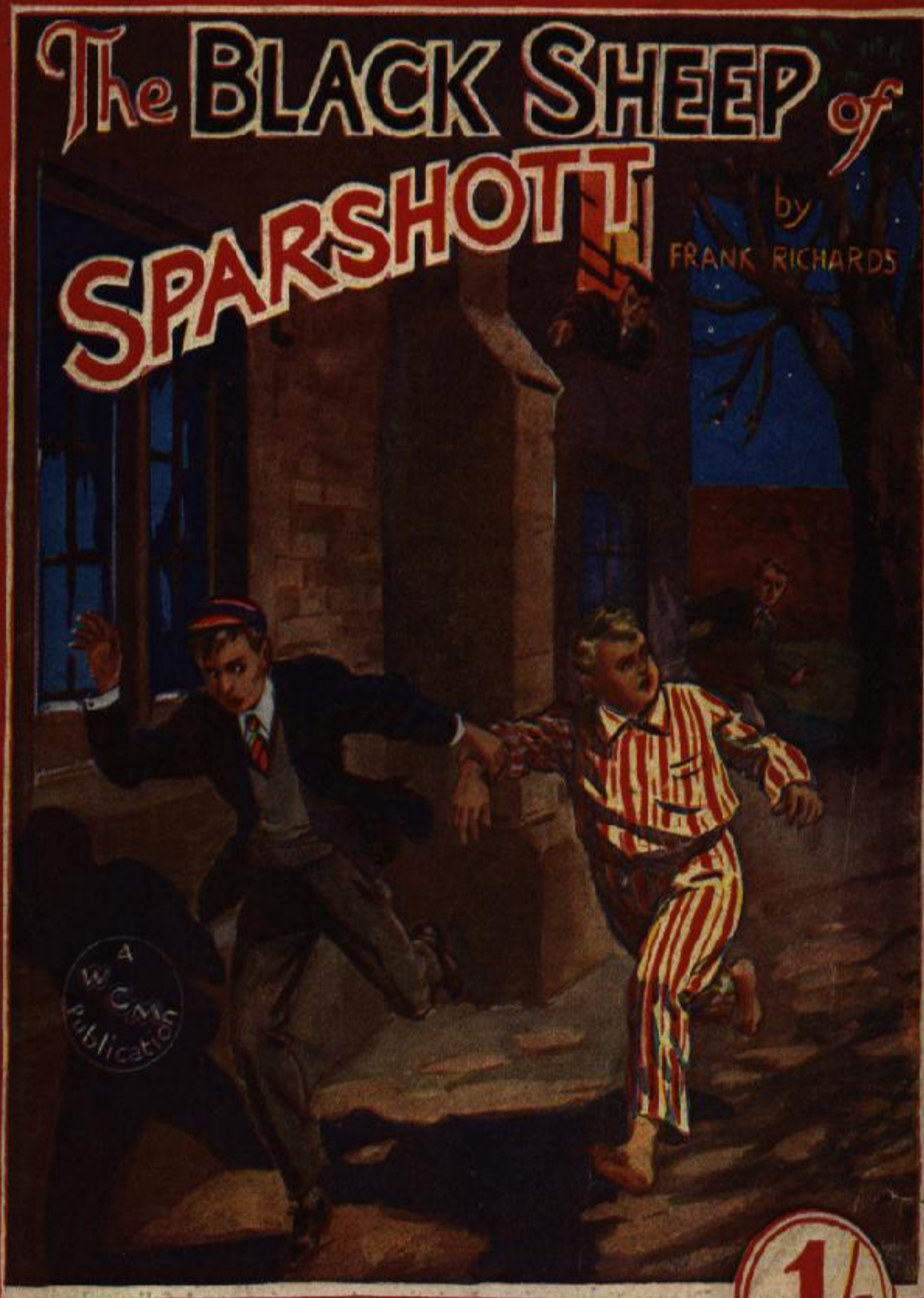


SCHOOLBOY SERIES No. 2

The BLACK SHEEP of SPARSHOTT

by
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The Black Sheep of Sparshott

“MIND this for me—quick!”

“Eh!—What?”

Plum Tumpton, of the Sparshott Fourth, was quite astonished.

Plum was loafing about inside the school gateway, waiting for his chums, Vernon and Rake, to come in. At a rapid step on the road, he looked round. But it was not Vernon or Rake—it was Barnes-Paget of the Fourth who came in at the gates hurriedly and almost breathlessly.

Plum gave Barnes-Paget only a careless glance. He was not interested in the “bad hat” of the Sparshott Fourth. He was interested in Vernon and Rake—not only because they were his pals, but because he expected them to bring back a cake from Rodwood. It was tea-time; and Plum had had nothing since dinner but a few scones, a chunk of toffee, and a pork pie. So the plumpest member of the Sparshott Fourth was naturally anxious to see the cake.

Barnes-Paget, as a rule, had little use for Plum. But on this occasion it seemed that he had a use for him. He thrust a little packet into the astonished Plum’s hand.

“Mind it—oh, you clown!” panted Barnes-Paget, as Plum let the packet fall. He pounced upon it, snatched it up from the ground, and thrust it into Plum’s hand again. “Can’t you hold it, you ass? Mind it for me—shove it in your pocket.”

In sheer astonishment, Plum put his hand in his pocket, with the packet in it. Barnes-Paget stepped back, and was several paces away from Plum, when another hurried figure came in at the school gates.

This time it was senior: no less a person than Wilmot of the Sixth, the captain of Sparshott. The big Sixth-former looked red and breathless, and his brows were knitted.

“Barnes-Paget!” he rapped.

“Yes, Wilmot!”

“Give me that packet at once.”

“What packet, Wilmot?” asked the junior, meekly.

“The packet I saw you take, through the hedge, from someone, not five minutes ago, you young sweep.”

“But I didn’t—!”

“That will do! Give me the packet at once—!”

“But I haven’t—!”

“That’s enough!” snapped Wilmot. “Come with me.”

The captain of Sparshott strode off towards the House, Barnes-Paget followed him—closing one eye at the amazed Plum as he went.

Plum stared after them. Eustace Percival Tumpton was not quick on the uptake, and he could not make head or tail of this. He could guess that the packet Barney had passed on to him was the one that Wilmot demanded: but what it was, and why the prefect wanted it, Plum did not guess. Thinking was not Plum’s long suit—besides, his mental processes, such as they were, were concentrated on cake. He dismissed Barnes-Paget from his mind, and resumed his watch for Vernon and Rake, like a plump Sister Anne.

Meanwhile Wilmot of the Sixth, with a grim brow, marched Barnes-Paget into the House. Two fellows of the Fourth, Carboy and Root, stared at them rather uneasily as they came in. Perhaps Carboy and Root knew something about that packet! Barnes-Paget winked at them in passing, and followed Wilmot to Mr. Lamb’s study.

Wilmot gave the junior a rather puzzled glance, as he walked him in. He was certain, as certain as a dutiful prefect could be, that he had seen Barnes-Paget take a packet of cigar-

ettes, through a gap in the hedge in Rodwood Lane, from someone who had been waiting there with the forbidden goods—not five minutes' walk from the gates of Sparshott. The "Buccaneer" of Sparshott was the fellow for such things: and Wilmot had no doubt whatever on the subject. Yet the young rascal was perfectly cool and calm, and—unless he was a remarkably good actor—did not care a boiled bean about being taken to his form-master.

"What is it, Wilmot?" asked Mr. Lamb.

Lamb was busy marking Form papers. He was occupied at the moment, as it happened, with a paper that had the name of V. Barnes-Paget on it. It was quite a good paper—but it had several mistakes in it, which Mr. Lamb could not help suspecting were intentional. V. Barnes-Paget could do a very good paper if he chose, but Lamb's opinion was that he did not choose—yet his paper was good enough to make it difficult to call him to account. That Latin prose was, in fact, one more sample of Barnes-Paget's favourite game of "ragging" his form-master, in a way that could not be punished. Lamb was practically certain of it—but not certain enough to hand out punishment without risk of injustice—and the Little Lamb was a whale on justice.

"I have brought this boy of your form to you, sir," said Wilmot. "He denies having a packet of cigarettes, which I am certain I saw handed to him by someone behind a hedge."

Mr. Lamb rose to his feet. His brows knitted, and he gave Barnes-Paget a look that might have made even the hardy "Buccaneer" a little uneasy—had that packet of smokes been still in his possession.

"Place that packet on the table at once," rapped Mr. Lamb.

"I've told Wilmot, sir, that I haven't any packet," said Barnes-Paget, meekly. "He is mistaken, sir."

"You will turn out your pockets."

Barnes-Paget turned out his pockets. He turned them out to the lining, and pulled the lining out, as if to show beyond all possible cavil that the pockets were empty. Mr. Lamb watched him grimly: Wilmot with more and more perplexity.

Wilmot was a good-natured fellow, and did not like reporting a junior to his "beak." But he had his duty to do, as a prefect, and he did it. Now it rather looked as if he had been too hasty. For no packet of smokes came to light, after all Barnes-Paget's pockets were turned out; and Wilmot grew more and more perplexed and uncomfortable, and his face reddened.

Mr. Lamb's frown intensified. He was prepared to cane the boy, and with no lack of severity, if he deserved it. But he did not want a member of his form reported to him for nothing. Barnes-Paget, no doubt, was a young rascal; he had been caned more than once for smoking, which was forbidden very severely at Sparshott. But even the scapegrace of the Fourth was entitled to justice.

"Well, Wilmot?" said Mr. Lamb, at length, "Barnes-Paget seems to have nothing of the kind in his pockets."

Wilmot was crimson by this time.

"I—I certainly thought, sir——!" he stammered. "I was coming round the corner of the lane, and Barnes-Paget was ahead of me—I saw him side-step into a gap in the hedge, and I am certain—practically certain—that an arm was put through from the other side, and that he took a packet——"

"I was looking for a bird's nest," said Barnes-Paget, mildly. "Carboy told me there was one in that hedge."

"Did you follow Barnes-Paget back at once to the school, Wilmot?"

"Yes, sir, I was hardly a minute after him——"

"Did you lose sight of him at all?"

"Only, for a few moments as he turned in at the gates. Oh!" ejaculated Wilmot, suddenly, "I—I suppose it is possible that he may have thrown the packet away, in those few moments when my eyes were off him——"

"In that case, the packet should be easy enough to find, in such a place," said Mr. Lamb. "But for the moment, Wilmot, I can only dismiss this boy."

"You may go, Barnes-Paget."

"Thank you, sir."

Barnes-Paget left the study, and did not grin until the door had closed on him. Then he grinned—widely. He had "done" his beak; he had made the captain and head-prefect of Sparshott look a fool; and later on the packet of smokes could be safely collected from that clown Tumpton. All of which made the young rascal feel very pleased with himself and things generally as he sauntered away to join Carboy and Root.

"WHAT a game!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is worth watching!"

Three juniors were collected in the window of No. 5 Study in the Fourth-form passage. No. 5 was Barnes-Paget's study which he shared with Carboy and Root. The three, at the window, were staring towards the school gates in the distance—and what they saw there seemed to entertain them considerably.

Nearer at hand, three juniors were crossing towards the House—Vernon, Rake and Tumpton. Tom Rake had a parcel, no doubt containing the cake for which Plum had been waiting so anxiously. Plum had a cheery grin on his plump face—a beatific grin—being assured now on the subject of the cake. Harry Vernon was glancing back, as if puzzled by what was going on at the gates. The three passed on into the House—unheeded by the three at the study window above. The "Buccaneer" and his comrades watched the little scene at the gate—chuckling.

Wilmot of the Sixth was there. Stooping every now and then, to glance into corners, he was searching and scanning—Barnes-Paget knew for what. Old Charne, the school porter, had come out, apparently to lend his assistance, for he was stooping and peering and scanning too. Then Rance of the Sixth, another prefect, came up—and evidently learning from Wilmot what was on hand, began to peer and scan and stoop and stare into corners. Which was a joyous spot of entertainment for the young rascals in No. 5 Study.

"Poor old Wilmot!" chuckled Barnes-Paget. "He looked a frightful ass in the Little Lamb's study. And now——"

"He won't be happy till he gets it!" grinned Carboy.

"Hallo, there's another pre.!" exclaimed Root, as Gower of the Sixth joined the searchers at the gate. "My only bonnet! If there were any smokes lying about you'd be a goner, Barney."

"Luckily, they're safe in that clown Tumpton's pocket!" grinned Barnes-Paget.

"I say, though, are they safe with Tumpton?" asked Carboy. "You know that bunch in No. 3 Study—they never smoke, and they'd think nothing of chucking a fellow's smokes on the fire. I'm surprised Tumpton took it on."

"I don't suppose he has the faintest idea what's in the packet," answered Barnes-Paget. "It was wrapped up, of course."

"If he thinks for a minute——"

"Does he ever?"

"Well, no!" chuckled Carboy. "Only about food, anyway. But look here, now all's safe and sound, bag the packet from him, and let's have a smoke before tea. I'm dying for a smoke."

"No jolly fear!" said Barnes-Paget, emphatically. "Lamb

had to let me off—but I didn't like the look in his eye. He couldn't do a thing, as there was nothing on me—but—this study is going to be as innocent, and spotless as No. 3 to-day. Lamb might look in."

"Oh, crumbs! Talk of angels!" breathed Carboy, as there was a footstep outside, and a tap at the study door.

The door opened, and revealed the master of the Fourth. Carboy and Root became extremely serious on the spot. They never felt quite at ease under Mr. Lamb's keen, penetrating eye. But the Buccaneer was quite cool and unconcerned. He had nothing to fear, with nothing of a contraband nature in his study; neither was fear a part of his composition.

Mr. Lamb was a rather small gentleman. He was generally alluded to in his form—though not in his hearing—as the "Little Lamb." He had a mild face and a quiet voice. But he could look grim—very grim—and his voice could take on a deep note; and every fellow in the Fourth knew that he could "whop." Barnes-Paget had the best of reasons to know it; he was "whopped" at least twice as often as any other fellow in the Fourth—and deserved it ten times as often.

Lamb had his cane under his arm. And he gave a slight sniff as he entered No. 5 Study. Evidently Lamb was suspicious.

"It is my intention, Barnes-Paget, to make an examination in this study!" said Mr. Lamb. "If anything is locked, kindly produce the keys."

"There's nothing locked, sir," answered Barnes-Paget, meekly. "But I do hope, sir, that you don't think there is anything here that isn't allowed."

"Twice this term, Barnes-Paget, cigarettes have been found in this study!" snapped Mr. Lamb. "On each occasion I caned you. If I find anything of the sort on this occasion, I shall cane you again, with greater severity."

"I assure you, sir——"

"I shall satisfy myself; you need say nothing."

For five or six minutes Mr. Lamb was busy. Barnes-Paget and Co. watched him, in silence, their manner dutifully respectful; but every now and then exchanging a grin when the form-master's back was turned. Mr. Lamb looked through the table drawer, through a desk of Barnes-Paget's, and a box of Carboy's, and a bag belonging to Root—he even looked behind the books on the shelf, and into the fender, and into the study cupboard and into a jar on the mantelpiece. And his expression grew more and more annoyed as he proceeded.

Certainly, he did not want to find any boy guilty. He would have been very glad to have been able to improve his opinion of Barnes-Paget. But he had a deep suspicion that the Buccaneer had, in truth, brought those smokes into the school, just as Wilmot had believed, though he could not guess what the young rascal had done with them. If they were now in his study, at all events, the Little Lamb was going to unearth them.

But they weren't! Doubting as he was, and irritated, Mr. Lamb had to admit that there was no contraband in the study. All that his visit to No. 5 had proved was, that Barnes-Paget had no cigarettes there.

He stopped at last, and stood by the table, taking a last glance round the room, to make sure that there was no receptacle that he had missed. Barnes-Paget winked at Carboy and Root, who barely repressed a chuckle.

Mr. Lamb moved at last. He made a step towards the door. As he did so, the door was suddenly kicked open from outside, and the plump face of Plum Tumpton appeared in view.

Something whizzed through the air, and landed on the study table.

"There you are, Barney!" called out Plum, cheerily.

"Wh-a-t——?" gasped Barnes-Paget. "Oh—You——"

"The packet you handed me when you came in, you know," said Plum, innocently. "I don't know what's in it, but I suppose you want it."

"You—you——!" gasped the Buccaneer.

"Oh! I didn't see you, sir!" Plum became aware of Mr. Lamb's presence. "I—I didn't know you were in the study, sir——"

"You may go, Tumpton."

Plum went. Mr. Lamb picked up the packet that had fallen on the table. His face bore a strong resemblance to a thunder-cloud.

Carboy and Root scarcely breathed. But Valentine Barnes-Paget drew a deep, deep breath. He was "for it" now.

The packet was carefully wrapped. There was no indication on the outside of what it was. But when Mr. Lamb had unwrapped the paper, a cardboard carton was revealed. The master of the Fourth opened it, in grim silence. The ends of ten cigarettes were displayed to view.

There was a fire in the study grate. Mr. Lamb dropped the packet of cigarettes into it, and stirred them in with the poker. Then, quietly, he laid down the poker, and took the cane from under his arm.

"Have you anything to say, Barnes-Paget?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"You contrived to get that thoughtless boy to take the cigarettes, in the moment or two that Wilmot lost sight of you?"

"I gave the packet to that clown to mind, sir."

"All three of you——"

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed the Buccaneer. "Carboy and Root had nothing to do with it, sir. They knew nothing about it at all."

That was like the Buccaneer. He was "for it"; but he was going to save his pals if he could. And in dealing with a "beak," Barnes-Paget had little regard for the truth.

"Very well, Barnes-Paget. You will now bend over the table!" said Mr. Lamb.

Quietly, the Buccaneer obeyed. The Little Lamb measured the stroke with his eye, and the cane came down. It came down with a terrific swipe.

With all his nerve, Barnes-Paget could scarcely keep back a yell. But he did keep it back. Carboy and Root looked on, almost cringing. They lacked the Buccaneer's will-power and iron endurance; the mere sight of that swipe made them cringe. But Valentine Barnes-Paget was silent, as the cane came down again, again, and yet again. Four reports sounded like four rifle-shots: echoing the length of the Fourth-form passage.

Then Mr. Lamb put the cane under his arm again.

"I trust, Barnes-Paget, that you will take this as a warning!" he said; and with that he left the study.

"Rotten luck, old chap!" said Carboy, when the door had closed on Mr. Lamb.

"That clown Tumpton!" said Root.

Barnes-Paget did not speak. He stood silent, his face a little pale. But he made a gesture to his pals to go—he wanted to be alone. Four of the best from the Little Lamb were enough even for the hardy Buccaneer—and a little too much.

"Oh, we'll stay with you, old fellow!" said Carboy. Perhaps it was friendship—or perhaps Carboy was curious to see whether the Buccaneer could or could not restrain his wriggles. Carboy was that kind of a pal.

"Get out!" breathed Barnes-Paget.

"My dear chap——"

"Get out or I'll boot you out."

Root had already gone to the door: and that was enough even for Carboy—the Buccaneer was on the point of being as

good as his word. The two left the study—and the Buccaneer was left to writhe and wriggle unseen—which he did for quite a long time.

“JOLLY good!” said Plum Tumpton.

Tea was over in No. 3 Study. The cake from Rodwood had been disposed of, to the last crumb and the last plum. Harry Vernon was looking over a games list—one of his duties as captain of the Fourth Form. Tom Rake was practising conjuring tricks—one of his favourite occupations when he was not twiddling the dials on his radio. From an old silk hat, which had once belonged to a master, he was extracting various articles conveyed into it by way of his sleeve. This kind of thing required plenty of practice, if the quickness of the hand was to deceive the eye. Plum had been silent for several minutes—rather unusual for Plum, who found more charms in his own voice than other fellows ever thought of finding in it. Now, at last, Plum spoke, and Tom glanced round at him.

“Think so?” he asked.

“What? Rather!” said Plum. “Don’t you?”

“Well, I haven’t had enough practice yet,” said Tom. “Tain’t so jolly easy to get a teddy-bear into a hat without being spotted.”

Plum blinked at him.

“Teddy-bear!” he repeated. “Who’s talking about a teddy-bear! What are you doing with that old tile? Conjuring tricks again? I say, though it was jolly good, wasn’t it—prime!”

“You howling ass, what are you talking about?” howled Rake. He had supposed that Plum’s remark referred to the performance with the hat.

“Eh! The cake, of course,” said Plum, staring. “What else should I be talking about?”

“E-r-r-r!” snorted the amateur conjurer, while Harry Vernon chuckled. Really, if there was, or had been, a cake in the offing, Plum could not reasonably be expected to think, or talk, about anything else.

“There were a lot of plums in it,” continued the fattest member of the Sparshott Fourth. “The way plums disappeared from cakes during the war was enough to turn any chap into a Pacifist. But things are getting round again, old chaps. There were a lot of plums——”

Tumpton of the Fourth was interrupted. The study door opened—and then, under the propulsion of a crashing boot, flew wide.

“What the thump——!” ejaculated Vernon.

Valentine Barnes-Paget stamped into the study. His face was flushed, his eyes glittering, and his fists clenched.

It was not uncommon for Barnes-Paget to lose his temper. Sparshott fellows were expected to keep temper under restraint: but in that, as in other things, the “Buccaneer” was a law unto himself. That was how he had earned his nickname, which was not exactly a compliment, though Barnes-Paget seemed to take it as one.

Fellows like Carboy and Root were very wary of him when he was in one of his “tantrums.” But in No. 3 Study, Barnes-Paget’s tantrums cut no ice whatever. The three juniors surveyed him quite coolly, and Harry Vernon gave a slight shrug of the shoulders.

“Oh, here you are!” roared Barnes-Paget, glaring at the plump member of the Co. Apparently it was Plum upon whom his wrath was concentrated.

“Fh! Yes! Here I am,” assented Plum. “Wan’t me?”

“Yes, I want you—I’m going to give you the licking of your life, you fat, flabby, fatheaded foozling blitherer.”

With that, the Buccaneer rushed at Plum.

Plum was blinking at him in sheer astonishment. He was quite unconscious of having given the Buccaneer any offence—indeed, he had obliged him lately, by taking charge of that packet, and returning it to him in his study! So he was quite taken off his guard—and would undoubtedly have gone crashing over under the fierce attack, had not the captain of the Fourth interposed in time. But Vernon, with a sudden jump, placed himself between Barnes-Paget and Plum—and the Buccaneer went reeling back from an unceremonious shove on the chest.

"You can pack that up!" said Vernon, curtly. "If you've come to this study hunting for trouble, you'll get all you want."

"And a little over!" said Tom Rake, laying down the old hat. "What has Plum done, you war-whooping wild Hun?"

"I'll smash him——!" roared Barnes-Paget.

"I say, I think perhaps he's gone mad!" said Plum. "I've wondered a lot of times whether he was that way. Have you gone batchy, Barney?"

That question did not seem to soothe the Buccaneer.

"Will you get out of the way, Vernon?" he roared.

"No, I won't!"

"Then I'll shift you."

"Get on with it!"

The Buccaneer looked, for a moment, like getting on with it. But it was Plum he wanted—and he seemed to want him badly. He stood panting.

"I'll tell you what the fat fool has done!" panted Barnes-Paget. "I gave him a packet to hold, when I came in—and then the born idiot brought it along to my study, and chucked it in under the Lamb's nose."

"Well, why shouldn't I?" asked Plum. "You didn't want me to keep it, did you? I don't even know what was in it—but if you were giving me a packet of toffee, you could have said so. Was that it?"

"You—you—you——!" gasped Barnes-Paget.

"But what's the trouble about?" asked the puzzled Plum. "I didn't notice the Lamb in your study for a minute, but what does it matter?"

"There were cigarettes in the packet!" shrieked Barnes-Paget. "Now do you understand, you blithering cuckoo?"

"Oh, scissors!" exclaimed Tom Rake. "Did the Lamb spot them?"

"He did—and gave me four."

"Serve you jolly well right!" roared Plum, indignantly. "Wharrer you mean by landing your filthy smokes on me? Why, if I'd got copped with them, I'd have got four myself."

"I wish you had!" yelled Barnes-Paget. "I wish you'd had forty. Four of the best—because you hadn't sense enough to guess what was in that packet, and came and chucked it right under Lamb's nose——"

"If I'd guessed what was in it, I'd have chucked it at your head!" retorted Plum. "Get out of the way, Vernon! Let him come in! I'll jolly well wipe up the study with him."

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a yell from the passage.

Plum was doubling fat fists. His round eyes gleamed from a fat face. Plum was fat, and he was not perhaps very bright. But he was valiant. But if Plum fancied that he could handle the Buccaneer, he was the only fellow in the Fourth who thought so. Every other fellow knew that poor old Plum would crumple up, with just about as much chance as a punch-ball.

"Now get aside, Vernon!" snarled Barnes-Paget.

"Oh, chuck it!" said the captain of the Fourth, contemptuously. "You've got exactly what you asked for, and it serves you right. Now get out of this study."

"I'm going to thrash that fat fool——"

"You're going out of this study: and you can choose whether to go on your feet, or on your neck!" said Vernon. "You're not going to touch Plum."

"I'm jolly well going to touch him!" roared Plum. "Look here, you shut up, Vernon, see? Think I can't wallop that smoky waster?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came another yell from the thickening crowd in the passage.

"You can snigger!" howled Plum. "You wait till I begin on him. Will you get out of the way, Vernon?"

"Fathead!"

"I'll jolly well make you, then!" exclaimed the warlike Plum. And he grasped Vernon's shoulders to whirl him out of the way.

Barnes-Paget did not lose the chance. He rushed. But Tom Rake rushed at the same moment, catching the Buccaneer round the body, and whirling him round towards the door. The next moment they were fighting furiously.

Harry Vernon, turning on Plum, grasped him, and sat him down in the study armchair, with a heavy bump. Plum sat there, gasping for breath. He was warlike—but he was always a little short of breath: and he was, at the moment, loaded a little above the Plimsoll line. It had been a large cake—and Plum had done it full justice, and a little more.

Leaving him gasping, Vernon rushed at the two struggling figures by the doorway. Tom Rake was more than a match for the Buccaneer—the only fellow in the Fourth who was. But there was not going to be a scrap in No. 3 Study. Harry Vernon grasped the Buccaneer, and dragged him away from Rake.

"Outside!" he snapped.

And the panting Buccaneer went crashing through the doorway. His sudden exit from the study took the crowd of juniors outside rather by surprise. There was a chorus of howls as Barnes-Paget crashed into them, knocking them right and left.

Barnes-Paget sprawled among a forest of feet. But it was only for a moment. He bounded up like an india-rubber ball, and rushed back into the study. Vernon and Rake grasped him as he came, and again he flew through the doorway.

"Keep it up!" said Tom Rake. "If this amuses you, Barney, don't mind us! We'll keep it up as long as you do."

The Buccaneer staggered up—more slowly this time. But he was not beaten yet—with a flaming face, he rushed again. Again two pairs of strong hands grasped him, and again he flew. Again there was a crash in the passage.

That was the last. Even Barnes-Paget realised that he could not carry No. 3 Study by storm. With a face that bore a strong resemblance to that of a demon in a pantomime, he limped away up the passage to his own study. Harry Vernon closed the door of No. 3.

"That's that!" he remarked.

"Is it?" hooted Plum. "It jolly well isn't! I'm going to wallop that cad for landing his smokes on me."

"He's had enough, fat old bean," said Rake, soothingly.

"He hasn't—and I'm going to give him some more—a lot more!" hooted Plum. "Are you making out that I can't handle him?"

Vernon and Rake exchanged glances. Plum, evidently, was happily unconscious of the fact that he would not, himself, last a single round, or half a one, if he "began" on the Buccaneer. But it was rather a delicate matter to explain to Plum!

"Where's that toffee?" asked Rake, suddenly.

"Toffee!" repeated Plum. That single word was enough

to change the whole current of his thoughts. "Did you say toffee?"

"I think I put it in the cupboard? Mind looking, Plum?"

Plum did not mind—far from it! Warlike thoughts faded utterly out of Plum's mind, and he concentrated on toffee.

PLUM trembled.

It was the following morning. The Fourth were in form: under the keen though kindly eye of the Lamb. And Plum was worried.

Barnes-Paget was occasionally giving him a glance that hinted of dire trouble to come. "Barney" had let the sun go down on his wrath: and rise on it again! He had, perhaps, got over the "four" from the Little Lamb: but he had not got over his hectic experience at the door of No. 3. Many an ache, and many a pain, lingered—and no doubt helped to fan the fire of the Buccaneer's angry resentment.

But it was not Barnes-Paget's dark looks that worried Plum. Plum did not even notice him, or know that he was handing out dark and threatening looks. Plum had a much more urgent worry on his mind. Barney was quite near him, but he might have been in the next county, for all the attention Eustace Percival Tumpton bestowed on him.

Fellow after fellow was called upon for "con." Fellow after fellow handed out his translation of a few lines of the section of Virgil that had been given out for the previous evening's preparation. Plum was in real terror of being called upon.

Fellows who were not called upon to construe had sometimes lucky escapes. If Plum was not called on this time, his escape was going to be very lucky. For Plum not only hadn't done his prep the night before, He hadn't even looked at it.

Plum had been too busy. Often Plum was too busy for work. Last evening he had been trying to make toffee in the study—with insufficient materials. The toffee had been a failure. But it had taken up the time. Plum had intended to give Virgil the once-over—just a glance at least. But he really hadn't had time for it. So now he dreaded to catch Mr. Lamb's eye, and to hear Lamb's voice rap out "Tumpton!"

Harry Vernon was on con at the moment. Vernon generally handed out a good con, and Mr. Lamb was looking rather pleased as he listened. Plum felt only too certain that that pleased look would vanish, if he, Plum, was called next.

Plum looked dismally at his Virgil. Plum was no whale on Latin at the best of times. Plum did not like Virgil. Indeed, if Plum could have stepped back a couple of thousand years, he would have liked to punch Virgil's head! That great Latin poet was, so far as Plum could see, nothing but an unnecessary worry to schoolboys.

Did the Little Lamb, with the corner of his eye, spot Plum's uneasiness? Quite possibly he did, for there was little in his Form room that escaped the Lamb's eye. Certainly that eye turned on Plum, while Vernon was still on con, and Plum fancied that he read his fate in it.

He was coming next! He felt in his bones that he was coming next! He gave a despairing glance at the Latin in his book—which, at any moment, he might be called upon to stand up and translate! He tried to concentrate on it. But it was futile—he just couldn't make it out! At prep, with the aid of a dictionary and a grammar, and a spot of help from his chums, Plum could have got through it somehow.

He was just able to follow Vernon as he construed, that was all. How Vernon did it, Plum didn't know: but he did! Listening to Vernon, Plum followed with his eye on his book, "reliquias Danaum atque immitis Achilli, arcebat longe Latio."

So he knew where he was, but that was all Plum knew: from that point onward all was "wropt in mystery" to poor Plum.

"That will do, Vernon!" said Mr. Lamb. "You will go on, Tumpton."

Plum could have groaned. He had jolly well known that it was coming, and now it had come! He gave his book a wild glance, and read—"multosque per annos errabant, acti fati, maria omnia circum." He could read the Latin, but turning it into English was another matter.

At that awful moment, there came a whisper from behind Cook, who sat between Plum and Barnes-Paget.

It was Barnes-Paget who whispered. Plum gave a start, as the Buccaneer's whisper reached his ears. Barney was giving him a tip! Barney, who had been chucked out of the study the day before, was coming to the rescue, risking a whisper under the eyes of the Lamb! Plum's relief and gratitude knew no bounds. Cook, certainly, gave a sort of gasp, as he overheard the whispered translation Barney was passing on to Plum behind his back. But Plum did not notice Cook.

"Many aunts wandered, while Maria was at the circus!" whispered Barnes-Paget.

"Thanks, old chap!" breathed Plum.

"Did you hear me, Tumpton?" rapped out Mr. Lamb.

"Oh, yes, sir!" gasped Plum. "I—I was just going to begin, sir."

"Proceed!"

"Oh, certainly, sir." And having got that happy translation from the malicious Buccaneer, Plum proceeded to hand out the most startling "con" that had ever been heard at Sparshott or any other school.

"Many aunts wandered——!" he began.

Mr. Lamb gave a sort of convulsive jump.

"While Maria was at the circus," went on Plum, cheerfully.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came in a yell from the whole Form. Fellows were not supposed to yell with laughter in class. But the Sparshott Fourth really could not help it. Plum's construe took them by storm.

"Boy!" roared Mr. Lamb.

"Is—is—isn't that right, sir?" stammered Plum.

"Silence! Tumpton, how dare you talk such nonsense in the Form room." Lamb almost raved. "How dare you, I say?"

"Oh, giminy-whiskers!" breathed Plum. He stared at his book. "Multosque" surely meant "many" or something of the sort—true, there was a "que" tacked on to it, which even Plum knew meant "and." Anyhow there was "Maria" in the sentence, though spelt with a small M—and if "circum" didn't mean "circus," it ought to. Besides, Barney had said so: and Latin was merely pie to Barney, when he chose. That Barney was wickedly pulling his leg had not dawned on poor Plum.

"Upon my word!" gasped Mr. Lamb. "In all my experience as a Form master, I have never—never—never——"

"Sorry, sir!" gasped Plum. "I'd forgotten the "and." I've got it right now, sir! And many aunts wandered while Maria was at the circus, sir."

"Boy!" spluttered Mr. Lamb.

"Isn't that right, sir?" groaned Plum. "I—I say, sir, I know "errabant" is "wandered," because you said so, and——"

"Silence!" roared the Lamb. "Tumpton, you have not only not prepared this lesson! You are attempting a stupid jest with your Form master."

"Oh, no, sir!" gasped Plum. He was innocent of that, at least—he was in no jesting mood.

"You are the stupidest boy in my Form, Tumpton. Listen to me! Multosque per annos errabant, acti fati, maria omnia

circum—and for many years they wandered, driven by fate over all the seas. Do you understand now?"

"Oh, yes, sir! But——"

"You will write out that sentence a hundred times, Tump-ton."

"Oh, jiminy whiskers!"

"What? What did you say, Tumpton?"

"N-n-nothing, sir! N-n-nothing at all!" gasped Plum. "I—

"You will write out both the Latin and the English a hundred times. Carboy, you will go on."

Plum sat overwhelmed. Carboy went on on, unheeded by Plum. Plum was thinking of a hundred lines in Latin, and a hundred in English, and he was feeling like Rachel of old, who mourned and could not be comforted.

"**T**HAT ass Barney——!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That chump——!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can snigger!" roared Plum. "But it ain't funny for me! I've got two hundred lines, just because that ass Barney fancied he knew Latin.

It was morning break, and the Fourth were "out." Most of them were chuckling over Plum's howler "in the Form room. Plum's indignation added to the merriment.

For it was clear that even yet Plum did not know that Barnes-Paget had been deliberately pulling his leg. He fancied that Barney had got it wrong, and passed it on to him wrong. Plum was not quick on the uptake. And his belief in human nature was unlimited.

"The frightful chump," said Plum, while the juniors howled with laughter. "Of course, he meant to help me out, I know that——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But look at it! Landing me in a row like that! The fat-head! Making out that 'annos' meant 'aunts.'"

"The fact is, Barney is a dud at Latin," said Plum. "Sheer ignorance! The chap meant well, but I'll never let him give me a tip again."

"You fathead!" roared Tom Rake. "Can't you get it into your fat nut that Barney was pulling your silly leg, for chucking those smokes under the Lamb's nose yesterday?"

"Rot!" he gasped. "He wouldn't! No chap would! Landing me in a row with the Lamb—and two hundred lines! Rot!"

"Ain't he a jewel?" chortled Cook. "When I heard Barney whisper, I nearly let out a yell! But fancy any chap being ass enough to be taken in like that!"

"Here, Barney!" roared Plum. Barnes-Paget was lounging by the fountain in the quad, with a grin on his face. Plum roared at him in great excitement, "I say, you weren't pulling my leg in form, were you?"

"What else?" asked the Buccaneer, laughing. "Don't you ask for your silly leg to be pulled? Don't you sit up and beg for it?"

"Why, you—you—you awful rotter!" spluttered Plum. "Mean to say that you knew that 'annos' didn't mean 'aunts,' and that 'circum' didn't mean 'circus?'"

"Sort of!" drawled the Buccaneer. "I gave you that, my pippin, instead of a lickin'. You're not worth lickin'."

"Why, you—you—I—I—I——!" stuttered Plum.

Words failed him. He made a sudden rush at the Buccaneer—so sudden, that even Barnes-Paget, who was quick and wary, was too late with his guard, as a fat fist lashed out at him. That fist crashed on the Buccaneer's nose, and there was a

spurt of red. Barnes-Paget staggered against the granite basin of the fountain.

"Now come on!" roared Plum, dancing round him, and brandishing a pair of plump fists in the air. "I'll give you aunts! I'll give you circuses."

"Hold on!" shouted Rake.

"Stop!" exclaimed Vernon.

They rushed to intervene. Barnes-Paget recovered his balance, and leaped at Plum like a tiger. His nose streamed red, and he was fairly foaming with fury. But he did not reach Plum.

Vernon and Rake grasped him by either arm.

"His nose wants bathing," said Rake. "This way!"

Splash! Barnes-Paget was whirled round to the fountain, and in spite of a frantic resistance, his face was dipped into the water in the granite basin. He struggled and spluttered.

"You rotters! Will you let me go?" he shrieked.

"Make it pax with Plum——"

"I'll smash him! I'll spiflicate him! I'll——"

Splash! Barnes-Paget was strong, and he was sturdy. But he was of no use in the grasp of two pairs of strong hands. His infuriated face dipped into the fountain again. It came out streaming with water, with a trickle of red from his nose mingling with the water.

"Now make it pax, old bean," said Tom. "You played a rotten trick on Plum in form, and asked for that nose."

"I'll mop up the quad with him! I'll——"

Splash! For a third time Barnes-Paget's face went in. He was gurgling for breath when it came out again.

"What is all this! What is all this!" Mr. Towler, the master of the Shell, was walking under the old Sparshott beeches, in break, and the disturbance drew him to the spot. "What—what——"

"Oh! Barnes-Paget is bathing his nose, sir—he's had a knock on it," gasped Rake. "We—we're helping him."

"What? I certainly had the impression that you were ducking Barnes-Paget's head in the fountain!" exclaimed Mr. Towler, "and if so, I shall certainly report the matter to your form master. Such outrageous actions in the quadrangle—Barnes-Paget, what were these boys doing?"

There was a second's silence. Then the Buccaneer answered quietly:

"Helping me bathe my nose, sir! I've had a knock on it, and it bleeds a little. Thank you, chaps—it's all right now."

"Oh! Very well!" said Mr. Towler, with a rather suspicious look. And he walked away.

Tom Rake chuckled.

"Good old Buccaneer!" he said. "You were always a sportsman, Barney. Sorry you've got rather wet!"

"Go and eat coke!" snarled Barnes-Paget. And he tramped away to the House—he was in need of a towel more than anything else.

The Buccaneer's nose was looking, like Marian's in the ballad, red and raw, when the Fourth gathered at their form room door for third school. Plum came along with Vernon and Rake, but he was no longer warlike. He gave the Buccaneer quite an amicable look.

"That was jolly decent of you, Barney, when Towler barged in," he said. "I often think you ain't such a rotter after all."

"What?"

"I mean to say, you're a smoky outsider, and you've got a rotten temper, and no manners to speak of, but in some ways you ain't a bad sort," said Plum. "I was jolly well going to give you a licking, but look here, now I jolly well won't."

Barnes-Paget did not answer that in words. He grabbed

Plum suddenly by the collar, and banged his head on the form-room door.

"Yarooop!" roared Plum. "Why, you awful beast—you ruffian—you—yarooop!"

"Cave!" breathed Carboy. "Here comes the Lamb!" Mr. Lamb turned the corner into the passage.

Plum rubbed his head, and controlled his just wrath. Mr. Lamb let his form in, and they went to their places—Plum breathing suppressed fury.

"Jevver see such a blighter?" he whispered to Rake. "Banging a chap's head, when a chap was speaking a few civil and friendly words—what are you grinning at?"

"Silence in the form-room," said Mr. Lamb.

And Plum went to his place—giving Barnes-Paget a look that indicated awful things to happen after class.

But after class, Plum's two devoted chums took Plum by either arm, and walked him away. Plum was not going to "lick" the Buccaneer if they could help it—the outcome would have been too painful for Plum.

"BEEEN up a chimney?"

Vernon and Rake asked that question together, as they came into No. 3 Study for prep. They stared at Plum. Plum had come up much earlier—they supposed with the intention of writing his lines for Mr. Lamb. But there was no sign of lines in the study when they arrived. On the other hand, there were signs of Plum—ample signs—that he had lately been in contact with soot.

There was soot on his fingers. There was a spot of it on his nose. There were several spots of it on his collar. There was a smear of it on his waistcoat, and a smudge of it on his trousers.

"What? No!" answered Plum. "Don't talk rot, old chaps! Of course I haven't been up a chimney."

"Then where did you collect that soot?" asked Vernon.

"Oh! Am I sooty?"

"Are you?" gasped Rake. "Look at yourself? What fat-headed game have you been up to now?"

"You'll know presently," said Plum darkly. "I jolly well shan't tell you, because I don't think you've been pally. Hanging on to a fellow every time he stirs a stump——"

"You're not going to scrap with Barney, you fat chump! Every time you start on the war-path, we're going to pull you back by the ears."

"Well, there's more than one way of killing a cat!" said Plum. "Perhaps Barney will be sorry for himself, when we go up to dorm. Ha, ha."

"Suffering cats! You haven't been playing tricks in the dorm with soot?" exclaimed Rake, aghast.

"That's telling!" retorted Plum. "You'll find out at lights out to-night. Barney may get a surprise when he pushes into bed. He may find his legs stirring up soot. Or he may not! Don't ask me."

"Oh, my dear Aunt Selina! You've scraped soot out of the chimney, and landed it in Barney's bed!" stuttered Rake.

"I've said I'm not going to tell you!" retorted Plum.

"There'll be a fearful row," said Harry Vernon.

"Who cares? Nobody will know I did it, I suppose? I didn't call on the Head, and ask him to keep an eye on me!" explained Plum, sarcastically. "and I didn't look in at the Lamb's study to report that I'd done it!" Plum could be very sarcastic!

"He won't need much telling, if he sees you spotted all over like a jaguar!"

"Oh! Perhaps I'd better get a wash and a brush down."

"Perhaps you had, if you don't want to be spotted on the spot!" grinned Rake. "Did you put it in the right bed?"

"Think I'd make a mistake?" hooted Plum.

"Do you ever make anything else? You utter ass, anybody might have seen the light from the dorm window while you were there, and——"

"Think I'd put on the light?" said Plum, derisively. "I wasn't born yesterday. I didn't need a light to put soot in a bed. I counted the beds—mine's the ninth, yours the tenth, Rake, and Barney's the eleventh. That's all right. Now I'll go and get a wash—Barney'll want one, too, after lights out! Ha, ha."

"You ass!" said Vernon.

"You clown!" said Rake.

"Yah!" retorted Plum, elegantly. And he departed from the study, to get the wash and brush-down he really needed, if he was not to be identified at first sight as the originator of the sooty bed.

Plum came back grinning, and was grinning a good deal over prep that evening. However, he contrived to give a little attention to prep: having two hundred lines on hand, he did not want any more. After prep, Plum started on his lines, while his chums went down to the Lair to join the rest of the Fourth. Plum was grinning again when they joined him for dorm.

It was the duty of Wilmot of the Sixth to see lights out for the Fourth Form. He gave Barnes-Paget a rather grim look, as that youth passed into the dormitory: he had not forgotten that search by the school gates for the cigarette-packet that was not there. Then he glanced at Plum.

"What are you grinning at like a hyena, Tumptón?" he inquired.

"Oh! Was I?" gasped Plum, becoming serious at once. Really Plum did not want to attract a prefect's special attention just then. Wilmot gave him a sharp look.

"If you've got any silly game on in this dormitory, you'll hear from me!" he rapped. "Cut in."

Plum cut in. He was grinning again the next minute. How could a fellow help it, when he was anticipating seeing Valentine Barnes-Paget roll in clouds of soot as soon as he got into bed?

"That clown is up to something," said Barnes-Paget. "Have you got anything on, Tumptón?"

"What? Rather," answered Plum, staring. "I haven't undressed yet. What do you mean? You can see I've got my clobber on, can't you? Blind?"

"Oh, help!" gasped the Buccaneer.

"Go to bed, instead of asking fool questions," said Plum. "Wilmot's waiting in the passage, you know. Don't hang about."

The Buccaneer gave him a fixed look. A fellow much less keen than Barnes-Paget might have become suspicious at that. Barnes-Paget, as soon as he was in his pyjamas, turned back his bedclothes, and gave the interior of his bed a glance, before he turned in. If Plum had made him an apple-pie bed, he was not going to fall for it. But the Buccaneer noticed nothing wrong, and he plunged into bed.

Vernon, Rake, and Plum watched him—as if fascinated. Plum knew what to expect, from what he had done: Vernon and Rake knew, from what Plum had told them. All three expected a sudden uproar.

But nothing happened. Barnes-Paget was first in bed—and he laid his head on his pillow and settled down unconcernedly.

Plum fairly gaped.

"Oh, jiminy-whiskers!" he breathed. "He—he—he hasn't noticed the soot."

"Perhaps you went to the wrong dorm!" chuckled Rake. "Some fellow in the Shell may be getting it."

"I—I couldn't have! Don't you talk rot!" gasped Plum. "I—I—I say, Barney, do—do you find your bed quite—quite comfortable?"

Barnes-Paget stared at him from the pillow.

"Why shouldn't I?" he demanded. "What on earth have you got in that chunk of solid oak you call a head?"

"Oh! Nothing," stammered Plum.

"Right in one!" exclaimed Carboy. "Never expected to hear you admit it, though."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Vernon and Rake, laughing, turned to their own beds. Evidently something had gone wrong with Plum's sooty jape. If there was soot in the Buccaneer's bed, he had not noticed it, and that was really unlikely.

"I—I counted the eleventh bed!" whispered Plum. "I—I say, d-d-d-do you think I—I could have gone into the wrong dorm, in the dark?"

"More likely than not," said Vernon, laughing.

"Oh, crikey!" said Plum.

"Oh! Urrg! OH! Who-hoop!" came a sudden terrific roar from Tom Rake. He had plunged into bed: and as he did so, a cloud of soot rose. Tom bounded out of that bed as suddenly as if he had been bitten, dragging the bedclothes after him. Cloud on cloud of soot surged into the air.

"What——!" gasped Vernon.

"Oh, jiminy-whiskers!" stuttered Plum.

"Urrgh! Grooogh! Oooooch!" spluttered Rake. The legs of his pyjamas were black with soot—his bedclothes reeked with soot—soot was smothering him—he choked with soot. "Oooogh! You mad ass, Plum—wooooch!"

"Great pip!" yelled Barnes-Paget. "He's got it! That was what that clown was up to—sooting his pal's bed! Ha, ha."

Plum gazed at his unfortunate chum in dismay. How it could have happened Plum really didn't now. It did not occur to him for the moment that, counting beds from the end in the dark, he had counted only ten instead of eleven. It was easy enough to lose count, groping about in the dark—easy for Plum, at any rate. Anyhow it was Tom Rake who had got the soot.

"Urrgh! I'm suffocated! Urrrrgh! Plum, you mad idiot—gurrrrggh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a yell from all the dormitory. It brought Wilmot of the Sixth in at the doorway.

"What——!" began the captain of Sparshott. He broke off, as he beheld the hapless Rake. "Great Scott! What's that?"

"Soot!" chortled the Buccaneer. "Just soot! Looks as if somebody's been sooting Rake's bed, Wilmot."

"Was it you, Barnes-Paget?"

"Not guilty, my lord."

"Who did this?" roared Wilmot.

"Echo answers who!" murmured Carboy.

Every fellow in the dormitory knew, or at least guessed, who had done it. But nobody was likely to give Plum away. Wilmot stared round angrily—soot in a bed did not seem so funny to a Sixth-Form prefect as it did to a Fourth-Form junior. No doubt he remembered Plum's grin, for he gave Eustace Percival Tump-ton a very sharp glance. But really he could not suspect Plum, of japing his own chum in this awful way: besides, Plum was gazing at Rake in horrified dismay, evidently not enjoying the jape at all. Plum was, indeed, quite overcome with horror and

remorse. He could not make out how it had happened. But it had happened—Plum could see that.

"Rake! Who did that?" demanded Wilmot.

"It was—was somebody!" stammered Tom. He was yearning to get Plum's fat head in chancery; but he did not want to hand Plum over to a prefect's ashplant. "I—I didn't see him do it, Wilmot! I never knew there was anything wrong with my bed—grooogh!"

"You'd better change your pyjamas, and get a wash!" growled Wilmot. "I shall have to ask the house-dame for new bedclothes! By Gad, I'll make the young rascal smart who did this, when I spot him."

The Sparshott Fourth were rather late to bed that night. Tom Rake had a lot of washing to do—and fresh bedclothes had to be supplied for his bed. Wilmot was frowning grimly when at length he was able to put the lights out, and leave the dormitory to itself. A chuckle ran from bed to bed when he was gone.

"I—I say, old chap, I'm sorry," mumbled Plum. "I had no idea——"

"Have you ever had one?" inquired Carboy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You shut up, Carboy! I'm talking to Rake! I say, Tom, I can't imagine how it happened. I know I counted the eleventh bed——"

"Is that you getting up, old chap?" asked Plum, as there was a creak of a bed. "Ain't you comfortable yet? I say, I think I might have counted only ten beds, in the dark, you know! I've just thought of that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you getting up, Rake?"

"Yes!" came a deep voice from the darkness. "I'm getting up, you benighted clown, and I'm bringing my pillow."

"What do you want the pillow for, old chap? What—Yaroooh! Here! Stoppit! Gone mad? Oh, jiminy-whiskers!"

Swipe! Swipe! Swipe! Swipe!

Plum roared and rolled as Rake's pillow swiped and swiped. He knew now what Rake wanted that pillow for! He was getting the benefit of it.

"I say, stoppit—chuck it—yaroooh! Wharrer you pillowing me for, I'd like to know! Oh, crumbs! Yoooo-hoop!" roared Plum.

"There!" gasped Tom Rake. "That will be a tip to you about putting soot in beds—especially the wrong beds."

"Oh! Ow! wow! Ooooh! Oh, crikey!" howled Plum. "It was all a mistake—ow! Jolly glad you got it now, so rats! Ow! wow! wow!"

Tom Rake went back to bed—feeling better. Plum was not feeling better. For a good five minutes Plum sat up in bed telling his chum what he thought of him. He did not cease till a boot sailed through the air, guided by his voice, and then there was a yell.

"Who threw that blinking boot?"

"I did, old chap!" answered Harry Vernon, "and the other's just coming, if you don't shut up."

Plum shut up.

"GOT him!"

Plum Tumpton smiled—a deadly smile.

It was a half-holiday that day at Sparshott. Plum had not enjoyed the half-holiday so far. His lines for Mr. Lamb had hung out, unfinished, for several days; till the Little Lamb had warned Plum that if they were not handed in that very day, they would be doubled. Wherefore did poor Plum labour in the study at lines, while his chums were more enjoyably engaged in games-practice.

Having completed that imposition, and taken it to Mr. Lamb, and heard Mr. Lamb's opinion of it, which was not a flattering one, Plum wandered out into the quad. He was feeling sore. It was bad enough to have two hundred lines to write, without Lamb telling him that his handwriting would have disgraced a small boy in the Third Form. Plum couldn't see anything much amiss with his "fist." Lamb, apparently, could. It was that swab, Barnes-Paget, who really had got him the impot—Barnes-Paget who had started all the trouble by landing his rotten smokes on him—and Barnes-Paget, who obviously ought to be licked, hadn't been licked! Vernon and Rake had seen to that!

And in fact the Buccaneer had seen to it, too. The Buccaneer had long since forgotten his wrath over the affair of the cigarettes, and he did not want to damage Plum. So while Vernon and Rake restrained Plum from warlike action—sometimes by forcibly walking him off, once or twice by sitting on his head—Barney on his side kept out of the wrathful Plum's way. Which was really good-natured of Barney, for there was still a faint glow in the tip of his nose, where Plum's fist had landed days ago. But Barnes-Paget could be good-natured, when his temper was at rest; and he had no desire—now—to hammer Plum black and blue; which would have been the outcome of a scrap, little as Plum was aware of it.

So Plum's wrath was still unsatisfied. Plum was not the fellow to bear a grudge. But he had said that he was going to lick the Buccaneer—and he was going to; all the more because he could see that his chums doubted whether he could. Plum was going to jolly well show them!

And now came his chance! For, wandering in the quad all on his own, he spotted Barnes-Paget, Carboy and Root, sauntering in a casual way in the direction of the old Norman keep. Plum knew what the game was. Barney and Co. were not interested in that ancient ruin—except as a safe quarter far from the eyes of masters and prefects. They were sneaking off to the old Keep for a quiet smoke—Plum knew that as well as if they had told him. And Plum ejaculated "Got him!" smiled a deadly smile, and strolled off in the same direction.

The three young rascals disappeared from sight. But Plum did not mind—he knew where to find them.

A few minutes later, Plum was pushing through an ivy-clad gap in the ancient wall, into the old Keep, where he had had a startling adventure once. But Plum was not thinking of that now. He was thinking of licking Barnes-Paget. A voice came to his ears.

"Half-past ten to-morrow night! You fellows coming!" It was the voice of Barnes-Paget.

"Jolly risky, breaking out at night, old chap!" That was Carboy's voice.

"Too jolly risky!" said Root.

"Cold feet?" came the Buccaneer's sarcastic voice. "Think Lamb will come baa-ing up to the dorm. an hour after lights out?"

"It's the sack if a fellow's copped."

"I haven't been copped yet, that I know of."

"I believe Lamb's got his eye on you, Barney. And he's no fool, though he looks one. I'd not risk it, if I were you."

Barnes-Paget laughed contemptuously. The next moment he uttered a startled exclamation, and the half-smoked cigarette dropped from his lips, as Plum rushed on the scene. The three stared at the triumphant Plum.

"Got you!" crowed Plum.

"You dithering dummy!" snarled Barnes-Paget. "I thought it was a pre. for a tick! What do you want, you blitherer?"

Carboy and Root gave Plum deadly looks. His sudden arrival had startled them more than it had Barnes-Paget. For a second,

they had seen themselves marched off to Lamb by a prefect. And it was only Plum—only the clown of Sparshott playing the goat as usual!

"Got you!" repeated Plum, unheeding Carboy and Root, and fixing a gloating glare on the Buccaneer. "Vernon and Rake ain't here to stop me now, and you can't dodge me——"

"Dodge you!" yelled Barnes-Paget.

"Think I haven't seen you dodging out of my way, for days?" said Plum, derisively. "But I've got you all right now, you funk."

"You potty podgy piffler, I've kept out of your way because you'd burst, and fall down dead, if I hit you!" yelled Barnes-Paget.

"I'll chance it!" jeered Plum. "Get up, and get on with it! What are you waiting for?"

"I tell you——!" hooted Barnes-Paget. "Keep off, you idiot! By gum, if you will have it——!"

Plum was grasping at his collar. Barnes-Paget had no choice about getting up, and getting on with it. So he got up, and got on with it. A jolt landed on Plum's chin, and he sat down suddenly on the old mossy stone flags.

"Oh!" gasped Plum. He seemed quite surprised.

"Now clear off, while you're still in one piece!" hooted the Buccaneer.

"By gum! I'll show you!" gasped Plum. He heaved himself to his feet, and rushed to the attack.

"Pound him," said Carboy, viciously. "Give him toco! Make the silly ass sorry for himself."

"Knock a spot of sense into him!" suggested Root.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Plum. Plum was full of beans. He was full of wrath. In fact the wrath of Achilles, to Greece the direful spring of woes unnumbered, had nothing on the wrath of Plum Tumpton. But fists that sailed in the air like a wind-mill did not seem to damage the Buccaneer much. On the other hand, Barnes-Paget's punches, planted just wherever he wanted to plant them, did damage Plum. They damaged him more and more.

Carboy and Root sat grinning, while Plum, fighting valiantly, was driven round the old Keep, under a succession of punches and jolts and jabs that made him quite dizzy.

Indeed, had the Buccaneer gone "all out," poor Plum would soon have been reduced to a state of utter wreckage. But Barnes-Paget pulled many of his punches. He was content with hammering Plum just as much as was necessary to keep Plum from doing any damage. Tap! tap! tap! came Barney's knuckles on Plum—on his nose, on his chin, on his chest, on his neck—everywhere, in fact, that the grinning Buccaneer chose to land them.

"Give him a good one, you ass!" called out Carboy.

He did not give Plum a "good" one. But those he gave were sufficiently good to daze and bewilder Plum. Finally Plum sat down under a sudden jolt, so utterly winded by his frantic exertions that he had to remain sitting—gasping, panting, spluttering, and gurgling for breath.

"Will that do, you clown?" asked Barnes-Paget.

"Wurrrggh!" gurgled Plum. He made a frantic effort to rise—but he sank down and sat again. Plum still had plenty of pluck—heaps of it. But he had no wind.

"Come on, you men—let's get out of this!" said the Buccaneer: and the three young rascals went laughing out of the old Keep.

Plum still sat where he was. He wanted to spring up and rush after the Buccaneer. But there was no spring in Plum. Plum had to sit it out.

It was five or six minutes before Plum was on his feet again. And then he did not spring up—he clambered up, still

gasping. It was in a chastened mood that Plum quitted, at last, the old Keep. It was dawning on Plum that "licking" Barnes-Paget was a bigger proposition than he had supposed—a very much bigger one.

“WHO'S that?”
“Who's getting up?”

Harry Vernon and Tom Rake sat up in bed, in the darkness of the Fourth-form dormitory. From the darkness came sounds of movement. Somebody was getting out of bed in the dark—long after lights out.

There was a sound of suppressed quick breathing. Then silence. Whoever was getting up did not seem to want to attract attention.

“Is that Barnes-Paget?” snapped the captain of the Fourth. It was too dark to see: but he knew that somebody was out of bed. He had little doubt that it was the Buccaneer. If anybody in the Fourth was “breaking out” at night, it was fairly certain to be the reckless scapegrace.

“Shurrup!” came a hurried whisper. “You might wake him.”

“Plum!” ejaculated Vernon.

“Keep quiet, for goodness' sake. Don't wake the dorm!” hissed Plum.

“You howling ass, what are you up to?”

“Keep quiet, I tell you. You might wake him!” hissed Plum. “You've woke two or three fellows already, you fathead.”

Vernon stared through the darkness. Plum, it was clear, was up—and was very anxious that Barnes-Paget should not be awakened. Apparently Plum's getting up had something to do with the Buccaneer.

“But what's the game?” exclaimed Tom Rake.

“Quiet! Just shut up and go to sleep. I shan't be gone long—just keep quiet, see? It's a jape! Now shut up.”

“What on earth is that clown up to, at this time of night?” asked Carboy. “He can't be going down to the Feathers for a game of banker, what?”

“Nothing in your line, you sweep!” snapped Vernon.

“You rotter, Carboy,” hooted Plum. “I've a jolly good mind to come and punch your head. So I would if it wouldnt make a row. Shut up.”

“But what's the game?” asked Cook.

“Just shut up and be quiet,” hissed Plum. There was another sound of movement, and then Plum's whispering voice, “I say, are you awake, Barnes-Paget?”

There was no reply from Barnes-Paget's bed.

It seemed strange enough that the Buccaneer had not awakened, as nine or ten fellows were now awake. But he did not answer, and Plum was satisfied.

“Look here, Plum, you clown——!” began Rake.

“Quiet!”

The dormitory door opened and closed. There was a chuckle from Carboy's bed.

“If that idiot runs into Barney——!” he said.

“Barney!” repeated Harry Vernon. “Barnes-Paget is in bed—he hasn't woke up.”

“I fancy that clown would have woke him up, if he'd been here!” chuckled Carboy.

“Isn't he here?” exclaimed Harry.

He sat up, groped for a match-box, and lighted a candle-end. In the flickering light, he stared across at Barnes-Paget's bed, and made out the outlines of a sleeper therein.

“What the dickens do you mean, Carboy?” he exclaimed. “There's Barney, in bed.”

"Queer that he hasn't woke up!" said Rake.

"Not fearfully!" said Carboy, with another chuckle. "I don't think he'd wake if you heaved a boot at him."

Harry Vernon, compressing his lips, stepped out of bed. He stepped to Barnes-Paget's bed, with the candle-end in his hand, and looked at it more closely. So far as the eye could tell, it contained a sleeper. Nothing was to be seen of him, for the edge of the sheet was drawn over the head. But certainly it looked as if Barnes-Paget was there.

But Vernon had guessed now. He turned back the top edge of the sheet, and revealed a folded coat. Barnes-Paget was out of bounds, and he had left a "dummy" in his bed, to deceive any eye that might look into the dormitory while he was gone.

Vernon set his lips harder. The Buccaneer's blackguardly outbreaks were no business of his. The fellow could take his chance of being spotted out of bounds at night, and "bunked" if he was caught. But for Plum, the captain of the Fourth would have gone back to bed and gone to sleep. But Plum was out of his dorm—certainly not for the same motive as Barney, but he was out, and there were dire penalties for breaking dormitory bounds after lights out.

"The shady rotter!" breathed Vernon.

"No bizney of yours, is it?" yawned Carboy.

"No! But if he's spotted, they'll get Plum too, as the silly clown has gone out of the dorm," snapped Vernon. "Barney can get bunked if he likes—but we don't want that ass Plum up before the Head."

"Fancy Plum and Barney going up together—birds of a feather!" chuckled Carboy. "Think they'd believe he was only playing the goat?"

Vernon did not answer that. He was deeply concerned for Plum—perhaps a little for Barnes-Paget, but certainly very deeply for Plum. More than once, more than twice, the Buccaneer had broken bounds at night, and his luck had been good. But his luck might fail him at any time—especially since the episode of the cigarette, which had drawn upon him the special attention of his form-master and the head-prefect of Sparshott. If he was "nailed" to-night, it meant an official visit to the Fourth Form dormitory—with Plum's empty bed to meet the official eye.

"That's a dummy in Barney's bed?" asked Tom Rake, sitting up and staring in the flickering glimmer of the candle.

"Yes," answered Vernon. "But Plum—! The frightful chump has left his bed wide open—and if anyone came up—"

"Better shove a dummy in it, too."

"Come and lend a hand, old chap."

Rake turned out of bed. Vernon set the candle-end on a wash-stand, and the two juniors set rapidly to work. Plum had said that it was a "jape": but where he was gone, what he was up to, and when he would return, his chums could not guess. They had to make matters safe for him—as safe as they could.

It did not take long. A rolled rug, a folded overcoat, and a couple of sweaters, were disposed quite artistically in the bed, and the bedclothes drawn over them—the edge of the sheet concealing the imaginary head—a tip taken from the Buccaneer's dummy. When Vernon and Rake had finished, Plum's bed looked as convincing as Barnes-Paget's. Only a close examination would have revealed that there was no sleeper in either.

"That's all we can do!" said Harry.

"Except kick Plum when he comes back!" said Rake.

They went back to bed, and the candle-end was blown

out. But they did not close their eyes. They were too uneasy about Plum.

It was hardly five minutes later that a quiet step was heard outside the dormitory door, and it opened. The light was suddenly switched on, with blinding brilliance. There was no sound from any of the beds—no movement. Every eye was closed—but Vernon's. From under the edge of a blanket, he peered cautiously—and saw the stalwart figure of Wilmot of the Sixth, standing in the doorway, and staring into the dormitory in the bright light. Evidently suspicion was abroad that night—the prefects "on the prowl."

Vernon hardly breathed. From the bottom of his heart he was thankful that Plum's bed had been rigged in time. But for that, an empty bed would have stared the captain of Sparshott full in the face.

For what seemed an age—but was really only a few seconds—Wilmot of the Sixth stood staring in. Then the light was shut off and the door closed.

Vernon gasped with relief. Wilmot had seen—or rather, fancied that he had seen a sleeper in every bed. The Fourth-Form dormitory was no longer under suspicion!

"Who was it?" breathed Tom Rake, when the footsteps in the passage died away. "Anybody see who it was?"

"Wilmot!" answered Harry.

"Somebody suspects something!" muttered Rake. "I know Wilmot's had his eye on Barney! But—he can't suspect Plum! If the fathead would only come back——"

"I'll jolly well boot him when he does!" breathed Vernon.

They waited. No sound came from the silent House. If the prefects were still "on the prowl" they were nowhere near the Fourth-form dormitory. Vernon and Rake were longing for Plum to return—partly because they were anxious about their chum, partly because they wanted to boot him for making them anxious! But the long, long minutes passed—and there was still no Plum.

"**H**A, ha, ha!" chortled Plum.

Plum, forgetful of his anxious chums, was having a great time.

While they wondered where on earth he was, Plum was not far away. He was in No. 5 Study in the Fourth form passage.

No. 5 was a very handsome study. It was the best-furnished study in the Fourth, with only one exception—that of Sir Algernon Lovelace, which was a thing of beauty and joy for ever. But Valentine Barnes-Paget had plenty of money, which he spent without much counting. Ordinary fellows were satisfied with the deal table and chairs provided by the ancient foundation of Sparshott. Or, if they were not satisfied, they made the best of them. Not so the wealthy Buccaneer. Barney's study table was of handsome oak—his bookcase had cost somebody twenty guineas—his Persian rug twice as much. Barney was in the happy position of being able to phone home to a wealthy and indulgent father when he wanted anything for his study. Perhaps it was not wholly good for him. Perhaps it was not good at all. But Barney liked it all the same. He might have been a much better and more orderly fellow, with a deal table and chair and only a half-crown in his pocket. But he had no desire whatever to be orderly: and a half-crown was to Barney less than a threepenny piece to most fellows in the Fourth.

That study was handsome—or rather, had been handsome. It was not looking so handsome after Plum had been there ten minutes.

Plum was "shipping" that study.

That was Plum's latest and brightest idea. Even Plum had relinquished the idea of licking the Buccaneer. But the fellow had to learn where he got off. He could not land smokes on Plum, pull his leg in form, and bang his head on a form-room door, without something to follow—something strong.

"Shipping" a study was no new thing. If a fellow was unpopular, he was very likely to find his study "shipped." But was rather an original idea to come down in the middle of the night to ship a study. Plum was an original fellow.

But there was really no help for that! Had Plum started shipping the Buccaneer's study in the day-time, the study would never have got shipped—Plum would have got the shipping! In the day-time, Valentine Barnes-Paget was about—a lion in the path, as it were.

Now, so far as Plum knew, at least, Valentine Barnes-Paget was fast asleep in bed—as Plum ought to have been. While Barney was passive, Plum was active. When the swob saw his study next day, perhaps he would be sorry for telling Plum, in form, that "annos" meant "aunts," and that "circum" meant circus! Perhaps he would be sorry for banging a fellow's head on a door! Plum hoped so.

As the study belonged to three, Carboy and Root were getting the ragging as well as the Buccaneer. That could not be helped. They were a pair of smudges, anyway, in Plum's opinion.

Plum chortled, surveyed his handiwork, and considered that it was good work, well and truly done. The oak table was upside down, with its legs sticking up in the air. Over one leg was draped the Persian rug, in a tangle. Over another hung a blazer, a sweater, and a pair of tongs. In the middle of the up-ended table was a stack of coal from the scuttle. The scuttle itself adorned another table-leg, crowning it like a bonnet. On the fourth leg a box belonging to Carboy was jammed upside down, the former contents scattered among the coal and over the floor. A cap belonging to Root lay near, with a shovel-full of soot from the chimney in it. Books and papers lay all about and around like the fallen leaves in Vallambrosa of old. The expensive Empire glass over the fire-place had a huge splash of black ink in the centre—Plum had emptied the inkpot at it. The lid of the window-seat was up, and everything in the interior had been lifted out and pitched about the room. But Plum had not left the ottoman empty—he had chucked into it cinders from the grate, a few knobs of coal, a cake from the study cupboard, and the contents of a bottle of gum. Plum, looking round, could not help thinking that he had done rather well. Few fellows could have done more in the time.

What the Buccaneer was likely to say—and do—when he found his study in that state, Plum did not reflect. It was not one of his ways to look ahead. Plum was a sharer of Horace's philosophy—the present moment was good enough for him.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled Plum. He could have roared with laughter as he looked round Barnes-Paget's wrecked study. But it was no time for roaring, at nearly eleven o'clock at night.

"I fancy that will do!" remarked Plum. "Ha, ha, ha! Barney's face will be worth seeing to-morrow! Ha, ha! I'll give him aunts and circuses, and banging a fellow's head!"

But Plum, like a true artist, was unwilling to leave his work without a few finishing touches. There was a hat in the study, and a tin of treacle in the cupboard. Plum poured the treacle into the hat. There was a pair of slippers at hand—also a bottle of Elliman's. Plum poured out the Elliman's, impartially, half into each slipper.

Then he looked round again, as if not even yet quite satis-

fied: sighing, like Alexander of old, for fresh worlds to conquer. But really there was little more that even Plum could do.

He turned off the light and left the study, chuckling.

It was very dark in the passage—there was never a light in the study quarters at night. But Plum, of course, knew every inch of that passage, and he groped away down it to the study landing at the end.

From that landing, the dormitory stairs led up, and the main staircase led down. Plum was about to grope across in the dark towards the dormitory staircase, when he stopped suddenly.

He stopped—his fat heart almost missing a beat. He had heard nothing—he had made no sound himself with his bare feet: he had never dreamed that anyone but himself was up and about: so it was fearfully startling for a voice to reach his ears—it seemed like a bodiless voice from the dark.

“Did you hear something, Wilmot?”

Plum dared not breathe.

It was Mr. Lamb's voice. Lamb was there—there, only a few yards from Plum in the deep dark. It made Plum's head spin.

Lamb should have been in bed—or, if up, in his study downstairs. He wasn't in either—he was here, a few yards from Plum, in the dark. And he was not alone—Wilmot was there too.

“No, sir!” came Wilmot's reply.

“I thought I heard a sound.”

“I heard nothing, sir!” said Wilmot.

“No, I suppose it was nothing! But I have no doubt we shall hear the boy when he returns,” said Mr. Lamb. “We must not miss him, Wilmot.”

“He can hardly dodge us, sir, as we are on the watch for him.”

Plum felt the cold sweat break out on his forehead. Did they know that a fellow was out of the dormitory? Were they waiting to catch him as he headed for the dormitory stair? Did they know he had been to the studies?

But the direction of the voices showed that they were nowhere near the foot of the dormitory stair. Unseen as they were, Plum could “place” them by the sound of their voices, knowing every inch of the study landing as he did. They were standing at the head of the staircase that led down to the hall. Plum realised that they were expecting some fellow to come up that staircase—from the ground floor.

“You have no idea who it is, sir?”

“No! I could not help thinking, in the first place, of Barnes-Paget, of my Form, when I found that the window of the junior lobby was unfastened,” came Mr. Lamb's voice. “It was clear that someone—a junior, I have no doubt—had let himself out by the window, and left it open for his return. I am afraid I have good reason to doubt Barnes-Paget, and I thought of him at once.”

“I also, sir!” said Wilmot.

A light broke on Plum. He realised that he was not the “game” that master and prefect were hunting. The name of Barnes-Paget was an illumination to him.

He remembered the words he had heard in the old Keep the day before—and which till this moment he had forgotten. Barnes-Paget had been saying something about “half-past ten to-morrow night.” That would be to-night!

The window in the junior lobby was open—somebody had gone out that way. It was, of course, Barnes-Paget, gone to keep his appointment with his rowdy friends at the Feathers. Plum realised it now.

Had the Buccaneer left the dorm after Plum? So far, Plum had believed that he had left him asleep in bed. But it came

into Plum's mind now that very likely the Buccaneer had been already gone. It was truly odd that he had not awakened when so many other fellows had—not, however, if he wasn't there! Plum Tumpton's powerful intellect did not move quickly. Still, it did move! Plum was getting it clear now.

"Indeed, it was because of my suspicions of Barnes-Paget that I did not go to bed at my usual time," came Mr. Lamb's voice, eerie in the darkness. "And when I found the lobby window open, I felt that my suspicions were practically confirmed. I am glad that it is otherwise—but the boy whoever he may be, must be detected."

This was Greek to Plum.

Lamb, apparently, had suspected the Buccaneer—he had found that some boy was out of bounds at night—yet he no longer suspected the Buccaneer. Plum was, of course, unaware that Wilmot of the Sixth had looked into the Fourth-Form dormitory, and reported to Mr. Lamb that no one was absent there.

"Shall we go down, sir?" asked Wilmot. "We could wait in the lobby for him—and we could sit down there." Perhaps the captain of Sparshott was getting tired of standing.

"We can hardly have to wait much longer, Wilmot."

Plum stood still. He did not dare to move—even to retreat.

There was a cold draught across the landing. His feet were bare—and he had stayed only to tuck his pyjamas into his trousers before leaving the dormitory. He wished now that he had put on a few more things. But what fellow could have foreseen anything like this? Not Plum, at any rate.

Whatever Mr. Lamb might think on the subject, Plum had no doubts—it was that shady goat, Barnes-Paget, who was out of bounds. Carboy and Root, no doubt, had funked going with him—but the Buccaneer had gone. And when he came back—by the lobby window—and came stealing quietly up the stairs—then he would run right into a master and prefect waiting for him!

The Buccaneer's number was up!

He had risked it often enough—and in his wild recklessness, he had enjoyed the risk. He had enjoyed other fellows wondering at his nerve. But if a fellow persisted in asking for trouble, again and again, trouble was certain to accrue at long last. This was the finish for the Buccaneer.

Serve him jolly well right, was Plum's first mental comment. Why couldn't a fellow be decent? Wasn't cricket and football good enough, without billiards and banker? Weren't his form-fellows good enough company, without rowdy loafers at a disreputable den like the Feathers. He had asked for it, and now he was going to get it, and serve him jolly well right!

But that was only Plum's first thought. His next worried him. Barnes-Paget was a shady swab, no doubt. He had a rotten temper, and rotten ways. But he had his good points—as Plum admitted. And he was a Sparshott chap—he was a Fourth-Form man—Plum's Form. It was awful for Barney to be sacked.

He forgot his "feud" with Barnes-Paget; forgot that he had "shipped" his study only ten minutes ago. He forgot that leg-pull in the form-room, and the bang of his head on the form-room door. He forgot everything except that Barnes-Paget was going to walk straight into the grasp of authority—that in the morning he was going to be up for the sack—that he was booked for an early train home, after which Sparshott would know him no more. He forgot that Barnes-Paget had punched him all round the old Keep! Barnes-Paget was "poor old Barney" now! What sort of a reception would he get, when he got home! Plum shuddered at the thought of a fellow going home expelled from school. But that was what it had to be. There was only one sentence for what the beaks called "breaking out at night."

"It is long past eleven." Mr. Lamb's voice came through the silence, after a long pause. "The young rascal, whoever he is, is keeping out very late. If you like, Wilmot, you may go to bed, and I will remain up alone."

"Oh, no, sir! I'll stick it out," answered Wilmot.

"I think we may as well go down to the lobby, Wilmot. The boy may remain out till midnight, for all we can tell."

There was a sound of footsteps softly descending the stairs to the lower regions. Plum was glad enough to hear them go. He had been feeling a great deal like a mouse with the cat at hand.

They were gone. They would be sitting in the lobby—and when Barnes-Paget pushed in at the window, probably about midnight—poor old Barney!

The coast was clear for Plum now. All he had to do was to cut across to the dormitory staircase, and get back to bed—safe and sound after his night's adventures. That was what he wanted to do—longed to do. He was tired, chilly, and sleepy, and he was anxious to be safe from beaks and prefects. But—

It was what he wanted to do—but it was not what he did! When Plum stirred, at last, it was not to head for the dormitory. It was to turn, and grope back into the Fourth-Form passage. And five minutes later, Plum was clambering out of the window of the Fourth-Form box-room, and clambering down a rain-pipe to the ground—with the night-wind blowing chilly through his scanty attire. Plum was not going back to bed and leaving the Buccaneer to it.

VALENTINE BARNES-PAGET clambered up the thick ivy, at the corner of the school wall near the old Keep. The ivy was almost as ancient as the wall; its tendrils were thick and strong, and to an active fellow like the Buccaneer it was easy to climb. He rested his chest on the top of the wall, and scanned the dusky interior cautiously before he descended.

The breaker of bounds clambered over, and dropped within. There he stood for a few moments, to dust his clothes, and get his breath after the climb; while the deep strokes from the clock-tower followed one another and died away. It was not the first time, by a good many, that Valentine Barnes-Paget had heard the chimes at midnight.

Considering that he had run unnerving risks for that "night out," the scapegrace of Sparshott did not look as if he had been enjoying life. Perhaps he was even thinking that the game was not worth the candle. His face was a little pale—and his eyes heavy—his expression irritable and discontented.

An hour or more in a smoke-laden atmosphere, in the company of Mr. Ikey Gilger and one or two other jolly souls, did not seem to have done Barney a lot of good. Neither was he bucked at having dropped a couple of pounds on the billiard-table, and one or two more at banker. Barney cared little for money—he had had too much of it to understand its value; but he had a dim realisation that he had played the fool, and he did not like getting the worst of anything. And he had got decidedly the worst of banker with Ikey. Ikey had forgotten more about card-playing than Barney was ever likely to learn.

Now, tired, irritated, discontented, in a far from amiable temper, Barnes-Paget had to get back into the House, steal silently back to his dormitory, and get to sleep—to wake unrefreshed when the rising-bell clanged out in the morning. With a knitted brow, he started to cross the quad to the House—taking advantage of every spot of cover, from a tree or a building. There was a glimmer of clear starlight in the sky. It was very unlikely that any eye would be looking out of a window at midnight; but Barney was not taking chances. Almost as invisible as if gifted with a cloak-of-darkness, he flitted through

the dim night—anxious only to get back to the dorm, and forget his folly in sleep.

But suddenly he came to a halt, his heart thumping, and then almost standing still.

He was heading for the window of the junior lobby, by which he had left, and which he had left unfastened, and an inch or two open, for his return. Close by the little window was a tree—one of the ancient Sparshott beeches, hardly ten feet from the wall in which the window opened. Under the tree was black shadow into which the starlight could not penetrate. Anyone standing there would have been completely invisible—but could have seen the Buccaneer as he came stealing along in the starlight. And, as he drew close, Barnes-Paget suddenly became aware of a movement there—someone was under the tree, and had stirred at his approach.

He stood rooted.

Someone was there—and had seen him. He knew that. He had to pass the tree to reach the little window, further along the wall—pass between the thick old trunk and the wall. And someone was there!

Who was there? Who but a master, watching for a fellow out of bounds? Nobody else could be out of the House at midnight.

It came into his mind, in a flash, what had happened. He had known that Lamb was suspicious. Had Lamb paid an unexpected visit to the dormitory—had he detected the dummy, carefully as it was contrived? Or had he found the lobby window unfastened? Yes, that was more likely—that was it! If he had, he knew that a fellow was out of the House—and there he was, waiting for him!

It was useless to run, useless to dodge—he had been seen.

That moment of utter dismay and terror was a sufficient punishment for the young rascal. He saw himself marched into the House, with a hand on his shoulder—he saw himself taken to the headmaster in the morning—he heard Dr. Whaddon's deep voice pronounce sentence. The station cab—the morning train—and home! Home—and his father! He leaned on the old stone wall, his face white and desperate.

Yet he did not lose his coolness, or his wits. Someone was under the tree—watching. He knew that. But if it was a master, or a prefect, why did he not stride out and grasp the offender at once? He had certainly seen him. And, after all, would a master wait outside, in the chilly wind in the quad, when his purpose would be equally effectively served by sitting in a comfortable chair in the lobby within? But if it was not a master, who was it?

"Is that you, Barney?"

A whispering voice came, and Barnes-Paget started violently. He knew that voice. The terror and dismay in his face changed to fury.

"Tumpton! he hissed, "Tumpton! You clown."

The plump form of Plum Tumpton emerged from the black circle of shadow under the great beech. The starlight glimmered on the plump face and the podgy little nose. Barnes-Paget clenched his fists convulsively. Only one consideration saved that fat little nose from crashing contact with the Buccaneer's knuckles. Plum would have yelled—and it was no time for a yell!

"You—you—you clown!" Barnes-Paget almost gibbered with rage. "You mad ass—you made me think it was a beak—you made me think—oh, you fool! What are you doing here, you potty piffler? Couldn't you stick in bed and snore, you—you fat octopus? Oh, you fool!"

"Don't shout——!" breathed Plum. "You see——"

"You dummy! You dithering cuckoo!" Barnes-Paget did

not shout—he hissed. "I've a jolly good mind to take you by your silly neck, and bang your silly head on that wall! You pottering piffler."

"Look here——!" hooted Plum.

"You dangerous maniac, what are you doing out of doors, in nothing but your bags and pyjamas? Nothing even on your feet! Have you gone mad?"

"I wish I'd gone back to the dorm to dress now," mumbled Plum. "I've been jolly cold waiting here, I can tell you. If I'd known you were sticking it out till midnight, you frowsy chump! But you might have come back any minute——"

"You came here to wait for me?" demanded Barnes-Paget more surprised than angry for a moment.

"Of course I did! 'Think I like mooching about in the quad at this time of night, with only my trousers on?" grunted Plum.

"What have you butted in for, you chump?"

"Well, I like that!" said Plum, indignantly. "You'd be in Queer Street if I hadn't, I can jolly well tell you."

"What do you mean, you clown, if you mean anything?" snarled Barnes-Paget.

"If you're going to call me names——"

"Don't talk to me, you goat!" snarled the Buccaneer. "I'm going in, and I've a jolly good mind to shut the window on you and leave you out."

The Buccaneer moved on, and as Plum laid a detaining hand on his arm, knocked it roughly off, and crept on along the wall towards the lobby window. Plum blinked after him in angry astonishment. Plum did not realise, for the moment, that he hadn't yet explained, and that Barnes-Paget had no idea why he was there—certainly not the remotest idea that Plum was there to do him a good turn.

"I say, stop!" breathed Plum. In consternation, he cut after Barnes-Paget, and grasped him by the shoulder. "Look here——"

"Let go my shoulder!" muttered the Buccaneer. "I don't want a row at this time of night, but you're asking for it. Let go my shoulder, you fat fool, or I'll knock you spinning."

"If you get in at that window——"

"I'm going in now. Shut up, and leave me alone."

"Lamb's inside, waiting in the lobby!" gasped Plum, getting it out at last.

"Wha—a—at?"

"Lamb—and Wilmot—waiting inside——"

"Oh, gad! A beak and a prefect—and you've been keeping me here gabbling—why, they may have heard us—oh, you mad idiot!"

"Well, I like that! If I hadn't tipped you, you'd have gone in and barged right into them, and——Here, what are you up to?" gasped Plum.

Barnes-Paget did not waste a second in explaining what he was up to. He seized Plum's plump arm in a grip that made Plum squeak, and dragged him into the thickest, blackest shadow of the beech, panting.

"Look here——!" panted Plum, struggling.

"Quiet, you fathead!" If they've heard us——!" breathed Barnes-Paget. "Oh, gad—they have! Listen!" There was a sound of a window opening.

"Oh, jiminy-whiskers!" gasped Plum. And then he was as silent as Barnes-Paget, hugging the dark cover of the beech.

BARNES-PAGET hardly breathed. He still kept his grip on Plum's arm, but it was hardly needed; even Plum understood that the peril was close. The lobby window had opened from within, and a head was put out—a head the juniors knew, as they glimpsed it. Mr. Lamb's keen eyes seemed to glitter in the starlight, as he glanced to and fro. But those eyes,

keen as they were, could not penetrate into the black shadow of the beech.

"I am certain that I heard voices, Wilmot. There must be more than one boy out of bounds," said Mr. Lamb.

"I think I heard something, sir," came from the invisible prefect within. "Can you see——?"

"I can see nobody, Wilmot; but if they were here, as I believe, they have had no time to get away, and are probably, at this moment, hiding under the tree yonder."

"Oh, jiminy-whiskers!" moaned Plum. The Buccaneer compressed his grip on the plump arm, to enjoin silence.

"I imagine," went on Mr. Lamb, "that they have taken the alarm—and will not now try to enter by this window. They must not be allowed time to find some other means of ingress. Go out into the quadrangle, Wilmot, while I watch from this window—if they are, as I suspect, hiding behind that beech, I shall see them in the starlight if they emerge."

"Very well, sir."

The Buccaneer breathed hard and deep. A door had to be unlocked and unbolted, but in a minute or two, Wilmot would come out. And Lamb was watching from the window, hardly more than a dozen feet away. The game was up.

But was it? Not if the quick-witted, iron-nerved Buccaneer of Sparshott could help it. He groped in his pocket, and his hand came out with a packet of cigarettes in it—a large, fat packet, his new supply from his friends at the Feathers. He wanted a missile—and it was the only one to hand. He could see Lamb—though Lamb could not see him. A couple of seconds would be enough, if Lamb's eyes were only off them for that brief space. And the Buccaneer was quite desperate now.

Whiz! The Buccaneer's hand shot forward, and the packet whizzed from it, with unerring aim. Barney had a sure hand. His action was too swift and too unexpected for Plum to follow it; and Plum was quite surprised when Mr. Lamb gave a sudden, startled howl, as something crashed on his nose.

"Why—what—how—who—goodness gracious—what——!" spluttered Mr. Lamb, starting back so suddenly that the back of his head crashed on the sash above, under which he was leaning out. "Oh—ah—ow—oh!"

"Quick!" hissed Barnes-Paget.

He was running already, dragging Plum by the arm. For the moment Lamb was not watching—Lamb had disappeared from the window, and was busily engaged in rubbing the back of his head, where he had a pain. Wilmot's voice was heard calling.

"What is it, sir? Is anything the matter? What——"

Something was thrown—oh! ah!—I have knocked my—wow—head—or—ah! Lose no time Wilmot—ooooh!"

The lobby door was dragged open. Mr. Lamb leaned out of the window again, and had a momentary glimpse of two distant running figures—much too distant for recognition. He called to Wilmot, as the captain of Sparshott came out at the door.

"There they are, Wilmot—two of them—juniors, I think—there—running past the windows of the changing-room—lose no time——"

Wilmot did not answer; he charged off at top speed. He was too late to glimpse the running figures, but Lamb had given him his direction. The big Sixth-Former came speeding along under the changing-room windows.

"Oh, jiminy-whiskers! I say, they're after us!" panted Plum.

"Fool! Quick!" hissed Barnes-Paget. Heavy footsteps were pounding behind. Barnes-Paget tore on, dragging Plum by the arm, at a speed that plump youth had seldom or never equalled. It was touch and go now.

"Stop!" roared Wilmot. He had a second's glimpse of two

running figures vanishing round a corner. They were not likely to stop!

"I—I say, we—we're going away from the House," panted Plum. "I say——"

"Shut up, ass."

Plum had no chance to argue. Barnes-Paget was running like the wind, and he was taking Plum's arm with him in an iron grip. Where Plum's arm went, Plum had to go. Why Barney was heading away from the House was a deep mystery to Plum. But he was!

A minute—one long minute of breathless, heart-breaking speed—and they were under the wall of the Head's garden. There the Buccaneer stopped—none too soon to save Plum from bursting for want of breath. He stood and listened. Footsteps could be heard, in the distance. But they were not approaching. Wilmot of the Sixth had no doubt that the two young rascals were seeking some way of ingress into the House. That was what Barnes-Paget had calculated upon. Wilmot had been dropped off the track.

"Oh, crikey?" gasped Plum. He panted and panted and panted. "Oh, lor'! Oh, jiminy! I say, I'm out of breath! Ooooooh. I say, we've got to get in, you know."

"Lots of time for that, my fat pippin," said the Buccaneer, cheerfully. He was quite cool now; indeed, it might have been supposed that he was enjoying the situation. "We get a rest here—keep close to the wall, fathead—while Wilmot's chasing round the House. When he chucks it, we'll get in. See?"

"Oh!" gasped Plum. "I see! I never thought of that."

"You wouldn't! Do you ever think at all?"

"Well, I jolly well thought you'd jolly well be copped, if I didn't come out and tip you!" hooted Plum indignantly. "I thought of that, and chanced it."

The Buccaneer gave him a very curious look. His last contact with Plum had been when he had punched Plum all round the old Keep. That would not have led him to expect Plum to come to his rescue, at such a fearful risk. For there was no doubt that if the two were to be caught out of the House at midnight, they would be judged as birds of a feather. It would be the early train for two!

"How did it happen?" asked Barnes-Paget, quietly.

Plum explained how he had almost walked into Mr. Lamb and Wilmot on the study landing. The Buccaneer whistled softly.

"They can't have found out anything in the dorm," he said.

"Think not?" asked Plum.

"They wouldn't be watching for me, and Wilmot wouldn't be chasing round by the form-rooms this minute, if they knew, fathead. Lamb would only have to sit on my bed in the dorm. They're putting up this song and dance because they don't know." The Buccaneer breathed freely. "If we get back all right, it's O.K.—they don't know a thing. And we'll get back all right, when Wilmot's tired of chasing shadows round the House."

Barnes-Paget chuckled. "How did you get out, Plum?"

"Down the rain-pipe from the box-room window."

"Good—easy to climb as falling off a form, when the coast's clear. Why did you come out to tip me?"

"Eh?" Plum blinked at him. "So that you wouldn't get copped, of course."

"Good old fathead!" he said. "But look here, there's one thing I can't make out. You were out of the dorm—what on earth were you doing out of the dorm? Not on a trip to the Feathers, I suppose?"

"Why, you rotter!" gasped Plum. "If you make out that I'd go pub-crawling after lights out, I'll jolly well punch your head. Think I'm a shady blighter like you, Barnes-Paget?"

"Then what were you up to?"

"Oh, just a jape!" grinned Plum. He remembered the state in which he had left Barnes-Paget's study, which he had forgotten during the later hectic happenings, and it made him grin.

"A jape!" repeated the Buccaneer, staring. "Yes, I suppose you're idiot enough to get out in the middle of the night for a jape. That's the sort of howling ass you are! And what was the jape?"

"You'll hear about that to-morrow!" chuckled Plum.

The Buccaneer gave a little movement, and bent his head to listen. Faintly, from afar, came the sound of a closing door.

"I fancy Wilmot's got tired of shadow-hunting, and gone in. Better get a move on," said Barnes-Paget. "Come on—and keep quiet!"

The Buccaneer led the way, and Plum followed, keeping to every shadow as they crept back to the House, every now and then pausing to listen. But there was no sound of footsteps—no sound at all, but the wind in the old beeches, and the faint distant murmur of the sea. They reached the dark corner under the box-room window at the back of the building, where Plum had descended. Looking up, Barnes-Paget could see the box-room window glimmering in the starlight—wide open.

"Oh, you born chump!" he breathed.

"Eh! What are you grouching about now?" asked Plum.

"Look, you ass—you've left the window wide open."

"We couldn't have got in if I'd shut it, you fathead! Have a little sense, said Plum.

"You benighted chump, an inch would have been enough. That open window could be seen a mile off!" hissed Barnes-Paget.

"Look here, I'm jolly cold," said Plum. "I've got bare feet—and I don't want to stand here jawing. You're like a sheep's head, Barney—all jaw. I'm going up."

And Plum began to clamber. The Buccaneer stood watching him, with knitted brows, and casting uneasy glances round. Plum was not a rapid climber. The descent of that rain-pipe, like the descent into Avernus, was facile: but the ascent—again like Avernus!—was a very different matter. Plum clambered, and grunted, and gasped for breath, and slipped, and clutched, and slipped again and clutched again, and seemed, to the impatient eyes of the Buccaneer, to progress like a snail—a very old and very tired snail.

"Quick, you fathead!" he hissed, after several minutes had elapsed.

"Eh!" Plum, half-way up the rain-pipe, stopped, hung on, and tried to look down. "Did you say anything, Barney?"

The Buccaneer very nearly answered with a howl of fury. It was like Plum to waste precious moments, and to call out—forgetting that there might yet be ears to hear. But Barnes-Paget suppressed his fury, and waved his hand to Plum to go on. Up went Plum again, and at length, to the Buccaneer's infinite relief, he reached the window-sill, and plunged in, his fat form disappearing from view, followed by his bare feet. Barnes-Paget heard the sound of a bump from far above. Plum apparently, had landed in the box-room in a heap.

Barnes-Paget grasped the rain-pipe, and went up it almost like lightning. Plum had not yet picked himself up, in the box-room, when the Buccaneer was clambering in at the window.

"I say, you've got up jolly quick!" he said. "How did you manage it? I'm a better climber than you any day, and——"

"Idiot!"

Barnes-Paget closed and fastened the window, and hurried across to the door. Plum followed him: and they crept up the Fourth-form passage, to the study landing. All was dark—but there was a sound from the hall below, which showed that someone was still stirring.

"Quiet!" breathed the Buccaneer, grasping Plum's arm in the darkness. "That's Lamb—quiet!"

From below, Mr. Lamb's voice came up, quietly, but audible.

"It seems useless to remain up longer, Wilmot. The boys must be still out of the House—their identity will be established in the morning. I am certain that they were juniors——"

"I am sure of that, sir."

"I am glad, at all events, that they were not boys of my form!" said Mr. Lamb.

"Oh, gad!" murmured the Buccaneer, as he heard that.

He dragged Plum to the dormitory stair. A minute later they were in the Fourth-form dormitory.

"**P**LUM, you benighted ass——!"

"Plum, you frabjous clown!"

Vernon and Rake spoke simultaneously: the sentences ran concurrently, as a judge would say.

They glared through the gloom at the shadowy figure. It was Plum! Only Plum would have bumped into a chair, and then into a bedstead, when it was so necessary to keep quiet. The chums had not heard the door open, but they heard the two successive bumps, and a grunt from Plum.

"Oh! Ow! I've shanged my bin—I mean, I've banged my shin—ow!"

"Quiet, idiot!" came Barnes-Paget's whisper. The Buccaneer was throwing off his clothes at a great rate. "Do you want Lamb up here?"

"Blow Lamb! Blow you! Blow that bedstead! Ow!"

Harry Vernon gave a gasp.

"Is that Barnes-Paget? Plum, you haven't been out with that blackguard?"

"Thanks!" drawled the Buccaneer.

"You rotter!" breathed the captain of the Fourth. "If Plum—Plum, you chump, have you been out with Barnes-Paget?"

"Eh! Yes! We've just come in. Ow! My shin——"

"You've been with Barnes-Paget?" exclaimed Rake.

"Ow! Yes! I say, got any Elliman's in the dorm? My shin——"

Neither Vernon nor Rake answered that. They turned out of bed, with faces grim with wrath in the darkness. Carboy had suggested it—Carboy would!—but not for a moment had Plum's chums dreamed that he had been out "on the razzle." It looked rather like it, coming in with the Buccaneer: but only his own words would have convinced them.

They were not blaming Plum—Plum was, in the opinion of his devoted pals, idiot enough for anything. But if Barnes-Paget had been leading the clown of Sparshott into his own disreputable ways, the Co. were going to deal with him, promptly and drastically. They did not need to speak—each had the same idea at the same moment, and they turned out of bed, grasping their pillows, and fairly jumped to Barnes-Paget's.

The Buccaneer was just getting in. Two pillows, whirling in the air, smote him at the same moment, and he crashed on the bed with a startled howl.

"Oh, gad! What—oooooh! What——!"

"Give him jip!" breathed Tom Rake.

Swipe, swipe, swipe, came the pillows, wielded by energetic hands. Barnes-Paget rolled over, panting and spluttering and squirming, trying in vain to elude the shower of swipes. There was no eluding them. They came down like hail. He scrambled spluttering off the bed, and the swiping pillows laid him on the floor. He rolled gasping on the floor, the pillows swiping and swiping. Swipe! swipe! swipe!

"Take that, you rotter!" gasped Vernon. "Give him some more, Rake."

"What-ho!" said Rake. "Take that—and that—and that——!"

"You mad idiots, what are you up to? Leave off! I'll smash you! Ooooooh! Oh, gad! Ow!" The Buccaneer gained his feet, but the swiping pillows knocked him over again, and he crashed. And they swiped on.

Plum was in bed now. He sat up there, and blinked amazedly at his chums, dimly visible in a glimmer of starlight from the high windows.

"Jiminy-whiskers! What are you fellows pitching into Barney for?" exclaimed Plum. "What the dickens——"

"Are you mad?" hissed the sprawling Buccaneer. "You'll have Lamb up here—will you stop it? Oh, gad!" He scrambled furiously up, and Tom Rake's pillow caught him on the ear, and he crashed over on his bed. "Ooooooh!"

"There!" gasped Tom. "That will do! You rotter——"

"You worm!" exclaimed Vernon. "That will do for now—but if you ever get that fool Plum to join up with you again——"

"You potty idiot, I never——"

"One more for luck!" said Tom, and his pillow caught the Buccaneer under the chin, as he sat up dizzily on the bed, and Barnes-Paget was flattened out on his back.

"But I say—what——?" bleated Plum.

"You podgy piffler, said Vernon. "I've a jolly good mind to give you the same. And I jolly well will, if you ever go razzling with Barney again."

"Eh! I haven't been razzling with Barney!" exclaimed the astonished Plum. "I'll jolly well punch your head if you say I have. Wharrer you mean?"

"You unlimited idiot, you said so yourself!" howled Tom Rake. "You said you'd been out with him——"

"So I have. But——"

"He has and he hasn't!" remarked Carboy. "Plum's getting more lucid than ever. It's worth while being woke up to hear him."

"Well, I have, you know," said Plum. "But of course I haven't——"

"Mad as a hatter!" gasped Rake. "If you mean anything, Plum, what do you mean?"

"Have you been razzling with that blackguard?" hooted Vernon.

"No, you cheeky ass! As if I would!" exclaimed Plum, indignantly, "and if you say I have, I'll jolly well——"

"You said you'd been out with him!" shrieked the captain of the Fourth.

"Of course I was out with him, when I went out into the quad to tip him that Lamb was on the watch. I was out with him a jolly long time, and my feet got jolly cold, without even my socks on——"

"You mad asses," came the Buccaneer's gurgling voice, as he struggled for wind. "Plum came out to tip me when I came in—he hadn't been out with me, you burbling dummies—grooogh!—he met me in the quad—ooooogh!"

"Oh" exclaimed Vernon.

"Of course, it would serve Barney right to be bunked," said Plum. "But I wasn't going to see him bunked, so I went to tip him. And——"

"And you couldn't say so before we pillowed him for taking you on the razzle!" chuckled Tom Rake.

"You fools—you dummies—you fatheads—you chumps——!" came gasping from the Buccaneer's bed. "You silly, burbling, babbling blitherers——"

Harry Vernon laughed. Clearly there had been a misapprehension—owing to Plum's inimitable way of explaining things.

"Making out that I'd go out with that sweep!" exclaimed the indignant Plum. "As if I'd go out with him. Of course, I was out with him——"

Vernon and Rake, chuckling, went back to bed. The Buccaneer had got his pillowing by mistake—owing to Plum—still, there was no doubt that he deserved a good deal more than a pillowing, so that did not matter. Certainly, it seemed rather to matter to Barnes-Paget, as he gurgled and spluttered for breath, with more aches and pains all over him than he could have counted without going into high figures. The Buccaneer was the last in the Fourth to fall asleep.

"**H**OP this way!" said Plum, grinning. It was sunny morning: and the Fourth Form of Sparshott were out in break.

"Where?" asked Vernon and Rake.

"Up to the studies."

They looked at him. Morning break lasted from 10.45 to 11: there was only a quarter of an hour in it. Most fellows wanted as many of those minutes as possible out of doors. Certainly Harry Vernon and Tom Rake did. They had not the slightest desire or intention of going up to the studies.

"What on earth for?" demanded Rake.

"Barney's just gone up!" chuckled Plum.

"Well, we don't want a smoke in the study with Barney, do we, ass?" asked Tom.

"Ha, ha!" Plum seemed in great spirits, and packed with mirth. "Barney won't be putting on a smoke! More likely tearing his hair."

"And why should he be tearing his hair?" asked Harry Vernon, blankly.

"Ha, ha! Hop this way, and you'll see! Ha, ha!"

Plum led the way: and his chums, in astonishment, followed him up the stairs to the study landing. Something, it seemed, was "on"—though they could not guess what it was. Something of a comic nature, it appeared—from the series of irrepressible cachinnations that exploded from Eustace Percival Tumpton.

"Look!" breathed Plum. "There he is! Ha, ha!"

They glanced along the Fourth-form passage. The door of No. 5 Study was open—and Valentine Barnes-Paget was standing at that door—staring into the study. The expression on his face made the chums of the Fourth stare too. Often and often, had the Buccaneer been seen in a rage. But never had they seen him look like this before. The "frightful, fearful, frantic frown" of the Lord High Executioner might have seemed a gentle smile, compared with the look on Barnes-Paget's face at that moment. He looked mad with fury.

"What on earth's happened?" ejaculated Tom.

"Ha, ha!" chortled Plum. "Let's go and see! Only pally to ask Barney what's up—what?" And Plum marched up the passage, followed by his wondering chums.

They looked into the study—and jumped! There it was—just as Plum had left it the night before. If the Boys' Maid had given it the once-over, she had given it up as a bad job—there was a morning's work in getting that study to rights. Vernon and Rake gazed at it blankly.

The Buccaneer turned round to them. He was pale with rage, and his voice came hoarse.

"Who did this? My study—wrecked! Look at it! By gad, I'll smash the rotter to little pieces when I spot him!"

Who—Oh!" It dawned on Barnes-Paget suddenly. His eyes fairly flamed at Plum. "You—you—you—out of the dorm last night—I see—it was you, you mad idiot! You!"

"Plum, you ass, you never——!" gasped Vernon.

"Plum, you chump, you couldn't have——" stuttered Rake.

"That's telling!" said Plum, astutely. "If Barney wants to find out who shipped his study, let him get on with it. I'm not going to tell him. Looks a bit of a prize-packet, don't it? Think it's worse than telling a chap in form that 'annos' is 'aunts,' and 'circum' 'circus,' Barney? Ha, ha!"

Barnes-Paget did not answer. He hurled himself at Plum like a thunderbolt. Plum ceased to chuckle, suddenly. He staggered back with a startled yell. Plum did not seem to have expected that. Really, he might have! But he hadn't.

It was rather lucky for Plum that he had brought his chums up to the studies with him. As Plum went staggering back under a terrific attack, Vernon and Rake seized the infuriated Buccaneer, dragged him off Plum, and with a combined effort, pitched him headlong into No. 5 Study.

Barnes-Paget, with a fearful yell, sprawled among the coals that were piled on the upturned table. Vernon and Rake grasped Plum by either arm and hurried him away. They sagely considered that the greater distance there was between Plum and the Buccaneer, the better . . . and they lost no time in getting him to a safe distance.

"**H**ERE he comes!" said Vernon.

"Now for the fireworks!" sighed Tom Rake.

"You fellows needn't chip in," said Plum. "I own up that Barney aint so easy to handle as I thought. But think I funk him? Yah!"

The three were in their study after class.

Since that little scene outside No. 5, Vernon and Rake had succeeded in steering Plum clear of the Buccaneer. They hardly knew how they had done it—but they had. So far, Plum had not been slaughtered. But Plum's worried chums realised that the slaughtering could only be a matter of time. They could not keep him out of Barnes-Paget's way for ever. And now, at the sound of footsteps tramping up the passage, they knew that Barney was coming—and that "fireworks" was the next item on the programme.

True, they could pitch the Buccaneer out on his neck, as they had done before. But really, after what Plum had done in his study, they were doubtful whether they ought to. If ever a fellow had asked for it, sat up and begged for it, Plum had.

The door flew open. Vernon and Rake cast worried glances at the Buccaneer as he appeared—Plum gave him a warlike glare. But, to the astonishment of all three, the Buccaneer did not look warlike.

He gave the three a cheery nod, as if they were all the best of friends, and stepped into the study. He had a large parcel under his arm. He laid it on the table—under the blank stare of three pairs of eyes.

"Heard the latest?" asked Barnes-Paget.

"N-n-no!" said Harry Vernon, a little uncertainly. He could not understand this. The Buccaneer had been expected to rush raging into the study, rather in the manner of an old-time buccaneer of the Spanish Main. Instead of which, it looked as if he had dropped in for a casual chat.

"Oh, there's a spot of news," said the Buccaneer, carelessly. "The beaks are chewing it over in Common-Room, and it's got round. It's said that two fellows were out of bounds last night night——"

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom Rake.

"Nobody knows who they are," said the Buccaneer, gravely. "It's thought that they were juniors—but that's not really certain. The strangest thing is that Lamb and Wilmot were up, and got after those two bad characters, and prevented them from getting back into the House. Yet this morning not a single fellow was missing. It looks as if they must have got in somehow—and the beaks don't know how, any more than they know who the chaps were."

Barnes-Paget seemed, from his manner, to be discussing some quite impersonal matter. The chums of No. 3 could only stare at him.

"It's a giddy mystery, the whole thing," went on Barnes-Paget. "Very sad and shocking occurrence, as I think you'll agree, at a school like Sparshott. There's only one satisfactory circumstance in the whole shocking story. It appears certain that those bad boys were not in the Fourth. Nothing else is known for certain—but that seems to be a dead cert. Lamb's sure of that, and of course Lamb ought to know. What!"

Harry Vernon laughed.

"Lucky for you!" he remarked.

"Quite!" said Barnes-Paget. "I'm afraid the Sparshott Fourth would have lost its most distinguished member, if a blithering idiot hadn't got out of the dorm to ship a fellow's study. That's why the blithering idiot isn't going to be chopped up into small pieces for doing it."

"Look here——!" bawled Plum.

"I've been down to Rodwood since class," went on the Buccaneer, unheeding. "I've brought back something for you, Plum. I saw it at Chicker's, and thought you might like it. There it is." He tapped the parcel and turned to the door, but at the door he glanced back. "If you ever think of shipping my study again, Tumpton, don't forget to make your will at the same time."

And with that, the Buccaneer went whistling down the passage.

"Well!" said Vernon.

"Well!" said Rake.

"I wonder what's in that parcel," said Plum, and he proceeded to unwrap it. "They make jolly good cakes at Chickers, but this can't be a cake, I suppose—I wonder—what—— Oh, jiminy-whiskers! Look!"

It was a cake! It was the largest cake that had ever been seen in a Fourth-form study at Sparshott School. It was studded with plums, and marzipan was thick on top. Plum gazed at it with distended eyes. Only for one long ecstatic moment did he gaze, however. Then he grabbed a knife, cut, and started.

"Well," said Tom Rake. "You never quite know how to take the old Buccaneer—but this—Barney's not a bad old bean, is he, Plum?"

But Plum could not reply. Plum's mouth was too full for speech. Plum was rather given to talking—but not at such moments as this!

THE END.