

RAG'S CATCH!

By FRANK RICHARDS

CHAPTER ONE

RAG KNOWS WHAT!

"I KNOW what!" said Rag Pickles.

Nobody heeded that remark.

There were three other fellows in the junior day-room at Dilcombe: Jimmy Denver, Carr, and Paget.

They stood at the big window, looking out into the wintry sunshine in the quadrangle. That bright sunshine was not reflected in their faces.

Generally, Jimmy Denver and Co. looked as merry and bright as any fellows at Dilcombe. And on this particular afternoon, had circumstances been normal, they would probably have looked merrier and brighter than usual. For it was Wednesday, a half-holiday, and the Soccer match at Walcot was due.

But circumstances were not normal. And they were looking grim and glum and gloomy, as if they found life hardly worth living, even at Dilcombe!

"Gated!" said Jimmy Denver, dismally; heedless of Rag.

"On Walcot day!" mumbled Carr.

"Rotten!" groaned Paget.

"I say, do listen to a chap," urged Rag, "I tell you I know what—."

"Oh, dry up, you!" snapped Jimmy Denver. "You've got us into this jam, with your fathead rags. You can't get us out of it. Pack it up."

"But I say—!"

"Pack it up!" hooted Carr and Paget together.

Rag looked indignant.

Rag—his full name was Albert Edward Pickles—was feeling the blow, just like his

chums. Rag was as keen to play Soccer at Walcot that afternoon, as any other fellow in Randall's House at Dilcombe. The house-master's sentence of "gates" had fallen as heavily on Rag as on his comrades. And Rag couldn't see that he was to blame, as his friends quite clearly could!

"Was it my fault?" demanded Rag, hotly.

"Wasn't it?" hooted Jimmy, "You had to get that ass Crawley of the Fifth with your silly pea-shooter—and start a row—."

"I didn't think he would spot me—."

"Catch you thinking!" said Jimmy, witheringly. "You've got nothing to do it with, if you come to that. He did spot you, and pitched into you, and then what could we do but drag him off and sit on his head?"

"And Randall had to barge in at that very moment!" said Carr. "Randall all over—poking his nose in where it wasn't wanted."

"And a gating all round for the four of us, for ragging in the Quad!" said Paget, "And what's going to happen at Walcot, with the four of us left out of the eleven? We've got to stay in gates, kicking our heels, while the Walcot men wipe their boots on Dilcombe."

"I know it's rotten," said Rag, "But—."

"Oh, give us a rest."

"But I say—!" persisted Rag.

"The question is," said Jimmy Denver, ruthlessly regardless of Rag, "Can we do anything about it? Might Randall let us off, if we explained about Walcot? Might catch him in a good temper after dinner. He's often in a good temper after tiffin."

"Um!" said Carr and Paget, very dubi-

ously. It did not seem very hopeful to them. Mr Randall, house-master of Randall's House, was a stern and severe gentleman. An edict from Randall was like the laws of the Medes and the Persians: fixed and immutable.

"Looks like the only chance," said Carr, slowly, "But—!"

"But—!" sighed Paget.

"If you let a fellow speak—!" hooted Rag. "I've told you I know what."

Three impatient juniors stared at Rag. They were in a jam: but they did not expect any help out of it from Albert Edward Pickles. True that Albert Edward was the best junior winger at Dilcombe, worth his weight in gold, if not in banknotes, on the Soccer field. But off the football field, he was, as his best chums agreed, the biggest ass at Dilcombe or anywhere else.

They did not expect any sense from old Rag. Still, in the dire circumstances, they were prepared to give him a hearing, if he had anything in the least useful to suggest.

"Well, if you know what, what's what?" yapped Jimmy, "Get it off your chest, and don't talk out of the back of your neck if you can help it."

"We're gated," said Rag. "That washes out the Walcot match for us. No good asking old Randy anything—you'd only get a snort from him! But it's all Crawley's fault—kicking up a shindy just because a chap got him in the ear with a pea-shooter. Crawley's a swanking ass—."

"Never mind Crawley now—."

"But that's it!" explained Rag, "Crawley's got lines to do for Randall this afternoon. I heard him telling Hart that he'd a good mind to give them a miss, because he wants to go to the pictures at Dilford—."

"Bother Crawley and his lines."

"He will be in his study, writing lines—," continued Rag.

"What about it?" hooted Jimmy.

"I'm going to lock him in."

"Wha-a-a-t?"

Rag grinned. His three chums stared at him blankly. Rag tapped the pocket of his jacket.

"I've got his study key here," he said,

"Nobody was about when I snooped it. I'm going to wait till Crawley gets busy on his lines in his study. Then I'm going to tiptoe along and turn the key on him. Tit for tat, you know—he's dished us over the Walcot game, and I'm going to dish him over his trip to Dilford this afternoon—see?" Rag chuckled. "When he's through his lines, and ready to start, he won't be able to get out of his study! Rather a rag on Crawley, what! Ha, ha, ha!"

Albert Edward Pickles laughed loud and long: evidently greatly taken with the idea of a rag on Crawley of the Fifth. He seemed to expect his chums to join in his merriment.

But they did not! Rag had the laugh all to himself! So far from laughing, Denver and Carr and Paget glared at him, almost as if they could have eaten him!

"You silly ass!" gasped Jimmy Denver.

"Look here—!" protested Rag.

"You dithering chump!" roared Carr.

"I say—."

"You frabjous, frumptious fathead!" hooted Paget.

"I tell you it will be no end of a rag on Crawley—bottling him up in his study for the afternoon—."

"You and your rags!" said Jimmy Denver, "You've got us gated on Walcot day with your silly ragging: and now all you can think of is another rag! We've got to let the team go over to Walcot without us, and get licked to the wide, and you—you—you—." Words seemed to fail the captain of the Dilcombe Fourth. He spluttered with wrath. "Bump him!" he added.

"Good egg!" said Carr and Paget together. Rag jumped back, in alarm.

"Here, I say, hands off—I say—leggo—Yooooop!" roared Rag, as three exasperated juniors grasped him, and swept him off his feet.

Bump!

"Oooooooh!" spluttered Rag, as he sat down—hard—on the old oaken floor of the day-room, "I say—oooooh!"

"Give him another!"

Bump!

"Oh, crikey! Ow! Ooooooh!"

"One more for luck," said Jimmy Denver. Bump!

"Urrrrrrggh!" gurgled Rag.

He sat and spluttered for breath. Jimmy Denver and Co. walked out of the day-room, and left him to splutter. Their problem was unsolved; but there was some solace in having given Rag that for which he had asked, and they were feeling a little better. Rag, sitting and spluttering, was feeling considerably worse!



CHAPTER TWO

CAUGHT!

MR RANDALL, house-master of Randall's House, frowned.

Randall was walking in the Quad, after dinner.

As Jimmy Denver had told his friends, Randall was often in a good temper after tiffin. But he did not look in the best of tempers now.

Pacing sedately under the old Dilcombe oaks, Mr Randall passed, at a little distance, a group of three juniors of his House. With gloomy looks, they seemed to be discussing some absorbing topic: so absorbing that they did not notice their house-master in the offing.

Had they noticed him, no doubt, they would have subdued their voices. Not noticing him, they didn't. As a result, three successive remarks floated to Mr Randall's ears as he passed.

"No good asking old Randy anything!" said Paget.

"Bother old Randy!" said Carr.

"Bother and blow him!" said Jimmy Denver.

Mr Randall walked on, with hard-compressed lips. Randall was not the man to take official note of words not intended for his ears, heard by chance. He walked on as if he had heard nothing. But a deep frown knitted his brow.

Those three juniors, and their chum Pickles, who was not with them at the

moment, were "gated" for the afternoon: quite a light punishment, in Mr Randall's opinion, for a reckless rag in the Quad. Possibly Mr Randall might have given consideration to a plea for leave out of gates in view of the fixture at Walcot. If so, that chance was gone now—after what he had inadvertently heard. "Old Randy" was not a phrase pleasing to his ears: neither did he like being "bothered" and "blowed" by juniors of his House. Jimmy Denver and Co. continued their anxious discussion, happily unconscious that their goose was already cooked.

Randall was frowning—and a few minutes later, his frown intensified. This time his glinting eyes fixed upon a senior of his House—Crawley of the Fifth Form.

Crawley had been mixed up in that rag, for which the juniors were gated. Crawley had been given two hundred lines, with orders to deliver them in his house-master's study before the tea-bell rang.

Crawley, therefore, should have been sitting in his study, in the Fifth, at that moment, grinding at Virgil. Two hundred lines of Latin was a task to take time. Crawley had to write two hundred lines from the Second Book of the *Aeneid*, from "*conticuere omnes*" to "*improvida pectora turbat*".

He couldn't have written them already, unless at supersonic speed. Yet there he was, sauntering down to the gates, with his hands in his pockets, as casually and carelessly as if house-masters and lines did not exist at all. As Mr Randall, from a distance, stared at him grimly, Crawley called out to another Fifth-form man.

"Come on, Hart."

Hart of the Fifth joined him.

"Going?" he asked. "Dilford Regal?"

"Yes—lots of time if we step out."

"But—"

"Oh, come on: we don't want to be late."

"Oh, all right."

They walked down to the gates together.

Mr Randall made a step to follow—to call Crawley back. But he paused. It was possible, after all, that Crawley had done his lines, and that they lay on his study table in

the Fifth, ready for delivery by tea-time as commanded. In which case, Crawley had every right to walk down to Dilford to the picture-palace, if the spirit moved him so to do. But if he had walked out, regardless of lines, and of his house-master, to turn up at tea-time with an excuse instead of lines—Mr Randall's lips set in a tight line at that idea.

Mr Randall turned and walked to his House. It was a simple matter to step into Crawley's study, and see for himself. If the lines were there, done according to orders, well and good. If not, a House Prefect would be despatched immediately to call Crawley in; with a double imposition to reward him for his disregard of authority.

Mr Randall whisked into his House, and up the staircase to the Fifth-Form studies. Randall's House at Dilcombe was a very ancient building, with dim old passages that seemed to lead nowhere in particular. Crawley's study was at the end of one of those passages. Not a soul was about, as Mr Randall billowed up the passage: everyone was out of doors that bright afternoon: most of the fellows interested in football.

Certainly it was not likely to occur to the house-master that a Fourth-Form fellow had parked himself in one of the deserted studies, where he was listening with intent ears for the sound of footsteps going into Crawley's study! Mr Randall, naturally, had no idea of Rag Pickles' astute plans for that afternoon: and had, indeed, quite forgotten Rag's unimportant existence.

He arrived at Crawley's study, at the end of the passage. He walked in, leaving the door ajar behind him.

He stepped to the study table.

There were books and papers, an inkpot and some split ink, and an odd football boot on the table: Crawley was not a tidy fellow. Mr Randall scanned that untidy table with grim eyes. If the lines were not there—!

They were not! There was not a sign of lines. Crawley had not even started on his imposition. Probably he had not come up to his study at all since dinner. Grimmer and grimmer grew Randall's brow. Crawley had gone off to the pictures that afternoon, passing by his house-master and his house-

master's commands like the idle wind which he regarded not!

Randall, with glinting eyes, turned to the door again.

Then he jumped.

The door, which he had left ajar, suddenly closed, with a snap, under his eyes. Randall jumped, and stared at it, blankly.

Obviously, that door could not have snapped shut of its own volition. Someone in the passage outside, unseen, had dragged it shut.

The next moment, there was a scraping sound of a key jammed into a lock—and click.

Click! Then a scrape of a key withdrawn. Randall stood petrified.

There was a low chuckle outside. Then a sound of hurriedly retreating footsteps. That sound died away almost in a moment.

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr Randall.

He made a stride to the door.

He grasped the door-handle, and dragged. The door did not open.

Then he knew beyond doubt, what his ears had already told him, that the door was locked on the outside.

He was locked in Crawley's study!

"Bless my soul!" repeated the house-master.

For a long minute, he stood staring at the door. He could hardly believe that this thing had happened! But it had!

Someone—he could not begin to guess who—had seen him, or heard him, come to Crawley's study, and tiptoed to the door and locked him in. He was a prisoner in Crawley's study.

He rapped on the door with his knuckles.

"Come back! Come back and unlock this door instantly! Do you hear me?"

But he knew that the unknown locker-in was gone, taking the key with him! He ceased to rap on the oak. There were no ears to hear: but even if he could have drawn a crowd to the spot, the door could not be unlocked without the key. And he did not want a crowd of fellows outside grinning over his predicament.

He crossed to the window and looked out. It gave a view of kitchen gardens at the back

of the House, with nobody in sight. Clambering down from a high window was not a feat to be performed by a middle-aged house-master. He turned back from the window: his feelings deep, the frown on his brow rivalling the frightful, fearful, frantic frown of the Lord High Executioner. He was a prisoner in Crawley's study—until the unknown ragger chose to let him out! He had to wait—and his feelings grew deeper and deeper and deeper as he waited!



CHAPTER THREE ALL CLEAR?

"GOT him!" trilled Rag.

Rag was jubilant, as he joined his friends in the Quad.

He had rather avoided them, since the bumping in the day-room. But he had to seek them now, to tell them of the complete success of his astute scheme to dish Crawley of the Fifth that afternoon.

They did not heed him. The Walcot match, and the faint hope of something coming from an appeal to Randall for leave out of gates, occupied their minds. But Rag ran on happily:

"Got him! Got that swanking ass Crawley! I say, do listen you fellows. I got him all right! I say, I waited in Hart's study till he came up. I heard him pass the door, and go into his own study. And then—"

"Shut up!" hooted Jimmy Denver.

"Then I tiptoed out, pulled his door shut, and locked it on the outside!" trilled Rag. "I've got the key! Even if he yells, nobody will be able to let him out! Ha, ha, ha!"

Again Rag had his laugh all to himself. Jimmy Denver and Co. were not amused. They did not care two hoots about Crawley of the Fifth, or whether he was locked in his study, or sitting watching the pictures at Dildford.

"You dithering dunderhead," said Jimmy, "Dry up! Bother you and bother Crawley!

Look here, you men, it's time to start for Walcot: and if the team go without us, they're going to be wiped off the earth."

"Might cut!" suggested Paget.

Jimmy Denver shook his head.

"Too jolly risky—Randall's as sharp as a needle. But—there's just a chance that he might let us off, if we explained about Walcot—"

"Try it on!" said Carr.

"Well, it won't do any harm, if it doesn't do any good," said Jimmy, "Let's go and ask him, anyhow. He's not a bad old bean, really, and he might go easy, with a Soccer match on."

"I say—!" recommenced Rag Pickles.

"Oh, pack it up, you!" snapped Jimmy. And, having finally made up his mind that an appeal to Randall was the only hope, he walked off to the House with Carr and Paget.

Jimmy Denver tapped at the door of his house-master's study. There was no reply from within: and he opened the door.

"If you please, sir—!" he began, in his meekest tones.

He broke off at that. Randall's study was vacant: his house-master was not there!

"Oh, blow!" grunted Jimmy. "Randall's not here."

"Common-Room, most likely," said Carr.

"Come on, then."

The three walked on to Masters' Common-Room. Jimmy tapped at the door of that august apartment, and opened it, and looked in. Three or four "beaks" were there, taking their ease in armchairs after "tiffin". But Mr Randall was not to be seen.

Jimmy Denver breathed hard, as he closed the door again.

"Bless him!" he breathed, "We shall be late at Walcot, even if he does give us leave, at this rate. Where the dickens is Randall?"

It was an unexpected set-back.

"Trotting in the Quad," suggested Carr. "He often does after tiffin. Let's go and look for him there."

They went to look for him there! But Mr Randall was not to be found in the Quad. They asked fellows right and left: but nobody seemed to know where Randall was. As a last hope they repaired to his study

again, thinking that he might have returned there during the search. But the house-master's study was still vacant.

"Not here!" said Jimmy Denver.

"Not anywhere!" said Carr. "Look here, it's pretty plain that he's gone out. And if he's gone out—!"

The three looked at one another. The same thought was in all three minds. For gated fellows to "cut" with Randall on the spot, was impracticable. But if Randall had gone out—!

"While the cat's away—!" said Paget.

Jimmy drew a deep breath.

"Must have gone out," he said, "Mightn't be back till we get home from Walcot—and he couldn't know a thing. But—even if he came in, and missed us, we'd get the game—we could stand a row afterwards. You fellows feel like chancing it?"

"What-ho!" said Paget and Carr together.

"That's that!" said Jimmy.

And "that" being "that", the chums of the Dilcombe Fourth lost no more time. In the unexpected circumstances, there was no need to make hurried last-minute changes—the Dilcombe junior team was not, after all, losing them. All that was necessary was for the motor-coach to roll off with its crowd: and four gated juniors to leave quietly and unostentatiously over a secluded wall, and pick up the coach later on the road.

Which they duly did.

Jimmy Denver and his chums were feeling cheerful as they rolled over to Walcot with the football crowd. From all appearance, Mr Randall was absent from Dilcombe; and while the cat was away, the mice, proverbially, could play. Quite possibly he might not return till after the footballers were home again: in which case he would never know that four juniors, supposed to remain within gates, hadn't done so. Anyhow they were going to play Walcot, and that was that.

Rag Pickles was the most jubilant of the four.

Rag, of course, was as glad as the others that Randall had gone out, and left the coast clear. But he had additional cause for

jubilation, in the success of his rag on Crawley of the Fifth. Albert Edward Pickles was a born ragger: he lived and moved and had his being in ragging: hence his nickname in the Dilcombe Fourth. Often, only too often, his "rags" ended in disaster: for if there was a blunder or a bungle to be made, Rag was the man to make it. But this time everything had gone like clockwork—at least Rag was sure that it had.

"Just think of that swanking ass Crawley!" chuckled Rag. "Raging, I expect—simply raging, in his study—locked in—and he won't get out till we come back from Walcot! Fancy Crawley's face, you men—locked in, and raging! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" echoed Jimmy Denver and Paget and Carr. They could join in Rag's laugh now: now that it was all clear for Walcot. They laughed: and all the football crowd laughed, at the idea of the swanking ass, Crawley of the Fifth, raging in his study till the Soccer team came home. Fortunately for their peace of mind, nobody had the faintest suspicion who it really was that the ineffable Rag had locked in Crawley's study!

CHAPTER FOUR

OKAY!

IT was a great game at Walcot.

Walcot men were good at Soccer. When the Dilcombe junior eleven met the Walcot junior eleven on the football field, they had to put their best foot forward, and go all out: and even then the result was generally on the knees of the gods. What would have happened, had the Dilcombe team gone over minus its four star players, their places filled by second-rate men, was a question that had only one possible answer: Dilcombe would have been wiped off the face of the earth.

Now, however, it was O.K. With Jimmy Denver at centre-forward, Dick Paget at centre-half, Chris Carr in goal, and Rag Pickles as fleet as a deer, and nimble as a

monkey, on the right wing, the Dilcombe junior eleven was at the top of its form. Rag, in exuberant spirits, excelled himself. Rag, who bungled everything else, was always worth watching on the Soccer field. Off it, he might be an unmitigated fathead and a priceless ass, as his chums often told him: on it, he was a pearl of price! And in fact, the first goal came to Dilcombe from Rag, with a long shot from the wing which hardly any other fellow could have brought off. And the second came to Jimmy Denver, from a pass that Rag gave him at exactly and precisely the right moment. The first half ended with Dilcombe two up.

In the second half, Walcot equalized. But they did not keep equal. The game went on ding-dong, till in the last few minutes, the ball whizzed into the home goal and stayed there. Dilcombe came off the field winners by three goals to two.

Which was a very satisfactory result for the visitors. They were all looking merry and bright as they piled into the motor-coach for home.

"Okay!" said Jimmy Denver, as they rolled away from Walcott. "But if Randall hadn't gone out—!"

"Let's hope that he hasn't come in yet!" said Carr.

"If he has—and if he's missed us—!" murmured Paget.

Jimmy Denver whistled. He was happy and satisfied, so far as Soccer was concerned. But now that the Walcot game had been fought and won, he had more leisure to think of possible consequences. Randall was as keen as a razor: and he had a watchful eye. If he had come in, and noticed that four juniors of his House, supposed to be within gates, were absent, there was going to be a row—a royal row. The Walcot game, no doubt, was worth it; but it was not going to be pleasant, all the same.

Three juniors were rather thoughtful, as they rolled homeward. Rag, who was never known to think, was as cheery as ever. The mental picture of that swanking ass, Crawley of the Fifth, raging in his study, was enough to keep Rag merry and bright.

Some distance short of Dilcombe, four

juniors dropped from the motor-coach. It rolled on without them: and they walked the rest of the way: and re-entered the school in the same quiet and unostentatious way that they had left it. As they were supposed to be gated, it would never have done, of course, to roll in with the crowd. Caution was their cue.

Having clambered in by an ivied wall, in a spot where it was nicely shaded by one of the old Dilcombe oaks, they breathed more freely.

"All serene—if Randall isn't back!" said Paget.

"We'll soon see!" said Jimmy Denver.

They strolled, with a casual air, into the Quad. If Randall wasn't back yet, it was all right—right as rain! If he wasn't in yet, they were prepared to be quite prominently on view when he did come in: and how was even old Randy, with his pin-point eyes, to know that they hadn't been in gates all the time! If only Randall hadn't come in yet—!

Apparently he hadn't! Jimmy Denver called to the first fellow they met:

"Is Randall in, Bates?"

"Haven't seen him," answered Bates.

Three or four other fellows answered the same question to the same effect. Jimmy Denver and Co. exchanged blissful glances. Somebody would have seen Randall, if he was about. Nobody seemed to have seen him. So—as far as the Co. would see—he was still out.

"Thank goodness," said Jimmy, "We just had to play Walcot—but we didn't want a row with Randy."

"We jolly well didn't!" agreed Carr.

"Not a lot!" grinned Paget.

"Might have been six of the best, all round," said Jimmy, "We can do without them!"

"Sort of!" chuckled Carr.

They strolled in the Quad, quite at their ease now. They had played Walcot, and beaten Walcot: and there was nothing to come! Wherever Randall was, and whatever might be the cause of his happy and fortunate absence, he was never going to know that four "gated" juniors had "cut". Everything was all serene.

"But I say," said Rag, "What about Crawley—?"

Jimmy laughed.

"You'd better cut in, and let him out," he said, "And if he skins you alive for playing potty tricks on him, serve you jolly well right!"

"Well, I'm going to let him out," said Rag, "I daresay he's had enough, by this time. But if he cuts up rusty—"

"Not much 'if' about that," said Jimmy.

"Well, look here, you fellows come with me," said Rag, "I can't handle a Fifth-Form man—too jolly hefty for me. If he cuts up rusty, the four of us can give him all he wants, and some over."

"Oh, all right!"

They went into Randall's House, and up to the Fifth-form studies. There was little doubt that if Crawley of the Fifth had been raging in his study for hours on end, he would be in a rather dangerous state when he was let out: and Rag was very likely indeed to be in need of help from his friends. The Co. were prepared to stand by him strenuously if Crawley cut up rusty!

Rag grinned, as he drew a study key from his pocket. They could see, as they came up the passage, that the door of Crawley's study was shut: plainly it had not been opened since Rag had turned the key. But there was no sound from the study: the occupant did not seem to be "raging", perhaps he had got tired of "raging", and was patiently sitting it out!

Rag, key in hand, bent to the keyhole. His face was wreathed in grins.

"Hallo, in there!" chirruped Rag, through the keyhole, "I'm going to let you out now, fathead!"

There was a gasping sound in the study.

"Hear me?" went on Rag, cheerily, "I'm going to let you out now, you swanking ass! I hope you've had a pleasant afternoon. Ha, ha, ha!"

There was another gasp within: it sounded as if that address through the keyhole had taken somebody's breath away.

Rag jammed the key in the lock, and turned it back. He pitched the door wide open.

"Now, you silly ass, you can come out!" he said, "and—!" Rag broke off, suddenly, as a figure appeared in the study doorway.

Rag's eyes bulged from his face. Jimmy Denver and Carr and Paget gazed in horror. It was not Crawley of the Fifth who emerged from Crawley's study. It was quite a different person. It was Mr Randall, house-master of Randall's House, his face crimson with wrath.



CHAPTER FIVE

RAG, ALL OVER!

"OH!" gasped Rag Pickles.

He stared at Mr Randall.

He goggled at him.

He could not believe his eyes. The ghost of Banquo did not startle Macbeth more, the shadowy form that drew his curtains at dead of night did not startle King Priam more, than the sight of his house-master in Crawley's doorway startled Rag Pickles.

It seemed like magic—black magic—to Rag. He had locked Crawley in that study—at least he was sure that he had! And it was his house-master who emerged in towering wrath.

"Oh!" babbled Rag. "Oh! Oh, crumbs! Oooooooh!"

His friends looked on, in utter dismay. Evidently, Rag had made one more of his many bumbles. Randall's happy and fortunate absence that afternoon was accounted for now. He had not gone out—he had been locked in Crawley's study, in mistake for Crawley, by that ass, that ineffable fathead, that priceless goat, Rag Pickles. It was not Crawley, it was Randall, whom that unmitigated ass, Rag, had locked in: and whom he had just addressed through the keyhole! Three juniors stood dumb with horror while Rag babbled incoherently.

"So it was you, Pickles, who locked me in that study!" Randall's voice was deep, with an edge on it. "You!"

"I—I—I—" stammered Rag.

"Come with me!"

"I—I—I—"

"Come!"

Randall's grip closed on Rag's collar. By the collar he led him away. Jimmy Denver and Carr and Paget watched them go. They were there to back up Rag if Crawley cut up rusty: but it was not Crawley, it was his house-master: there was no help for Rag. Rag was led away to his house-master's study. Only too well he knew, and his chums knew, what awaited him there.

"Well, my hat!" said Carr, with a deep breath, "Rag, all over."

"Poor old Rag!" said Jimmy.

And they sadly went their way: deeply sympathetic for poor old Rag. He needed sympathy!

ALL the Dilcombe Fourth, with a single exception, chuckled over the story of Rag's catch. The exception was Albert Edward Pickles. Other fellows might smile over that extraordinary bungle: but Rag, after his house-master had dealt with him faithfully—very faithfully!—did not feel like smiling. Indeed, for a long, long time, Rag seemed to be understudying that ancient monarch who never smiled again!



THE END