CHAPTER I

CHARD knew that something was "on" in the Fifth.

Chard must have known.

There were so many whispers, nods, grins among the Fifth-form men at High Coombe, that Chard must have been both blind and deaf if he had not suspected something.

That it was something up against James McCann, the new headmaster, Chard also knew, or at least accurately surmised.

As a member of Mr. McCann's staff: as form-master in the Fifth: obviously it was Mr. Chard's duty to look into the matter, and take steps.

Chard neither looked into the matter, nor took steps.

He calmly affected to observe nothing.

Even when, coming out of his form-room after class, he caught muttering

voices in the corridor, and words that could hardly have left him in doubt, Chard was still determined to know nothing and suspect nothing.

Three Fifth-form men were in the corridor—Aubrey Compton, the dandy of the Fifth, glass of fashion and mould of form at the School for Slackers; Bob Darrell, muscular and rugged and a keen footballer, whose necktie and trousers were eye-sorrows to his elegant chum Aubrey; and Teddy Seymour, who chummed with both of them, and in his irresolute way followed the lead of either, generally the slave of the last word.

Bob Darrell was speaking as Chard came out. Bob's voice was not loud, but it was rather deep, and every word reached Chard's large red ears.

"You can't do it, Aubrey! You know you can't."

"Can't we?" smiled Aubrey.

"Everybody's in it, Bob," said Teddy. "Why, even some of the Sixth-form pre's are in it—they hate McCann as much as we do."

"I don't!" said Bob.

"Nor I," said Aubrey, loftily, "I hope I shouldn't condescend to hate a dashed usher. I admit that I loathe him. One loathes a bounder."

"Oh, don't be a silly ass!" growled Bob. "Look here, whether you loathe him or not, he's the Head, and a fellow who lays a finger on a headmaster—"

Chard coughed loudly.

The three Fifth-formers, becoming aware of him, were suddenly silent. Chard gave them a smile and a nod as he passed. Chard, certainly, was not deaf: but it seemed that he must have been as deaf as an adder, for he took no note whatever of what he had heard. He charged on his way as if he had heard nothing.

Chard, big, red, stout, aggressive, was aggressive even in his walk. He charged rather than walked. In Common Room his loud voice dominated all the other beaks. Gapes, the master of the Fourth, sometimes mimicked Chard, in Common Room, when he was not present, to the amusement of the rest of the staff. But in Chard's oppressive presence Capes was meek. Chard was not exactly popular, in Common Room. In one matter, however, he had the hearty support of all—in his opposition, open or covert, to the new Head.

Chard, as all High Coombe knew, as even Liggins the porter knew, had expected to step into Dr. Chetwode's shoes when that venerable Beak retired. Instead of which, the Governors had appointed Jimmy McCann: a young man hardly more than half Chard's age: a nobody from nowhere, as Chard at least described him. High Coombe had been nicknamed the "School for Slackers", not without reason. It had practically run to dry rot in old Dr. Chetwode's time. That fact, it seemed, had dawned at last on a rather drowsy governing body: and they had woken up, as it were, and appointed quite a young headmaster in the Venerable Beak's place: a keen and vigorous young man, with a spot of ginger in his hair, and more than a spot of ginger in his character.

It was a disappointment to Chard, as well as a shock for everybody else. Everyone knew that Chard couldn't get over it. Like Juno in the Aeneid, he nursed an undying wound.

But that, of course, was not all. James McCann had come to High Coombe to pull the old school out of its rut: to wake it up from its long drowse, as it were. To a staff accustomed to let things take their own easy course, he seemed rather like a bull in a china-shop.

Since McCann had come, all High Coombe, from Tredegar, captain of the school, down to the smallest fag in the Third Form, had turned out at rising-bell in the morning! Work had been done in the form-rooms, and even in the studies. Capes no longer chatted in the passage while his form played leap-frog in the Fourth Form-room. Mace looked at history papers before he marked them. Fellows who had browsed contentedly on the back benches in Chard's form-room for whole terms, untroubled by Chard, made the sudden and unpleasant discovery that life is real, life is earnest! Cigarettes disappeared from Big Study, where the prefects congregated, as completely as if Sir Walter Raleigh had never brought the noxious weed home at all. The influence of James McCann ran through the old school like an electric current. Nobody liked it. Nobody could be expected to like it—at the School for Slackers.

Least of all did Chard like it.

Chard, big and aggressive, twice the weight of the slim young man who now reigned in the old Head's place, somehow felt like a small man under McCann's clear steady eyes. His loud voice, often likened by the High Coombe fellows to the trumpeting of an elephant, was subdued when he talked to him. After all, McCann was Head: and a headmaster had to be obeyed. But it came hard. Added to Chard's personal grievances, was his conviction that the old way was the best way: that every change must necessarily be for the worse, and that James McCann's new methods would ruin the old school. Chard believed that chiefly, perhaps, because he wanted to believe it. Anyhow he did believe it: and there were few at High Coombe who did not agree with him.

Chard, of course, would never have permitted any mutinous act, directed against the new headmaster, to pass unchecked and unreproved, if he had known of it—officially. There was a limit. But a man who was determined to keep his eyes shut, and his ears sealed, naturally could not act upon anything that he saw or heard! In the present instance, Chard charged out into Big Quad with his mind resolutely blank to the mutterings he had heard in the corridor.

Bob Darrell looked uneasy, as he glanced after Chard's broad disappearing back. He knew that Chard must have caught something as he came down the corridor.

"Think he knows?" muttered Bob.

Teddy Seymour looked alarmed.

"I say, even Chard would have to do something if he knew—!" muttered Teddy.

Aubrey Compton smiled, and shrugged his elegant shoulders. Aubrey knew his Chard better than they did.

"Chard won't know a thing," he answered. "None so blind as those who won't see, or as deaf as those who won't hear. Don't you worry about Chard."

"But—!" said Bob.

"My dear man, forget it! Chard won't give three cheers in the quad when that outsider McCann gets it in the neck: but won't he chuckle in his study? I can tell you that all Common-Room will be on the grin."

Bob Darrell snorted.

"Pretty state of affairs!" he growled.

"Quite!" agreed Aubrey.

"Look here, you can't do it," argued Bob. Bob Darrell was almost the only man in the Fifth who could see good in James McCann. But Bob could see quite a lot of good in that vigorous young man. Bob, one of the few High Coombers who was keen on games, liked keenness and admired it. Bob would have liked to see High Coombe rally round the new Head, pull up its socks, and earn some more creditable name than the "School for Slackers". His opinions, indeed, often put a severe strain upon his friendship with the elegant Aubrey: who was the heart and soul of the covert resistance to McCann.

"You've said that twice!" remarked Aubrey.

"Well, I'll say it three times, then—you can't do it!" growled Bob. "It's a rotten, disrespectful, putrid stunt—"

"Dear me!" said Aubrey.

"He's headmaster," said Bob. "There's such a thing as respect for a man's position, even if you don't like the man."

"Um!" said Teddy. As usual, Teddy rather followed the views of the last speaker. "Of course, there's that, Aubrey."

"What rot!" drawled Aubrey. "The man's a bounder—a rank outsider. The whole show is at sixes and sevens since he came. He's abolished fagging for the Fifth—the fags are cheeky since he's been here. When I told young Ferguson, of the Fourth, to carry a bag to my study the other day, he just looked at me and walked away! I smacked his head—but he didn't carry the bag. Does Chard rag us in form now or does he not? He hates it as much as we do: but he's got to do it—now! That man McCann is capable of pushing him out if he doesn't toe the line—after twenty years as a beak here."

"Isn't it rather a beak's duty to see that fellows in his form learn something?" asked Bob, sarcastically.

"Don't preach, old chap," implored Aubrey. "When you get on your seventhly manner, you almost make me forget that you're a pal."

"Look here—!"

"Yes, don't preach, old chap!" said Teddy, following Aubrey's lead this time. "We're all up against McCann. Look how he's pulled in school bounds—"

"There's one thing you don't seem to have thought of!" snapped Bob.

"What's that?" asked Compton. "If we've overlooked any detail, old bean, put us wise, like a good chap."

"This—if you carry on, every man who has a hand in it will be sacked from High Coombe, so quick it will make his head swim."

"Phew!" said Teddy Seymour. His mind swayed again. "I say, Aubrey—"

Aubrey Compton laughed.

"Is McCann a cat?" he asked.

"A cat!" repeated Bob, staring at him. "What do you mean, fathead?"

"I mean, is McCann a cat? If he isn't, he can't see in the dark," explained Aubrey. "He won't see a thing, dear man—especially after he's got the tar over him, with the feathers added—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" trilled Teddy.

"After it's over," resumed Aubrey, calmly, "the Blighter will have the whole school to choose from, if he wants to know who did it. He will get a lot of assistance from the staff!"

"I don't think!" chuckled Teddy.

"And there's another thing," yawned Aubrey. "It's pretty well known that McCann hates the idea of sacking a man, and that he's going to get through without sackings if he can. It wouldn't do him any good with the governors, if he started sacking men right and left. If it comes out who did it, I fancy nobody will have to catch the morning train home. But it won't come out."

"How could it?" said Teddy. "It will be as black as a hat in Head's corridor, when McCann gets the tar and feathers."

"If he switched on a light!—" said Bob.

"He can switch on all the switches he likes," drawled Aubrey. "All the lights will be out of action, you see. Old Corky cuts it off at the meter."

"Oh!" said Bob.

"We're taking some care, you know," said Compton. "Nobody wants six on the bags from McCann—he's a hefty brute: and it has to be admitted that he can whop! He has the nerve to whop Fifth-form men as if they were fags—"

"If Fifth-form men act like fags—!" began Bob.

"Dear man, I asked you not to preach!" murmured Aubrey. "You're wastin' your breath, anyway—McCann's got it comin'. We've been plannin' this for days, and it's comin' off this evening. If you funk takin' a hand—"

"Do you want me to punch your silly head, Aubrey Compton?"

"Thanks, no! I mean, if you feel that it would be naughty—!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" from Teddy.

"—in that case, you can stay out. Lots of us to do the trick," said Aubrey, cheerfully. "I shall be there, and Teddy, and Carter, and two Sixth-form men —old Tred and Randal. We really shan't need your help."

"It's mad—!" said Bob.

"Dear me!"

"For the love of Mike, Aubrey, old man, wash it out!" said Bob, earnestly. "It's rotten—measly—you can't do it! McCann's a good chap really—he means well by the school, and well by us—look how he's pulled the games together, since he's been here—look— And he was quite right to pull in school bounds, too—"

"Comin' out, Teddy?" yawned Aubrey.

"I'm speaking to you—!" hooted Bob.

"You can go on speakin', old bean, as long as you like: but I'm tired of listenin'-in. Come on, Teddy."

Aubrey and Teddy strolled out into the quadrangle. Bob Darrell was left with a red face and knitted brows. He was only one man against many—his earnest remonstrances had no more effect on Aubrey, than water on a duck. He could not stop them—he had to let this go on! He could keep out of it, if he liked: and certainly he was going to keep out of it. But he had to let it go on!

CHAPTER II

"COMPTON!"

"Oh!" breathed Aubrey.

He had not known that Mr. McCann was at hand. That quiet, but extremely authoritative voice was his first intimation that the new headmaster of High Coombe was in the offing. If he had known, probably he would not have kicked Ferguson. On the other hand, if any fag at High Coombe deserved to be well and truly booted, was it not Ferguson of the Fourth form? Ferg had been Compton's fag before the new Head came. McCann, among other innovations, had abolished fagging for the Fifth form. The Sixth still had their fags: the Fifth, seniors as they were, had none. If Compton wanted tea in his study, he had to brew it with his own well-cared-for hands. If he wanted a parcel carried, it was useless to call "Boy!" as in the happy days of old. No call of "Boy" from a Fifth-form study was answered now. It was very annoying and exasperating.

It was hardly Ferg's fault. But Ferg was, or Aubrey fancied he was, cheeky about it. Certainly, under the new dispensation, he refused to fag. No doubt that constituted cheek. Aubrey, quite a good-natured fellow at heart, never dreamed of bullying. He simply kicked Ferguson, in passing, because he had no doubt that it was for Ferg's good to be kicked for cheek to the Fifth. It was a trifling incident—the merest trifle: Aubrey would have forgotten it in a minute or two, though perhaps Ferguson would have remembered it longer, being the recipient of the kick.

Aubrey did not even glance round before he kicked Ferguson. Teddy

Seymour noticed the new Head coming up the path: but, unaware that his friend was about to kick a fag for his own good, did not draw Aubrey's attention to the circumstance. So it came about that Compton of the Fifth kicked Ferg right under the eyes of James McCann.

Ferguson yelled.

Aubrey's foot was not large, and it was shapely, and elegantly shod. But there was a lot of drive in it when he planted it on Ferguson of the Fourth. Aubrey would have strolled elegantly on, leaving him to yell: but for the quiet authoritative voice that rapped out his name. He stared round at James McCann, breathing rather hard. Teddy looked dismayed. But Aubrey, if he felt dismayed, was not the fellow to allow dismay to appear in his face. He met the Head's gaze calmly. But his heart was beating a little fast. He could have kicked himself, harder than he had kicked Ferguson, for feeling the trepidation he so carefully concealed.

"Did you call me, sir?" His voice was calm.

"I did, Compton! Go to my study, and wait for me there."

Aubrey Compton breathed hard, and he breathed deep. He knew what that meant, of course. He was going to be caned. In old Dr. Chetwode's time, seniors had never had to bend over, at High Coombe, like juniors. Chard would have been quite horrified at the idea of caning any boy in his form—a circumstance of which his form did not fail to take full advantage. McCann had changed all that. If a senior man asked for a whopping, he received that for which he asked. Indeed it was said in Big Study that the man was quite capable of whopping a Prefect of the Sixth, if just cause were given. No such catastrophic occurrence had occurred so far, it was true, to shake High Coombe to its ancient foundations. But you never really knew what McCann might do next!

Having given his order, Mr. McCann walked on. Aubrey gazed after the stocky, muscular figure of the new Head. His gaze was expressive. Teddy Seymour's face registered deep dismay.

Ferguson grinned. He cut away in quite cheery spirit, to tell the Fourth-form men that that supercilious Fifth-form man, Compton, was going to be whopped for booting him. Aubrey did not even notice him. He stood breathing hard and breathing deep, without stirring from the spot.

Teddy touched him on the arm.

"Better go, old chap!" he murmured. "I—I say, McCann will expect to find you in his study when he goes there. Better go."

"That—that usher—!" breathed Aubrey.

"Well, he's Head—"

"I won't go."

"Oh, gum!" Teddy Seymour almost wailed. "I say, old chap, don't play the goat. For Pete's sake, don't play the goat! You've got to go."

Aubrey did not stir.

"I'll go to Chard!" he said. "Chard won't stand for that outsider whopping men in his form."

"Chard can't do a thing! He talks jolly big in Common Room, as all the fellows know: but he always has the wind up, under McCann's eye. He loathes him as much as we do: but he can't do a thing!" pleaded Teddy. "Besides, even Chard couldn't stand for booting fags on their trousers. You did, you know."

Aubrey clenched his hands. He realized that Teddy was right: Chard could do nothing. Gladly, very gladly, Chard would have backed up any High Coombe man against the newcomer whom he regarded as an interloper. Everyone knew that. But Chard was, after all, in the position of the gentleman who was willing to wound and yet afraid to strike! Chard, as Teddy said, couldn't do a thing.

Compton of the Fifth kicked Ferg.

Slowly, very slowly, Aubrey went into the House, and repaired to the Head's study, to wait there for Mr. McCann. Teddy carried the dismal news to Big Study, where Tredegar and Randal, and Carter, and a dozen more of the Sixth and Fifth, all agreed that it was the limit, that it was just what was to be expected of a bounder like McCann, that the governors must have been off their nuts to send such an outsider to High Coombe at all: that the whole school was fed up with him, that Chard ought to do something, and that it was rough luck on old Aubrey. Which, if Aubrey could have heard it as he waited in the Head's study, would probably not have comforted him very much.

He had to wait! McCann was not in a hurry to come; possibly having matters to attend to, which he regarded as more important than dealing with a wilful, mutinous body in the Fifth form. Aubrey moved about the study while he waited, stared from the window into the quad, loafed round the room again, and finally came to a halt, looking at the papers on the Head's table, with a very supercilious sneer on his handsome face. Among his other shortcomings, McCann was a man with classical tastes. True, he was a great games-man: he had bowled for the M.C.C.: and his record at soccer was known, if not admired, at High Coombe. But his prowess at games did not deter him from finding pleasure in books. Amid the many cares and duties of a headmaster's busy life, he found time somehow to indulge that taste, and it was known that in his scanty leisure hours, he was working on a translation of the Odes. Quintus Horatius Flaccus was not a popular name at High Coombe: but this sort of thing was, of course, to be expected of a man like McCann.

Evidently, he had been at work on Horace that afternoon, for there were sheets and sheets of paper on the table, covered with the fine, clear, caligraphy of Mr. McCann, and a volume of the Odes lay wide open. Aubrey looked at the papers and sneered: and then a gleam came into his eyes. Those written sheets, corrected and corrected again in many places, represented many hours of work. For a long minute Aubrey gazed at them. Then he stretched out his arm over the table, and knocked over the inkpot. He knocked it over with a careful hand, so that the stream of ink from it spattered all over those carefully-written papers. If the Blighter was so fond of construing Latin for amusement, he could do it all over again, and Aubrey wished him joy of it.

Aubrey walked back to the window, and stood staring out, with his hands in his pockets. He was going to be whopped, he knew that: but he had, so to speak, paid the bill in advance, by swamping McCann's papers with ink. What the outcome would be, he did not know: but he waited for it to accrue, with cool hardihood.

The door-handle turned at last.

Aubrey turned from the window, as Mr. McCann came into the study. The young man who now governed High Coombe glanced across at him,

without for the moment noticing what had happened to his papers on the writing-table. He eyed the Fifth-Former thoughtfully.

"Compton!"

"Yes, sir!" muttered Aubrey.

"I am afraid that you are a somewhat unthinking boy, Compton. You deserve to be caned for the action I witnessed in the quadrangle, as you very well know. But I shall not cane you for it. I only warn you not to let anything of the kind occur again. You may leave my study."

Aubrey caught his breath. Never for a moment had he expected that. He had had a bitter suspicion that the Blighter had been glad of a chance to catch him for a whopping! Evidently, the Blighter hadn't! And he had paid McCann in advance for a whopping that was not going to materialize. Half-an-hour's wait in the study was all his penalty: and now he was free to go—unwhopped! But the next moment, McCann's eyes fell on the ink-swamped papers on the table, and he gave a start, and uttered an exclamation.

"What is this? What—?"

He gazed at the swamped papers. Then he turned to Aubrey, his face hard.

"You did this, Compton?"

"An accident, sir—!" said Aubrey, calmly. "Sorry—" He paused at the contempt in McCann's face, and coloured, and was silent. Aubrey had the courage of his misdeeds: and he would not lie like a frightened fag. He would never give that outsider just cause to despise him. He stood sullen and stubborn—and silent.

"I shall not cane you, Compton, for your action in the quadrangle, as I have said." McCann's voice was very quiet. "But I shall cane you for this act, with the greatest severity." He picked up a cane from the table. "Bend over that chair, Compton."

In savage silence, Aubrey bent over the chair. How he got through the "six" that followed, without yelling, Aubrey hardly knew. But pride was strong, and he would not utter a sound: though he had to clench his teeth to keep back yells. It was well known at High Coombe that McCann could whop: and if Aubrey had ever doubted it, he had it proved now to his fullest satisfaction. Every stroke of that "six" was laid on with scientific precision, and Aubrey was almost tottering when it was over.

"You may go, Compton!"

Aubrey went from the study almost blindly.

As the door closed on him, Mr. McCann dismissed him from mind. His attention was wholly given to the papers Aubrey had rendered indecipherable. Mr. McCann was not the man to cry over spilt milk. Many hours of patient labour had been wasted by the folly of a wilful boy: and James McCann had a great deal of work to do over again. He sat down at his writing-table to do it. Other matters which claimed his time had to be set aside, for the present.

But as his pen travelled over the paper, there came an interruption: the buzz of the telephone-bell.

Mr. McCann put down the pen, and picked up the receiver. A rich and fruity voice came through, not particularly welcome to McCann's ears. It was Chard speaking from his rooms across the quad. The charms of Chard's conversation, if any, had long since palled on Jimmy McCann. However, he was always polite to the staff.

"Chard speaking," came the fruity voice. "Is that Mr. McCann?"

"Speaking."

"If you are at leisure at the moment, sir, there are some matters I should like to discuss with you." A slightly sarcastic tone crept into Chard's voice. In the older days, of Dr. Chetwode, Chard had never bothered to ascertain whether the Head was at leisure before he charged in on him. The Venerable Beak simply had to be at leisure, when Chard desired to exercise his double-chin. Old Dr. Chetwode had never been able to stand up to big aggressive Chard. But it was quite different with the new Head. McCann's time was more valuable than the old Head's: no doubt because he ran High Coombe with a firm and efficient hand, instead of letting things slip and slide.

"At the moment, I am busy, Mr. Chard," said McCann. "But what is the matter you desire to discuss?"

"The question of bounds, sir! The town of Okeham has always been within bounds for senior boys on half-holidays, until your new order was posted, rescinding school bounds to this side of the town. That order is, if I may venture to say so, unpopular in my form. Several of my boys have spoken to me about it."

"I am sorry for that, Mr. Chard! But it is definite."

McCann could bear heavy breathing at the other end.

"I trust, sir," said Mr. Chard, with almost overwhelming dignity, "that you will consent to discuss the matter with a senior form-master."

Mr. McCann hesitated for one moment. School bounds had been drawn in, in the direction of Okeham, for good reasons. Chard might not have known, but Mr. McCann knew, that certain sporting fellows in the senior forms had been wont to "back their fancy" with a certain sporting gentleman at the Feathers in Okeham. It was quite useless for Chard to "discuss" the matter. But Jimmy McCann, though High Coombe called him a bounder, and an outsider, and all sorts of names, never liked taking a high hand with members of the staff who had been years and years and years at High Coombe. He liked to be considerate.

"Very well, Mr. Chard," he said, after that moment's hesitation. "I am afraid that I cannot alter my decision: but I will certainly hear whatever you desire to say on the subject."

"Then I will walk across, sir, if you are at leisure—" Again the slightly sarcastic note in Chard's voice!

"At the moment, no!" Jimmy McCann was prepared to let Chard trumpet in his study when he was at leisure. But he was not at leisure now: he had to put in some long and steady work to undo the mischief Aubrey had done. "I am very busy at the moment, Mr. Chard, but if you care to walk across this evening—say about nine—"

Heavy breathing again!

"Very well!" came Mr. Chard's reply, with almost overpowering dignity. "If you are not at leisure now, sir, I certainly do not wish to trespass on your time. I will look in about nine, sir."

"Very well, Mr. Chard!"

"Puppy!" said Chard, after he had cut off, confiding that opinion of the new Head to his rooms on the other side of the quad.

Mr. McCann did not confide his opinion of Chard to his study! He sat down at his writing-table, and forgot that such a person as Chard existed.

CHAPTER III

BOB DARRELL looked, and felt, just miserable.

In No. 3 Study, in the Fifth, he stood with his hands in his pockets, his sturdy shoulders leaning on the mantelpiece, looking at Aubrey Compton.

Teddy Seymour, sitting on the corner of the table, looked at him, too, with a deeply sympathetic face, and making vague sympathetic noises.

Aubrey heeded neither of them.

He was standing—since leaving the Head's study he had had no inclination whatever to sit down. His handsome face was quite pale. His eyes smouldered. "Six" on his elegant bags had told on Aubrey. He was feeling it yet: and likely to feel it for some time to come.

There had been a long silence in the study, save for Aubrey's hard breathing, and Teddy's sympathetic but vague distressed murmurs.

Bob Darrell had seldom felt so discouraged and downcast. He had hoped, even at the eleventh hour as it were, to dissuade Aubrey and his friends from carrying out that mad scheme of ragging the new Head. It had been planned—all preparations had been made—the time and place had been fixed—yet Bob still hoped that he might induce the reckless fellows to wash it out—till now. Now he knew that the last hope was gone. The expression on Aubrey's face was more than enough to tell him so. If there had been the remotest chance of dissuading Aubrey, it was gone.

Bob was loyal to his pal. He liked Aubrey, and Aubrey liked him, though they had hardly a single taste in common. He felt every pang of that "six" almost as much as Aubrey did. It was rotten ill-luck that this should have happened now, embittering Aubrey to the very limit. He felt a little resentful

towards McCann too. Need he have laid it on so hard? After all, senior men did sometimes boot fags. Bob knew nothing so far of Aubrey's exploit in the Head's study: Aubrey had not spoken a word since his arrival in No. 3. Both Bob and Teddy supposed that the licking had been for landing an elegant shoe on the trousers of Ferguson of the Fourth. And if that was it, McCann had certainly come down very hard and heavy. Bob, looking at Aubrey, could not help resenting that.

And yet, McCann was a good man, an able man, and just exactly the Head that High Coombe needed: Bob realized that, though few if any others at High Coombe could see it. Under the Venerable Beak, the old school had drifted into utter slackness. Most of the staff were old, and set in their ways—unconsciously consulting their ease more than their duty, for lack of a strong hand on the reins. Younger masters, like Capes, fell into the rut, under the influence of the general slackness. Some of the fellows hardly worked at all, till McCann came: Randal of the Sixth, for instance, a happy-go-lucky and pleasant fellow whom everyone liked, "specialized" in history, as he was pleased to call it: which meant that he could stay out of form to work in his study—and everyone knew just how much work Randal did there! School bounds had extended far and wide in old Dr. Chetwode's time—Jimmy McCann had pulled them in: much to the indignation of all concerned. Fifth-Form men were furious about it—especially those members of the form who liked to drop in at the back door of the Feathers on a half-holiday! Chard was deeply annoyed by it: he trumpeted in Common-Room on the subject, declaring that it showed a lack of trust: he, Chard, had always trusted his boys!

Bob knew that McCann was right. In his quiet way, he backed up the new Head as much as he could. But now, as he looked at the suffering Aubrey, he felt resentful, as well as miserable. That mad scheme was certain to go on now: High Coombe fellows were so hopelessly out of hand, that they did not seem to realize what an awful, unheard-of thing it was to rag a headmaster: and it was no mild rag, either—it was tar and feathers! It was really unthinkable—yet they were not only thinking of it, but were going to do it, and had laid careful and meticulous plans for the doing. And in Aubrey's present mood, it was obviously useless for Bob Darrell to say another word on the subject.

There was a tap at the door of No. 3, and it opened to reveal a stout aggressive figure and a red face. Chard walked in.

Three Fifth-form men stood to attention at once: Aubrey making a great effort to clear his countenance, and suppress the signs of anguish. Mr. Chard's face, always red, was redder than usual, and his small light-blue eyes had a gleam in them. Apparently Chard was angry about something. It was not uncommon for Chard to be angry about something: and on such occasions he always felt, like the ancient prophet, that he did well to be angry! Chard's temper, in fact, had been straining at the leash ever since Jimmy McCann had blown in at High Coombe.

"Ah! You are here, Compton." Chard's loud, deep, fruity voice was a little deeper than usual. "I have heard, Compton, that you have been called before the—before Mr. McCann." Chard hated alluding to McCann as "the Head".

"Yes, sir," muttered Aubrey. No. 3 Study knew now why Chard had looked in. He had heard of the whopping in the Head's study. A Fifth-Form boy had been whopped, without any reference whatever to the Fifth-Form master! No wonder Chard's small eyes gleamed from his portly red face. Was Chard a a man to be disregarded in this manner: disregarded as if he did not exist? Chard was prepared to take up the cudgels for that member of his form: if there was anything to be done. But naturally he wanted to know the details first. Quite aware that something against the new Head was being planned in his form, Chard had to walk warily. He could not afford to make mistakes in dealing with that keen, efficient, steady-eyed young man, James McCann.

"I heard that you have been caned, Compton?"

"Yes, sir."

Chard breathed heavily. Aubrey really did not want to reveal the signs of suffering: but Chard could see that he had had it hard. And Aubrey was high in Chard's good graces. He was the son of Colonel Compton, a member of the Governing Board, with great influence on that Board. Chard revered the Board of Governors: except, of course, when they made such a ghastly mistake as that of appointing a young man like James McCann as headmaster!

"For what," asked Chard, heavily, "were you caned, Compton?"

Aubrey hesitated.

Teddy Seymour rushed in to explain. Teddy was burning with indignation, as well as throbbing with sympathy.

"It was nothing really, sir! Nothing at all really! Aubrey never did a thing, sir! He just booted a cheeky fag—and McCann saw him—and that—that was all, sir! Young Ferguson wasn't hurt—why, I saw him laughing as he walked away! And Aubrey's had six—"

"It's pretty thick," muttered Bob.

Chard breathed more heavily. Aubrey's offence, evidently, was very light. Still, Chard could not exactly register official approval of the booting of fags!

"A thoughtless act, Compton!" he said. "Hem! A very thoughtless act! But I shall certain take this matter up with the—with Mr. McCann—"

Aubrey coloured. Chard, evidently, fancied that he had hold of a case of undue severity, of which he was going to take all the advantage he could. Aubrey could not let him go to the Head and make a fool of himself.

"That—that wasn't all, sir!" Aubrey stammered a little, but he had to get it out. "Mr. Cann let me off for that, sir—"

"Oh!" ejaculated Chard, staring at him, "I do not quite follow, Compton—"

"He let you off—!" babbled Teddy, in astonishment. "But you've jolly well been licked—"

"What—?" began Bob, equally surprised.

"I—I—I had to wait for the Head in his study, and—and upset some ink over the papers on his table," muttered Aubrey.

"Oh!" ejaculated Teddy.

"Oh!" breathed Bob.

They understood now.

Chard was silent for a moment or two. But he rallied.

"An accident, I have no doubt!" he said.

Aubrey was silent.

Chard looked at Aubrey, and for a moment he was angry, even with the son of Colonel Compton, influential member of the Governing Board. He knew what had happened in the Head's study just as if Aubrey had described it to him: and there was evidently nothing to be done: he had wasted his time, and his breath, in coming up the stairs to No. 3 in the Fifth. But his portly brow cleared. He could find extenuating circumstances in anything that was up against that obnoxious young man James McCann.

"Hem!" he said, at last. "Hem! In that case—hem! In the—the circumstances—hem! Hem!" A faint smile dawned on the red face. "I have heard from Mr. McCann that he is very busy now—hem! Possibly that accident—hem—with the ink may have given him some extra work—hem! It was my intention to raise the matter of drawing in the school bounds, with Mr. McCann but—hem—he seems very busy at the present moment." Chard almost grinned. "Hem!"

He revolved on his portly axis to go.

Then he gave a little start, his eyes fixing on a large can that stood in the corner of the study. A large can was quite an unusual article in a study at High Coombe. And several black smears on the outside of the can revealed that its contents were still more unusual: for obviously it contained tar. Mr. Chard gazed at that can of tar for a long moment, as if it fascinated him. Did so extremely unusual an article in a High Coombe study connect itself, in Chard's mind, with the whispers and mutters he had caught on the subject of an intended rag on the Head?

If so, Chard was quite determined to know nothing. He simply could not help staring at that surprising can. Otherwise he took no note of it. He charged out of the study, and was gone.

Bob Darrell quietly closed the door after him. Then he looked at Aubrey, meeting a stare of defiance.

"So that was it!" said Bob. "McCann never licked you for next to nothing—you ragged the papers in his study—!"

"Why not?" sneered Aubrey. "A few hours writing them out over again may keep him from meddlin' where he's not wanted. He seems to like swotting over Horace, too—I wish him joy of it."

"Well, he had to lick you for it. And I was thinking—" Bob did not finish. But that spot of resentment against McCann had vanished.

"I say, Chard saw that can!" Teddy was alarmed. "He never said anything, but he jolly well saw it—"

"Safer to keep it out of sight, if you're mad enough to do anything with it, Aubrey," grunted Bob.

"Why?" sneered Aubrey. "The Blighter never comes to this study: and nobody else would say a word."

"Chard's a beak, and—"

"Chard will forget all about that can. He won't know a thing about it, when McCann gets the tar and feathers. You know that!"

Bob was silent. He did know it: and that knowledge did not add to his respect for his form-master.

Aubrey gave a painful wriggle.

"He's got it comin'!" he said, between his set lips. "Tar and feathers for that rank outsider—and they'll laugh as much in Common-Room, as the fellows in the studies. He may go, after that! He may be as fed up with High Coombe as High Coombe is with him. This evening—"

"Aubrey, old man, chuck it—"

"Don't be a fool!"

"I tell you, it's mad—rotten—chuck it, old chap—"

"After six from McCann?" Aubrey laughed, while he wriggled. "Shut up, if you can't talk sense, old man. He's got it comin'!"

Bob, dismally, shut up.

CHAPTER IV

IT was sheer luck—a happy chance that solved a problem for Bob Darrell. What would have happened, if he had not spotted James McCann just then, in the thickening dusk Bob did not know.

There was a heavy weight on Bob's mind. He couldn't let this thing go on—how could he? He, if nobody else, realized how terribly serious it was, and what a frightful row there would be about it: and he was as much concerned for McCann himself, as for his unthinking friends. He couldn't let it go on—and he couldn't stop it. It was something of a dilemma.

He knew the whole plan. His friends had never thought for a moment of hiding anything from Bob: he was to be trusted. He was against it: but that cut no ice. Only by giving his friends away to the Beak could he have stopped it: and that, of course, was unimaginable. Bob would not have betrayed a friend to save a whole clan of McCanns from tar and feathers. He wandered in the dusky quad thinking it out, miserably and dismally, wondering and wondering whether there was anything he could do to stop that mad scheme. The dusk fell more thickly: lights gleamed in innumerable windows: but Bob, in his distress, was oblivious of lock-ups. Was there anything he could do?

It was all cut and dried. The can of tar was ready in No. 3. Carter had

the bag of feathers in his study. At the fixed time, no less a person than Corkran of the Sixth, head-prefect of High Coombe, was going to cut off the electric light at the meter. The House would be plunged into sudden and utter darkness. Everyone would think, of course, that it was a "cut": such cuts had occurred before. Anyhow there would be utter darkness. They would make sure first, of course, that McCann was in his study. Plunged into sudden dark, McCann would come out of his study: he was not likely to sit there, like the heathen of old, in darkness! Besides, if it was an electricity "cut", he would have to see to temporary lighting arrangements. There was no doubt that he would come out of his study.

In the corridor, black as a hat, five fellows would be waiting for him, with a can of tar, and a bag of feathers!

McCann was a muscular man, fit as a fiddle. But five pairs of hands would be more than enough for him. And he would be taken wholly and utterly by surprise. It would be, in fact, a matter of only moments, to up-end the can of tar over him, and add to that adhesive flood the mass of feathers. Aubrey, Teddy, Carter, Randal, Tredegar, would be gone the next moment: leaving the Blighter staggering and tottering, well and truly tarred and feathered: and in no doubt whatever about what High Coombe thought of him!

The plan had been laid, discussed, conned over, considered in all its aspects and from every angle: and it simply could not fail. Bob himself did not see how it could possibly fail. James McCann was going to be tarred and feathered that evening by the rebels of High Coombe: and Bob could not stop it: the stars in their courses couldn't stop it.

In No. 3 Study, in the Fifth, there was quite a merry gathering. Aubrey, a little recovered from the "six", was in high spirits: rejoicing in happy anticipation. Bob, feeling as he did, was quite disinclined to add himself to that merry gathering. He was wandering dismally in the dusky quad, thinking it out, or trying to think it out. Was there anything—anything that he could do to stop this mad trick?—to stop it without bringing disaster on his friends? And thinking it over till his head almost ached with the problem, he couldn't think of a thing. And then, glimpsing the Head in the dusk, he remembered that he was staying out of the House after lock-ups.

Much as he admired Jimmy McCann, and gave him what support he could in putting a spot of discipline into the School for Slackers, Bob did not precisely want that discipline to come down on him personally: and McCann was very strict about lock-ups. In the circumstances Bob did not desire to meet his eye. He was close to the ivied wall of the old clock-tower, and he backed into the ivy as he glimpsed the mortar-board. McCann was, apparently, taking a walk in the dusky evening, as he often did: Bob had noticed that there was no light in his study window. He was quite content to let Mr. McCann pass him unseeing. He had not seen him yet, and was not going to, if Bob could help it. To his dismay, McCann came directly towards him.

For a moment or two, it seemed to him that he was spotted. But it was not that. McCann, as Aubrey had remarked, was not a cat to see in the dark: and keen as his eyes were, they did not pick up a shadowy figure crammed into shadowy ivy. He passed within a yard of Bob, and disappeared into the little stone porch of the clock-tower. Bob, breathing rather fast, heard the sound of a key turning in a lock: and then footsteps within the little building died away. McCann had not seen him: did not know he was there: he had evidently walked across to go into the clock-tower for some reason of his own. Bob fancied that he knew the reason, too.

There was only one ingress into the old ivied tower: by the iron-clamped door in the porch, where McCann had just gone in. But about fifteen feet up there was a little window, to which venturesome fags had climbed on the ivy, trespassing into forbidden precincts: at risk of life and limb. Mr. McCann was not the man to come down very heavily on venturesome fags for thoughtless breakages of the rules: but he was the man to be very seriously concerned about their lives and limbs. So he had directed Liggins to screw up that little window: thus putting an effective end to the antics of Ferguson of the Fourth, and other reckless spirits in the Lower School. Old Liggins was as slack as almost everyone else at High Coombe, and the master's eye was required to see that he had carried out instructions. Bob, looking up, caught a glimmer of light at the little window in the tower. McCann had gone up the almost endless spiral stair, as far as that window, and the gleam came from a pocket-torch. Clearly, McCann, taking his evening stroll in the quad, had remembered that window, and was giving it a look-in to make sure that Liggins had done his job. It was merely one of the unnumbered details to which McCann had to give his attention, in the slack and shiftless state of the school of which he had taken charge.

Bob blinked up at that glimmer, and could not help thinking that Jimmy McCann was a much more thorough and dutiful headmaster than High Coombe deserved to possess. Almost every minute of his day and evening was taken up with some duty or other: and that ass, Aubrey, had deliberately wasted hours of his time with that silly trick on the papers in his study. And they were going to tar and feather him that very evening, unless Bob Darrell could think of some way of putting a stop to it. And he couldn't!

But could he not?

Looking up at that glimmer, Bob knew that the Head was fifteen feet up. In all likelihood he had left the key in the lock, to lock it when he went. If he had—!

Bob felt quite giddy, for a moment, with the startling idea that flashed into his mind. If that key was still in the lock—!

He groped into the dark porch.

The iron-clamped door in the little arch was half-open. His groping hand felt the key sticking in the outside of the lock. Naturally McCann had left it there.

Bob's heart thumped.

Locking his headmaster in was an act of disrespect in which many members of the Fifth Form at High Coombe would have rejoiced. Aubrey, certainly, would never have let such a chance like the sunbeams pass him by. Bob would never have dreamed of it: but for one reason—if McCann could be kept from going back to his study, the whole plan of the rebels of High Coombe would fall to pieces. For the accomplishment of that plan, McCann had to be in his study, to issue forth when the light failed. If he was not in his study—!

He couldn't be in his study if Bob turned the key in that door! If that band of reckless young rascals waited for him in the corridor, when Corkran cut off the light, they would wait in vain: and could wait on till dorm, if they liked, but no McCann would fall into their mutinous hands. That awful "rag" could not take place: Bob would have prevented it, and without landing his friends in trouble!

He hesitated. Locking the Head in was a very serious thing—awfully serious! But to prevent something much more serious—to prevent a mad prank that would be followed by the most frightful "row" High Coombe had ever known—surely—! While Bob hesitated, there was the sound of a footstep descending the spiral stair. That settled it for Bob. He had to stop that rag, if he could—and he could: by pulling that door shut and turning the key. McCann would be grimly angry: he would leave no stone unturned to discover who had locked him in the tower: and if he discovered who had done it, Bob would have to face the music, and take what came to him. But he would have saved Jimmy McCann from being tarred and feathered!

He drew the door shut, and turned the key! He jerked the key out of the lock, slipped it into his pocket, and cut away. Later—when all danger of a rag was over—he would have to cut out of the House and unlock that door—the Head could not be left there all night. For the present, James McCann was safest where he was: and Bob vanished into the shadows with the key in his pocket.

CHAPTER V

MR. CHARD grunted, as he stepped out of his door, into the deep dusk, and into the wind that came up the coombe from the Atlantic. Chard had reached an age when an armchair in the evening had a strong appeal. An armchair, a fireside, a pipe, and somebody to listen to his opinions stated in loud tones that brooked no contradiction, was Chard's idea of comfort. And he had to walk across the windy quad to see that obnoxious young man, because he had not been—forsooth—at leisure earlier. Old Dr. Chetwode had never been inaccessible to Chard—though perhaps he would have liked

to be, sometimes! This young man with ginger in his hair seemed to consider his time more valuable than Chard's. It was annoying. Everything, in fact, about McCann was annoying to Chard: and he resolved to speak very plainly, and very emphatically, on that subject of the drawn-in bounds. Really it was time that McCann learned that a senior master, who had been twenty years on the staff, was not a trifle light as air.

Still, Chard smiled, as he remembered why McCann had not been at leisure earlier. He could not, of course, approve of such a trick as Aubrey had played in McCann's study. He was bound to disapprove of it very strongly. Nevertheless, he smiled. A young man who made himself obnoxious all round must naturally expect a spot or two of trouble.

Chard charged across the quad, and almost charged into a dim figure that lurked in the shadows there.

"Carter!" he exclaimed.

It was Carter of the Fifth, out of the House long after lock-ups. Chard peered at him, Chard was not a whale on discipline like McCann, and he closed his eyes when he could to kickings over the traces in his form. Still, even Chard could not quite pass this without remark.

"What are you doing out in lock-ups, Carter?" he asked.

Carter gave him a stealthy look. Inwardly, he was thinking that it was just like that old ass, Chard, to blunder in where he was not wanted. If he was going across for a chin-wag with the other beaks in Common-Room, did he have to run into a fellow in the dark? Carter, as a matter of fact, was a scout: he was watching the window of the Head's study, waiting for a light to come on there. As soon as a light in the study indicated that McCann was there, Carter had to pass the word to his confederates, and the "rag" would proceed. But no light had come on in the study window yet.

"Well!" rapped Mr. Chard, as Carter did not immediately answer.

"I—I just stepped out for a breath of fresh air, sir, after prep—Livy gave me a bit of a headache," said Carter, artlessly.

That would not have done for Jimmy McCann. But it did for Chard. Chard, as he often said in Common-Room, trusted his boys!

"Well, well, you should not have stepped out in lock-ups, Carter," he said. "Rules are rules, you know. You had better go in at once."

"Oh, yes, sir!" Carter made a few steps towards the senior lobby.

Chard charged on, and disappeared.

Carter winked at a star glimmering overhead, and halted.

Chard, no doubt, supposed that he had gone in at once, as bidden. Carter was willing to let him suppose so. But as Carter had to scout in the quad till a light came on in McCann's study window, he was not thinking of going in. Chard went in. Carter stayed out.

Mr. Chard forgot all about Carter, as he charged into the House. He stopped for a few minutes to chat with Capes, and then for a few more minutes

to chat with Mace. He was a chatty soul. At length, however, Chard charged up the corridor to the headmaster's study, tapped at Mr. McCann's door, and opened it.

Then he stared into the study, breathing hard and breathing deep.

It was dark within. McCann was not there. Distinctly, quite distinctly, he had said that he would see Chard about nine. It was now nine. There was no mistake about the matter. Chard was on time. In common civility, McCann should have been there to greet the senior master with whom he had made a definite appointment. He was not there!

For a long moment, Chard stood looking into an empty shadowy study. He was deeply offended—not for the first time. Careless neglect like this could hardly be accidental—McCann had a very retentive memory, and never forgot an appointment or anything else. This was deliberate! It was an affront! It stirred Chard's ire deeply. Apparently McCann considered that a senior master could wait till he chose to come, like a fag waiting for a beak!

Breathing very hard, and very deep, Chard reached in and switched on the electric light, and charged in.

He had to wait!

That puppy intended him to cool his heels in the study, waiting for him! Chard could think nothing else—knowing nothing, of course, about a headmaster in a clock-tower, and a key in Bob Darrell's pocket!

"Puppy!" breathed Chard.

He closed the study door, and sat down in an armchair—to wait! He drew a spot of comfort from a glance at the writing-table, where sheets of paper lay, covered with McCann's neat writing. Judging by the number of the sheets, the puppy had had a lot of work to do after Aubrey Compton's visit. Thinking of Compton, he was reminded of something he had seen in Compton's study. A grim smile came over the red face. What were they going to do with that can of tar?

But Chard resolutely dismissed that thought from his mind. He was going to know nothing—he was not even going to surmise. Puppies who kept senior masters waiting and cooling their heels, could look after themselves.

Suddenly, Mr. Chard gave quite a jump.

The light went out.

Unexpectedly, he sat in complete darkness. He blinked in the dark like an owl! Something had happened to the light—a fuse, perhaps! Or another of those cuts? Whatever it was, the light was gone, and the interior of the Head's study was as black as the interior of a hat.

"Pish!" grunted Mr. Chard.

He waited for a few moments, in the hope that the light would come on again. But it did not come on. It must be a "cut". They were always cutting off the electric current, in these days, and always, of course, at the most inconvenient moments. Chard had no idea of sitting it out in the dark. He heaved

his portly form from the armchair. If the "cut" lasted, fags would be larking in the dark—there would be uproar among thoughtless Lower boys. No doubt McCann would be taking the matter in hand: he could hardly be coming to his study in present circumstances. Chard's interview with the headmaster was unavoidably postponed. He groped to the door and opened it.

He stepped out into the passage.

And then—!

What followed seemed like an awful dream to the master of the Fifth Form at High Coombe. It was real—awfully real—but it did undoubtedly seem like some ghastly nightmare.

What followed seemed like an awful dream

CHAPTER VI

"QUIET!" breathed Aubrey Compton.

He did not need to whisper that warning. They were all very quiet: as quiet as mice with the cat at hand.

They were all ready!

Everything had gone like clock-work. Not a single detail had gone wrong. Aubrey had planned it all carefully, cautiously, efficiently. The whole thing was absolutely fool-proof, and couldn't go wrong!

Carter had cut in, by way of the senior lobby, with the news that the light had come on in the Head's study. He had even seen a shadow on the blind. That was the first essential: the man was where they wanted him!

The next step was up to Corkran of the Sixth. Corkran played his part without a hitch. He strolled away to regions seldom explored by High Coombe fellows, leaving Aubrey, Teddy, Carter, Randal, and Tredegar waiting for the light to go off. They waited in Big Study: to which apartment a can of tar and a bag of feathers had already been conveyed. Other fellows in Big Study grinned and chuckled. Everyone knew what was scheduled to happen: everyone was looking forward to it with pleasurable excitement. Aubrey rather expected Bob Darrell to butt in, at the last moment, with futile remonstrances. But he did not butt in. Bob was up in No. 3 Study, giving rather belated attention to prep.—no longer interested in the proceedings of Aubrey and Co. since he had turned the key of the clock-tower. Bob, deep in Livy, at which he was not half so good as he was at soccer, was not thinking of Aubrey and Co. at all. Not, of course, that Aubrey would have listened to a word of remonstrance. Aubrey was going through with this!

There were exclamations in Big Study when the light suddenly went out. Corkran had done his bit!

In the dark, five fellows slipped out of Big Study, Compton carrying the can of tar, Carter the bag of feathers, the other three following. There was no time to lose—they had to get on the spot swiftly, to catch the victim as he came out of the headmaster's study. There were sounds of confusion all over the House—the sudden blotting out of all lights was startling and a little bewildering. The voice of Ferguson of the Fourth was heard yelling:

"It's another cut, you men! Come on."

There was shouting, and scampering of feet, and loud sounds of expostulation as fellows barged into one another in the dark. Masters' voices were heard calling—unheeded by excited fags secure in the dark. Aubrey and Co. paid no heed to what went on around them. Swiftly, they reached the corridor on which the headmaster's study opened: swiftly, they reached the door of that study: very swiftly indeed were they on the spot, ready for that door to

open. Swift and silent, they gathered about that door—ready! Aubrey whispered "Quiet!"—but really there was not a sound. The man who was to come out of the Head's study couldn't have the slightest misgiving that five fellows, a can of tar and a bag of feathers waited for him in the dark corridor.

The study door was heard to open.

Nothing could be seen in the darkness: not even a moving shadow. Aubrey and Co. had to depend on their ears. Out of the doorway came an unseen figure, and the next moment five fellows were busy. Seymour and Randal groped, and grasped arms: Tredegar pushed against a chest: Aubrey Compton up-ended the can of tar, Carter hurled the feathers from the bag. It all went beautifully according to plan. From an astonished and bewildered recipient of the tar and feathers, came a choked howl, which sounded as if some of the tar and feathers had gone into a mouth. Gurgling, spluttering, a tarry and feather figure staggered in the doorway: while five fellows, their work well and truly done, cut down the corridor in haste—leaving the tarry and feathery figure to stagger, with an empty bag, and a can from which tar was still trickling, to keep him company.

"Urrrrgh! Oooooch! Woooooch! Urrgh! Wurrrggh!" Such were the sounds that followed the raggers as they fled!

A minute later, a loud shrill whistle was heard. Whoever it was that whistled was not visible. But a good many fellows knew that it was a signal to Corkran that the deed was done, and that he could turn on the light again. It was the briefest "cut" ever: for the lights had not been out five minutes, and now they flashed on again all over the House.

Bob Darrell was standing in the doorway of No. 3, up in the Fifth studies, when the lights came on. His belated prep. had been interrupted by the light that failed, and he was staring out of the study, wondering what had happened. Two laughing fellows came up the passage, and he stared at Aubrey Compton and Teddy Seymour. They seemed in high feather.

"Coming down, Bob?" asked Aubrey, laughing.

"What's happened?" stuttered Bob.

"Guess!" grinned Teddy.

"The light went out—"

"Didn't you expect it to?" asked Aubrey. "Forgotten what was on, old man? Livy so jolly attractive that you forgot that the Blighter was booked for tar and feathers this evening?"

Bob could only stare blankly.

"Come down," urged Aubrey. "He will be worth seeing! We came up to fetch you, Bob—do come down! Now the light's on again, you'll be able to see the sight of your little life—McCann in tar and feathers!"

"Gone mad?" gasped Bob. "If not, what do you mean? You didn't carry on with that rot, I suppose, without McCann?"

"Hardly! We got him all right."

"You got him!" repeated Bob, like a fellow in a dream.

"Of course we did! The whole thing went without a hitch! He came out of his study, as we knew he would, when the light went. And—"

"He came out of his study?"

"Of course he did—"

"Not McCann?"

"Who else?" asked Aubrey, staring at him. "What are you burblin' about? Carter tipped us when the light went on in his study, and we knew he was there—and the rest went like clockwork. Tar and feathers—"

"Oh, holy smoke!" gasped Bob Darrell. "Was there somebody in the Head's study, and did you think it was McCann?"

"It was McCann—"

"It wasn't, because it couldn't have been!" yelled Bob. "McCann's over in the clock-tower this very minute, and I know he is, because I locked him in there to keep him out of your mad rag. If you got anybody, it wasn't McCann."

"Wha-a-t—?" stuttered Aubrey.

"Oh, jiminy!" gasped Teddy.

They stared at Bob, stared at one another, and then raced away down the passage to the stairs.

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Bob.

He went down the staircase after them, but he did not join the buzzing, wildly-excited crowd that had gathered round a strange and startling, tarry and feathery, figure. He slipped quietly out of the House, to cut across to the clock-tower and unlock a door there. But Aubrey and Teddy joined the crowd, and their eyes popped at the tarry and feathery figure; which, now that it could be seen in the light, was seen to be much too ample in its proportions for Jimmy McCann. And its voice, though somewhat disguised by tar and feathers, was now recognizable. And it trumpeted:

"This outrage—this iniquitous outrage on a senior member of the staff—grooogh!—I have been attacked—assaulted—smothered with tar—smothered with feathers—who has done this? Who? Where is Mr. McCann? They must be found at once—flogged—expelled—" Chard trumpeted on.

"Chard!" said Teddy, faintly.

"Chard!" moaned Aubrey.

They faded out of the crowd, anxious not to catch a tarry eye, feeling, and looking, quite sick. That plan had gone like clockwork: there had not been a hitch: only in one single, solitary detail did there seem to have been a slip—they had not got Jimmy McCann with the tar and feathers—they had got Chard!

CHAPTER VII

JIMMY MCCANN never knew who had locked him in the clock-tower. He had been a prisoner there for quite a considerable time, when he heard the key turn in the lock, and guessed that it meant release: but whoever had handled the key, was gone in the darkness before he could emerge. Possibly, when he learned of what had happened in the House during his absence, Mr. McCann was rather glad that he had been locked in the old tower out of harm's way: he might even have guessed that it was a friendly hand that had turned the key on him. However that might be, Bob Darrell's exploit as a locker-in of beaks never came to light: the inquiries on the subject were very perfunctory. But the inquiries into the authors of the tar-and-feather exploit were not perfunctory! Chard was raging. And Chard remembered something he had seen in No. 3 Study on his visit there. He had taken no heed of a can of tar destined, in all probability, for a "puppy": but that can of tar having descended on his own portly head, he heeded it very much indeed. And when a summons came to No. 3 to appear in the Presence, there was only one thing for Aubrey to do: go to his beak, own up, taking the whole thing on his own shoulders: and express his deep, heartfelt regret—which undoubtedly was sincere!—for that sad, sorrowful, lamentable mistake in the dark.

What view Chard would have taken of the episode, had the tar and feathers landed on McCann, his form had been able to surmise. But the tar and feathers had not landed on McCann: they had landed on Chard, and he took them to heart, as it were. It was a very painful interview: and Aubrey went away after it with the knowledge, for what that was worth, that Chard, portly and short of wind as he was, could whop as effectively as Jimmy McCann.

But there was at least one satisfactory outcome of the affair: after what had happened, nobody was ever likely to be tarred and feathered again in the dark by the slackers of High Coombe!

THE END