

A RAG AT CARCROFT!

by
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CHAPTER I

A RAG IN THE SIXTH

BANG!
Packe, of the Carcroft Sixth, jumped. Or rather, he bounded.

A Sixth-form man, swotting Greek in his study, might expect a tap at his door if some fellow came along to speak to him. But no man could have expected a terrific bang that sounded as if it had been delivered by a coke-hammer—a bang that made the stout oak door creak and quiver.

That terrific bang fairly thundered in Packe's study. It woke all the echoes. It made Packe jump almost out of his skin, and caused him to drop his volume of Thucydides—and there was another bang as that famous historian landed on the study floor.

“Oh!” gasped Packe.

He stared blankly at the door.

Following the terrific bang, the sound of swiftly-scudding feet was heard for a moment. The rest was silence!

Packe sat blinking. Suddenly dragged out of the Peloponnesian War, with Cleon just starting for Sphacteria to deal with the Spartans, Packe was

rather confused in mind—rather like an owl suddenly dragged into the daylight. It took him a full minute to realize that that resounding bang on his door had been a runaway knock!

When he did realize it, the bemused bewilderment in Packe's face gave place to deadly wrath.

He rose to his feet, clutched up his official ashplant, and started for the door. Packe was a Sixth-form man and a prefect: he was not to be treated so disrespectfully with impunity—if he could help it. Packe often erred on the side of whopping offenders a little too severely: which was probably the reason why some playful junior had given him that runaway knock. This time the whopping was going to be a record—if he could lay hands on the runaway knocker.

But he was much too late. When he opened his study door and stared into the corridor, there was no sign of the fellow who had banged.

Packe made a step out, thinking of asking at the other studies whether anything had been seen of the offender. But he remembered that there was nobody but himself in the Sixth-form studies that afternoon. There was a senior cricket match on, on Big Side at Carcroft: and all the senior men who were not playing would be watching. Packe was the only man swotting in his study on a half-holiday, a glorious summer's afternoon. Packe preferred Greek to cricket—a taste quite unique at Carcroft.

He breathed hard as he turned back into his study and shut the door. He had to let this pass. There was no hope of discovering the runaway knocker now. He wondered savagely who the fellow was. Some junior he had whopped, no doubt, who knew that he was swotting in his study, and that everyone else was out of the House and the coast clear. Vane-Carter of the Fourth, most likely, whom he had caned only that morning. Or perhaps Turkey Tuck, whom he had cuffed for running into him in the quad. Or perhaps one of Compton's gang in the Fourth. Packe was conscious of being the most unpopular prefect at Carcroft School: and he could not have counted up the fellows who disliked him without going into high figures.

He looked out of the study window.

In the distance he saw a group of three—Compton and Drake and Lee of the Fourth form. Nearer at hand he saw a fat figure, that of Turkey Tuck, rolling out of the House. James Smyth Tuck rolled away in the direction of the cricket field, doubtless to give Carcroft's First Eleven the honour of his attention. Packe stared after him sourly. Was it Turkey who had banged at his door? It might have been Turkey—or almost anybody.

Packe returned to his armchair at last, and picked up Thucydides from the floor. He was in a very acid temper. Nobody in the Lower School would have ventured to give any other prefect runaway knocks—Langley, or Lowndes, or Crewe, or Gates. Packe was not respected. He had stealthy ways. He would listen to what fellows said when they did not know that a prefect was in the offing.

He was fussy, and mistook his fussiness for a sense of duty. He whopped more than any other prefect at Carcroft: but never could get himself respected in the Lower School. It was all very annoying and disgruntling to Packe.

However, he dismissed the incident from his mind, at length, and once more immersed himself in Thucydides. By the time Cleon had arrived at Sphacteria, in the seventh year of the Peloponnesian War, Packe had forgotten the runaway knock. Then he was reminded of it.

BANG!

For the second time that afternoon, Packe bounded, and dropped Thucydides on the floor.

It was another runaway knock at his door—as terrific as the first.

This time Packe was a little quicker on the uptake.

He leaped from his chair, and charged across the study to the door. He tore the door open, and jumped into the passage.

But it booted not! The young rascal, whoever he was, had lost no time. He had vanished before Packe had the door open, round a near corner.

Packe stood in the doorway, breathing fury.

Twice had his door been banged: and it dawned upon him that the second bang was not to be the last. It was going on. When he settled down to Greek again, and became once more lost to the world in the delights of Thucydides, there was more to come! He had no doubt of it.

Packe wanted to get on with Greek. Still more he wanted to get on with exercising his ash on the runaway knocker. A "rag" like this—a rag on a Sixth-form prefect—was beyond all limits. He simply had to get hold of that young rascal and whop him.

And, after a little thought, Packe decided that he knew how. Almost opposite his study door was an alcove in the passage. He drew the door shut, and, with his cane gripped in his hand, stepped across the passage to that alcove.

There he was out of sight of anyone coming to his study, either up or down the passage. There he was going to lie in wait!

When the ragger came back—as Packe had no doubt that he would—he would fancy the coast clear as before. The moment he reached the spot, Packe, from the alcove, would be upon him, with the spring of a tiger. There was no margin for error—for no junior had any business in the Sixth-form passage, especially at a time when everybody was out of doors. The runaway knocker was, of course, a junior: some Lower boy whom Packe had whopped not wisely but too well. As soon as a junior came along to Packe's door, Packe had his man!

He waited!

In his intense desire to get hold of the ragger, Packe forgot even Thucydides: and did not care a boiled bean what happened to the Spartans besieged on Sphacteria, or what Nicias thought of Cleon, or what Cleon thought of Nicias. He dismissed the whole bag of tricks from his mind—if the great works of

Thucydides may be described as a bag of tricks—and concentrated on the matter in hand.

Minutes elapsed. Five—ten—but Packe was patient. Then, at last, came a sound of footsteps entering the passage.

Packe waited, his eyes gleaming. Backed in the alcove, he could not see who was coming, until the comer reached his study door opposite. Packe waited for him to reach it. Then he would be in view.

A fat figure rolled in sight. Packe's eyes glinted at Turkey Tuck, the fattest member of the Fourth form at Carcroft. He had rather suspected that the ragger might be Tuck of the Fourth. Apparently it was! For the fat Turkey, turning to Packe's study door, lifted a fat hand!

He had no time for more!

Forth from the alcove across the passage, like a tiger from its lair, leaped Packe of the Sixth. His left hand grasped Turkey's collar, to make sure of him. His right wielded the ash.

There was a startled howl from Turkey Tuck, as his collar was grasped. It was followed by a fearful yell, as the ashplant landed. Then yell on yell, on Turkey's topnote, resounded far and wide, as Packe whacked, and whacked, and whacked, putting all his beef into it.

"Oh! Ow! Wow! Yooop! Wooogh! Oooh!" Turkey spluttered and yelled, as Packe laid it on. "I say—yooo-hoooh! Leago! Help! Stoppit! Yaroooooh!"

Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack!

"Ow! Wow! Gone mad? Help! Oh, haddocks! Woooooh!"

Whack! whack! whack!

Immemorial custom prescribed six as the limit in a whopping. Packe forgot all about limits. More than a dozen of the very best landed on Turkey, as he wriggled, and hopped, and struggled, and roared, and yelled.

Then Packe, rather out of breath—he was no athlete—let him go. The moment he was released, Turkey Tuck shot down the passage like an arrow from a bow, and vanished howling. Packe, feeling better, went into his study and shut the door, and settled down once more with Thucydides, satisfied that there would be no more runaway knocks at his study door that afternoon.

CHAPTER II

CRACKERS?

"WHAT THE dickens—!" ejaculated Harry Compton.

The Carcroft Co. stared.

Compton, Drake, and Lee, whom Packe had seen from his study window

chatting in the quad, were coming towards the House, when Turkey Tuck happened. From the open doorway of the House, a fat figure shot, like a scared fat rabbit. Dozens of fellows stared at it.

Turkey of the Fourth looked wildly excited. He looked terrified. Had he encountered a grisly spectre he could hardly have looked more so. His mouth was open, and he panted and gasped for breath as he charged out into the quadrangle. His fat cheeks, always red, were crimson: his eyes seemed to be popping from his face. Harry Compton and Co. regarded him in wonder. Never had they beheld the fat Turkey in so wild a state.

In so tremendous a hurry was Turkey, that he did not even see where he was going. Dudley Vane-Carter of the Fourth was standing near the House steps: and as his back was partly turned towards Turkey, he did not see him coming. He knew he was coming the next moment, however, as Turkey crashed into him, ramming him on the port quarter, so to speak.

A charge with Turkey Tuck's weight behind it, taking a fellow by surprise, was irresistible. Dudley Vane-Carter fairly flew.

He gave a startled howl, as he pitched over headlong, landing suddenly and hard on the cold, unsympathetic earth.

Turkey staggered from the shock: but only for a moment. The next, he was careering on again, leaving Vane-Carter for dead, as it were.

"Here, hold on, you mad chump!" shouted Bob Drake. "What's the matter with you?"

"What's up?" called out Compton.

If Turkey heard, he did not heed. He charged wildly onward, and Lord Talboys, who was in his way, had to jump like a kangaroo to avoid being strewn in the quad like Vane-Carter.

"Better stop him!" grinned Dick Lee.

Bob Drake rushed in, and grabbed Turkey by the collar. It was really time that Turkey was checked, charging across the quad like Death on a Pale Horse. But he was going too fast for Bob to stop him. The grip on Turkey's collar checked his flight, but he went spinning round Bob Drake, held by his collar, and almost circled round that sturdy youth before he was finally halted.

Then he struggled.

"Leago! Oh, leago! He's after me. He's crackers! Leago!"

Bob tightened his grip.

"Who's after you?" he demanded.

"Packer! He's crackers! He's dangerous! Leago!" yelled Turkey.

"Packer's not after you, you fat chump," said Bob. "Nobody's after you! What the thump makes you think he's after you?"

"Oh!" gasped Turkey. "He's crackers, you know."

"Packer is?" exclaimed Harry Compton, blankly.

"Yes—bats in the belfry—quite batchy—hay-wire—had as a matter—I

mean mad as a hatter!" spluttered Turkey. "I—I say, look here, don't you let him get near me. He's dangerous."

Turkey squinted back at the House from which he had shot so suddenly. To his immense relief, there was no sign of pursuit. Packe was still in the House. But the fat junior was still terrified. His eyes rolled as if they would roll out.

"But what's happened?" exclaimed Dick Lee.

A dozen fellows gathered round Turkey. His excitement, his evident terror, and his extraordinary statement that Packe of the Sixth was "crackers", excited general interest. Lord Talboys, Levett and Leath, Barrick major, and several more of the Fourth form surrounded the frantic Turkey, all wanting to know what had happened. Nobody liked Packe of the Sixth: but nobody, so far, had suspected that he had bats in the belfry. They were quite eager to know.

"I—I say, sure he ain't coming?" gasped Turkey. "I say, if he comes out, you fellows keep round me."

"But what has Packe done?" roared Bob Drake.

"He pitched into me—!" gasped Turkey. "Whopped me like mad—"

"Well, that's nothing new," said Harry Compton. "Packe's always whopping somebody or other."

"But it was for nothing—" howled Turkey.

"It's generally for nothing, when a fellow gets whopped!" grinned Bob. "Surprising what an innocent lot of ducks we are at Carcroft, really."

"I tell you it was really for nothing," shrieked Turkey. "I tell you, he was hiding—"

"Hiding?"

"Yes, hiding in that alcove in the Sixth-form passage—I didn't know he was there, of course—how could a fellow guess that a prefect was hiding, ready to pounce out like a tiger—" spluttered Turkey. "And when I was just going to tap at his study door, thinking he was in the study of course, he suddenly sprang on me from behind—"

"Packe did!" gasped Bob.

"Yes, he did! Seized me," gurgled Turkey. "Grabbed me from behind, and pitched into me right and left—oh, crikey! Oh, haddocks! I—I can tell you I was frightened—clutched by a madman, you know—"

"Well, my only summer hat and sunshade!" said Bob. "Sure he wasn't in his study? Wasn't swotting in his study as usual?"

"I tell you he was hiding in the passage, and suddenly jumped out on me from behind and pitched into me!" shrieked Turkey. "Oh, dear! I was scared out of my wits!"

"If any!" murmured Lord Talboys.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'd have been scared, Lizard," hooted Turkey, indignantly. "I

wouldn't have gone to his study if I'd known that he was mad. Oh, dear!"

"Well, what did you go to his study for?" asked Levett.

"Lowndes sent me," explained Turkey. "Lowndes of the Sixth, on the cricket ground. I think he was going out with Packe after the cricket, if the match was over in time, and it ain't. So he called to me and said go and tell Packe that I shan't be able to come after all, and of course I had to—Lowndes is a pre. Well, I went to Packe's study to tell him, and then—" Turkey shuddered at the recollection—"instead of finding him in his study, as I expected, I never even had time to tap at the door—he sprang on me from behind like a wild beast—oh, lor'!"

"Great pip!" said Bob Drake.

"You didn't do anything?" asked Vane-Carter. V.C. had come up, probably with the intention of booting Turkey for up-ending him. Instead of which, he listened to Turkey's strange tale.

"Nothing at all," gasped Turkey. "I tell you I never knew he was there—never even saw him, till he grabbed me from behind and started in with his cane—looking awfully furious—madmen do, you know."

"Look here, Packe can't be crackers," said Harry Compton. "He's poisonous, but he isn't crackers."

"I tell you he glared at me like a maniac," yelled Turkey. "Simply furious—and I hadn't done anything—only just come to his study to bring him a message from Lowndes. I jolly well shan't take the message now. I daren't go near Packe. I say, V.C. will you go?"

Vane-Carter, laughing, strolled away to the House. Apparently he was not going to take any message to Packe. But the other fellows remained collected round the spluttering Turkey, in surprise and considerable excitement. It was hard to believe that a Sixth-form prefect of Carcroft had suddenly taken leave of his senses: but from Turkey's strange narrative it certainly looked like it. A fellow who hid himself in an alcove, and jumped out suddenly on a junior who was coming to his study with a message, could hardly be quite sane. A fag in the Third form, like Braye or Dinkin, might have played such a trick—but not a prefect of the Sixth, like Packe, if he was in his right mind.

"Sure he was hiding?" asked Dick Lee.

"Yes, in that alcove opposite his study door, you know—lying in wait like a tiger in the jungle," groaned Turkey, "and he sprang out—Oh, crikey! Fancy Packe going mad, you fellows! It's all that Greek, very likely. He's a swot, you know."

"Well, this beats Banagher," said Bob Drake, rubbing his nose. "If Packe played a trick like that, he's off his rocker—must be."

"I say, Compton, think you'd better go to the Head?" asked Turkey.

"Eh! What am I to go to the Head for?" asked the captain of the Fourth.

"I mean, to tell him that Packe's gone mad—"

"Oh, my hat! I can sort of see myself calling on Dr. Whaddon to tell him that one of his prefects has gone mad!"

"Well, something ought to be done about it," urged Turkey, "our lives ain't safe with a maniac in the House. He had a cane when he pitched into me—but he might have a poker next time—or a hammer—or a bread-knife or something. Springing on fellows from behind, you know—"

"Blessed if I make it out," said Harry, "but—"

"Well, look here, go and tell Roger," said Turkey. "Roger will know what to do with him! It ain't safe to leave him loose. He will have to be taken away to an asylum, of course."

"You go and tell Roger," chuckled Bob Drake. "There he is, in his study, looking out! Cut off and warn him there's a lunatic loose at Carcroft."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Turkey Tuck squinted in the direction of Roger Ducas's study window. There stood Mr. Ducas, master of the Carcroft Fourth, looking out of the open window: perhaps wondering what was causing that spot of excitement in the quad. Roger's eagle eye was on the group surrounding James Smyth Tuck.

Turkey hesitated.

He had not the slightest doubt that Lucius Packe, of the Sixth, had gone mad. There was no other imaginable way of accounting for Packe's actions, which, to Turkey at least, were clearly maniacal. A senior man who hid himself in an alcove, jumped out from behind on a junior, and pitched into him without rhyme or reason, could only be as mad as a hatter, and requiring care. Still, Turkey did not quite like the idea of reporting Packe's sudden and alarming insanity to his form-master. He realized that it was an unusually startling story for a beak's ears.

"I—I say, think he'd believe me, Compton?" asked Turkey. "I—I mean to say, Roger doesn't always believe what I say, and—and this is a bit unusual—"

"More than a bit, I think," chuckled Bob.

"But I tell you he's crackers—"

"Better make sure before you spin a yarn like that to Roger," chuckled Dick Lee. "Look here, we'll come with you, if you like, while you go and give him Lowndes' message, and see."

Turkey shivered.

"I wouldn't dare go near him," he stuttered. "I—I say, it's nearly tea time, and—and I daren't go into the House again while Packe's loose—"

Harry Compton laughed.

"Come to tea in our study, old fat chump," he said, "we'll keep Packe off if he does any more springing."

"You'll keep round me?" asked Turkey, anxiously. "You won't bolt and leave me to it if that maniac shows up?"

"Ha, ha! No: come on."

Turkey—still in a state of great trepidation, his gooseberry eyes popping as he squinted round him uneasily—went into the House with the Co. He did not feel safe till he was in the corner study in the Fourth, in company with the three juniors—and even there he did not feel quite safe. There were sausage-rolls and cake for tea, from which Turkey drew comfort—but even while he travelled, rapidly, through sausage-rolls and cake, his eyes kept wandering to the door, and he gave an uneasy jump at every sound of a footstep in the passage. Even sausage-rolls and cake could not wholly fill Turkey's thoughts, while he was haunted by the dread of a lunatic loose in the House.

CHAPTER III

A SPOT OF TROUBLE IN THE CORNER STUDY

BANG! BANG!
Packe could hardly believe his ears—though the deafest ears must have been startled by those two terrific bangs at his study door.

He had dismissed the runaway knocker from his mind. He had no doubt that it was Turkey, whom he had, as he supposed, caught in the very act. After that tremendous whopping, Turkey was not likely to carry on. So Packe was deep in Thucydides, getting on quite nicely with Cleon and the besieged Spartans in Sphacteria, when again came the bang, twice repeated—and he stared at his study door almost gibbering with rage.

Once more Thucydides was thrown aside. Once more Packe grasped his official ash, and flew to the door. Once more he glared into the passage like a lion seeking what he might devour.

Nobody was there. But that did not matter, now that Packe knew for whom to look. He quitted the study, and went in search of Turkey Tuck. Cricket was still keeping the seniors on Big Side, but a good many juniors were about, and Packe called to Vane-Carter of the Fourth, who was lounging in the big doorway with his hands in his pockets, looking out idly into the sunny quad.

“Vane-Carter!”

V.C. glanced round. His eyes glimmered as he looked at the prefect.

“Yes, Packe,” he said, meekly.

“Where is Tuck, of your form?”

“I saw him in the quad about half an hour ago.”

“He was in the House a minute or two ago,” snapped Packe. “Has he passed you going out?”

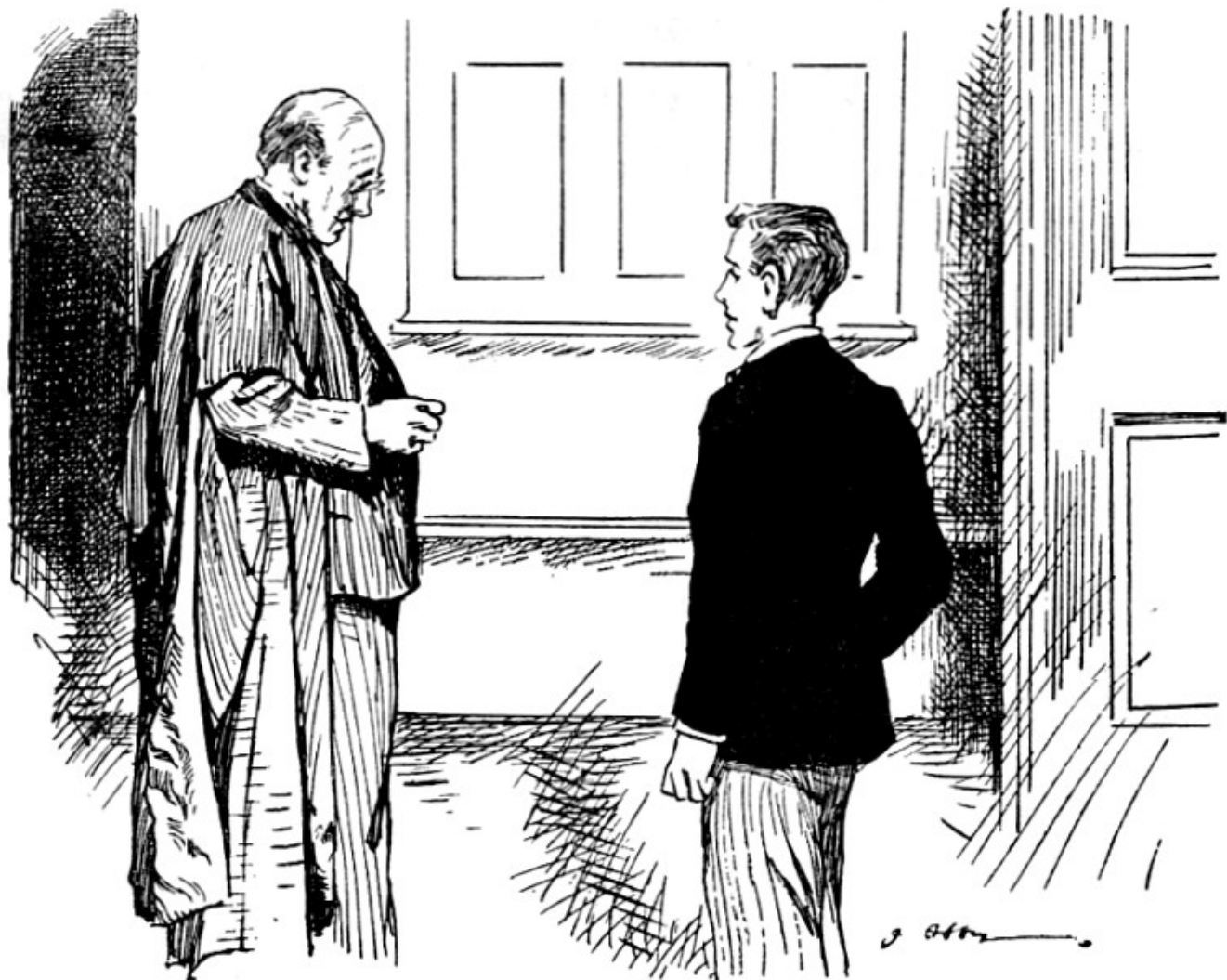
“No!”

"Levett! Do you know where Tuck is?" called out Packe, as Levett of the Fourth came in with Leath.

Levett gave him a rather startled glance. Like the other fellows, he had been hardly able to make head or tail of Turkey's startling tale of Packe's sudden outbreak of insanity. Turkey had the fattest head, as well as the fattest waist, at Carcroft: and if there was a mistake to be made, Turkey was the man to make it. But now, as he looked at Packe, Levett wondered uneasily whether Turkey had had it right. Packe looked very excited, his eyes were gleaming, and his cane was clutched in his hand. And he was after Turkey!

"Do you hear me, Levett?" snapped Packe, angrily. "Where is Tuck of your form?" He came nearer to Levett as he spoke, and to his surprise and annoyance, both Levett and Leath backed hastily away, almost as if they thought he might bite!

"Oh! Yes!" stammered Levett. "I—I—I think he went up to the studies,



Packe—" He backed further off, watching Packe uneasily. If the fellow was crackers, he wasn't going to spring on Levett as he had on Turkey!

"Go and tell him I want him, and he is to come at once."

"Oh! All right, Packe," stammered Levett.

Leath was already heading for the staircase. Levett was glad to follow him. He did not like Packe's looks at all.

Packe waited impatiently at the foot of the staircase. Levett and Leath went up two steps at a time, and on the study landing above, they gave each other startled glances.

"Think he's madders, as Turkey said?" whispered Leath.

"Blessed if I know what to think," muttered Levett. "We'd better go and tell Turkey—he's teeing in the corner study with Compton's gang."

They hurried to the corner study, which was Number Five in the Fourth-form passage. As Levett opened the door, there was a scared squeal in the study.

"Oh, haddocks! If that's Packe—!"

Levett and Leath looked in.

"Turkey here?" asked Levett. "Oh, here you are! You're wanted, Turkey."

Turkey had a chunk of cake in a plump hand. He had been about to transfer it to the widest mouth at Carcroft. But the plump hand stopped half-way: and the chunk of cake remained suspended, like Mahomet's coffin, in mid-air. The fat junior's gooseberry eyes popped at Levett, while Compton, Drake, and Lee exchanged glances.

"Who—who—who wants me?" gasped Turkey.

"Packe does—"

"Oh, haddocks! I won't go!" yelled Turkey. "I say, Compton—you stand by a chap! I ain't going to be sprung at by a lunatic! Drake, old man, you stick to me if he comes here! Get hold of the poker, Lee! I—I say, that lunatic's after me again—oh, haddocks!"

"Look here, what does Packe want Turkey for?" asked Harry Compton.

"Licking, I suppose," answered Levett. "He's got his cane in his paw, and looks as fierce as a Red Indian."

"But Turkey hasn't done anything," exclaimed Bob. "He can't have—he's been with us ever since Packe licked him half an hour ago."

"Well, Packe wants him," said Levett. "That's his message."

"I won't go!" shrieked Turkey. "You fellows stick to me, and keep him off if he comes here. Oh, lor'! I wish I'd gone to Roger now. I—I say, Levett, you go and tell Packe I ain't here—tell him I've gone home—tell him anything you like, only don't let him know I'm here—"

"This is jolly queer," said Dick Lee. "I suppose it can't be possible that Packe's really gone off his nut?"

"Blessed if it doesn't look like it," said Bob. "What on earth is he after Turkey again for, when he's done nothing?"

"You'll have to go, Turkey," said Leath.

"I won't go!" yelled Turkey.

"Better not," said Harry Compton. "Pre. or not, Packe's got no right to lick a fellow a second time for nothing. Stick here, Turkey. We all know you've done nothing, and if Packe comes after you, we'll stop him."

"Hear, hear!" said Bob.

"Bet you he'll come up, if Turkey doesn't go down," said Levett.

"Well, let him!" said Dick Lee. "If he's gone crackers, there's enough of us to hold him, if he begins on Turkey again."

Lord Talboys came up the passage from the landing. There was a startled look on the Lizard's usually placid countenance.

"Turkey here?" he asked, looking into the corner study.

"Oh! No!" yelled Turkey. "I ain't here, Lizard, if Packe's sent you for me—"

"Well, he has," said Lord Talboys. "He's waiting at the foot of the staircase, and he told me—"

"Oh, haddocks! I say, won't some of you fellows go to Roger and tell him that Packe is nuts!" wailed Turkey. "I—I say, did he look mad, Lizard?"

"Well, he looked jolly shirty, and he's got his ash," said Lord Talboys. "I fancy he's comin' up after you, old fat top."

"Help!" squealed Turkey.

"Look out—here he comes!" called out Leath from the passage.

Levett and Leath faded out of the picture. Lord Talboys stepped into the study. There was a heavy and hurried tread in the passage: and the juniors in the corner study all rose to their feet, breathing rather quickly. A moment more, and Packe's enraged face glared in.

"Oh! You're here!" Packe fairly roared, as his eye fell on the terrified Turkey. He rushed in, and round the table.

Turkey bounded off his chair. He shot round the other side of the table, yelling.

"Ow! Help! Keep him off! Help!"

"Look here, Packe—!" exclaimed Harry Compton.

Packe did not heed him. He had come up after Turkey, boiling. Now he was boiling over. He rushed round the study table in pursuit of the fat junior.

Turkey flew.

He barged into a chair, and sent it spinning. He banged on the table, and set the crockery clattering. But he barged on frantically, in terror of the clutching hand behind.

Harry Compton and Co. looked on, almost stupefied. Lord Talboys stared blankly. Five or six fellows gathered round the doorway, staring in. Round the study table flew Turkey—after him flew Packe. For a minute it was like a game of going round the mulberry bush. But Packe's long legs covered the ground faster than Turkey's short fat ones, and the clutching hand closed on Turkey's collar.

"Yaroooh!" roared Turkey, as he was clutched. "Help! Rescue! Save me!"

"Packed!" shouted Compton.

"Stop that, Packed!" roared Bob Drake.

"Let him go!" exclaimed Dick Lee.

Unheeding, Packed gripped Turkey's collar with his left, and the ash rose in his right. Turkey yelled frantically. And the Carcroft Co. as one man, rushed at Packed, and grasped him. Lord Talboys rushed to their aid: Scott and Drummond ran in from the passage, to lend a hand.

Handling a Sixth-form prefect was an awfully serious matter. No one would have dreamed of it, in ordinary circumstances. But the circumstances were not ordinary. They were extraordinary—very extraordinary. If Packed had gone "crackers", Packed had to be restrained. And it certainly looked as if he had. Everyone knew that Turkey, teeing in the corner study, could not have done anything to Packed.

"Stop him!" exclaimed Harry Compton.

"What-ho!" gasped Bob.

"Ow! Help! Draggimoff!" shrieked Turkey. "You can see he's batchy—he's nuts—he's gone crackers—help!"

Packed was dragged away from Turkey by main force. In the midst of half a dozen breathless juniors, all grabbing him, he went reeling across the study. Turkey did not join in the fray. The moment Packed's grasp was off him, Turkey shot to the door. In the corner study there was wild uproar, as Packed, spluttering with fury, struggled in the grasp of Harry Compton and Co. Leaving them to it, Turkey Tuck fled for his fat life, and his fleeing footsteps died away down the passage.

CHAPTER IV

ROGER TAKES A HAND

ROGER DUCAS, master of the Fourth form, laid down his pen, lifted his head from a pile of form papers, and glanced at his open window, frowning.

From the quadrangle, voices, on the balmy summer breeze, floated in at that open window. The voices sounded excited. And the words that came to Roger's ears were quite startling.

Roger had an idea that something unusual was going on in his form that afternoon. He had seen a crowd of Fourth-form juniors in the quad earlier, and wondered what the excitement was about. But he had returned to his labours on form papers and dismissed the matter from mind. Now he was reminded of it, as the voices floated in on the summer breeze.

"He's crackers!"

"No doubt about that! Mad as a hatter!"

"Dangerous!"

"Better keep clear of him."

"He won't get near me, if I can help it."

"We had to drag him off Turkey—goodness knows what he might have done."

"I say, there'll be a row about handling a pre."

"Not if he's mad—we had to stop him."

"Where is Packe now?"

"In his study. He said he'd report us to the Head for collaring him. Of course the Head will see at once that he's crackers."

"He ought to see a doctor."

"I expect the Head will send for one, when he sees Packe."

"Oh, haddocks! I say, suppose he sprang at the Head like he did at me!"

"Phew!"

"Well, I suppose he might, as he's off his rocker."

"I expect he's been swotting too hard, and just gone off his onion. But he was always rather queer, Packe was."

"Yes, I always thought he had a queer look in his eye."

"So did I!"

"But I say, it's jolly serious, a fellow off his onion, going about the school. The beaks ought to be told."

"They'll hear soon enough—it's all over the shop—"

"He might spring at anybody any minute, like he did at me when I went to take Lowndes' message—"

All this, and more, floated in at the open window. Roger Ducas sat motionless at his study table, his frown intensifying. Finally he rose to his feet, and looked out. At a little distance there was quite a crowd of the Fourth, and some fellows of other forms, drinking it all in. Every face was excited, and some were uneasy. Roger's keen, penetrating eyes fixed grimly on the group.

He knew now what the spot of excitement in his form was. For some strange and inexplicable reason, the juniors believed that Packe, a prefect of the Sixth form, had gone "crackers". Roger did not like Packe: and had he been head-master of Carcroft, Packe would never have been a prefect. But he did not suppose for a moment that Packe was "crackers". He only wondered how so extraordinary an idea could have got into so many heads. Turkey was obtuse enough to fancy anything: but sensible fellows like Compton, Drake, Lee, Talboys, Drummond, Scott, were in the excited crowd, and they evidently were of the same opinion. It was quite a puzzle to Roger, and evidently a matter to be looked into without delay.

He thought it over for a minute or two, and then crossed his study to the door. Clearly the best thing was to see Packe at once, and get to the bottom

of this. Packe was a fussy, nervy fellow: but certainly he wasn't "crackers". One of the juniors in the crowd had said that he was in his study: so Roger Ducas bent his steps in the direction of the Sixth-form passage, to see Packe without delay.

As he turned into that passage, he was surprised to see a junior of his form at Packe's door.

It was Dudley Vane-Carter, the scapegrace of the Fourth.

Roger's eyes fixed on him.

Vane-Carter's actions were quite peculiar. He was on tiptoe, apparently having crept down the passage to Packe's study without making a sound. He had come, it seemed, from an adjoining corridor, further up the passage, as Roger, at his end, had seen nothing of him till this moment. Vane-Carter was in the act of taking a small mallet from under his jacket, where it had been concealed. As Roger watched him he lifted the mallet, and banged on Packe's study door.

Bang! Bang!

The instant the double knock had been delivered, Vane-Carter shot up the passage like an arrow, turned the corner, and vanished.

He had not seen Roger—never glancing round in his direction. But Roger had seen him—and Roger smiled, the grim smile that the Carcroft Fourth knew.

A moment more, and Packe's door flew open, and Packe of the Sixth rushed out, with fury in his face.

Packe had been in his study for some time, Thucydides was no longer the order of the day. He was rumped, dishevelled, breathless, after the spot of trouble with Harry Compton and Co. Those reckless young rascals were going to be reported to the headmaster, and flogged for laying hands on a prefect—sacked, Packe hoped! Quite unaware that he was regarded in the Fourth as a perilous lunatic, Packe was almost more astonished than enraged by what had happened in the corner study in the Fourth.

It was unheard-of at Carcroft for juniors to lay hands on a prefect of the Sixth. Packe really could hardly believe that it had happened. But it had—and he was going to see that condign punishment was the result.

Having recovered his breath, and put himself to rights, Packe was considering whether to go in search of the elusive Turkey again, or whether to seek his headmaster with a report of the outrageous happenings in the corner study, when the bang resounded at his door.

It was the runaway knocker again—Turkey once more, Packe had no doubt. It had not occurred to him for a moment to doubt that the runaway knocker was Turkey.

His look, as he rushed into the passage, really gave some colour to the juniors' belief that he had gone "crackers". Never had any man at Carcroft had so wild and whirling an aspect.

Roger, from the lower end of the passage, stared at him with grim dis-

approval. Roger was always calm and self-contained. He had no use whatever for enraged glares or spluttering fury.

Packe glared round quite like a tiger.

It was amazing that so fat and unwieldy a fellow as Turkey Tuck could have vanished so promptly. But there was no sign of the runaway knocker.

Packe easily guessed that the young rascal had cut up the passage and whizzed round the corner. But he glanced in the other direction—and saw Roger.

He caught his breath, as he caught Roger's grim stare. He was angry: and he felt, like the prophet of old, that he did well to be angry. But he realized that his aspect did not display the decorum that was expected of Sixth-form prefects. He flushed crimson under Mr. Ducas's grim eyes, and strove to suppress his boiling wrath, and clear his too expressive countenance.

"Packe!" Roger's voice was deep.

"Oh! Yes, sir!" stammered Packe. "Someone has been knocking—I mean banging—at my study door, and—and—"

"I am aware of it."

"A boy of your form, sir," added Packe, "an impudent young rascal—"

"I am aware of that also, Packe. That is no reason why you should give an exhibition of uncontrolled temper, and cause alarm among the Lower boys," said Roger, sternly. "It has reached my ears, Packe, that there has been a scene—actually of violence—between you and some boys of my form—"

Packe panted.

"I'm going to report them to the Head, sir—Compton, Drake, Lee, Talboys, and some others—they laid hands on me—"

"I shall inquire into the matter as their form-master, Packe. Kindly accompany me to my study, and I will send for them."

Roger Ducas turned: and Packe, having pitched his ashplant back into his study, followed the portly figure of the master of the Fourth. Roger, in his study, rang for the House porter, and dispatched Ruggles to collect quite a numerous party of his form.

CHAPTER V

MERELY A MISUNDERSTANDING!

"**B**UT WHY me?" said Dudley Vane-Carter.

V.C. was puzzled.

Ruggles had delivered his message. Compton, Drake, Lee, Talboys, Turkey Tuck, and Vane-Carter, were all wanted in Roger's study. Why the Carcroft Co. were wanted was clear enough—it was the affair of the corner

study. But Vane-Carter had had no hand in that. V.C. had been nowhere near the corner study when Packe was dragged away from Turkey.

"Me, too!" said Turkey. "I say, I never did anything. You fellows collared Packe, but I didn't, did I?"

"No, you fat villain, you bolted," said Bob Drake. "Come to think of it, I was going to boot you—"

"Here, you keep off! I say, you tell Roger that I never had anything to do with it, and—and I needn't go. Just say to Roger—yaroooh! Keep your hoof away from my trousers will you, you swob?" yelled Turkey.

"Blessed if I know why Roger wants me," said Vane-Carter. "He can't know anything about—" V.C. broke off. "Well, we may as well go—Roger doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Come on," said Harry Compton, "it's all right, you fellows—Roger will understand that we had to collar Packe, if that's what he wants to see us about. And the sooner he knows, the better. If the chap's crackers, he's got to be looked after."

And the half-dozen juniors proceeded to their form-master's study.

"Come in!" came Roger's deep voice, as Compton tapped. And the captain of the Fourth opened the door, and walked in, followed by his friends: Turkey reluctantly bringing up the rear.

Roger was seated at his writing-table. Packe of the Sixth stood by the window. The juniors glanced at him a little uneasily. But Packe was quite calm now, though his expression was dark and bitter.

Turkey Tuck, last into the room, did not notice Packe for the moment. But when his gooseberry eyes fell on the Sixth-former, Turkey jumped almost clear of the floor, and let out a startled howl:

"Oh, haddocks! He's here! Help!"

"Tuck!" thundered Roger.

"Ow! Keep him off!" yelled Turkey, too terrified to heed even the voice of his form-master. "Help! Oh, haddocks!"

Turkey bounded back to the door. Roger rose to his feet, in wrath.

"Stop! Tuck, stop at once!" he roared.

Turkey, unheeding, tore the door open. But Bob Drake grasped him by a fat shoulder, and jerked him back.

"You fat chump, don't you hear Roger?" he hissed.

"Yaroooh! Leago!" shrieked Turkey. "He's mad—you know he's mad! I ain't going to be sprunged at—I mean sprung at—by a maniac! You know he sprang on me from behind like a tiger. Leago! He may have a knife about him! Leago!"

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Mr. Ducas. "Drake, close the door, and keep that foolish boy here."

"Yes, sir," gasped Bob.

"Yaroooh! Leago! Help!"

"Tuck! Be silent at once! Packe, what have you done to terrify that obtuse boy in such a manner?" exclaimed Mr. Ducas.

Packe was staring blankly at the fat Turkey. He was quite amazed. Certainly he had whopped Turkey, and was going to whop him again, but that did not account for the fat junior's frantic terror.

"Nothing, sir!" gasped Packe. "He seems to be to me out of his senses."

"Oh, haddocks! He's crackers, sir—!" howled Turkey. "Maniacs always think other people are mad, sir, that's why he said that. I know he can't help being mad, sir, but he ain't safe."

"You utterly stupid boy, what has put this absurd fancy into your head?" exclaimed Roger.

"'Tain't a fancy, sir—he's mad—all the fellows know! They all know what he did!" yelled Turkey. "He ain't safe. Hiding and jumping out on people—you look out, sir—he might spring at you—"

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Ducas. "Is the boy wandering in his mind? Packe, you did not play any such trick as he describes—surely—"

"Oh!" gasped Packe. "I—I—"

"He did!" yelled Turkey. "He was hiding in the alcove in the Sixth-form passage, sir, and he sprang on me from behind when I went to his study—"

"Impossible!" exclaimed Roger.

"He did!" shrieked Turkey. "Like a tiger! Sprang on me from behind and— and clutched me—I was awfully frightened, sir. Then afterwards he came up to Compton's study, and sprang at me again—these fellows saw him, sir. He's mad, sir—he springs at people! He may spring at you any minute, sir."

Roger gazed at Turkey, and then at Packe. Then he gazed at Harry Compton and Co.

"Compton! Can you explain this?" he exclaimed.

"We only know what Turkey—I mean Tuck—told us, about what happened in the Sixth-form passage, sir," answered Harry, "but Packe did come up to our study, while Tuck was teeing with us, and jumped at him. Turkey couldn't have done anything, as he had been with us all the time, and it looked to us as if Packe had gone batchy, and we dragged him away from Turkey—"

"We had to, sir," said Dick Lee. "When a chap's gone nuts—"

"He looks calm now, sir," said Bob, "but you should have seen him in our study—mad as a hatter—"

"Perfectly potty, sir," said Lord Talboys.

Vane-Carter said nothing. His eyes were glimmering, as if he found the whole affair amusing, but he remained silent.

"I fail to understand this," said Mr. Ducas. "Can you explain it, Packe? You did not, I presume, conceal yourself in the alcove in the passage, and seize this foolish boy suddenly—"

"He did, sir!" yelled Turkey. "Sprang on me from behind like a tut—tut—tiger—"

"Silence! Answer me, Packe."

"I—I—I—," Packe stammered, "I can certainly explain, sir. Tuck had been playing tricks at my study—giving runaway knocks at the door, and getting away before I could get out of the study after him—"

"I didn't!" howled Turkey. "I never—"

"Silence! Proceed, Packe."

"Well, sir, as it happened twice, and I could not catch him or even discover who it was, I—I stepped into that alcove, to catch him if he came back a third time," explained Packe.

"Oh!" ejaculated Roger.

"Oh!" murmured Harry Compton. The juniors exchanged glances.

"He came back, sir, not knowing that I was on the watch there, and was just about to bang at the door, when I took him by the collar, and—and caned him," said Packe. "And later, when the runaway knocking happened again, I knew of course that it was Tuck, and went to look for him, and found him in Compton's study—"

"Tuck! Had you been playing tricks at Packe's study door—"

"I didn't!" gasped Turkey. "I never! I—I wasn't—"

"It happened twice, sir," said Packe, "the third time I caught him—"

"I never—I didn't—I hadn't—"

Roger gave Packe a grim stare.

"You did not see him on the first two occasions, Packe?"

"No, sir—I can't see through a door," said Packe, sullenly. "I saw him the third time, being outside the study in the alcove opposite—"

"Tuck! Why did you go to Packe's study?"

"Lowndes sent me, sir."

"Lowndes?" repeated Roger.

"Yes, sir, he sent me with a message for Packe, and I was just going to tap at his door, when Packe sprang on me from behind—," gasped Turkey. "Of course I thought he was in the study, and then—oh, haddocks! Wouldn't you be scared, sir, with a lunatic jumping at you from behind—"

"Silence, you foolish boy. You have heard Packe's explanation," snapped Roger. "He supposed that you had been giving runaway knocks at his door."

"But I hadn't, sir," gasped Turkey. "I hadn't been anywhere near his study, till I went there with Lowndes' message—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Bob Drake, suddenly. Roger's study was no place for a sudden roar of laughter: but Bob really could not help it, as he realized the idiotic mistake Packe had made. Obviously, somebody else had been delivering those runaway knocks, and Packe had jumped on the wrong man—giving the hapless Turkey the alarming impression that he had taken leave of his senses.

"Drake! You seem to be amused!" Roger's glare froze Bob's merriment on the spot.

"Oh! No—yes—no—yes, sir!" stammered Bob.

"Kindly be silent!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

Roger's glare turned on Packe. Packe's face was a study. It was dawning on him, too, that he had made a mistake—that some other fellow had been banging at his door, and that he had jumped on Turkey, who was only there to deliver a harmless message from a man in the Sixth.

"Well, Packe!" snapped Roger. "Probably you realize now that it was not Tuck who gave the runaway knocks at your study door."

"Oh!" gasped Packe. "I—I—I certainly thought—"

"You gave that foolish boy the impression that you were out of your senses," snorted Roger. "And no wonder!" he added.

"Oh! I—I—I caught him at my door, just about to knock—," stammered Packe. "I—I took it for granted—I—I—I certainly thought—and—and—who was it if it was not Tuck, sir?"

"As it happens, I know who it was," snapped Roger, "and it certainly was not Tuck."

Vane-Carter gave a jump.

He understood now why Roger had sent for him along with the others. Roger knew!

"The whole matter is now explained," said Mr. Ducas. "You acted hastily, thoughtlessly, and foolishly, Packe, in a manner quite unworthy of a Sixth-form prefect. Your action, in suddenly seizing upon a boy who had given no offence, was quite enough to give him the impression that you were utterly irresponsible: and these other boys were certainly not to blame for restraining you from punishing him again for absolutely no cause. Is that clear to you, Packe?"

"Oh! Ah! Er—," stammered Packe.

"Is that clear to you or not?" snapped Roger.

"Oh! Er—yes, sir!" gasped Packe.

"I—I—I say, sir, do you mean that he ain't mad, sir?" mumbled Turkey with an uneasy eye on Packe.

"Certainly not, you stupid boy."

"But springing on a chap from behind, sir—!"

"Bless my soul! Cannot you understand that that was a mistake, Tuck, now that the matter has been explained?"

"Oh! Yes, sir! But he did spring on me from behind, and a fellow who springs on a chap from behind for nothing must be crackers, sir. I mean to say, hiding in a dark corner and springing on a chap—"

"Be silent, Tuck!" gasped Roger.

"Yes, sir! But oughtn't he to see a doctor, sir—?"

"That will do, Tuck."

"Oh, very well, sir, still if a fellow's mad, and loose about the school, a chap doesn't feel safe, sir—"

"You fat ass, shut up!" gasped Bob.

"That's all very well, Drake, but with a lunatic about the place—"

"If you say another word, Tuck, I shall cane you!" roared Roger.

"Oh!" gasped Turkey. And he did not say another word. But he kept a very uneasy eye on Packe. Turkey's fat brain was slow on the uptake: and he was far from satisfied that Packe was not, after all, "crackers".

"The matter closes here," said Roger, "excepting for the reckless young rascal who delivered the runaway knocks at Packe's door." Roger picked up the cane from his table. "Vane-Carter, you will bend over that chair!"

Dudley Vane-Carter said nothing. Roger knew, and that was that! The scapegrace of Carcroft bent over the chair, and six whops sounded in the study like six pistol-shots. Then Roger dismissed everybody with a wave of the hand, and was left once more to his pile of form papers. V.C. wriggled like an eel as he departed from the study. The other fellows were grinning—only Turkey Tuck's fat face remaining uneasy. And for days and days afterwards, a mere glimpse of Packe of the Sixth in the offing was enough to send Turkey hurriedly scuttling round corners, with a lingering dread that Packe, after all, really was "crackers".

THE END