now he told them again. And not a man in the Fourth said "Shut up, Ferg!"

Aubrey had to "stop out" of school

for two or three days. It transpired that the "swiping" was off. Stopping out of school, with time on his hands, Aubrey had ample leisure for laying fresh plans for beating the Blighter and putting paid to the bargee!

But no such plans were running in Aubrey's mind. Aubrey was doing some thinking—unusually hard thinking. But he was not thinking of beating the Blighter now!

CHAPTER 35.

Dumped in the Cupboard!

FERGUSON of the Fourth was taken completely by surprise. Corkran, head prefect, had asked him—not told him, but asked him quite politely—to go to Big Study and fetch his tennis racket, which Corky had left on the table there. Naturally, Ferg went.

Opening the door of Big Study he saw the tennis racket lying on the table. He stepped across to pick it up.

How was Ferguson to know that three Fifth Form fellows—Compton, Seymour, and Carter—were parked behind the big oak door he had swung open, waiting for him there?

It happened suddenly. The open end of a large sack descended over Ferg's head and shoulders from behind, blindfolding him, blotting out the sunshine that streamed in at the windows of Big Study. He struggled wildly. But it was too late. The sack was over him, down to his knees, and a cord round the neck of it was drawn tight at his knees, and Ferg was a helpless prisoner.

The three seniors grinned as Ferg's voice came, muffled, from the interior of the sack.

Now that it had happened Ferg, of course, knew why it had happened. There was games practice at four. Games practice, in these days at High Coombe, was carried on under the stern eye of Ferguson of the Fourth—appointed captain of cricket by James McCann.

So freely and liberally did Ferg exer-

cise his "whopping privs" as captain of cricket that even the slackest slacker at the School for Slackers no longer ventured to cut games. Even Tredegar, captain of the school, turned up like a lamb; even Corky, head prefect, did not venture to shirk; even Aubrey Compton had learned to toe the line!

But if the captain of cricket was headed up in a sack for the afternoon, obviously he could not carry on on the cricket field. And here was Ferg, headed up in a sack! And three Fifth Form men chuckled and grinned over the sack!

They did not speak; they did not want Ferg to hear and to recognise their voices. It was rot, of course, for senior men to have to care a straw about a cheeky fag in the Fourth. Still, there it was—Ferg would have whopped them afterwards for this—and they did not want a whopping from Ferg.

And if it had reached the ears of James McCann it was quite uncomfortable to think of what might have happened.

So, save for a cheery chuckle, they were silent. In silence they heaved Ferg, in the sack, across Big Study, to the cupboard in the corner. Teddy Seymour opened the cupboard door—Compton and Carter rolled Ferguson in. A muffled howl came from the sack as Ferg bumped over.

"Oh, you rotters! Lemme out! Look here, you cads—"

If Ferguson said any more it was shut off by the closing of the cupboard door. Aubrey turned the key, slipped it into his pocket, and the three strolled out of Big Study.

They passed Corkran of the Sixth in the passage. Teddy winked at him as they passed. Corky grinned.

A few minutes later Corky went into Big Study for his racket—as Ferguson had not brought it to him. He did not perhaps hear muffled sounds from the cupboard in the corner. If he heard them he did not heed. With his racket under his arm Corky went out to join Tredegar, Coffin, and Randal, and play

tennis. Compton & Co. strolled into the quad.

"What about a stroll down the coombe?" asked Teddy.

"Games practice!" Aubrey answered reprovingly.

Teddy stared at him.

"But—" he began.

"My dear ass, if anything's happened to our jolly old captain of cricket we don't know anything about it! Isn't there a notice on the board, signed J. A. Ferguson, ordering the Fifth to turn up at four o'clock? Don't we take a proper pleasure in obeying the orders of J. A. Ferguson? I'm surprised at you, Teddy!"

Teddy Seymour chuckled.

"We turn up, of course," said Carter. "Bound to. We may have to wait for our captain. I don't mind waiting. To tell you fellows the truth, I'd rather wait under a shady tree, with a bag of cherries, than slog along at the nets in a hot sun. Strange, but true!"

Teddy chuckled again.

Edward Carter sauntered away to negotiate the purchase of cherries at the school shop.

Aubrey and Teddy strolled on. They were already in flannels, ready for cricket, as became fellows eager to obey the orders of J. A. Ferguson of the Fourth Form. Other Fifth Form men were changed ready, but most of them had smiling faces—and they did not usually smile when games practice was scheduled. Perhaps they knew what had happened to the captain of cricket in Big Study.

Only one man in the Fifth looked at all keen. That was Bob Darrell; but then Bob was always keen.

He joined his two chums with a cheery look on his ruddy face.

"Ripping day for cricket!" he remarked.

Teddy chortled.

Bob stared at him. He did not see anything funny in his remark—unless it was the idea of anybody at the School for Slackers being keen on cricket or anything else.

"Oh, fearfully!" said Aubrey. "I'm rather lookin' forward to it this afternoon, Bob. Let's get along, shall we?"

"It's not four yet."

"Still, let's get along! Nothin' like showin' keenness," said Aubrey blandly. "It will please McCann to see us keen."

Teddy contributed another chuckle. But Bob, in the innocence of his heart, gave Aubrey a very cordial and approving look.

"I'm jolly glad to hear you talk like that, old man," said Bob. "I'm glad you're getting over your fatheaded feud with McCann. I knew you'd come round in the long run."

"You're a bit of an obstinate ass, Aubrey," went on Bob. "But I knew you'd see, in the long run, that McCann was really decent. The man who fished you out of a pit on Okeham Moor and carried you miles on his back because you'd damaged your leg——"

"Oh, shut up!" said Aubrey.

"That was decent," said Teddy. "Who'd have thought it of McCann?"

"Well, I should," said Bob. "It's like him all over! And it's like Aubrey, too, to show that he can appreciate a thing like that. If he wants to let McCann see that he's not ungrateful, he can't do better than by playing up and showing some keenness. McCann would like that better than anything else. So I'm jolly glad——"

"You ass!" said Aubrey.

"Eh? What do you mean?" asked Bob.

"What I say—ass!"

Aubrey's face was clouded. They walked down to the cricket ground in silence after that. Bob was puzzled, and Aubrey, rather to his own surprise, was feeling a painful twinge in his conscience. Ever since that night on Okeham Moor, when Jimmy McCann had rescued him from the pitfall and carried him back to the school, Aubrey Compton had had spasms of thoughtfulness, and even worry. And now Bob's words seemed to have made him more thoughtful and worried than ever.

CHAPTER 39.

Surprise on Top of Surprise!

BULLOCK, the games master, smiled—a sour smile. It was ten minutes past four. Every man in the Fifth Form was on the ground, in spotless flannels. Ferguson, captain of cricket, was not there. Old Bully was rather surprised; for little as he liked the reign of J. A. Ferguson, he had to admit that the kid was keen—very keen. But now he had failed. Ten minutes past four, and no sign of Ferguson. Whereat Bullock smiled sourly.

Certainly there was no need to wait for J. A. Ferguson. The seniors could have got going. But, if a meddling blighter chose to take matters out of Bullock's hands—to appoint a Fourth Form fag captain of cricket against Bullock's strong objections—he could not expect too much of Bullock.

Old Bully, compelled to treat Ferguson with some sort of respect on the cricket field, was entitled to treat him with so much respect as to wait for him and do nothing till he came. So the Fifth Form cricketers did nothing. Which was a thing that all High Coombe men did exceedingly well.

Most of them were grinning. Bob Darrell was perplexed—and Aubrey Compton looked more and more thoughtful, indeed worried. Carter, sharing his cherries with Peverill and Warren under a shady oak, seemed to be enjoying life. At a quarter-past four, James McCann walked down from the House to see how the practice was getting on—and raised his eyebrows very considerably at what he saw—a study in still life.

"Are you waiting for anything, Mr. Bullock?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir," answered the Bullock, with heavy satire. "I thought it better to wait for the captain of cricket."

"Is not Ferguson here?"

"Apparently not," said Bullock.

James McCann's keen eyes flashed round. He did not fail to detect lurking smiles. Something was "on," that was

clear to McCann. A gleam came into the blue-grey eyes.

"Darrell, do you know where Ferguson is?"

"No, sir," answered Bob.

"Do you, Compton?"

Aubrey looked at the Head. There was an expression on Aubrey's face that his friends found it hard to read.

Looking at the keen face, the stocky figure of the man who was variously called the Blighter, the Bargee, the Bounder, at High Coombe, Aubrey did not at the moment see him a blighter, a bargee, and a bounder. He saw the man who had clambered down into the deep rift on Okeham Moor at the peril of his limbs and got him out by a superhuman exertion of strength—the man who had carried him on his back over miles of rugged moor.

Somehow of late Aubrey seemed to be continually seeing McCann like this, instead of in his former character of blighter, bargee, and bounder. And under the headmaster's eyes, Aubrey Compton's face coloured slightly, and his own glance dropped.

There was a distinct pause before he answered:

"I think I could find him, sir."

That answer puzzled all Aubrey's friends. Certainly Aubrey could have found Ferguson had he liked. That he had any idea of doing so, however, was unimaginable. Probably McCann was puzzled, too. However, he answered:

"Please do, Compton!"

Aubrey handed his bat to an astonished Teddy and headed for the House.

The Fifth Form men looked at one another. Puzzled, they could form only one theory—that Aubrey was going to pretend to look for Ferguson—looking everywhere where he was not to be found, in order to waste time and keep the Blighter hanging about, fuming. Having come to this conclusion, the Fifth Form men smiled again, and prepared to enjoy the Head's discomfiture.

They would have gaped had they been able to see Aubrey Compton's proceedings in the House. Aubrey went directly to Big Study. As he entered, he took a key from his pocket, crossed to the cupboard in the corner—and paused.

From inside the big cupboard came rustling sounds and a mumbling voice. Aubrey stood listening, with changing expressions on his face. He had schemed that scheme, and it had worked like a charm. Was he going to undo what he had so cleverly done?

He was!

The key scraped into the lock—after long hesitation. Aubrey snapped it back, and pulled open the door.

Louder, with the cupboard door open, came the mumbling voice of J. A. Ferguson from inside the sack. Aubrey rolled J. A. Ferguson out, and unloosed the cord about his knees. He jerked the sack off. Ferguson sat panting on the floor, while Aubrey tossed the sack into the cupboard and closed the door on it.

"You cheeky rotter!" roared Ferg, scrambling up. "By gum! Shutting a man up in 'a cupboard in a sack!"

Aubrey shrugged his shoulders.

"They're waitin' for you," he said disdainfully, and walked to the door of Big Study.

"Look here!" roared Ferguson.

Aubrey walked out. Ferg followed him, red with fury. But he was astonished, too. He had not seen or heard the fellows who had headed him up in the sack. But he had had no doubt that Compton of the Fifth was one of them. And here was Compton letting him loose. It was rather amazing. He cut after Aubrey, overtook him as he was going out of the House, and grabbed his arm.

"Look here! You jolly well had a hand in sticking me in that sack!" hooted Ferguson. "I jolly well know you did!"

Aubrey gave him a glance of superb disdain.

"Didn't you?" hooted Ferg.

"Oh, yes!" answered Aubrey care-

lessly. He shook Ferg's hand from his arm.

"Then what have you let me loose for?"

"Find out!"

With that scornful reply Compton walked away to the cricket field. Ferg mystified, hurried after him. Aubrey had shut him in—and let him out again in ample time for games practice. There did not seem any sense in it, so far as Ferg could see.

"What the jolly old thump——" ejaculated Carter, in blank surprise, at the sight of Compton, followed by Ferguson.

The Fifth stared blankly. It was not a trick to waste McCann's time, it seemed—Aubrey was not pulling the Blighter's leg. He had gone for Ferguson—and he had come back with Ferguson. They could not begin to understand it.

Mr. McCann gave Ferguson a sharp glance.

"You are late, Ferguson!" he said.

"Not my fault, sir!" gasped Ferguson. He said no more, and Mr. McCann asked no more; probably he could guess enough. There was Ferguson, and Bullock and the Fifth had no further excuse for slacking about and wasting time. Incarceration in the cupboard in Big Study had not sapped any of Ferg's energy; he got going with his usual vim. And the Fifth Form cricketers got going—Compton with much more than his usual vim.

Mr. McCann glanced at Aubrey with keen, curious eyes several times during the next hour. Teddy Seymour gaped at him. Bob Darrell grinned at him with happy satisfaction. The Fifth did not know what to make of him.

There had been many surprises since Jimmy McCann had blown in as head-master. But surely the greatest surprise was to see Aubrey Compton, the dandy of the Fifth, and the most determined slacker in the School for Slackers, displaying keenness at cricket!

Was it some weird jest, of which his

astonished friends could not see the meaning? Some fellows almost wondered whether it was sunstroke. Aubrey could bowl—he was, in fact, a first-class bowler when he chose! Now he seemed to be throwing himself into it as if he loved the game of cricket—as if he liked bringing a delighted smile to the face of the Blighter—as if indeed he was a real live schoolboy, and not a stuffed tailor's dummy!

Whatever it meant, there it was. It was the happiest afternoon Bob Darrell had had that term. Aubrey had always had this in him. Now he was letting it come out. Bob, the best batsman at High Combe grinned with glee when Aubrey scattered his sticks. What a rod in pickle for Okeham if old Aubrey kept this up, instead of rotting about and planning japes on McCann and playing the giddy ox generally! That victory over Okeham, of which Bob and even Fred at times had dreamed, might not be such a remote possibility, after all.

CHAPTER 40.

Keen as Mustard!

"I 'M not goin'," said Aubrey Compton, "to be under a dashed obligation to a dashed usher."

In Big Study after tea there was a crowd—Fifth and Sixth. Everybody was discussing the proceedings of the dandy of the Fifth—everybody wanted to know what the dickens he meant by it—and everybody was jolly well going to make him explain himself. So there was quite a roar when Aubrey came in with Bob and Teddy.

Some of the High Ccombers were angry. Some were reproachful. They felt that Aubrey had let down the school. For was it not their first duty to oppose the Blighter, to beat him and baffle him, to make him sit up, and to score over him? The Blighter could—and did—make fellows work in the Form-rooms. Only within limits could he make them work at games. Was it not up to every man to make those limits as narrow as possible? So

what the dickens did Aubrey think he was at?

But Darrell was in a state of undisguised satisfaction. It really seemed as if, unconsciously, McCann's boundless energy had infused itself into High Coombe; and quite a number of fellows, though they hardly realised it, were in a frame of mind to follow a new lead. If Aubrey, the most determined champion of slacking, changed sides, there really was no telling what might come of it.

Everybody wanted Aubrey to explain—and he explained. He still alluded to McCann as a "dashed usher." He was still, it appeared, against the Blighter. Nevertheless—

"You know what the man did!" said Aubrey. "I tumbled into that dashed pit on Okeham Moor, and stayed there for hours. I should have had a night of it if the Blighter hadn't found me and lugged me out. He carried me home on his back. Well—"

"What," asked Randal of the Sixth, from the depths of his armchair, "has that got to do with cricket?"

"Well," said Aubrey, "it was decent of the Blighter, after the way I'd treated him. What's the good of sayin' it wasn't? I'm not stayin' under an obligation when I can wash it out. I'm goin' to get even with him. He's frightfully keen on the school makin' a show at cricket! He would dance round his study, I believe, if we beat Okeham—"

"Beat Okeham?" repeated Randal dazedly. "Wake up, old chap!"

"Why the thump shouldn't we beat Okeham?" asked Tred. "I've always thought—"

"We're goin' to beat Okeham!" said Aubrey Compton quietly, "or, at least, we're goin' to give them the fight of their lives. I'm goin' to do that for McCann, to get even. Afterwards—"

Aubrey paused.
"Never mind afterwards!" said Bob Darrell. "We're going to beat Okeham."

"We are!" said Teddy Seymour.

With both his pals pulling the same way, Teddy had no doubts; his course was marked plain and clear before him. Teddy was going all out to develop into a terrific cricketer. Always, at the bottom of his heart, he had wanted to. Now he was going to.

"You're an ass, Aubrey!" said Randal plaintively.

"A silly ass!" complained Peverill. "You take all the trouble to shut that little beast Ferguson up in a sack, then you let him out in time to make us slog at games practice. You jolly well ought to be kicked."

"Fathead!" said Aubrey cheerfully. "I'm going to play up. You men are goin' to play up!"

"You're lettin' us down!" said Randal.

"Bucking you up, you mean!" grinned Bob Darrell.

But that, from Randy's point of view, came to the same thing. He sat up in

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his armchair and almost glared at Aubrey. He would have been actually angry if it hadn't been too much trouble.

"Do you think," demanded Randy, "that because you've changed your mind, we're all going to do the same? Think you can run High Coombe like a second edition of the Blighter! What?"

"Shut up, Randy!" said Tred.

"Compton can change his mind if he likes," said Randy. "I'm not goin' to change mine."

"I would, old chap, if I got a chance!" advised Carter. "Change it at the first chance, Randy—it's rather a weak one."

"I think," said Randy, unheeding, "that Pev's right, and Compton ought to be kicked! You kick him, Tred."

But Tredegar only grinned. Instead of kicking Compton, or displaying any desire to do so, Tred entered into a discussion with Aubrey, Bob and Teddy, on the subject of—cricket! Corkran joined in, with some keenness, then Coffin and Carter. Randal gave them an indignant look, and went to sleep.

Jimmy McCann, the next morning, had a pleasant surprise. That morning there were no Early Nets. Even the indefatigable Ferguson did not work his men at Early Nets every morning. So the headmaster of High Coombe, taking his usual early walk abroad in the freshness of the summer dawn, was naturally surprised to hear the cheery sound of clicking bat and ball from the direction of the Senior Nets. He walked in that direction to see what was to be seen.

What he saw was a little crowd of the Fifth and Sixth—all busy, all keen, and all so intent that they did not observe the stocky figure of James McCann as he came. There were Tredegar, Corkran, Coffin, and Carew, of the Sixth—there were Darrell, Seymour, Compton, Carter, Burke, Warren and Durance, of the Fifth. It was on Compton that Jimmy McCann specially

fixed his eyes. Aubrey, in his flannels, made a handsome figure, but seldom an energetic one. But now—

Bob Darrell had hit a high catch. The ball was whizzing towards James McCann. So was Aubrey Compton. "Whizzing" was the only word for it. The elegant saunterer of High Coombe covered the ground as if gifted with the seven-league boots. It was a high catch—an extremely difficult catch—a catch that few fieldsmen could have brought off; and Jimmy McCann halted to see whether Compton could do it. He could, and did!

His whiz carried him right up to the Blighter—he almost barged into McCann when he got the ball. But he got it—with his left hand, and held it—and then, in surprise, stood staring at McCann, whom he had not seen till that moment. He almost dropped the ball in his surprise.

The crimson came into his face. Did McCann think that he knew he was there—that he was putting this up to catch his eye—to "grease" up to the Blighter? If McCann thought that! Aubrey's new and not very firm resolutions trembled in the balance. If McCann thought he was "greasing"—But McCann evidently did not. He gave Compton a nod and a cheery smile.

"Well caught!" he said, and walked on towards the nets.

The men there eyed him rather uneasily. They knew well enough that McCann would be pleased to see them there, turning up of their own accord—the first sign of keenness since he had been headmaster of High Coombe. That knowledge made them uneasy. If the Blighter fancied they were "greasing"—But James McCann had heaps of tact.

From his manner, no one could have guessed that he had driven the School for Slackers like a team of jibbing horses, and that he was neither surprised or delighted to see them coming into line at last. He looked, and spoke, precisely as if it were the most ordinary

and normal thing to see High Coombe men at games practice when a big match was coming along.

"You've got a good man there, Tredegar!" said Mr. McCann, with a nod towards Compton. "I've noticed his bowling before, and now I see he is equally good in the field. A very good man."

"Oh! Yes!" stammered Tred.

"A rod in pickle for Okeham, what?" said Mr. McCann pleasantly.

"Oh! Yes!"

"You will be selecting your team soon, Tredegar?"

"I, sir?" said Tred. He was rather worried about Ferguson. There had been no outside fixture since J. A. Ferguson of the Fourth Form had been appointed captain of cricket. What would happen when the Okeham match came along nobody knew, and nobody, hitherto, had cared very much.

Now, in a new and regenerated frame of mind, some of the fellows cared—and wondered. To follow a fag captain into the field would have been putting that new and regenerated frame of mind to a very severe strain—a strain under which it might have cracked!

Jimmy McCann was not the man to impose such a strain. Having got what he wanted, he was satisfied. So, in response to Ted's ejaculation, he simply raised his eyebrows slightly.

"You, naturally, as captain," he said; "though, of course, Mr. Bullock will give you any advice, if you consult him."

With a cheery nod to the cricketers, Mr. McCann walked on. He left them keen as mustard!

CHAPTER 41.

A Ragging for Randy!

RANDAL had an idea. It was not often that old Randy had an idea, so he was naturally rather proud of this one. For many days Randy had witnessed, with grief and indignation, what seemed to him the hopeless degeneration of High

Coombe. So far as Randy could see, the old school was absolutely going to pot. No longer did fellows plot and plan and contrive to dodge games practice.

Aubrey Compton, instead of setting an example of elegant slacking, was setting one of keenness, energy, vim—the sort of thing that made Randy feel tired to contemplate. That beefy brute, Darrell, had always been keen. Now Aubrey was just as bad, and so was Teddy—and so, alas! were quite a mob of other fellows in the Fifth.

In the Sixth it was as bad—or nearly as bad! Big Study, once the home of sweet repose, now echoed to eager talk on the subject of games. Fellows discussed the chances of beating Okeham—as if it mattered a twopenny ice whether they beat Okeham or not. As a member of the First Eleven, Randal was prepared to play and contribute a duck's egg, or a pair of spectacles, as the case might be—which was surely all that a reasonable fellow could expect. Further than that Randy was not prepared to go.

Randy, who had an easy and hopeful nature, hoped that this was a temporary phase, and would pass. But as the Okeham date drew nearer matters went from bad to worse. Tredegar, once in danger of being howled down if he talked cricket in Big Study, now seemed unable to hit on a more popular topic. His ruddy, good-natured face would beam as he talked, and fellows would gather round him, cheery and keen. And more and more of them, too! It seemed to poor Randy that it was catching, like measles!

Wherefore did Randy set his tired brain to work and put in some thinking—a process to which he was unaccustomed. The result was the idea—for even Randy could produce an idea under stress. And a couple of days before the Okeham date Randy propounded that big idea to a crowd of fellows in Big Study.

It was an idea that a few short weeks ago would doubtless have caught on

and been greeted with acclaim. Randy hoped that it was not too late.

"About the Okeham match, you men——" said Randal.

Tredegar turned to him with quite a bright smile. Was even old Randy coming round? That was good, for Tred was bothered about old Randy. If there was going to be any earthly chance of beating Okeham he could not possibly play an incurable slacker like Randal, and he hated the idea of dropping the old bean. But if Randy was coming round, like the rest——

"Go it, Randy!" said Tred.

"I've got rather an idea," said Randal. "It seems that that cheeky little tick, Ferguson, isn't captaining the side—the Blighter only sprung him on to us to make life not worth livin'. Now my idea is this—the Blighter chose to make the little beast captain of cricket. Let him get on with it. Leave it at that!"

"Eh?"

"Every senior man," continued the happy Randy, "refuses to play under his captaincy, naturally. What happens?"

Twenty fellows gazed, speechless, at Randy.

"What happens," said Randal, "is this—either they have to scratch the fixture or send Ferguson into the field with a team of fags. In either case, we score over the Blighter—knock him sky-high—what?"

That was the idea.

Randal had not, perhaps, quite realised that his hearers were no longer keen on scoring over the Blighter, but on scoring over Okeham. The silence of astonishment and wrath followed the propounding of Randy's big idea. Randal, taking silence for consent, smiled cheerily.

Tredegar rose from the window-seat.

"Scrag him!" he said.

"Eh, what?" ejaculated Randal.

"Scrag the silly ass!" said Aubrey.

"But I say—what——" stuttered Randal.

"Bump him!" said Bob Darrell.

It was like a horrid dream to Randal. Scragging and ragging and bumping were, or had been, unknown in Big Study. Now, however, such proceedings proceeded in Big Study. Five or six wrathful cricketers grasped Randal and jerked him headlong out of his arm-chair.

They bumped him on the carpet—hard. It was a thick, soft carpet, but it felt hard enough to Randy. He whirled in the grasp of many hands and smote the carpet and smote it again and again.

He roared, but the bumps continued until at last Randal was left on the carpet, gasping and spluttering. He lay there with his long legs stretched out, his coat split at the tails, his collar hanging loose, his hair like a mop. He wondered dizzily whether this thing had really happened. He sat up—and gurgled.

Big Study, gathered round Tred, who was talking cricket in the window-seat, did not heed. They seemed to have forgotten him.

"Wooooogh!" gurgled Randy.

"The list," Tredegar was saying, "goes up to-morrow."

"Wurgh!" Randal collected his long legs and got on them. "Urrgh! I resign from the Eleven! Urrgh!"

"No need for that," said Tred.

"I mean it—urrrghh!"

"I mean you're not in it," explained Tred. "You're kicked out, so you needn't bother about resigning a place you haven't got!"

Randal limped out of Big Study. The last of the old brigade, he had done his best—and this was the outcome! Randy could only make up his mind to look on, a silent spectator, while the school went to pot!

CHAPTER 42.

The Miracle!

○ KEHAM expected to walk over High Coombe that day. They had grown rather accustomed to looking upon High Coombe as a

sort of doormat to be walked over. They did not know—though they were going to learn—that Tredegar and his merry men were no longer understudying a doormat.

It turned out to be a great day, a surprising day, in the annals of the School for Slackers. Tred, having got fairly going, had taken the bit between his teeth, as it were. Aubrey, having once thrown up his attitude of elegant slacking, found, perhaps a little to his own surprise, that he was fearfully keen to beat Okeham.

He still told himself that he was just merely doing this to get even with McCann for what the Blighter had done. One good turn deserved another. But he hardly believed it himself.

Old Tred, once the most easy-going of mortals, combed out his team with an unsparing hand. Randal was chucked, and two or three other men, and in the place of one of them the name of J. A. Ferguson figured in the list. This made some of the big men look grave, and it made the Bullock snort. But Tred seemed to be a new Tred, being in this matter monarch of all he surveyed. Tred lived up to that lofty position. He knew, too, that McCann approved—and of late Tred had grown more and more to respect the opinion of McCann, and to be anxious for his approval.

Ferg, indeed, might have had his private dreams of captaining the side in a school match. But Ferg was a canny, level-headed youth, and did not need telling where he got off. Ferg knew that he had answered a useful purpose, and was glad to have done so; and it was great glory for Ferg to play even at the tail of the First Eleven—in the present high and palmy state of that Eleven.

Keenness, as poor Randy had feared, had proved catching, like measles! Everybody was keen. It was noticeable that hardly anybody, these days, talked of McCann as the Blighter, the Bargee, or the Bounder. They spoke

of him as "the Head"—as if they had made the interesting discovery quite lately that he was headmaster—they even began to speak of him as "Jimmy"—just Jimmy!

On Okeham day a special concession from Jimmy made it a whole holiday for the school, so that all High Coombe, if they liked, could watch the great match from the first ball of the first over to the fall of the last wicket. Which all High Coombe wanted to do, and intended to do—and did—which alone made it an historic occasion at the School for Slackers!

It was a great game.

Tredegar & Co. surprised Okeham, and perhaps surprised themselves.

High Coombe made fifty-nine in their first innings, taking first knock. Of those, twenty belonged to Bob Darrell and two to Ferguson, and there were no ducks.

Okeham went in and made sixty.

The Okeham men had had an idea of knocking up a couple of hundred or so for three or four wickets and then declaring—with the comfortable knowledge that they would not have to bat again. Instead of which they made sixty—and had put in all their beef to get that sixty. Evidently, they had to bat again—and would have to play their very hardest, unless they were to go home to Okeham with the astounding news that they had been beaten at High Coombe.

And defeat began to look possible when High Coombe took their second knock. For Bob Darrell added another twenty; Tred put up ten; Aubrey Compton contributed twenty-four; Teddy Seymour was good for a dozen; Corkran made fourteen—and Ferguson, who had a feeling that it was his day, proceeded to prove that it was by hitting fifteen off very good bowling.

And if the rest had to be satisfied with smaller scores, again there were no ducks. The total for the innings was 105—which looked as if High Coombe were warming to the work, and could, if they liked, show that they,

were a cricketing school, though it had pleased them to pretend that they weren't.

The Okeham men were quite serious when they went in again. It was only too clear that High Coombe cricket, at least on this occasion, had to be taken seriously. Still more serious did they look when the Okeham captain was bowled in the first over by Compton. Jimmy McCann, at the pavilion, positively grinned, and added his deep roar to the shout that went up. The first duck in that game was an Okeham duck.

But Okeham were good men and true, and they pulled up their socks and fought every inch of the way. Slowly, but steadily, the score went up, and as the afternoon waned, it looked like anybody's game. After tea, all High Coombe was packed round the field; and when the 100 went up for Okeham there was breathless suspense. One hundred for nine wickets, and last man in!

Tredegar gave Aubrey Compton the ball, and a beseeching look along with it. Okeham wanted four to tie, five to win, and there were bags of time yet—if they could do it. And Compton sent down a ball off which the batsman made three, first shot!

Jimmy McCann was not grinning now.

He hardly breathed. All High Coombe, packed round and staring with all their eyes, seemed to have suspended breathing. Aubrey Compton seemed an age getting the next ball off. Now—Hot from the bat it flew—where?

The batsmen were running—and so was a small figure with a freckled face—till there came a smack, as leather met palm, and Ferguson of the Fourth tossed up the ball—and all High Coombe broke into a tremendous roar.

"Well caught!"

"Oh, well caught!"

"Ferguson! Bravo, Ferg!"

"Bowled Compton—caught Ferguson!" said Jimmy McCann; and, hardly

knowing what he was doing, he thumped Bullock on the back with a thump that made old Bully stagger. But old Bully only chuckled.

Suddenly there was a rush of boys on to the playing field. Yelling madly, a mixture of fags of the Fourth, boys of the Shell, Fifth Formers, and men of the Sixth crowded round the victorious Eleven, hoisted them on to their shoulders, and bore them in triumph back to the pavilion.

Jimmy McCann smiled at the cheering crowd. It was the finest thing that had happened since he had taken over the reins at High Coombe. All along, he had known that the fellows had the right stuff in them, and that it only wanted bringing out. It had been a hard fight to rouse them, but now it looked as if he had succeeded.

"Well played, Tredegar!" he said, as the hot and breathless Tred was dumped down at the entrance to the pavilion. "I am proud of you and your team!"

Jimmy left it at that. He felt like shaking hands with every man jack of the Eleven, but wisely refrained, well knowing that to give too much praise at this moment might lead to the undoing of his good work. Fellows were still inclined to be suspicious of him and his methods, and to make himself too prominent at that moment would only serve to remind them how they had had to be driven to throw off their slackness.

Jimmy turned away and walked thoughtfully back to his House as the fellows massed in front of the pavilion gave three hearty cheers for the team.

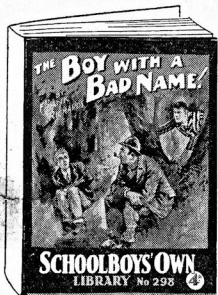
Was it going to last?

Jimmy McCann, perhaps, wondered.

Anyhow, there was so much to the good, and there was no doubt that the young man with the ginger hair had wondrously gingered High Coombe—hardly recognisable to anyone that great day as a School for Slackers!

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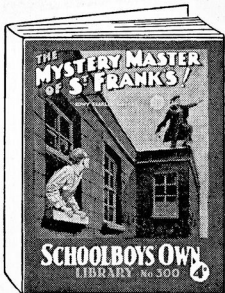


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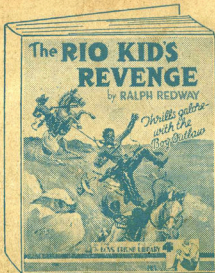
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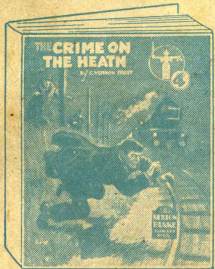
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