Smack!—Peele clapped his hand to his ear

CHAPTER I

DICKY was hasty.

Dicky—otherwise Mr. Richard Dalton, master of the Classical Fourth at Rookwood—was a kindly young man. But there was no doubt that he had a slightly hasty temper.

That was how he came to box Peele's ears.

Ears were not boxed at Rookwood. It was a hasty act.

The Fourth Form at Rookwood liked their beak. They always called him "Dicky": not in his hearing, of course. He was even alluded to sometimes as "Old Dicky". On the other hand, nobody liked Peele. Peele had a "catty" temper, and a malicious tongue, and would remember a grudge for a whole term or longer. So when Dicky boxed Peele's ears, it was rather a shock and a surprise, but nobody had any sympathy to waste on Peele.

Dicky, of course, shouldn't have done it. There was a cane in his study,

the accustomed instrument of punishment when punishment was required. Dicky should have walked Cyril Peele off to his study and caned him. Boxing a fellow's ears was "not done".

Dr. Chisholm, certainly, would have raised his eyebrows very expressively at such a hasty act. The other beaks, in Common-Room, would have shaken their heads very seriously at such an incident. Dalton himself, probably, regretted the action a moment after it was performed. But there it was—he did it!

Peele had asked for it, and fully deserved it, and more. Among Peele's other unpleasant characteristics, there was a streak of cruelty. On this especial occasion, Peele was entertaining himself by throwing stones at the pigeons in a corner of the quad. He had no idea that Dicky Dalton was at hand. But as it happened, Dalton was taking a walk under the old Rookwood beeches in morning break, and he came on Peele, just as the marksman landed a stone on an unoffending pigeon.

Smack!

It rang like a pistol-shot. Louder still rang Peele's startled yell that followed the smack.

Peele clapped his hand to his ear, and spun round, to meet his form-master's angry stare.

"You young rascal!" exclaimed Dalton.

"Oh! Oh! Ow! Ooogh!" gasped Peele, rubbing his ear. That ear seemed to have a pain in it. Dicky's smack had landed hard.

That smack, and the yell that followed, had drawn attention. A dozen fellows came running up to see what had happened. Jimmy Silver, Lovell, Raby, Newcome, Mornington, Tubby Muffin, and five or six other fellows, gathered round. Peele, gasping, rubbed his ear—and Dicky Dalton stood with a face that was becoming crimson. He had acted on a hasty impulse, and done that which a Rookwood form-master should not have done: and he felt that he had let himself down in the eyes of his form. He would have given anything to recall that hasty smack. But it was too late.

He strode away and disappeared into the House. A crowd of fellows were left staring at Peele, as he rubbed his burning ear.

"Did Dicky—?" began Jimmy Silver.

"He smacked my head!" hissed Peele. "Smacked a fellow's head! I wonder what Dr. Chisholm would say, if he knew?"

"I expect you asked for it," said Lovell. "What were you doing to make Dicky smack your head?"

Peel did not answer that.

"I jolly well know what he was doing," squeaked Tubby Muffin. "He was stoning the pigeons—I saw him—."

"So that's it, Peele," said Jimmy Silver. "Serves you right! I'd have booted you if I'd seen you."

"Same here!" said Raby and Newcome together.

"He's no right to smack a fellow's head," said Peele, sullenly. "He could whop a fellow if he liked. But he can't box a fellow's ears. I'll jolly well make him sorry for it, too, somehow."

Peele trailed away, still rubbing his ear. The other fellows were left discussing the incident, till the bell rang for third school. They were rather sorry for Dicky who, as they could easily guess, wished that he hadn't acted on a hasty impulse. They were not in the least sorry for Peele. As for his sulky threat to make Dicky sorry for it, they did not heed that at all. When they went in, at the clang of the bell, they expected to hear no more about the incident. But in point of fact, quite a great deal more was going to be heard about it.

CHAPTER II

"PEELE!"

No answer.

"Peele!"

Still no answer.

Cyril Peele sat in his place, in the form. It was Latin in third school that morning, and Peele was looking at his book. He did not look up, and he did not speak, as Dicky Dalton addressed him.

Every other fellow in the Classical Fourth glanced round at Peele.

That Peele, in his usual vicious way, was nursing a grudge, was easy to guess. That he would have wreaked it, in any way he could, was also an easy guess. But disrespectful disregard of his form-master, in the form-room, was hardly the line he would have been expected to take. Yet he sat with his eyes on his book, and Mr. Dalton's voice passed him by like the idle wind which he respected not.

A glint came into Dalton's eyes.

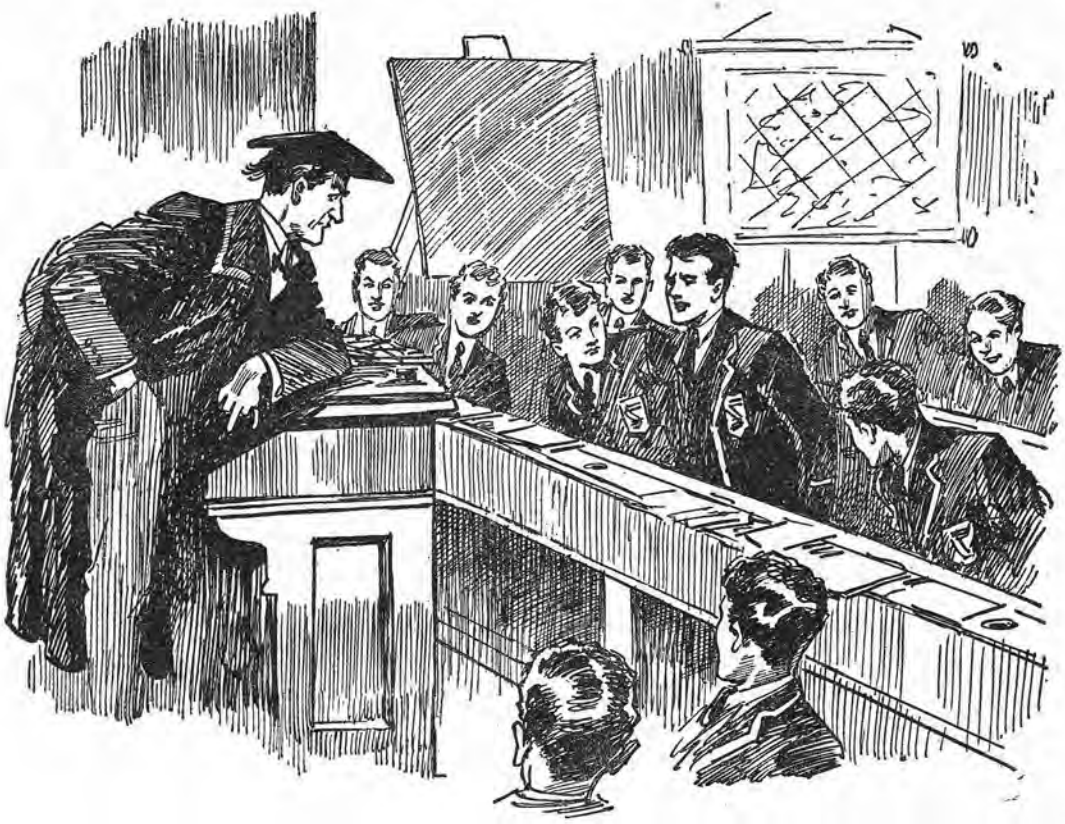
"Peele!" he rapped out, for a third time, in sharper tones. "You will go on."

Jimmy Silver had been on construe. Now it was Peele's turn. But Peele still sat silent and unregarding. Unless he had suddenly gone deaf, it was quite inexplicable.

Oswald gave him a nudge.

"Dicky's speaking to you, Peele," he whispered.

"Eh?" said Peele.



"Did you speak, sir?" he asked

"Peele!" The fourth time Mr. Dalton pronounced that name, was in a voice of thunder.

Then, at last, Peele looked at him.

"Did you speak, sir?" he asked.

"I have called to you four times, Peele. How dare you?"

"Eh?"

"Peele! What does this mean?"

Peele put his hand to his ear, as if in an effort to hear.

"What did you say, sir?"

All eyes were glued on Peele, now. Mr. Dalton came towards him, with a puzzled face. Peele's manner was quite respectful. He was not "cheeking" his beak. But what it all meant was a mystery.

"Asking for it, and no mistake!" Arthur Edward Lovell whispered to Jimmy Silver, and Jimmy nodded.

"Has the fellow gone deaf?" muttered Raby.

"Rot!" said Newcome.

"Well, it looks like it!"

"Bosh!" said Lovell. "He's pulling Dicky's leg."

"Peele! What do you mean by this?" Mr. Dalton's voice was not loud, but deep. "Explain yourself at once."

"I don't mean to be a dunce, sir—"

"What? What? I did not call you a dunce, Peele, as you know perfectly well," exclaimed Mr. Dalton. "What do you mean?"

"Eh?"

"Upon my word! Unless you explain yourself at once, Peele, I shall cane you."

"Oh, sir! I'm sure you wouldn't brain me—"

"What?" gasped Mr. Dalton.

"I'm sorry, sir, I can't hear what you say," said Peele, meekly.

"Are you deaf?" snapped Mr. Dalton.

"Yes, sir, I think I must have gone deaf, through you smacking me so hard on my ear, sir—"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Lovell. There was a buzz of excited whispering in the Classical Fourth.

"You can hear me perfectly well Peele," said Mr. Dalton, breathing hard. "I am assured, Peele, that you hear every word I speak."

"I don't mean it for cheek, sir—"

"What?"

"It isn't cheek, sir, only I just can't hear you."

Richard Dalton stood looking at him. The whole Classical Fourth looked on breathlessly.

"I'm so sorry, sir," said Peele, meekly. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind speaking louder, sir. I'm trying to hear you, sir."

"Are you telling me, Peele, that you cannot hear what I say?"

"Eh?"

"Can you hear me or not?"

"Do please speak louder, sir! I'm trying to hear! But there's a buzzing in my ear, sir, where you struck me—"

"That will do, Peele."

"Eh?"

Richard Dalton said no more. He went back to his desk, with a heightened colour. Peele sat down, and rubbed his ear.

"You will go on, Mornington," said Mr. Dalton, quietly.

"Yes, sir," said Morny.

The lesson proceeded without a contribution from Cyril Peele. He sat it

out, escaping "con". Richard Dalton gave him no more attention. He did not allow his face to express his thoughts or his feelings. But Jimmy Silver and Co. and all the rest of the Classical Fourth, could guess at his feelings, which could only have been of the greatest and keenest discomfort.

Peele might be playing a trick: he was well known to be as full of malicious tricks as a monkey. On the other hand, if he was telling the truth, the matter was very serious for Dicky Dalton. Boxing ears was, in fact, a perilous practice. It had been known to cause deafness. Had that hasty smack produced so dire an effect on Cyril Peele? Whether that was so, or not, there was no doubt that he was, as he had declared that he would, making Dicky Dalton sorry for that hasty smack.

CHAPTER III

"YOU spoofing worm!"

Thus Arthur Edward Lovell.

After third school, the "Fistical Four" rounded Peele up in the quad. They wanted to know. All the form was buzzing with excitement over the incident. If Peele was playing a part, he certainly played it well: and it certainly looked as if his sudden deafness was genuine. Arthur Edward Lovell, at all events, had no doubts about the matter. He liked Dicky Dalton, and he loathed Peele: so it was all "spoof". Thus did Arthur Edward reason it out!

"Spoofing worm!" repeated Lovell, as Peele did not answer. "Think we're going to believe that that tap made you go deaf?"

"Eh?"

"Making out you can't hear me?" roared Lovell.

"Did you speak?"

"Did I?" gasped Lovell. "You know jolly well I did. You're doing this to pay Dicky out."

"Lout yourself," said Peele.

"Whaat?" stuttered Lovell.

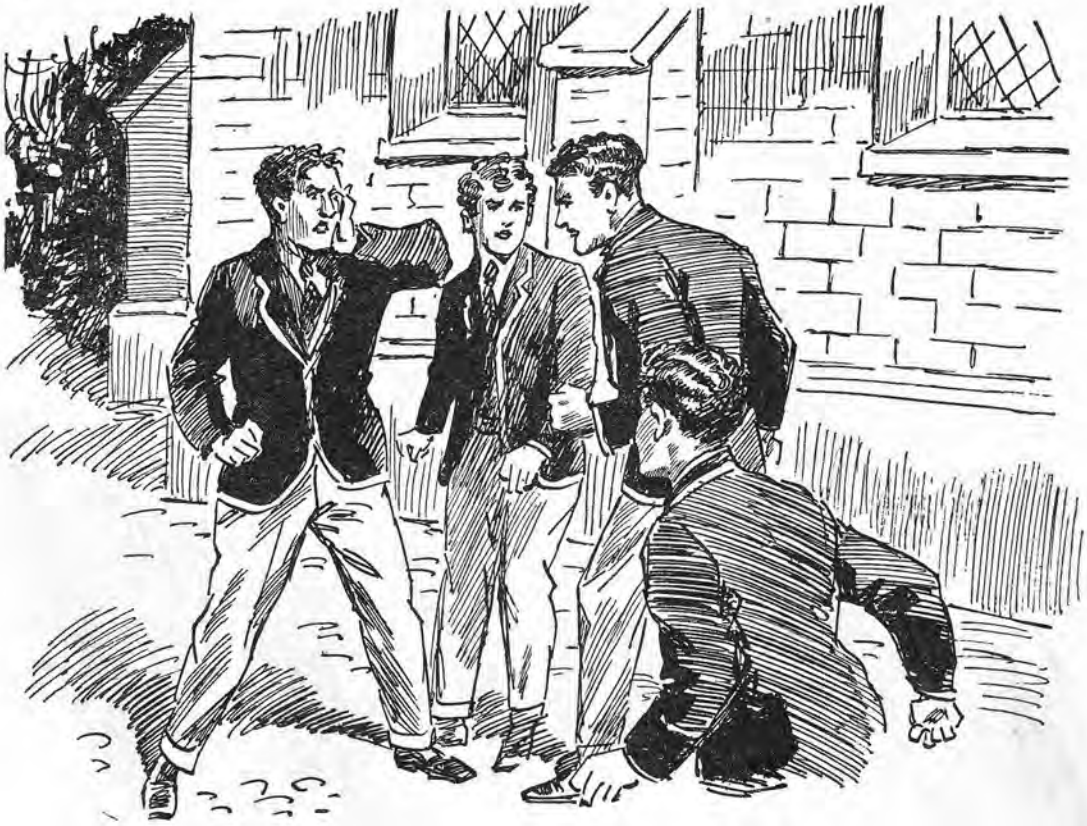
"You call me a lout, and I'll call you one—!"

"I didn't call you a lout! You jolly well know I didn't! You're just playing tricks to make out you can't hear."

"Can you or not, Peele?" asked Jimmy Silver, doubtfully.

"Eh! Did you speak, Silver?"

"It's all gammon," hooted Lovell. "Just one of his tricks to get level with Dicky. Why if this gets around, it will be the talk of the school. Dicky will be in a row with the Head. That's what that spoofing worm wants. Wouldn't he just like to land Dicky in a row with the Big Beak! He's thought this up, since



"Think we believe that tap on the ear made you go deaf?"

Dicky boxed his ears, and he's jumping at the chance. And I'm jolly well going to punch his head for it."

Jimmy Silver, Raby, and Newcome, barged between, just in time to prevent Edward suiting the action to the word.

"Stop that, ass," said Jimmy. "If he's really deaf—"

"He isn't!"

"Well, he says he is," said Newcome. "If it's true—"

"He couldn't tell the truth if he tried," snorted Lovell. "And he's not going on with this game, and landing Dicky in a row—"

"Here comes Dicky!" murmured Raby. "Quiet!"

Arthur Edward Lovell suppressed his wrath, as Mr. Dalton came into the offing. Richard Dalton's face was very thoughtful, and a little troubled. No doubt he realized how very awkward the affair would be for him, if that hasty smack really produced the result claimed by Peele.

"Peele!" he said, very quietly, taking no notice of the Fistical Four.

Peele looked at him.

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

"I did, Peele," said Mr. Dalton, breathing hard.

"Would you mind speaking a little louder, sir?"

"Cannot you hear me, Peele?"

"I'm sorry, sir, that you hurt me so much. I know you didn't mean to, sir. But I can't help it, can I, sir?"

Mr. Dalton compressed his lips. Jimmy Silver and Co. stood silent. If Cyril Peele was "spoofing", he had the nerve to do it thoroughly. Three members of the Co. were convinced, or almost convinced. Only Arthur Edward Lovell remained fixed in his belief that it was all "spoof". Arthur Edward was not a fellow to change his opinion in a hurry.

"If you really cannot hear, Peele—" said Mr. Dalton.

"Eh?"

"If you really cannot hear," repeated Mr. Dalton, more loudly, "you must see the school doctor about it, Peele."

"Very well, sir."

Jimmy and Raby and Newcome exchanged glances. If Peele was prepared to undergo examination by a medical man, that certainly looked like proof.

Mr. Dalton gave Peele a very, very keen look, and walked away. Peele's eyes glimmered after him as he went. Lovell barely restrained himself till Dalton was gone. Then he burst out:

"You spoofing, diddling, fibbing tick—!"

"Oh, chuck it, Lovell," said Raby. "If it's true, Peele can't help it. Think he'd have the nerve to face the doctor, if he was spoofing?"

"Of course he would!" snorted Lovell. "How's the doc. to know whether he's lying or not? He can hear all the while just as well as I can, and I'm going to punch him for his monkey tricks—."

Three pairs of hands fastened on Arthur Edward Lovell, and he was walked away from the spot by his chums. Peele was left grinning.

CHAPTER IV

"ALL spoof, I tell you!" snapped Lovell.

He snapped that statement at tea in the end study.

Three heads were shaken.

By that time, Arthur Edward Lovell was the only fellow in the Classical Fourth who clung stubbornly to the conviction that Peele was playing a mali-

Peele was left grinning

cious part, in retaliation for that smack on his head. Could a fellow keep up such a "spoof" for so long: never once making a false step? Peele, certainly, was a cunning fellow, with all his wits about him, and his wits were very sharp. But it did not seem possible. At dinner, Peele hadn't been able to hear a word. Later, he failed to hear anything that was said to him by other fellows, many of whom doubted, and tried to catch him out. Morny even dropped a coin behind him to surprise him into turning his head, if he could hear it drop. But Peele did not turn his head. In form in the afternoon, Dalton passed him over—no doubt puzzled how to deal with him. After class, Peele was still deaf—and by that time, it was attracting quite a lot of attention.

Obviously, before long, it would come before the Head. If Peele had to see the school doctor about it, the Head would have to know. If Peele actually was "spoofing", would he have the nerve to keep it up to Dr. Chisholm, and to a medical man? Few fellows could think so. The fact was, that Richard

Dalton was in a "spot". That hasty smack at Peele's head had landed him, bound hand and foot as it were, into Peele's hands: genuine or not genuine, the result of that smack was going to spell trouble for Dicky Dalton. Peele, who owed him many a grudge, was going to square the whole account.

"All spoof!" repeated Lovell, with a glare at his study-mates. "That tick Peele can take you in. He can't take me in. I keep on telling you that it's all spoof from beginning to end."

"'Fraid not," said Jimmy Silver.

"You're an ass, then," said Lovell.

"Looks genuine, at any rate," said Raby.

"Think so?" snorted Lovell.

"Yes, I do."

"Then you're as big an ass as Jimmy."

"Everybody's an ass except Lovell," remarked Newcome, sarcastically. "Lovell knows all the answers. He always did, and he always will. Shut up, you fellows, and listen to the Great Panjandrum!"

At which Jimmy Silver and George Raby chuckled.

Lovell frowned.

"Have a little sense, you chaps!" he exclaimed. "Look what this means to Dicky Dalton! Why, he might have to resign here! Want us to lose him?"

"Of course not, fathead," said Jimmy. "But—."

"Isn't he the best of the batch among the beaks?" demanded Lovell.

"He is! But—."

"Look what a cricketer he is!" added Lovell, as if that clinched it.

'Topping!" said Newcome. 'But—."

"Don't we all like him, and admire him, too, every man in the form, excepting that worm, Peele?"

"Quite!" said Raby. "But—."

"Well, that settles it," said Lovell. "Peele's got to own up that he's spoofing, before it all gets to the Head."

"But if he isn't spoofing—."

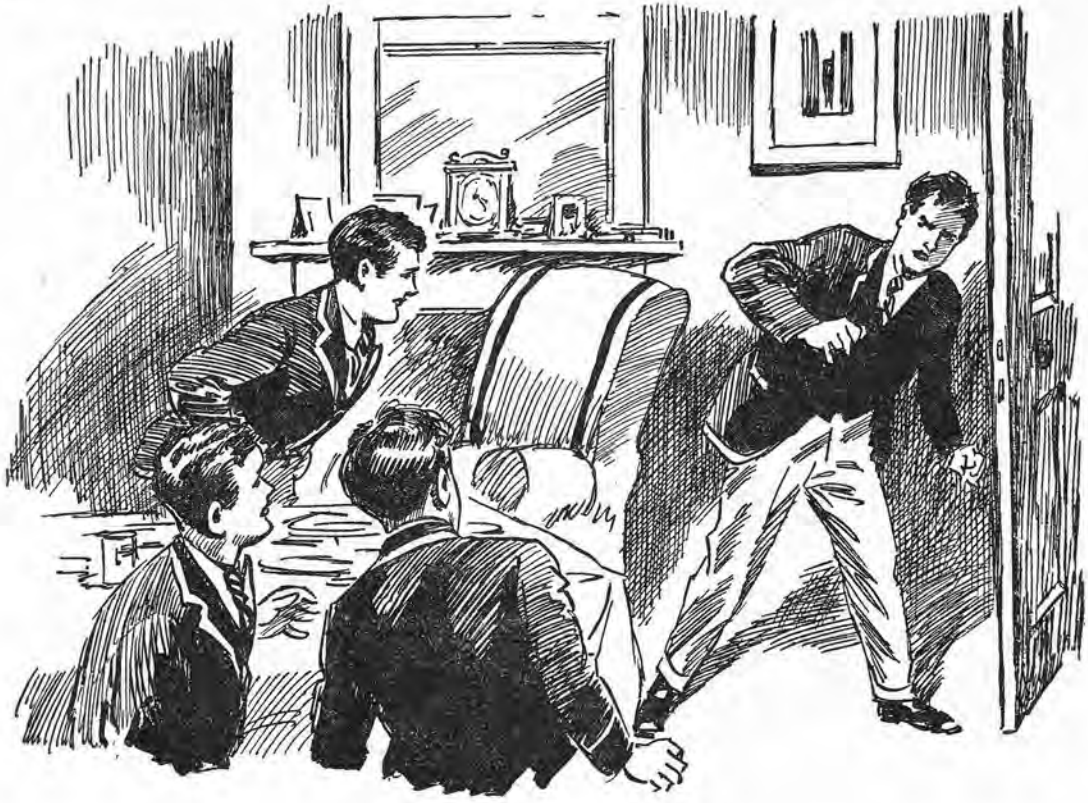
"Rot!"

"If he's really gone deaf—."

"Rubbish!"

"My dear chap—."

"Don't dear chap me!" hooted Lovell. "You all admit that Dicky Dalton is a splendid chap. You all know that Peele's a wormy tick—smokes in the box-room, bullies small fags in the Second Form, and chucks stones at birds. I'm surprised at you fellows—sticking up for a rat like Peele, and letting down a chap out of the top drawer like old Dicky—."



He left the study, frowning

"We're not!" yelled Jimmy Silver. "Dicky's top-notch, and Peele's a rat, but that's got nothing to do with Peele going deaf because his ear was smacked."

"Nothing at all," said Raby.

"Less than nothing!" said Newcome.

"Oh, pack it up!" growled Lovell. "You make me tired! I can jolly well tell you this much—Peele isn't going to put this across old Dicky if I can stop him. Why, if Peele's really gone deaf because of that smack, Dicky might have to go. He jolly well hasn't, see?"

Lovell's chums gazed at him. His reasoning powers were rather beyond them. However, they seemed to satisfy Lovell. Arthur Edward Lovell never doubted that he had it right! And, as a fellow who always knew best, he had little patience to waste on lesser intellects. He rose from the table, frowning, marched out of the end study, and slammed the door after him as he went.

"Dear old Lovell!" sighed Jimmy Silver. "What a brain! Peele's spoofing

—because it would be bad for Dicky if he wasn't! He's only pretending to be deaf, because Dicky's a good cricketer—!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lovell all over!" chuckled Newcome.

"Just Lovell!" agreed Raby.

It was said of old that a prophet is without honour in his own country. Perhaps it was just as well that Arthur Edward Lovell had so profound a faith in his own judgment. No other member of the study had any.

CHAPTER V

"HERE, Peele!"

No answer.

"Still deaf?"

Silence.

"Keeping it up, what?" jeered Lovell.

Peele looked at him, but did not speak.

Lovell had looked for him after tea, and he found him loafing under the old beeches. There was a grin on Peele's face, as if he had amusing thoughts. Possibly he was thinking of the rough passage that lay ahead for Richard Dalton.

"So you can't hear me?" went on Lovell.

"Eh? Did you speak?"

"You jolly well know I did."

"Eh?"

"Deaf as an adder, what?" said Lovell. "Jolly like an adder in other ways, too, aren't you?"

"What did you say?" drawled Peele. "You'll have to speak louder if you want me to hear. Didn't you know that my hearing's gone, since Dalton hit me on the ear this morning?"

"You cringing tick, Dalton didn't hit you on the ear—he smacked your head, as you jolly well deserved, and serve you jolly well right. I'd have smacked it myself if I'd seen you at your rotten game. You're putting up this show just to worry old Dicky whose shoes you're not good enough to clean. You'd like him to get the Head's marble eye, wouldn't you?"

"Do speak louder."

"I'm not going to speak louder," said Lovell. "I'm going to speak just like I'm speaking now, Peele, and you're going to own up that you can hear every word. Got that?"

"Sorry, I can't hear a word you say, Lovell."

"You'll be sorrier soon," said Lovell. "Know what I'm going to do, Peele? I'm going to up-end you, here and now, and sit on your chest, and bang your head on the ground—."

Peele made a hurried backward step. Apparently he heard that, although Lovell was carefully speaking in a quite ordinary tone of voice. Otherwise, there was no apparent reason why Lovell's statement of his warlike intentions should have caused him to back away.

"Oh, you heard that, did you?" jeered Lovell.

Peele bit his lip, hard.

"Well, that's what I'm going to do," said Lovell. "I'm going to bang your head, Peele, and keep on banging it. till you own up that you can hear me, when I whisper. Hallo, where are you going, Peele?"

Peele did not answer that question, whether he heard it or not. He turned to run. But a powerful grasp was on him before he could escape. In Arthur Edward's grasp Cyril Peele was nowhere. Slack and loafing ways, and cigarettes in the box-room, did not make for fitness. Peele was leagues ahead of Lovell in cunning. But he was a weed in his grasp.

"Let go!" yelled Peele, struggling.

Arthur Edward did not let go. If he had doubted before—which he hadn't, being a fellow who always knew best!—he could not have doubted now, that Peele had been putting on an act.

With a twist of his strong arms he up-ended the weedy slacker of the Fourth and strewed him on the earth under the beeches. Then he sat on his chest, pinning him down.

"Now then—!" said Lovell, grimly.

"You bully, let me get up!" panted Peele.

"All in good time!" said Lovell. "Can you hear me?"

"I'll yell for help—."

"Can you hear me?"

"Help!" yelled Peele.

Bang!

Lovell's grip was on his collar. Peele's head smote the hard, unsympathetic earth. It smote it hard.

"That's a start," said Lovell. "Now I'm going to whisper, Peele. If you don't hear me, I'm sorry for your napper."

"Help!" shrieked Peele.

Bang!

"Oh! Ow! ow! ooooh!"

"Can you hear me?" Lovell deliberately whispered. "Can you hear me, Peele? Your napper gets another bang if you can't! Yes or No?"

"Can you hear me?"

Peele glared up at him. To hear that whisper was to give his whole game away, and admit that the pretended result of Dicky Dalton's smack was a deception from beginning to end. But two bangs of his head were enough for Peele. He dared not face up to a third.

"Yes!" he gasped.

"Oh, you toad!" said Lovell. "You make out that you can't hear a word any fellow says, just to get at Dicky: and you own up that you can hear me whisper! I've a jolly good mind to bang your head again—."

"Stoppit!" gasped Peele.

"I'll stop it if you'll go straight to Dicky and own up that you've been spoofing about being deaf—."

"I—I—I can't do that—."

Bang!

"Oh! Ow! Wow! Stoppit! I'll go to Dalton!" shrieked Peele.

Even Tubby Muffin landed one

"Mind you do!" said Lovell. He rose from the wriggling young rascal's chest. "Get up, you worm! Go off to Dicky—while I go and tell all the fellows just how deaf you are you miserable tick."

With that, Arthur Edward Lovell marched off, leaving Peele sitting up under the beech, rubbing his head, and wishing from the bottom of his heart that he had never thought up that cunning scheme for putting Dicky Dalton in a "spot".

CHAPTER VI

RICHARD DALTON was undoubtedly very glad to hear from Peele that he had completely recovered. That was how Peele put it. Probably Dicky saw through the whole thing, and was quite aware that his leg had been

pulled. But he had to remember that his own hasty act had started the trouble: and for that reason he let the matter drop.

But if Dicky let it drop, the fellows in the Classical Fourth were in no haste to do so. When Edward Arthur Lovell stated the facts—which he did at the top of his voice—Peele's last state was worse than his first. Almost every fellow in the form felt that it was up to him to kick Peele for his trickery. Even Tubby Muffin landed one.

In the end study Lovell, of course, was triumphant. In that study he pointed out that he had known best all along. That, according to Lovell, was nothing unusual: did he not always know best? But this time, at least, his comrades had to admit it, which hitherto they had seldom done.

"Did I know best?" demanded Lovell. "Did I or didn't I?"

To which Jimmy Silver, George Raby, and Arthur Newcome answered, with one voice:

"You did!"

And that was that!

THE END