



SCHOOLBOY SERIES No. 1

Top Study at Topham



FRANK RICHARDS
(AUTHOR OF BILLY BUNTER)

A COMPLETE "BOB HOOD & CO." STORY

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MASCOT SCHOOLBOY SERIES No. 1.

A "BOB HOOD" STORY.

TOP STUDY AT TOPHAM.

By FRANK RICHARDS

Author of "Billy Bunter"

CHAPTER I

LEFT BEHIND!

"**S**ORRY—no room!"

Harry Vane stared.

He had been waiting a quarter of an hour on the platform at Hamley, for the train that had just come in. As soon as it stopped, he cut across the platform, heading for the nearest carriage, and grasped the door handle to turn it.

To his surprise, it did not turn. He gave another wrench, but still the handle did not turn.

Then he realised that it was held inside; and that a ruddy face, with smiling blue eyes, was looking out at him from the window, which was down. At the first glance, Harry Vane would have liked that ruddy, cheery face, and the schoolboy to whom it belonged. But that cheery fellow was holding the door shut, and keeping him out of the carriage, which made a difference.

Why, he could not guess: for he could see no one else in the carriage: every seat was vacant.

"Look here, what do you mean?" he exclaimed.

"Only what I say!" answered the schoolboy in the carriage.

"Awfully sorry—no room. Cut along the train."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," exclaimed Harry Vane, angrily.

"Why should I? The carriage is empty! Let me in at once."

"No room!"

"There's lots of room."

"Not for you, at any rate!" retorted the fellow inside, cheerily.

"Cut along—you'll find a seat further up."

Harry Vane did not cut along. He gave another powerful wrench at the door-handle, which very nearly succeeded. But the schoolboy inside, grinning, grasped with both hands, and held it fast.

"You silly ass" panted Harry, "Let go! Look here, I've got to catch this train—I've got to get to Topham!"

"Oh! You're going to Topham, are you? New kid?"

"Yes! Now let me in!"

"Sorry—no room!"

"Do you want a whole carriage to yourself, you ass?" exclaimed Vane.

"Not exactly. But there's no room for you! Sorry and all that, but you'll have to cut along the train."

Harry Vane dropped his bag from his left hand, put both hands to the handle, and wrenched once more. The fellow inside had to exert himself

to keep the door shut. But he did keep it shut, grinning down at Harry with quite a good-natured grin. For some mysterious reason, quite inexplicable to the new junior for Topham School, he was not going to let him in—if he could help it.

"You cheeky ass!" gasped Vane.

"Same to you, with knobs on!"

"Will you let me in?"

"Not so's you'd notice it! Cut along the train."

"I'll punch your cheeky head when I get in."

"I'll be there when you do it! Why not cut along the train, and save trouble? You're not getting in here."

A porter hurried up.

"Now, sir, if you're going——!" he rapped.

"Get the door open, will you?" asked Harry. "There's a silly chump inside holding it shut!"

"Oh! Now then, Master Hood!" said the porter, staring at the grinning face at the window, "You let go that 'andle! What are you larking for, with the young gentleman trying to get in? You let go, young Bob Hood! You 'ear me?"

"I hear you, old scout!" answered Bob Hood, "But——"

The porter did not wait for him to finish. He grasped the door handle, and wrenched it with a force that the fellow inside could not resist. The door flew open.

"Now then, sir, 'op in!"

Harry Vane "hopped" in fast enough. The porter threw in his bag after him, and slammed the door. The train rattled into motion.

The two schoolboys, for a moment or two, remained standing, eyeing one another truculently. Harry Vane was strongly tempted to carry out his threat of punching the head of the fellow who had tried to keep him out for no apparent reason. But he did not, on second thoughts, want a "scrap" in the train, on his way to his new school! He lifted his bag to the rack, and dropped into a corner seat. Then the ruddy-faced youth sat down also.

From his blue-and-green school cap, and from what he had said, Harry Vane guessed that he was a Topham fellow. He asked the question.

"You belong to Topham?"

"Sort of!" agreed Bob Hood.

"What the thump did you want to keep me off the train for?" demanded Vane. "I told you I was going to Topham, too."

"My dear man, it doesn't matter a boiled bean to me whether you're going to Topham or to Timbuctoo!" retorted Bob Hood. "I——"

"Oh!" ejaculated Vane suddenly, interrupting the Topham junior. His eyes fairly started at what he suddenly saw. It was a surprising sight—nothing less than a leg—a very fat leg—protruding from under the seat.

Bob Hood was not, after all, alone in that carriage! There was another fellow with him, and that fellow had been hidden under the seat while the dispute was going on. Harry stared blankly at the fat leg.

"Who—what——?" he stuttered.

"You can come out, Bunny," said Bob Hood. "You have been spotted, old fat top. May as well show up."

Harry Vane watched in astonishment as a fat youth crawled out from under the seat, panting for breath. "Bunny," as the other fellow called him, was fat, with plump cheeks as red as cherries, and he was short of breath, as well as considerably dusty, from his sojourn in the cramped space under the seat.

He gave Vane a glare, and then fixed reproachful eyes on Bob Hood.

"You said you wouldn't let anybody in!" he said, accusingly.

"Well, I tried to keep that smudge out!" said Hood. "I did my best, Bunny Binks. But the pushing bounder pushed in."

"Are you calling me a pushing bounder?" demanded Vane.

"Just that!" agreed Hood. "If you don't like it you can lump it. But look here, keep your mouth shut about Bunny when we get to Combe—that's the station for Topham. We stop at Greenford first, and you don't want me to chuck you off the train at Greenford, do you?"

"I'd like to see you do it!"

"Well, you will see me do it if you're cheeky. You can sit up for a bit. Bunny: you're safe as far as Combe, anyhow."

Bunny Binks plumped into a seat, gasping for breath.

Harry Vane stared at Bunny, and then at Bob Hood. He began to understand, and a frown came over his face. There was only one possible explanation of Bunny's antics: and that was that he was travelling without a ticket. That was why he had been hidden under the seat at Hamley, where tickets were examined: and that was why his companion had tried to keep other passengers out of the carriage. Bunny had got through so far; no doubt when he arrived at Combe he had to rely on his fat wits to pass the barrier without a ticket.

"So that's the game, is it?" exclaimed Vane, "Bilking the railway company?"

"Any business of yours?" asked Hood.

"Not specially: but it's a rotten trick, and you jolly well ought to be ashamed of yourself," retorted Vane, "You tried to keep me out—for a swindle."

Bob Hood coloured.

"If you want to know, you cheeky puppy, I've got my ticket," he snapped. "Bunny hasn't. I never knew he hadn't a ticket till we were on the train, or I'd have booted him—"

"Would you jolly well?" gasped the fat Bunny.

"Yes, I jolly well would!" growled Bob Hood, "and I've a jolly good mind to boot you now, you fat frog." He turned to Harry Vane again. "So you see, Mister Superior Meddling Ass, I'm not bilking the railway company, only doing a good turn to a fat chump who landed himself in a scrape. See that?"

"Yes, I see it," answered Harry. "But bilking is bilking, and if you help a fellow to bilk, one's as bad as the other."

Bob Hood's face, already red, became crimson. Perhaps his conscience echoed Vane's words. Evidently he had acted thoughtlessly and good naturedly, without thinking further: not realising that he was making himself a party to what was, in point of fact, "bilking." Harry Vane's words brought that fact home to him, with an exasperating effect.

"By gum," he said, "you've got plenty of say for yourself, for a new kid, who hasn't put his hoof into the school yet. Are you going to yowl out at Combe that Bunny Binks is travelling without a ticket?"

"Certainly not. It's not my business. But—"

"Well, shut up!" growled Hood.

"I say, chuck him off at Greenford!" piped Bunny Binks, anxiously. "I say, if he gives me away at Combe, I shall get into a fearful row. Carfax whopped me last time it happened. I say, you can handle him, Bob. Chee'v ass, butting in where he's not wanted, and putting on airs. Never travelled without a ticket yourself, what?" added Bunny, with a glare at the new junior.

"Never—and never helped a bilk to do it, either," retorted Vane. "Not good enough for me."

"Good enough for me, but not good enough for you, what?" roared Hood.

"So it seems," answered Harry, coolly.

"That does it! You go off this train at Greenford! Open the door when the train stops, Bunny.

"What-ho!" chuckled Bunny.

Harry Vane's eyes gleamed. The train was already slowing down into Greenford, the last stop before Combe. Bob Hood sat glaring at him, with a warlike gleam in his blue eyes, and bulldog determination in his face. Evidently, there was going to be a tussle when the train stopped—for Harry Vane assuredly, was not going to be "chucked" off, if he could help it.

The train whirled to a standstill. Bunny Binks, grinning, plunged across and threw open the door: and Bob Hood laid his powerful grasp on Harry Vane.

"Out you go!" he growled.

He was a sturdy fellow, and his grasp was strong. But Harry Vane was sturdy too, and he gave grasp for grasp. Bunny backed out of the way, grinning from one fat ear to the other, evidently in the expectation of seeing the new junior shoot out of the carriage like a pip from an orange.

But that was not what happened.

Bob Hood was rather bigger and rather stronger than the new junior. But Harry Vane was no weakling: and he was active and lithe. For a long minute they wrestled, swaying to and fro and panting, and then suddenly Bob Hood found his leg hooked, and he went over.

A flying figure came out of the doorway, and landed on the platform with a heavy bump, and a roar. But that figure was not Harry Vane's. It was Bob Hood's. The captain of the Topham Remove sat up, dazed and dizzy, and stared blankly at the new junior as he reached out and drew the door shut.

"Good-bye!" said Harry, from the window.

"Oh, scissors!" gasped Bunny.

Bob Hood, too dizzy from the bump on the platform to stir for the moment, just gazed. The whistle rang, and the train moved. Bob staggered to his feet—too late! He stared after the train as it went! He had not "chucked" out the new junior and left him behind. The new junior had chucked him out, and he was left behind! He stared and gasped.

"Oh, gum!"

Harry Vane, laughing, waved a hand from the window. Then the train was gone—with Hood of the Remove left behind, still staring.

CHAPTER II

TAXI TO TOPHAM!

HARRY VANE stepped from the train at Combe, bag in hand. Bunny Binks rolled out after him. During the ten minutes' run from Greenford to Combe, the fat Bunny had sat eyeing Vane in a very dubious way: Harry taking no heed whatever of him. The new junior had rather wondered what his schoolfellows would be like at his new school. Hood and Binks were the first specimens he had encountered. In spite of the trouble on the train, he rather liked Bob Hood on his looks. But he was not at all impressed by Bunny Binks, and had no desire whatever to improve that fat youth's acquaintance. So he passed the fat Bunny by like the idle wind which he regarded not.

But if he had no use for Bunny, Bunny had a use for him. As he walked down the platform towards the exit, he felt a fat hand grab his elbow, and looked round rather impatiently at a podgy face.

"Hold on a tick, old chap," said Bunny amicably. "I say, don't be shirty, you know. I say, I haven't got a ticket—"

"I know that! Take your paw away."

"Well, look here, you stand by a chap, and I'll stand by you!" said Bunny. "Mind, you're for it when Bob comes across you again. Think Bob won't whop you for leaving him behind at Greenford? Well, Bob's a pal of mine, and I'll put in a word for you, see?"

Harry Vane laughed.

"You needn't trouble," he answered, "I think I can take care of myself. If that's the lot, sheer off."

"Well, it ain't," said Bunny. "I say, what form are you going into at Topham? Fourth, I suppose—but Fourth A or Fourth B?"

"Fourth A or Fourth B," repeated Harry. "I'm going into Mr. Carfax's form—the Remove."

"That's Fourth A," said Bunny with a sniff of superior knowledge. "You don't know Topham yet, of course. Fourth A is the Remove, the Lower Fourth, see? Fourth B is the Upper Fourth—Spood's lot. Well, look here, Bob Hood is captain of the Remove—and he's a pal of mine—we're in the same study. Now, you've got the captain of your form down on you, but I'll stand by you, old chap."

"Thank you for nothing!" answered Vane ungratefully.

Bunny Binks breathed hard. He would have liked to tell that cool and self-reliant new fellow just what he thought of him. But he refrained.

"Well, look here," he said, "you've dished me, leaving old Bob behind. I've got to get off this platform without a ticket, and if I'm spotted it will mean another row with Carfax. Old Troodle—that's the man at the gate—ain't very bright. You keep him talking while I slip out, see?"

"Would that fellow at Greenford have done that for you?" asked Harry, with a curl of the lip.

"Eh? Yes! Old Bob would do anything for anybody. He would have lent me my fare if he'd had any money. Bob's a Briton."

"Well, I won't do it," said Vane. "If you bilk the railway, you will have to take your chance, you fat bounder."

"Why, you cheeky smudge!" hooted Bunny. "I—I—I—I mean, hold on a minute, dear old chap. You can't leave a fellow in the lurch—that ain't Topham style. Look here, I'll tell you what—you lend me a bob to pay my fare, and I'll give you a lift in my taxi to the school."

"I'll lend you a bob, but bother your taxi," answered Harry. "Come on, you fat fraud, and I'll see you through."

"Oh, all right," said Bunny, quite comforted, "so long as I get out without a row I'd just as soon pay the fare. Where's that bob?"

Bunny's fat hand closed on a shilling, and he rolled on cheerfully with the new junior. Harry Vane handed over his ticket, and Bunny handed over a shilling in lieu thereof, and they walked out of the station together.

Outside the little village station was a single, solitary taxi. Bunny Binks waved a fat hand to the driver.

"I'm taking this taxi," he said. "Old Crum will settle at the other end."

"Who's old Crum?"

"Eh? The school porter at Topham. That's all right," said Bunny, "I say you've done me a good turn—let me do you one. Come in the taxi with me."

"It's only a short walk I've been told—"

"My dear chap it's miles," said Bunny. "Up hill and down dale, and all that. You'd be tired to death carrying that bag. And look here, if you take my taxi you can hike your box along—"

"They're going to send it on."

"Much better take it with you," said Bunny. "Tell the porter to shove it on the taxi, and let me give you a lift. Look here, whatever your name is—what's your name?"

"Harry Vane."

"Well, look here, Vane, you've done me a good turn, lending me that bob, and I want to make it quits. Just hop in, see?"

Harry Vane paused for a moment. He did not want to receive favours from the fat Bunny, but he did not want to be ungracious. And if it was "miles" as Bunny said, to Topham School, a lift in the taxi would be very welcome.

"Oh, all right," he said, "if I pay half the fare."

"It's only five bob to the school," said Bunny, "I'd really rather you left it to me, old chap."

"Halves!" said Vane, shaking his head.

"Oh, just as you like—that's half-a-crown each, then," said Bunny. "Tell them to shove your box on. You wouldn't get it till to-morrow, and it would be one and six. See? I'm saving you that."

And the taxi rolled out of Combe, with Vane's box on top and the two schoolboys inside. Harry Vane looked from the window with interested eyes at the smiling woods and meadows of Bucks., with the green slopes of the Chilterns in the distance. After what Bunny had said he expected a rather long drive, and he was quite surprised when the taxi slowed down in six or seven minutes at an ancient stone gateway, beyond which could be discerned a mass of buildings with ancient stone walls and red roofs.

"Is that Topham?" he asked.

"Eh! What did you think it was?" asked Bunny, "Harrow or Eton?"

"But you said it was miles!" exclaimed Vane.

"Oh! Did I?" said Bunny. "Well, I—I mean it seems miles if you walk it, see? That's what I meant."

Harry Vane gave him a rather fixed look. It was obvious that Bunny Binks had exaggerated the distance to the school, as an added inducement to him to share the taxi. Why, was rather a puzzle, for he could hardly suppose that Bunny found his company particularly attractive.

Bunny Binks threw open the door as the taxi stopped at the porter's lodge inside the great bronze gates, and jumped out.

"Tell Crum to take down your box," he said, "I'll be back in a minute—I've got to speak to Walker."

A number of Topham fellows were visible in the quadrangle within, one of whom, apparently, was Walker. Bunny Binks hurried off, as fast as his little fat legs could carry him, and disappeared from view.

Harry Vane descended from the taxi. Mr. Crum, the Topham porter, came out of his lodge, touching his hat. The box was taken down, and the taxi-driver looked at Harry.

"Five shillings, please," he said.

Vane looked round for Bunny Binks as he sorted a half-crown from his pocket. But the fat Bunny was not to be seen. He glanced at Mr. Crum, but the Topham porter was going back into his lodge, obviously with no intention whatever of paying the taxi. The new junior drew a deep breath.

It dawned upon him now why Bunny Binks had been so eager for him to share that taxi! Being too lazy to walk the short distance to the school, the cheerful Bunny had taken the taxi—and disappeared as soon as it stopped, leaving the little matter of the taxi-fare to the new fellow Vane had insisted upon paying half—which had no doubt rather amused Bunny, in view of his real intentions.

There was no help for it. Harry Vane handed over the taxi-fare with as good a grace as was possible in the circumstances, inwardly resolving to pull one, if not both, of Bunny Binks' fat ears when he met him again.

TAP!

"Oh, scissors!"

Harry Vane jumped.

He was tapping at the door of Mr. Carfax's study. He had to report his arrival to his prospective form-master: and having been directed to that study, there he was, tapping respectfully at the door. He expected to hear the voice of Mr. Carfax saying, "Come in!" Instead of which, he was amazed to hear a startled exclamation, in a voice he recognized—that of Bunny Binks.

He was not thinking of Bunny—and had in fact almost forgotten his fat existence. Now he was reminded of him.

Bunny, evidently, was in Mr. Carfax's study. That, perhaps, was not surprising, as Bunny was in the Remove, and Carfax was master of the Remove. But his startled and scared exclamation was very surprising indeed.

Vane opened the door.

Mr. Carfax as he saw at the first glance, was not present. There was only one person in the room, and that was a fat junior—Bunny Binks. And Bunny was staring at the door as it opened, with his little round eyes almost popping from his fat face in terror. What was the matter with Bunny, Vane could not begin to guess—but it was plain that he was scared almost out of his fat wits.

"I—I—it wasn't me sir!" babbled Bunny, "I was here—I mean—I never—I didn't—I wasn't—OH! You! You beastly smudge, you startled me." Bunny's terror seemed to disappear as he saw Vane. Apparently he had expected to see some more alarming personage. "Only you! You smear!" Bunny's terror changed to wrath. "You blot, what are you butting in here for I'd like to know."

Vane stared at him blankly.

"I have to see Mr. Carfax," he said, "What's the matter with you?"

"Oh!" gasped Bunny, "I—I see! I thought it was Carfax for a minute."

"You must be an ass," answered Harry. "Mr. Carfax wouldn't tap at his own door, I suppose."

"Oh! I—I never thought of that! I—I was—was startled! Not that I've been up to anything here," added Bunny, cautiously. "Don't you run away with that idea! I—I came here to—to ask Carfax something about—about deponent verbs—and—and as he wasn't here, I—I waited. See?"

That this was not the truth Harry Vane could see: though why the fat Bunny was lying—unless it was one of his favourite amusements—he could not see. Anyhow, he was not interested in Bunny and his antics.

"Well, if Mr. Carfax is out, I shall have to wait for him," he said.

"Better not," advised Bunny, "I advise you to clear off. I haven't finished here—"

"What haven't you finished?" asked Harry in surprise.

"Oh! Nothing! But I'd rather you went—I mean you'd better go. Best thing you can do is to wait in the Jungle till Carfax comes in."

"The Jungle!" repeated Harry, blankly. "What on earth's that?"

"Oh, of course you don't know," snapped Bunny. "You new scum don't know anything. It's the junior day-room—up the passage, round the corner, turn to the left, and there you are! Cut off."

"I'm going to wait here for Mr. Carfax," answered Harry. "And by the way, you owe me half-a-crown for your half of the taxi fare."

Bunny Binks did not seem to hear that. He eyed Harry Vane with a hostile eye and sidled towards the door. Then he looked back at Vane.

"Look here, if you're going to wait for Carfax—"

"I am."

"Well, if you are, I'm going," said Bunny. "But look here, don't you tell Carfax I was in his study. We're not allowed in here, see, when Carfax is out. I might get into a row if you told him."

"Why should I tell him, fathead?" said Vane, impatiently. "He's not likely to ask me, I suppose."

"Well, he might," said Bunny. "Beaks do ask fellows questions. I'd rather he didn't know I'd been here. Look here, after you're through with Carfax, come up to the top study and I'll settle that taxi fare. See?"

"What and where is the top study?"

"Oh, scissors! You've got a lot to learn about Topham," said Bunny, disdainfully. "You don't know a thing."

"How should I, on my first day here?"

"Well, top study is Number Eight in the Remove—it belongs to Hood and me. It's called top study because—because it's top study, see?" said Bunny lucidly. "That's why I say you won't tell Carfax I was here, will you?"

"Not if you don't want me to."

"Honest Injun?" asked Bunny anxiously.

"Honest Injun!" said Vane laughing.

"Oh, all right, then."

And Bunny, apparently satisfied, rolled out of the study, and shut the door after him.

Vane, dismissing the fat junior from his mind once more, crossed to the window, and stood looking out into the quadrangle, while he waited for Mr. Carfax.

There were a good many Topham fellows to be seen of whom, so far, he did not know a single one. But a face already familiar came into his view after awhile—a ruddy face, with blue eyes and a mop of curly, brown hair that escaped under the school cap. Bob Hood had caught the next train from Greenford, for here he was coming in at the gates.

Vane noticed that he was surrounded by five or six fellows as he came across the quad—Remove fellows, no doubt. It seemed that Bob Hood was a popular fellow. The study window was open and voices floated to Vane's ears, as the bunch of juniors came towards the House.

"How did it go at Monksford, Bob?"

"Oh, the Ramblers won," answered Hood. "I say, has Bunny got in, Walker?"

"Yes, he blew in in a taxi."

"Did he? Blessed if I know how he did, then—the fat smear had no ticket on the railway!" growled Bob. "Whom did he diddle for a taxi fare, I wonder? Seen anything of a new kid?" Bob Hood's face darkened in a frown as he asked that question. "He made me lose my train at Greenford, and I owe him a thick ear."

The little crowd passed on out of Vane's hearing and he heard no more. His face was rather thoughtful, as he stood looking from Mr. Carfax's window, after they had disappeared. He could not help feeling rather a liking for Bob Hood, as it was clear that many Topham fellows did. But Bob, it seemed, "owed him a thick ear" for the episode at Greenford; so it did not look as if friendly relations were likely to be established.

Vane began to wonder how long Mr. Carfax was going to keep him waiting. But at long last the study door opened, and a portly gentleman in a master's gown and mortar-board, came in. Harry turned from the window, guessing that this was Mr. Carfax. Two very sharp eyes in a plumb face, scanned him.

"Vane, I suppose?" said the form-master. "You have had to wait for me? I have been rather busy. Let me see." He stepped to his writing-table, and opening a drawer, took a paper therefrom, which Harry could see was a list of some sort. "You have your medical certificate, I suppose? You may lay it on the table. Let me see! You will go into Number Eight Study—when you leave me, Vane, inquire for either Hood or Binks, who belong to the study, and will show you there. Let me see! You may sit down, Vane—I can give you precisely five minutes."

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

"Let me see—!" Mr. Carfax was beginning again, that apparently being a phrase with which he filled in all pauses. He sat down in the swivel chair at the table. "Let me see—Oh! Great Gad!" He bounded up, portly as he was, as if the seat of the chair had been red-hot. Harry gazed at him in startled astonishment.

Mr. Carfax gave him a look—or rather a glare—then turned round, and stared into the chair from which he had so suddenly bounded. His brow, which was already frowning, became perfectly thunderous, as he gathered up almost a handful of tin-tacks from the chair, and threw them on the table.

"You young rascal!" he thundered.

Harry Vane gasped. At the sight of the tin-tacks, he realised why Mr. Carfax had bounded out of the chair a split second after sitting down. But why Carfax was angry with him he did not know.

"Vane! You are a new boy here! You have not, I suppose been an hour in the school. Yet you have dared to play this trick on your form-master!" thundered Mr. Carfax. "Upon my word! So that was how you amused yourself while waiting in my study! In all my experience of thirty-five years as a schoolmaster, I have never heard of such a thing. Upon my word!"

"I—I—I—!" stammered Harry. It flashed into his mind why Bunny Binks had been in that study, and had been so scared when the door opened. He understood too, why Bunny had been so anxious that his presence there should not be mentioned to Mr. Carfax! "If—if you please, sir—"

"How dared you, Vane?" thundered Mr. Carfax, his plump face almost purple.

"I—I—I did not—I—I—" Harry stammered helplessly. "I—I assure you, sir, I—I did not—I never knew—"

"You did not? You have been here—no one else has been here! Has anyone else been in this study?"

Vane opened his lips—and shut them again. Mr. Carfax paused, like Brutus, for a reply. Like Brutus, he did not get one. He glared round the table, and picked up a cane. Harry caught his breath! Was that how he was going to begin at Topham?

It was!

Obviously, the tin-tacks in the armchair had caused Mr. Carfax discomfort. He was a heavy man, and he had sat down heavily—on the tin-tacks! He was wriggling painfully as he stood. He was purple with wrath. He swished the cane.

"Vane! I am sorry to punish you on your first day in the school. You leave me no alternative! You must learn that this kind of thing will not do. In all my experience of thirty-five years as a schoolmaster, I

have never—ow! Oh! I mean,—Oh—ow—oooh! " Mr. Carfax wriggled. " Vane, bend over that chair! "

" But, sir—I—I—"

" Bend over that chair! " thundered Mr. Carfax.

With deep feelings, the new junior at Topham bent over the chair. Swipe! Swipe! Swipe!

" Now leave my study! Let that be a lesson to you, Vane! Ow! On your first day—such audacity—ow! Ow! Go! Leave my study."

Harry Vane left the study, wriggling rather painfully. As he shut the door, he had a last glimpse of Mr. Carfax, also wriggling painfully. And his feelings towards Bunny Binks, as he went, were almost homicidal!

CHAPTER IV

NOT WANTED!

TALBOT HOWARD BINKS, generally called "Bunny" in the Topham Remove, reposed in a deep armchair in Number Eight Study, in an attitude which a novelist might have described as one of unstudied grace. It was a large armchair, but Bunny's ample proportions filled it to overflowing; and his little fat legs were stuck out to rest on another chair. His fat head rested on the padded back of the armchair, and comfortable as he looked, there was a frown upon his plump face. Judging by his expression, the universe was not running entirely to the satisfaction of the fattest member of Fourth A.

Number Eight was a very nice study. It was the largest of the eight that made up the Remove passage. It was at the top of the passage, and had two windows, one of which looked out on the quadrangle. It was furnished with a table and an armchair and several other chairs; and it needed a second glance to discern that what looked like a couple of ottomans were really small iron bedsteads—Number Eight being, like all the other studies at Topham, a study by day and a dormitory by night.

Number Eight was a rather distinguished study, being, by tradition, the quarters of the captain of the form. For that reason, or because it was the largest, or because it was at the top of the passage, or for all these reasons combined, it was called the Top Study. But space was too valuable at Topham for even the captain of a form to have a study all to himself. All along the passage they went three to a study; and there were never fewer than two in Top Study, sometimes three. At the moment there were two—Robert Hood and Talbot Howard Binks.

Every fellow in Fourth A would have been glad to share Top Study with Bob Hood; and nobody quite knew how Bunny had pushed in, except that Bunny was the most pushful pusher that ever pushed, and Bob the most good-natured and easy-going fellow in Topham School or out of it. Bob had Bunny as a study-mate chiefly because nobody else wanted Bunny.

" Oh, blow! " Bunny was speaking to himself, " I've got those beastly verbs to do—blow 'em! Carfax will ask for them—blow Carfax! Anyhow, I hope he sat on the tin-tacks! He, he." Bunny's frowning face cleared for a moment as he pictured Mr. Carfax sitting on the tin-tacks. " But he will ask for those verbs, all the same—blow everything! "

Knock! Bunny Binks glared round at the door.

" Oh, come in, fathead! " he yapped.

The door opened, and Bunny stared at Harry Vane, framed in the

doorway. He stared and he glared.

"Is this Number Eight?" asked Harry.

"Can't you read numbers?" yapped Bunny.

"It seems to be obliterated," said Harry, mildly. "It it's Number Eight, all right." He came in and threw the door shut.

Talbot Howard Binks gave him an inimical glare.

"If you're after that taxi fare, you can wash it out," he grunted. "I've got no change till I change a fiver."

Harry Vane laughed. He had seen enough of Bunny Binks and his manners and customs by this time, to be able to guess exactly how many fivers he was likely to have about his fat person.

"Never mind that, Binks," he said. "I've come here because this is my study."

Bunny Binks sat upright in the armchair.

"Your study! What the dickens do you mean? It's my study—I whack it out with Hood. Mean to say that Carfax has had the cheek to stick you in my study?"

"Just that!" assented Harry.

"Then you can go straight back to him and tell him that it won't do!" roared Bunny, indignantly. "There's no room in this study for new scum. Look here, cut along to Number Two, Walker and Potts and Green will take you in. Tell them that Carfax said so, and it will be all right. See? Shut the door after you."

Bunny turned his fat head away, apparently under the impression that that settled the matter. But Harry Vane, instead of turning to the door as Bunny seemed to expect, walked across to the window. He glanced down into the quad, and at the green playing-fields at a little distance, with the river shining beyond.

"Jolly fine view from here," he remarked. "I think I shall like this study."

"Will you jolly well?" hooted Bunny. "We've had only two this term so far, and we're going on the same, see? You're not wanted here, Shane or Wane, or whatever your name is. It's a bit caddish for a fellow to stick where he isn't wanted."

"Oh, quite! Think that Walker and Potts and Green would take another fellow into Number Two?" asked Harry.

"Oh, yes, rather!"

"Cut along, then!"

"Eh! What?"

"You're not wanted here, Winks or Pinks or whatever your name is."

"Why, you—you—you smear!" gasped Bunny, glaring at the smiling new junior.

"It's a bit caddish to stick where you're not wanted!" Harry pointed out.

Bunny glared at him, speechless. Words seemed to fail the fat Bunny. Harry Vane, smiling, strolled round the study. He glanced at the two beds.

"I suppose they'll shove in another bed for me," he remarked.

"You're not sticking here!" roared Bunny in wrath. "Think we're going to be crowded out by new scum? Look here, my tip to you is to get out before Bob comes in. If you wait for him, you'll go out on your neck."

"I'll chance that," said Harry cheerfully. He sat down in the window-seat, but immediately rose again with a grimace. The window-seat was of wood: but had it been softly cushioned he would have been disinclined to sit down on it, so soon after two hefty swipes from Mr. Carfax's cane. "Do you know, you fat image, that I've a jolly good mind to bang your silly head on that table? I've been caned because Mr. Carfax thought I'd put those tin-tacks in his chair—!"

"Oh, scissors!" gasped Bunny. "Ha, ha! Did he think it was you? Bunny Binks roared with merriment. "Ha, ha, ha!" Then he became suddenly serious. "I say, you didn't tell him I'd been in the study, did you?"

"No, you ass! I said I wouldn't! But—"

"That's all right, then," said Bunny, relieved. "Fancy you getting whopped for it—ha, ha! That's jolly funny, ain't it? Ha, ha, ha."

"So glad you're amused," said Harry drily. "I've a jolly good mind—"

"Well, I didn't know you'd get toco," said Bunny grinning. "Ha, ha! It's just as well, though—he might have guessed it was me, and now he won't. The brute gave me a paper of deponent verbs. I say, can you do deponent verbs? You can do that paper on the table for me, if you like. Write out hortor, hortatus sum, and the rest, see, in all the beastly tenses? It won't take you half an hour."

"It won't!" agreed Vane. "It won't take me half a minute you fat chump. I—" He broke off as the door was suddenly hurled open and Bob Hood came tramping in. The captain of the Remove gave a sudden start as he saw Vane there.

"Hallo! You here! I've been looking round for you, you cheeky blot. You chucked me out of the carriage at Greenford. I don't know what you're doing in this study: but one good turn deserves another—I'll chuck you out, see?"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Vane. "I—"

But Bob Hood did not hold on. He came straight at the new junior and grasped him. Harry Vane had no choice but to give grasp for grasp, and they whirled round the study table locked in a fierce struggle. Bunny Binks grinned from the armchair and chirruped encouragement to the captain of the Remove.

"Go it, Bob! Chuck the cheeky smear out! I say, he says he's going to stick in this study whether we like it or not. Push him out on his neck."

Bob did not answer: he needed all his wind for the tussle. He whirled Harry Vane to the door: but at the door the new junior rallied, and whirled him back again across to the window. They rocked across to the table and crashed into it, sending books and papers scattered to the floor. They bumped into chairs and sent them flying; they crashed into the fire-grate, where, luckily, there was no fire—and then, still struggling, reeled across to the window once more.

There was a sound of footsteps and voices in the passage without, and the open doorway was crammed with faces staring in. The uproar in Top Study had drawn a crowd of fellows from other studies.

"What's up?"

"What's the row?"

A dozen fellows inquired at once. But neither of the combatants had breath to reply. They rocked to and fro, exerting every ounce of strength—Bob to pitch out the newcomer, the newcomer to prevent him from doing so. But Bunny Binks squeaked information.

"I say, it's a new scum, and he's butted in here and won't go. I say, Walker, Potts, Didcot, Flynn—I say, all of you lend a hand and chuck him out."

"Won't he go bedad!" exclaimed one of the juniors, apparently Flynn. And he rushed in and grasped the stranger in the land. "Is it sticking in Bob's study you are entirely? Out you go."

That did it! Harry Vane was about a match for the captain of the Remove, but he had to go all out to hold his own. The additional grasp was too much for him. He whirled to the door and flew.

There was a splutter among the juniors there, as they backed hurriedly

away to give him room to drop. But Didcot and Walker went sprawling with Vane as he sprawled. Bob Hood looked out of the study doorway, laughing. "Walk him along to the boxroom and sit him down there!" he said.

"Look here—!" panted Harry.

But the grinning juniors did not heed. Bob Hood's word, evidently was law in Fourth A at Topham. Five or six fellows grasped the new junior and hooked him along the passage.

They sat him down with a heavy bump, amid a shout of laughter, and left him. And Harry Vane, utterly winded, with his collar hanging by a single stud, his tie over his shoulder, his hair like a mop, his face crimson and bedewed with perspiration, sat in the boxroom gasping for breath, as if he would never leave off gasping.

CHAPTER V

NO GO!

BOB HOOD stood before the glass in Top Study, still breathing hard, dabbing his perspiring face with an handkerchief, setting his collar and tie to rights, and striving—not with much success—to reduce his mop of curly hair to something like order. That obnoxious new junior, whom he had found in his study, had been ejected—and done with, as Bob supposed. But it had cost the captain of the Remove an effort—indeed, he was not quite sure that he could have pulled it off entirely on his own. Anyhow, he was gone now.

"Cheeky tick!" said Bob, breathlessly. "Sticking in my study, by gum! Does he think Topham belongs to him, or what?"

"I jolly well told him we wouldn't have him in the study whatever Carfax said," squeaked Bunny Binks. "And we jolly well won't."

Bob Hood started; and stared at his fat study-mate.

"Whatever Carfax said!" he repeated. "Mean to say that Carfax sent him here?" You podgy piffler, why didn't you tell me that? If Carfax sent him here, it's his study as much as ours."

"We don't want him!" argued Bunny. "He can pig along the passage. I told him to go to Number two and say Carfax had sent him there, and he wouldn't!"

Grunt from Bob Hood.

"Perhaps he isn't so fond of fibbing as you are, you fat ass," he said. "Come to think of it, Carfax would land him here, as we're only two this term, and all the other studies have three."

"No room for him," said Bunny, decidedly. "We've not got too much room as it is, with your feet in the study."

"Leave my feet alone, you fat chump." Bob Hood's feet were certainly not small, they were, in fact, considerably well developed. Nobody ever failed to hear Bob coming! But he did not want to hear anything on that subject. "Certainly we've not got too much room with a fat hippopotamus like you in the study. But if Carfax has planted him here, it's his study, and we can't help it."

"Rot!" said Bunny. "I'm not standing it! I'll jolly well chuck him out if you won't, Bob."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob. He could not quite see the fat Bunny chucking out a fellow who had taxed his strength to the limit.

"Well, I mean it," snorted Bunny. "I don't like the fellow. Why should we have new scum landed on us? Another bed stuck in here will crowd us out."

"It's the same for other fellows down the passage—they're all three-bedders."

"Eh? That's got nothing to do with it," said Bunny. "I'm not thinking of the other fellows. Keep to the point, old chap. I say he said he would stick here whether we liked it or lumped it, and if you didn't like it, he would chuck you out like he did on the train."

"Did he by gum?" exclaimed Bob, warlike at once. "I'd jolly well like to see him do it! We won't have him here."

There was a knock at the door. Bob Hood pushed back his cuffs, prepared to deal with the new junior if he had returned. Bunny grinned. It was always easy to pull old Bob's leg. Talbot Howard Binks did not want to be crowded in his quarters by a "new scum." And a fib or two cost him nothing.

Bob's eyes were blazing. The bare idea of new scum saying that he would chuck him out of the study as he had chucked him out of the train roused his deepest ire. And he was not aware that the statement had been evolved wholly and solely from Bunny's imagination!

But it was not Harry Vane at the door. It opened to admit Phipps, the house-porter, who was laden with a small iron bedstead like the other two in the study.

"Oh! You!" said Bob. "Look here, Phippers, you can take that somewhere else."

"Mr. Carfax's orders, sir," said Phipps, and he landed his burden in the study. Then he went out into the passage for other things, which he piled on the bedstead. Then the house-porter retired. The making of the bed was left to the maids, who came round to perform such duties while the Topham fellows were at supper in hall.

"Chuck all that out into the passage, Bob," advised Bunny. Bunny was not sure of what the result might be if the new fellow's things were chucked into the passage. So he remained in the armchair, leaving it to Bob. If there were to be any disagreeable consequences, Bunny sagely decided that they might as well come Bob's way.

"I'm going to!" growled Bob.

And Phipps being off the scene, Bob picked up the pile of bedclothes from the bedstead and started for the door with them. He pulled the door wide open, and marched out into the passage—and almost marched into a portly figure there.

"Hood! What is this—what are you doing with those bedclothes?" exclaimed Mr. Carfax in astonishment.

"Oh!" gasped Bob. His arms were full of folded blankets and sheets, bolster and pillow: and he blinked over the top of the stack at his form-master. "Oh! Nothing, sir."

"Take them back into the room at once," snapped Mr. Carfax.

Bob silently obeyed. The bedclothes were dumped down on the bedstead again. Mr. Carfax followed him into the study and glanced round.

"Is not Vane here?" he snapped.

"Vane? Oh, the new fellow, sir? No, he—he—he isn't here!" stammered Bob. He was—was here, but—but he isn't now."

The master of Fourth A had evidently looked in to see whether his instructions had been carried out. Bunny Binks heaved his weight out of the armchair, and stood at attention, eyeing his form-master uneasily. The tin-tacks were on Bunny's fat conscience. But to his relief, Carfax did not even glance at him.

"The new Boy, Vane, will share this study, Hood," said Mr. Carfax. "I expected to find him here. You will see that he attends roll-call and supper, and tell him where to put his things."

"Oh! Yes, sir" mumbled Bob.

Mr. Carfax gave another glance round and went out of the study. Then he stopped suddenly, fixing his sharp eyes in angry surprise on a

dusty, untidy, dishevelled figure coming up the passage from the boxroom.

"Upon my word! Is that you, Vane? What state are you in? Upon my word! Boy! This is disgraceful! Why are you in such a state? Have you been fighting before you have been two hours in the school? Or what? I have never seen a Topham boy in so utterly shocking a state! What does this mean?" thundered Mr. Carfax.

"Oh, scissors!" murmured Bunny.

Bob Hood stood crimson and dumb. Looking from the doorway, past Mr. Carfax, he saw Harry Vane—undoubtedly a shocking sight! Bob gave an anticipative wriggle. As soon as Vane told Carfax what had happened in Top Study, he had no doubt that the vials of wrath would be poured upon his devoted head. "Chuckling" a new junior out of the study to which he had been assigned by his form-master was a proceeding that, in the form-master's opinion at least, merited "four up."

"Oh!" stammered Harry Vane. His face, already red, grew crimson as he looked at Mr. Carfax. "It—it—it's nothing sir—"

"Nothing!" thundered the master of Fourth A. "Nothing—when you are in a disgraceful state of untidiness, on your first day in the school. What is the cause of this, Vane? I insist upon knowing."

"I—I—it was a—a sort of rag, sir," stammered Harry. He was aware that Bob Hood was staring from the study, past Mr. Carfax; but he did not look at him. "Some—some fellows—a—a bit of a rag, sir—it's nothing."

"If that is the case, Vane, tell me at once who did this!" snapped Mr. Carfax.

"I don't know the fellows here yet, sir!" answered Harry, an answer that savoured perhaps a little more of the wisdom of the serpent than of the dove. It was true enough: he did not know the names of the fellows who had bundled him along the passage to the box-room. But he knew Bob's name, though he was not going to mention it.

Mr. Carfax gave an angry sniff.

"Judging by what occurred in my own study, Vane, you are looking for trouble at your new school," he snapped. "No doubt you were to blame for this."

And the master of Fourth A rustled away down the passage, frowning.

"By gum!" said Bob. "That's decent of you, Vane. His Nibs would have given me four up if he'd known! But look here," he added, immediately, "You're not wanted in this study! You've got too much cheek! See?"

"I see," assented Harry Vane. "But I'm coming in all the same."

And he came in. Bunny Binks gave him a hostile glare: Bob eyed him a good deal like a bulldog. But after Carfax's visit, he could not venture to renew the "chucking-out" process. That, only too evidently, was "no go". He eyed the new junior for a long moment, and then, shoving his hands deep into his trousers' pockets, tramped out of the study.

Harry Vane shrugged his shoulders—and remained. He unpacked his bag, sorted out his things and proceeded to set himself to rights: heedless of Bunny and of Bunny's disapproving glare. And there he remained till the bell rang for tea.

CHAPTER VI

BUNNY KNOWS HOW!

"I've got it!"

Grunt!

"I tell you I've got it, Bob!"

Grunt!

Bob Hood did not seem to want to know what Bunny had "got." Neither did he seem in his usual sunny temper. He was standing in Top Study, looking at the belongings of the new junior, and half resolving to pitch them out into the passage—regardless of Carfax.

But he could not quite resolve on that. Carfax might come up again, and Bob did not want "fouled up." The fact was, that as Carfax had "planted" the fellow there, Top Study had to stand it. But it made captain of the Remove feel sore.

The new junior had gone down to tea in hall. Fourth A generally tea'd in their studies. But Top Study was rather too inhospitable to attract Harry Vane. After tea he had gone for a walk in the quadrangle, keen and interested to see all he could of his new school. As he had no "prep" his first evening, he was not bound to come up to Number Eight again till bedtime, which was at nine-forty, for Fourth A. And he had not yet come.

Prep was on in Fourth A now. But in Number Eight they were rather neglecting preparation. Bunny, as usual, was extended in the armchair. Bunny had been thinking—not about prep, however!

"Look here, Bob listen to a chap!" urged Bunny. "I've got the big idea."

"Go and boil it!" answered Bob.

"I know how to make that new scum fed up with this study."

"Oh!" Bob was slightly interested at last. "How's that, Bunny?"

"Carfax would change him out if he asked. Last term Number Two was a four-bedder, and it can be a four-bedder again—if Vane wants to change out."

"But he doesn't!" growled Bob. "And we can't make him—against Carfax."

"We jolly well can—by ragging him till he's fed up," said Bunny, brightly. "We'll jolly well make him tired of life in this study. See? How do you think he would like walking into a booby-trap to begin with—and getting a bag of soot on his napper?"

Bob Hood laughed.

"By gum! That's not bad!" he exclaimed. His frowning face brightened. "If a new scum barges in where he's not wanted, he can take what's coming to him."

"I know where to get a big paper bag," said Bunny. "We rake down soot from the chimney and fill it. We stick it over the door. Leave the door a few inches ajar for him—"

"But he'll spot it, with a light in the study."

"There won't be a light in the study!" grinned the astute Bunny. "We'll go into Number Seven for prep—King and Didcot and Flynn won't mind. See? No light here—and he will have to push open the door and switch it on—ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha!" echoed Bob. "Bunny, you're a fat genius! Hold on, though—he mayn't come up till bedtime—and then we have to be here—"

"I've thought that out too!" chuckled Bunny. "As soon as we've got the booby-trap ready, we get Flynn to go down and speak to him. Flynn can tell him we're making some arrangements about the study, and would like him to be present. That'll be the jolly old truth, won't it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob. "Quite. It's a go, Bunny! Where is he now, do you know?"

"He was in the Jungle when I came up to prep, writing a letter—home, I suppose. He can put in a postscript later, to tell his people how he likes the soot."

"I'll get the bag—you get the soot!" grinned Bunny.

"Go it, old fat man."

Bunny, grinning, rolled out of Number Eight. Bob lost no time. There was no fire in Top Study, but there was plenty of soot in the chimney. With a cricket-stump, Bob proceeded to rake it down. He had quite a collection in the grate—and not a little on his hands and face—when Talbot Howard Binks returned with a large paper bag.

"Hold the bag while I shovel it in," said Bob cheerily. And he shovelled soot into the bag, filling it to the very brim.

It was a large bag, and it held plenty of soot. It was quite certain the fellow on whose head it fell, would not like it the least little bit in the world. It seemed probable that he would feel tired of a study where such things happened. So, at all events, Bob Hood and Talbot Howard Binks hoped!

"O.K.," said Bob. "Get into the next study, Bunny, and borrow a chair."

"What-ho!" chortled Bunny.

Bob, carrying the bag of soot very carefully, followed him out. Bunny rolled into Number Seven—whence sounds of laughter were soon heard. King, Didcot and Flynn, who occupied Number Seven, seemed to be entering into the spirit of the thing. They all came to their doorway to look on, while Bunny followed them with a chair.

Bob switched off the light in Top Study and drew the door half-shut. Then he mounted on the chair Bunny had brought, and lifted the bag of soot to the top of the door.

It needed very careful handling to pull the door closer shut with the bag on top, and rest the bag partly on the door, and partly on the lintel of the doorway. But Bob Hood managed it quite well in a few minutes.

The door was left about six inches open. With no light within, it would have needed a very careful survey to observe the bag perched on top of the door. It could be taken for granted that an unwary fellow coming to the study would not even glance up—why should he? He would push the door open and enter—and then—!

"Oh, scissors!" murmured Bunny. Fancy that new scum, when he gets it! What?"

"Bedad, he'll want a wash afterwards!" chuckled Flynn.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob stepped off the chair, and King lifted it back into Number Seven.

"O.K.," said Bob. "That's all right! Flynn, old man, you cut down to the Jungle and tell that new scum what Bunny's told you—"

"Sure, I'm your man," grinned Flynn. "Making arrangements about the study and you want him to be present, what? ha, ha."

Flynn went down the passage, grinning. Bob Hood and Bunny went into Number Seven with King and Didcot. The door was shut, and the four remained very quiet—there was to be nothing to alarm the new junior, or make him suspicious as he came. Some suppressed chuckles were heard, till Bob held up his hand for silence.

"Quiet! He's coming."

The juniors in Number Seven were as still as mice, listening. Footsteps were heard in the passage, coming up from the landing. If they passed Number Seven the newcomer could only be going to Number Eight, the last room in the passage. And they did pass Number Seven!

Bob Hood and Co. waited, tensely. Bunny Binks almost choked in an endeavour to suppress a fat anticipatory chortle! They listened with all their ears and heard the footsteps pass on to Number Eight. Then—!

Crash!

"Yuuuuuuurrggh!" came a wild frantic splutter.

"He's got it!" gasped Bunny.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled all the juniors in Number Seven. And Bob

Hood threw the door wide open, there was another roar of merriment at the sight of a strange, weird figure, black as the ace of spades, staggering in the doorway of Number Eight amid clouds of soot.

CHAPTER VII

SOOT FOR SOMEBODY!

JOSEPH CARFAX, master of Fourth A at Topham hardly knew what happened.

It came as a complete surprise to him.

Life is full of surprises, and no doubt Mr. Carfax has had his share of them in a career of thirty-five years as a schoolmaster. But this was undoubtedly the biggest surprise of his life.

Mr. Carfax was a dutiful form-master. He had been displeased with the new member of his form, Harry Vane: but Vane was a new boy at Topham, and a dutiful form-master could not forget his existence. He had seen Vane that afternoon in a dusty, untidy, dishevelled state, evidently the victim of a "rag." There were unruly spirits in the Topham Remove, as Mr. Carfax knew only too well. And it was quite natural that a dutiful form-master should decide to give his form a look-in that evening to ascertain that no more ragging was going on.

With which dutiful purpose Mr. Carfax detached his portly form from the comfortable armchair in his study and went up the staircase. He crossed the landing into the Remove passage—where all looked normal: not a fellow out of his study. He walked up the passage to the top study—and then he frowned.

Something, as he had half-suspected, was "on" in the Remove. The door of Number Eight being partly open, revealed that there was no light on in the study. Hood and Binks should have been at preparation there: but obviously they could not be at prep. in the dark.

Something was going on in the Remove! Mr. Carfax was going to know what it was. He pushed open the door of Number Eight, stepping into the doorway, reaching for the switch inside—and it happened.

Something crashed on his head, knocking off his mortar-board. Something swamped him from head to foot.

It was soot—the smell told him that it was soot. It smothered him—his head, his face, his clothes—it filled his ears and his eyes, and his mouth as he opened it to splutter. It wrapped him like a garment. It fell thicker than leaves in Vallombrosa. It swamped him—blinded and choked him—and floated round him in clouds as he staggered helplessly to and fro.

The door of Number Seven was flung wide open, the doorway crowded with laughing faces. Other doors along the passage opened, and fellows stared out. Eyes popped at the sight of the staggering, sooty figure at the door of Number Eight.

"Ha, ha, ha!" soared Bob Hood. "He's got it."

"Ha, ha, ha!" trilled Bunny Binks. "I say, you swob, how do you like the soot? What! Ha, ha!"

"Urrrggh! Gurrgh! Wurrgh!" came in wild splutters from seas of soot. "Gurrgh! What-oooogh! Ooooch! Wooooch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob. "He—OH! Oh, gum! What!" Bob's roar of laughter died suddenly away at the sight of a junior coming up the passage from the landing.

It was Harry Vane!

The sooty figure was unrecognisable. But evidently it was not Harry Vane—for there was Vane, coming up the passage, neat and clean as a new pin.

"Vane!" gasped Bob.

Harry stared at the staggering sooty figure in amazement. Then he looked round at faces from which merriment had suddenly died.

"Flynn told me you wanted me in the study," he said. "I—what on earth's happened here? Who's that?"

"Urrrggh! Gurrgrgh! Wurrghh! Who did this?" Mr. Carfax gouged soot from his eyes and snorted it from nose and mouth, and found his voice. "Hood—Binks—"

"Carfax!" stuttered Bob.

"Oh, scissors! Carfax!" gurgled Bunny.

Bob put his hand to the door-post of Number Seven for support. He felt quite faint! It was not—evidently—the new junior who had got the soot! It was Joseph Carfax, master of Fourth A.

"Urrrggh! Wurrgrgh! Hood—Binks—you did this—to me, your form-master—urrgh!"

"Oh, gum! Nunno—yes—no—" babbled Bob. "We—meant it for the new fellow, sir—we never meant. We—meant it for Vane, sir—not you—oh, jiminy!"

"We—we—we—!" gurgled Bunny. "We—we—we—oh, crikey!"

"Urrrggh! Go down to my study at once—yurrgrgh! Wait for me here! Ooogh! I will deal with you—wurrgrgh—later!"

Mr. Carfax swept away—leaving a black trail of soot behind him as he went. He was going to deal with those two juniors—he was going to deal with them drastically. But he needed a wash first! Of all things in the wide world, what Mr. Carfax stood most in need of just then was a wash! And he rushed off to get one.

"Oh, gum!" groaned Bob.

"Oh, scissors!" moaned Bunny.

Harry Vane glanced after the trailing black figure of his form-master. He glanced at Hood and Binks. He burst into a laugh.

"You meant it for me?" he asked. "That's why I was called up here, what? Ha, ha! Much obliged to Mr. Carfax—he's welcome! Ha, ha, ha! I'll cut down and finish my letter as you don't want me! Ha, ha! Don't worry about fixing up any more booby-traps—you won't make another catch."

Harry Vane went down the passage laughing. But Bob Hood and Bunny Binks were not laughing as they followed. It was no laughing matter for them. Neither were they thinking of any more booby-traps! They were fed up with the mere thought of booby-traps! They trailed away dismally to Mr. Carfax's study—to wait there for what was coming to them!

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HARRY VANE had rather wondered whether, when he turned in that night, there might be another spot of trouble in Number Eight. But neither of his study-mates was in a mood for trouble after Mr. Carfax had dealt with them faithfully—very faithfully! Whatever might be coming later that night, at least, there was not the ghost of a spot of trouble in Top Study at Topham!

THE END