THE BUMPER BOOK SERIES—6

POPULAR STORY BOOK

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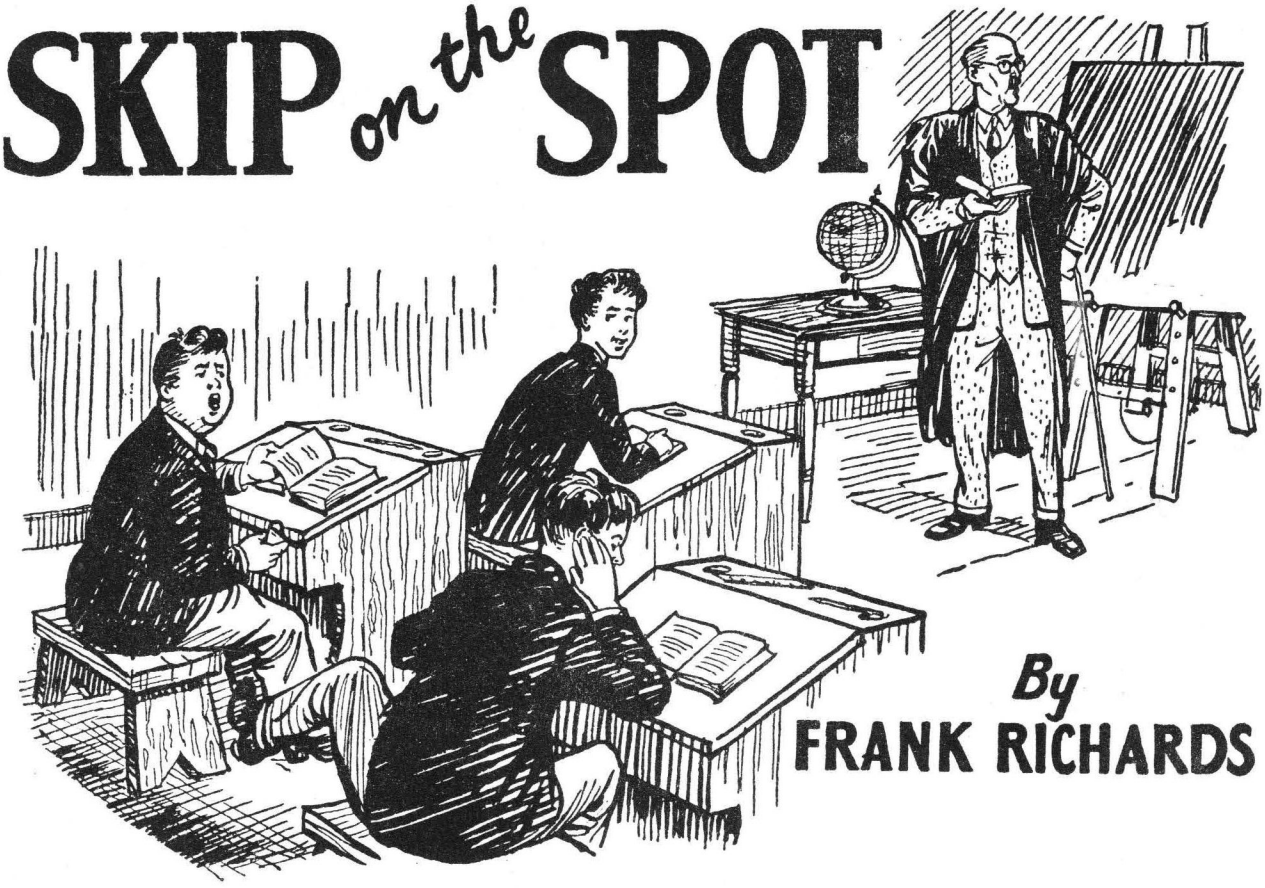
SKIP on the SPOT



By FRANK RICHARDS

BULLINGER hacked Skip under the desk, not because Skip had done anything, but simply because he was in the worst temper ever; and Skip Ruggles, inoffensive as he was, was a member of Study Four. Bullinger's feelings towards Study Four at the time were inimical, not to say homicidal, much as he would have preferred to hack Tom King or Dick Warren – especially Tom King, the junior football captain. But they were not near enough in form; moreover, they were not fellows to be hacked with impunity. So he hacked poor Skip.

Bullinger had been shirty, not to say savage, ever since Tom King had taken his name out of the list of men for the St. Jude's match which was to be played on the Felgate ground that afternoon. Tom had taken it out for good reasons: for had not Bullinger in a practice game deliberately kicked a man, having lost his temper, as he not infrequently did? Tom was not going to risk that sort of thing happening in a school match – and Bullinger, good right-half as he was, was dropped like a hot potato. The mere idea of hanging about with his hands in his pockets while other fellows played soccer was infuriating to Bullinger, and the fact that he had asked for it was no comfort to him. It was a little comfort perhaps to hack Skip's fat leg under the desk in form in third school.

It was no comfort to Skip. It took him quite by surprise, and it hurt. The howl that Skip uttered as he received the hack woke all the

He put a fat hand behind him, considerably too late

echoes of the Fourth Form room, caused fellows to stare round, and caused Charne, the form-master, to fix his pin-point eyes on Skip with quite a deadly glare. Charne did not like the lesson being interrupted by a wild howl like that of a startled jackal in the jungle.

It was all the more dismaying because Skip at that moment did not want Charne's attention directed to him. Charne had his eye on Reece, who was handing out quite a good 'con'. With Charne's eye fixed on Reece, Skip had ventured to take a packet of toffee from his pocket and to help himself to a chunk therefrom. Toffee in class was very strictly forbidden, and Skip masticated the same almost in fear and trembling, lest Charne's eye should fall upon him. Now it fell.

'Ruggles!' rapped Charne.

'Ow! Wow!' was Skip's agonised reply. Bullinger was a heavy-handed fellow. He was also heavy-footed. That hack had been an emphatic one.

'Ruggles! Stand out before the class!'

'Oh, crikey!' moaned Skip.

The anguish in his plump leg occupied Skip's whole attention. He hardly realised that the packet of toffee was still in his fat hand as he limped out before the form. But Charne noticed it at once. Little escaped those pin-point eyes in the Fourth Form room at Felgate.

'You have interrupted the lesson, Ruggles —'

'Ow! I–I couldn't help it, sir–somebody kicked me under the desk.'

'What is that in your hand?'

'Oh! Nothing, sir!' gasped Skip. He put a fat hand behind him, considerably too late. 'I–I–I mean–oh–nothing, sir.'

'Hold up your hand, Ruggles.'

There was no help for it. With Charne's eyes and the eyes of all the Fourth on him, Skip held up a fat hand, clutching the toffee packet. Charne's eyes glittered at it.

'Toffee!' he said. Toffee might have been a dangerous poison by the way Charne spoke. Charne, of course, was long past the age of toffee. He almost snorted: 'Place it on my desk, Ruggles.'

Slowly and sadly Skip placed the packet on his form-master's desk. His eyes lingered on it mournfully. Dido's sad gaze could hardly have lingered so mournfully on Aeneas' departing sails as Skip's did on that packet of toffee.

'Take fifty lines, Ruggles, for bringing toffee into the form-room.'

'I-I—'

'Go back to your place.'

With one last long lingering look at the toffee, Skip went back to his place. Bullinger grinned at him as he sat down. Charne did not seem to care who had hacked Skip and caused that sudden howl, or whether anybody had. Skip's dire offence in bringing toffee into the form-room was enough for Charne.

'Go on, Reece,' said Charne.

'Oh, you smudge!' hissed Skip to Bullinger as he sat down.

Charne's eyes swivelled round.

'Are you talking in class, Ruggles?'

'Oh, lor! No, sir-yes, sir-I-I mean —' burbled poor Skip.

'Take a hundred lines.'

After that Skip refrained from telling Bullinger what he thought of him. He waited dolorously till third school was over, hoping against hope that the toffee might then come back to its owner. When the Fourth were dismissed he ventured a word.

'Please, sir —'

'Well?' The monosyllable came like a bullet.

'M-m-may I take my toffee, sir?'

'You may not!'

Skip rolled out of the form-room after the rest with an almost tragic face. Other fellows might be thinking of football-in fact most of them were! - but Skip wasn't playing in the St. Jude match, and toffee was toffee! And it was a large packet-lots and lots of chunks in it. Skip had hardly started on it, when it was gone from his gaze like a beautiful dream!

He did not go out into the quad with Tom King and Dick Warren as usual. He lingered in the corridor, with an eye on the form-room door. Charne would be out in a few minutes, and there might, Skip thought, be a chance of nipping into the form-room when he was gone and retrieving that toffee.

But alas for Skip!

Charne came out, with papers in his hand. But there was something else as well as papers. It was a large packet of toffee. Skip's feelings were unutterable as he realised that Charne was taking in to his study with him.

'Ruggles!'

'Oh! Yes, sir!' moaned Skip.

'Why are you here? You should not loaf about the corridors. Go away!'

Skip went away with feelings inexpressible in words.

In the quad a few minutes later Tom King and Dick Warren were listening to his tale of woe. They grinned-they were sympathetic, but Skip's disaster seemed to them to have a comic side. However, they condoled with Skip, and were condoling, when Bullinger came up with a scowling brow and his jaw jutting aggressively.

'Look here, King —!' growled Bullinger.

'Looking!' said Tom politely.

'If you mean it about chucking me this afternoon —'

'Quite!'

'You'll be sorry for it,' said Bullinger darkly.

'I'll chance that! But never mind soccer now,' said Tom. 'There's something else. You hacked Skip in form and landed him in a row with Charne. Bag him and duck his head, Dick.'

'What-ho!' said Dick Warren.

They were standing by the fountain in the quad. Two pairs of hands collared Bullinger

and his head was promptly ducked in the granite basin. It came out streaming with water, its owner spluttering like a grampus.

'Urrrrgh!' spluttered Bullinger. 'I – I'll – gurrggh! Ooooch!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled Skip.

He was almost consoled for the loss of his toffee, as Bullinger, streaming, dripping and spluttering, made for the House in search of a towel. But it was only for a few moments. His chums had avenged his wrongs, so far as they could. But the toffee was still in Charne's study – and Skip, like Rachel of old, mourned for that which was lost, and could not be comforted.

Charne, when he left his study to go along to the common-room before dinner, certainly never dreamed that any boy in his form had burglarious designs on that study. Such an idea could never have occurred to Charne. And indeed few fellows in the Fourth Form at Felgate would have made the venture. They would almost as soon have ventured into a lion's den; and in ordinary circumstances, the last fellow in the Fourth to think of following the example of Daniel of old was Skip Ruggles. But it was Skip who dared to be a Daniel.

His head was ducked in the basin

It was, of course, the toffee. Skip might be a fat ass, as even his best chums admitted. He might be a rabbit at games and a dunce in form. But when it came down to brass-tacks Skip had plenty of pluck. And he needed it all to tiptoe surreptitiously into Charne's study and bag that toffee. Greatly daring, Skip had an eye on Charne's study from a corner of the corridor when Charne went along to the common-room and disappeared into that apartment. Skip did it. He could hardly believe his own nerve but he did. Hardly a minute after Charne was out of the study Skip Ruggles was in it – the door closed, staring round eagerly in search of a packet of toffee.

His fat heart was beating fast. If Charne happened to come back for something and catch him there . . .! Six of the very best would be his reward – and Skip felt all his fat cringe at the bare thought. But after all, it was safe enough if he did not linger. Charne was not likely to come back, and Skip did not expect to be more than a minute or two in the study.

That was the idea, but it did not work out. Charne, Skip supposed, would have left that packet on his table. But he hadn't! There

were books and papers on the table, but no packet of toffee. There was a small table by the window where the telephone stood, and Skip gave it the once-over. But the packet was not there. It was not on the mantelpiece. It was not to be seen at all. Skip breathed hard and deep. It was not a matter, as he had hopefully supposed, of snatching that packet and fading swiftly out of the picture. He had to search for it. Where had that unutterable smudge, Charne, put it?

Minutes were passing – and every minute was fraught with peril, with the awful possibility of Charne coming back.

Skip came back to the table. There were many drawers in Charne's writing-table, and it seemed probable that Charne had dropped the confiscated toffee into one of them. Where else? The drawers were in two columns, on either side of the space where Charne extended his legs when he sat there. Skip tried the top drawers. They opened to his touch, revealing papers and other utterly uninteresting material, and he closed them again silently. He tried the next lower down, with the same result. Then he stooped down to try the lowest drawers – and as he did so the door handle turned.

Skip's heart failed to register a beat.

The door was opening. Sombody was coming in. Who but Charne? Only the circumstance that Skip was stooping below the level of the tabletop saved him from immediate discovery.

Stanley St. Leger Ruggles was not as a rule quick on the uptake. But sheer terror sharpened his fat wits for once. He made a single movement – into the space under the table usually occupied by his form-master's legs. He did not stop to think – he just did it! It was not a large space to contain Skip's rotund form, but he got into it. There he crouched, palpitating. If only he could keep out of sight until Charne went . . .

Charne couldn't be coming back to work at his table. It was too close on dinner for that. Skip hoped, at least, that he had just popped into his study for something or other and would pop out again. And this hopeful view was confirmed, when the door closed and footsteps crossed the study, not towards the writing-table under which Skip crouched like a frightened rabbit, but towards the small table by the window where the telephone stood. Skip comprehended – Charne had come back to telephone to somebody. He would go when he had phoned.

Crouched under the table, Skip could see nothing. But he could hear. Somebody was fumbling with the telephone, no doubt dialling. Realising that whoever was standing by the telephone by the window must have his back to the writing-table, Skip ventured to project a fat head and peep out. Then he almost betrayed himself by a squeak of surprise, suppressed just in time.

It was not Charne at the telephone. It was a Fourth Form man; Skip could not see his face, but he knew who it was. It was Bullinger.

'That smudge!' breathed Skip.

It was not quite unknown for a fellow to borrow a beak's phone when the beak was out. It was awfully risky to do so when the beak was no farther off than the common-room. Skip wondered at Bullinger's nerve. A muttering voice reached him.

'The rotter! Chucking a man! I'll show him!'

It was Bullinger's muttering voice, full of venom. His temper, seldom good, and very

Why Bullinger was phoning St. Jude's in a disguised voice was a deep mystery to Skip

bad indeed since he had been dropped from the eleven, had probably not been improved by ducking his head in the fountain. Obviously Bullinger at the moment was feeling very savage, though what his words implied Skip could not guess. Skip judiciously remained where he was. He did not want another hack from Bullinger, and anything like a row in Charne's study would have drawn very unwelcome attention. Sagely, Skip decided to keep doggo and wait for Bullinger's departure, as he would have waited had it been Mr. Charne.

'That St. Jude's?'

Skip jumped, under the table. Bullinger was phoning St. Jude's, whose team were coming over that afternoon to play Felgate. That was surprising enough. Still more surprising was the fact that Bullinger was not speaking in his natural voice. He was making his voice very deep and throaty, apparently to give the impression that it was an older person speaking. Why Bullinger was phoning St. Jude's in a disguised voice was a deep mystery to Skip; indeed, he almost wondered whether he was dreaming this.

He was still more disposed to wonder whether he was dreaming when Bullinger, still in that deep throaty voice, went on:

'Mr. Charne speaking from Felgate.'

Skip squatted, dazed.

'I regret to say that the football match arranged for this afternoon must be cancelled. A sudden outbreak of measles in the school ...'

Skip gasped.

What came from the other end Skip could not hear. But he heard Bullinger going on in that throaty voice:

'Quite, quite; but we knew nothing till this morning. It would be scarcely safe for your boys to come here in the circumstances. The school doctor takes a serious view . . .'

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Skip.

In a state of almost dithering amazement, Skip squatted under Charne's table, his mouth open like that of a fish out of water. He was not dreaming this, but he could scarcely believe his fat ears. Dizzily, he listened to the throaty voice as it added a few details. Then Bullinger rang off and tiptoed across the study to the door, opened it silently, and went out. He left the astonished Skip, under Charne's table, almost gibbering.

'Tom —!'

'Come on, ass!'

'But I say—!' spluttered Skip.

'The bell's stopped!' said Dick Warren. 'Come on.'

'But I say—I've got to tell you—I—I went to Charne's study after my toffee, you know—'

'Oh, my hat! Did Charne catch you?' exclaimed Tom King.

'No! No! It ain't that! But—never got the toffee, but—'

'Come on, ass! Charne might detain a fellow for being late for tiffin! Come on, and pack it up till after dinner.'

'But I—I say—I—I—'

'Come on!' roared Tom King and Dick Warren together; and taking Skip by either arm, they rushed him into the House.

Skip spluttered breathlessly and went. The school dinner was Charne's lunch – and Charne was a whale on punctuality. The slightest chance of a detention that afternoon was enough to make any member of the Felgate junior eleven feel quite faint. King and Warren were not likely to risk it in order to listen to Skip's spluttering. They rushed him spluttering into the House, and into Hall, where he plumped breathlessly into his seat at the Fourth Form table, under Charne's disapproving pin-point eye.

Skip's startling news had to be bottled up till after dinner.

Skip had remained under Charne's study table only a few minutes after Bullinger had gone out—too dazed and dizzy after what he had heard to stir. But as it slowly but surely dawned on his fat mind what that peculiar talk on the telephone meant—what it could only mean!—he woke to action. Bullinger, chucked out of the eleven, had told the junior captain that he would be sorry for it—and this was his way of making him sorry. As Bullinger was not going to play soccer, nobody else was going to play soccer. Felgate would be expecting the St. Jude's team—and the St. Jude's team would not come. At St. Jude's, they could only believe that a Felgate master had phoned to warn them of a sudden outbreak of measles in the school, and the match naturally was cancelled. It was an awful trick to play on the footballers—and Bullinger must have been as mad as a hatter to think of it. But there it was; and as Skip realised it, be it said to his credit that he forgot all about the toffee that had drawn him to Charne's study—even the toffee! But when Skip got out of that study the dinner-bell was ringing, and he found King and Warren in the quad only in time to be rushed in headlong to tiffin.

Dinner, as a rule, was a deeply interesting function to Skip. On this particular day there was steak-and-kidney pie, which Skip loved. But even steak-and-kidney pie failed to fill his thoughts—though he took his usual care that it should fill his extensive circumference. Steak-and-kidney pie, perhaps, came first; but Bullinger's awful treachery came a good second, and it worried Skip all through dinner. Charne did not allow talking at his table during meals, beyond requests for articles required. But in a pause before the pudding Skip ventured to whisper to Tom King.

'I say, Tom, I was in Charne's study—'

'Shut up, you old ass!' breathed Tom. 'Charne's got an eye on you.'

'But I say, that awful rotter Bullinger—look at him now, grinning like a Cheshire cheese—I mean cat—'

'Shut up—here's the pudding.'

'But I say, that beast Bullinger —'

'Ruggles!' It was the dread voice at the head of the table. 'Ruggles! If you persist in chattering at the dinner-table —'

'Oh! No, sir! I mean, sir —'

'Silence!'

The amazing news had to continue bottled up. And after dinner there was another blow. Charne called to Ruggles, while the rest went out, to give him a few minutes' instruction on the subject of behaviour at the dinner-table, to which Skip listened in an agony of impatience.

When he escaped at last he rushed out into the quad in search of Tom King. Bullinger was wheeling out his bike, grinning. He called out to Tom, who was in a group with Warren, Parrott, Reece and Preece and several other fellows talking of the coming game and oblivious of Bullinger. But they all looked round as he called.

Bullinger was wheeling out his bike, grinning

'Have a good game, you men!' called Bullinger. 'And don't forget to beat St. Jude's before I come in.'

'Why not stay in and see us do it?' asked Dick Warren.

Bullinger chuckled.

'Fact is, I don't think there'll be much to watch!' he answered, and he put a leg over his machine, laughing, and in a moment disappeared.

Considering that the match was cancelled and that the Felgate men were waiting for the arrival of a team that was booked not to arrive at all, it seemed rather funny to Bullinger. It would not have seemed funny had it been possible for the Felgate men to guess, when the facts came out, who had put through that telephone call to St. Jude's. But who was to guess that? Bullinger was quite unaware that a fat excited fellow, careering breathlessly out of the House, was full of the news of it. Skip came spluttering up to the group as Bullinger vanished on his bike.

'Tom, old chap – oooogh! I'm all out of breath. I say, Tom,' panted Skip, 'I say– wooogh! – listen to me – the St. Jude's match, you know – I say —'

'Oh, scissors!' said Tom. 'Are you going to ask for a place in the team again, Skip? Wait till we play St. Jude's at marbles, old chap.'

'Or hop-scotch!' suggested Dick Warren.

'Or kiss-in-the-ring!' said Reece.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

''Tain't that!' gurgled Skip. 'I say, I was in Charne's study, and I thought he was com-

ing in and dodged under the table, Charne's table, you know, and it wasn't Charne —'

' Charne's table wasn't Charne? ' repeated Tom King blankly. ' Wandering in your mind, old porpoise? '

' I mean it wasn't Charne – it was Bullinger. Fullinger came in to bone – I mean Bullinger came in to phone, and I heard him,' gasped Skip, ' and he rang up St. Jude's and told them there was skeasles in the mule – I mean measles in the school, and the match has been cancelled, and —'

' *What!* '

Every fellow present ejaculated. They all stared at the spluttering, excited Skip. He spluttered on.

' I tell you, they think we've got measles here, and they ain't sending over the team – they think a pheak boned – I mean a beak phoned – to tell them, and the catch is mancelled – I mean the match is cancelled – they ain't coming! ' spluttered Skip. ' I say, if you don't do something, St. Jude's ain't coming at all, and there ain't much time now, an —'

' Gone crackers? ' asked Dick Warren.

' It's impossible! ' said Tom.

' I tell you I heard Fullinger at the bone —' howled Skip. ' He's done it because he was chucked. Didn't you see him grinning at tiffin? I say —'

Tom King's face set. He grasped Skip by a fat shoulder.

' Stop spluttering and tell us exactly what you heard Bullinger say on Charne's phone! '

Skip couldn't stop spluttering. He was too breathless and excited for that. But he got his story out. The Felgate fellows listened, amazed, but with faces growing grim. Twice over Skip had to tell his story, with all details, before it could be quite credited. Then, at last, Tom King went into the House to ring up St. Jude's and set the matter right.

' Goal! '

It was quite a roar on the junior football ground. It woke most of the echoes in and around the ancient buildings of Felgate. Probably it would not have pleased Bullinger had he heard it. But Bullinger, far away on his bike, did not hear it. The match that had been cancelled was going strong. Skip's warning had come in good time – the matter had been set right.

They knew at St. Jude's that the measles message was nothing but a mischievous practical joke, and the St. Jude's team had come over on time after all. A crowd of fellows watched the game, Skip among them with a beaming fat face.

Skip would have been glad to be playing for Felgate, as he thought that on his form he was entitled to do – being the only fellow at Felgate who thought so! But he enjoyed that match almost as much as if he had been playing in it and scoring for his school. Tom King might score goals, Dick Warren might put paid to shots that whizzed at the Felgate citadel, while Skip only stood around and looked on. But it was Skip who had saved that fixture; but for Skip it would not have been played. It was a joyous Skip that watched Felgate beat St. Jude's, and his fat voice was heard on its top note when Tom King kicked the winning goal.

' Goal! '

Skip did not even remember the toffee, still parked somewhere in Charne's study. Even toffee mattered little to him now. He waved his cap and hurled it, careless where it came down or whether it came down at all.

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' They're going to give Mr. Bogey a medal for bravery! ' he exclaimed, ' but I think you're entitled to one as well.'

His sister laughed – the adventure in the spinney was just like a bad dream now.

' Still, I think there is something you'd like even better,' Greg continued, almost shyly.

He went to the cupboard and brought out his bow and quiver and threw them on the fire.

' Oh, Greg, don't you mind now? ' Sue asked.

Her brother shook his head. ' That's just a kid's game,' he said. 'Anyway, I don't think I could kill anything else now . . .'

Sue looked at Mr. Bogey, who was dreaming of bigger and better cats, and she smiled happily.

' Thank you, Greg. I wouldn't mind breaking my leg all over again to hear you say that,' she said.

SKIP ON THE SPOT *(continued from page 15)*

The game was over and the St. Jude's men gone, when Bullinger came in on his bike. He found quite a number of fellows waiting for him, and noticed that they were looking grim, but had no idea why.

' Here he is! ' called out Dick Warren.

Bullinger was rather puzzled. He had not expected a reception when he came in. But his cue was to affect ignorance, and he asked:

' Had a good game? '

' Fine! ' answered Tom King.

' Beat St. Jude's three to two! ' chuckled Skip.

Bullinger could not help jumping.

' St. Jude's came over? ' he stuttered. It was an injudicious question, but it popped out in his amazement.

' Why shouldn't they? ' asked Tom.

' Oh! I – I so – so – oh —!' stammered Bullinger. ' I – I mean – so – so you beat St. Jude's —'

' No thanks to you! ' said Tom King. ' You see, you were seen and heard at Charne's phone this morning – and I rang them up and put it right.'

' Oh! ' gasped Bullinger.

' Collar him! '

' Boot him! '

' Boot him all round the quad and back again,' said Tom King.

How many kicks he captured before he finally escaped, Bullinger could not have computed without going into very high figures. That evening a sad and sorry Bullinger kept to his study. But in Study Four, along the passage, there was a face that was undoubtedly the brightest as well as the fattest at Felgate.

Skip's packet of toffee was still in Charne's study, unless Charne had disposed of it elsewhere, as he probably had. But Skip, at last, ceased to sigh for it, for Tom King and Dick Warren had clubbed together to purchase the biggest packet of toffee that was to be had for love or money, and duly presented the same to their fat chum.

SKIP'S GAME

BY FRANK RICHARDS.

'MY PATER'S coming to see the Oakshott match,' said Skip.

There was no reply.

Skip Ruggles's fat face was deeply serious. Apparently the circumstance that Mr. Ruggles was coming down to Felgate that afternoon to watch the junior eleven play soccer was important in Skip's eyes.

But the other two fellows in Study Four couldn't have cared less. Tom King and Dick Warren were thinking of football, which at the moment excluded all lesser matters from their minds.

'With you in goal, old man, they won't get through a whole lot,' Tom King was remarking, when Skip interrupted.

'And with you at centre-forward, old chap, the Oakshott goalie will have plenty to do,' said Dick Warren.

Snort from Skip.

'When you fellows have finished with your Mutual Admiration Society —' he yapped.

Tom King glanced round.

'Eh? Did you speak, Skip?'

'I said my pater was coming down this afternoon to see the match!'

'Oh! Is he? I'm not so jolly sure about Reece at inside right,' went on Tom thoughtfully. 'He's a good man, but —'

'Will you let a chap speak?' howled Skip impatiently.

'Oh, yes! Run on, fatty,' said Tom resignedly. Really, when fellows were talking soccer Skip was a little superfluous.

Skip, it was true, was keen on the game. No fellow at Felgate was keener. His two chums admitted that it was a thousand pities that Skip couldn't play the game on which he was so keen. Still, he couldn't! What Skip did not know about soccer would have filled an extensive library with large volumes. Really and truly, when soccer was in the air it was time for Skip to keep quiet. But they were very chummy in Study Four, in the Fourth Form at Felgate, and King and Warren reluctantly but chummily let him run on.

'My pater's seeing the match,' said Skip. 'Well, this is a special occasion. He would like to see me playing for the school!'

'So would we, old fellow, if you could,' said Tom. 'Pity you're such a prize ass at the game.'

'Oh, cut that out,' snapped Skip. 'I've heard all that before and don't want to hear it again.'

King and Warren looked at him, giving him attention at last. Skip, they noted now, was not in his usual good temper. Generally Skip's fat face was placid and cheery, his plump features adorned by a happy grin. Now he was frowning. It seemed that something was the matter with Skip. Actually there was a dark and resentful expression on the usually cheery fat face.

'My dear chap—!' murmured Warren.

'You can cut that out, too!' snapped Skip. 'You fellows think that I can't play soccer.'

'We don't think,' murmured Tom King gently; 'we know.'

'Do I ever get a chance in games?' said Skip, quite bitterly. 'I'm not a fellow to grouse, I hope. But I can jolly well tell you that there's a limit. Just once, at least, I ought to be given a chance.'

Tom King sighed. Dick Warren echoed his sigh. It was the same old tale—poor Skip never could understand what a hopeless dud he was at games. He did not even know that if he played for a school side, that side was scheduled to go down in utter disaster. Any fellow at Felgate could have told him: and in fact not infrequently did tell him. But it was no use—Skip just couldn't get it into his fat head. The clumsiest ass that ever miskicked a ball nourished a secret conviction that he was a misunderstood genius at the game. Argument on the subject rolled off Skip Ruggles like water off a duck.

'I've said my pater's coming!' resumed Skip, as his comrades merely sighed. 'Well, he would jolly well like to see me play for Felgate, and I'd jolly well like him to see me, too. I—I—' Skip stammered a little. 'I—I haven't told them at home how you fellows keep me out of games—'

'You keep yourself out, old boy.'

'I tell you I've heard all that before and don't want to hear it again,' hooted Skip. 'Can't you put on a new record?'

'Well, you see—!'

'I don't!' contradicted Skip. 'Look here, Tom, be a pal!'

'Tom can't play a man because he's a pal, Skip!' said Warren. 'Soccer's soccer, you know. Or do you?'

'He could play a man who could play his head off and chance it,' said Skip. 'What's the matter with my soccer, I'd like to know?'

'You mean what isn't!' asked Warren.

'I'm practically barred out,' said Skip. 'Well, that's all very well. You're skipper, Tom, and you fancy you know, and I don't grouse as a rule. But my father's coming down today, and I've said that I haven't told them at home how you bar me from games. It's not only that he would like to see me play. He will expect to after—after one or two things I may have said.'

'Oh!' ejaculated Tom.

'Oh!' repeated Warren.

They began to understand. It was not merely the usual keenness to shove in where he was of no earthly use that bothered Skip. It was not even wholly the paternal visit. Skip, who often talked too much, had been talking too much at home, and more in the

line of wishful thinking than of actual facts!

'You've been stuffing your pater!' exclaimed Warren.

Skip gave him an indignant glare.

'No, I haven't!' he roared. 'Think I'd stuff my pater, or anybody else? I may have said a few things – I mean – well, I may have said that I expected to get a show this term – and – and things like that – so I jolly well did, too! How was I to know Tom was going to keep me out of the footer as he did out of the cricket? A skipper ought to know a man's form.'

'Oh, my hat!' said Tom.

'Give a man a chance, say at centre-forward — !'

'Oh, scissors!'

'And judge by results!' said Skip. 'After all, you want to beat Oakshott, don't you? They beat us last time. Let's beat them this time. Play me – and let my pater see that I'm a games-man, see?'

'But you're not, old chap.'

'Chuck that!' snapped Skip. 'I don't want any more of your dashed ignorance, Tom King! Give me a chance this once and see. Is it a go?'

Tom King shook his head. Skip was red, and he was wrathy; he was hurt, and he was indignant. Tom would have done anything else – but not that. Playing Skip in a soccer match was not merely playing a man short. It was playing a man who would get in everybody's way and put the whole side off their form. Playing Skip was as good as presenting the match to Oakshott on a plate. It simply could not be done.

'Is it a go?' repeated Skip belligerently.

'You see, old fellow — '

'Cut the cackle and say yes or no!'

'No!' said Tom.

Skip heaved his fat form out of the study armchair. His expression reproduced that of the Alpine young gentleman, whose brow was set and whose eye beneath flashed like a falcon from its sheath!

'What's that?' he said. 'All right! Don't call yourself my pal any more, Tom King. I'm done with you!'

'My dear old fathead — !'

'Yah!'

That elegant retort from Skip was followed by the banging of the study door. Skip was gone from Study Four, and he went in wrath.

Tom King and Dick Warren looked at one another sadly but comically.

'Poor old Skip!' said Tom.

'Poor old blithering ass!' said Warren.

'He really thinks he can play soccer.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

They laughed. They could not help it. The thought of Skip as a footballer might have made a cat laugh. They were sorry for poor old Skip – but they could not help laughing. But it was to turn out, after all, that it was not quite a laughing matter.

Skip was desperate.

That was why he did it.

Otherwise, he certainly would not have done it: would never have dreamed of doing it.

Had anyone suggested that he, Stanley St. Leger Ruggles, was capable of playing such a trick on any fellow, especially on a football captain and pal, Skip would have repudiated the suggestion with scorn.

Yet he did it!

And he did it without a qualm.

It was some time after dinner that he asked

Tom King to come up to the top box-room. That apartment was at the very top of the ancient building of Felgate School, never used, and hardly ever entered, save as a secure spot for doggish fellows smoking surreptitious cigarettes. It was called a box-room, but was quite disused expect for odds and ends of lumber. Once upon a time Skip had unintentionally locked Charne, the Fourth Form master, in that remote room in mistake for someone else – the sort of thing that Skip would do! But it was not going to be a mistake this time!

Tom King went up the old winding staircase with Skip quite cheerfully. He supposed that Skip wanted a helping hand with a box or something. He was very glad to do anything that Skip wanted – anything short of playing him at soccer, that is. Skip had declared in Study Four that he was 'done with him' – wild words that he had now apparently forgotten. He followed Tom up, puffing and blowing on the almost endless staircase.

Perhaps from shortness of breath, he lingered on the little landing as Tom went into the box-room. Tom glanced round the room, dimly lighted by a small window.

'Well, what is it, Skip, old man?' he asked.

Bang!

The door closed.

Tom stared at it. Why Skip, staying outside on the landing, had banged the box-room door shut he could not begin to guess.

'Skip!' he called out.

'Yah!' was the unexpected response.

Click!

A key turned outside!

Almost dizzily Tom King realised that Skip Ruggles had locked him in. He made a jump at the door and rattled the handle.

'Skip, you ass!' he shouted.

'Tom King, you goat!' retorted Skip from the safe side of solid oak.

'What have you locked that door for?' shouted Tom. 'Gone crackers?'

'Yah!'

That monosyllable, expressive as it was, did not explain matters. Tom rattled the door-handle more energetically.

'Is this a lark, you ass?' he exclaimed. 'Let me out.'

'It's not a lark, and I'm not going to let you out!' came Skip's fat voice in determined tones through the keyhole. 'You're staying

there, Tom King, until you make up your mind to do the decent thing. I told you my pater's coming down to see the match this afternoon — '

' Bless your pater! Let me out! '

' I want him to see me play! I want him to see me play centre-forward. I want him to know that I'm a games-man! Are you playing me? '

' No! ' roared Tom.

It dawned on his mind now why Skip had inveigled him into that remote box-room. He would never have thought it of Skip! He would never have dreamed that Skip could develop such artfulness. Really, it was not at all like Skip. But there it was!

He thumped on the door. Then he kicked on it.

' Go it! ' said Skip. ' If I'm not playing, you're not playing! You don't come out till you've promised, honour bright, to play me at centre-forward! '

' You mad ass! ' yelled Tom.

' You can chuck Reece – he's all gas, anyhow, and not much use. You can take his place and give me yours.'

' You potty smudge! '

' Do I play centre-forward today? '

' No! ' shrieked Tom.

'All right! I'll sit out on the landing while you make up your mind! You can see the game from the window, if you want to.'

' Skip, you fat villain — '

' Yah! '

' Will you let me out? '

' Not so's you'd notice it! '

' I'll smash you into a million pieces when I get out! '

' Yah! '

' Oh, you fat rotter! '

' Yah! '

Tom King brandished a furious fist – unfortunately on the wrong side of the door. He could hardly believe that it was Skip – fat old fatheaded Skip – who was doing this. He just couldn't believe that Skip was in earnest.

For long, long minutes, Tom King talked to him through the keyhole. He called him many names – all he could think of! – to which Skip either replied with a derisive ' Yah! 'or did not reply at all. He had to realise, at long last, that Skip meant this.

And time was passing. There was absolutely no hope of rescue. Nobody was likely to come up to the box-room, especially with a football match in the offing. By this time fellows would be in the changing-room, wondering why their captain was not there. They could never guess where he was or why. Who could ever guess that Skip – fat, fatuous old Skip! – was capable of this Machiavellian trickery? Tom heard two o'clock boom out from the clock-tower. At half-past two the game was scheduled to begin: Oakshott would be along soon. And here he was, locked in the top box-room, far from help.

He looked from the window, with a wild idea of climbing out. A slanting roof and a drop of sixty feet did not look encouraging. He came back to the door.

' Skip, you mad goat, let me out.'

' Am I playing centre-forward? '

' No! ' yelled Tom.

' All right! I'll stick it out as long as you do! I've got some toffee – like me to slide a chunk under the door? '

' I'll smash you! '

' Yah! '

Tom paced that solitary box-room rather like a lion in a cage. He had to play for Fel-

gate. What the other fellows would think of his absence he could not begin to imagine. If he did not turn up they would have to play without him – without the champion goal-getter of Felgate School. The game would be a goner. Slaying Skip afterwards would not compensate for that. Somebody would have to be shoved in at the last minute – the team would be at sixes and sevens – even playing Skip would be no worse. In sheer desperation Tom began to toy with the idea. The sound of the quarter chiming from the clock-tower helped.

'Skip!'

'Hello!'

'Don't be a rotter, old chap! Let me out!'

'Don't be a rotter, old chap – let me in – into the team!' mimicked Skip.

'The men will scrag you for this.'

'I don't care – after I've kicked goals for Felgate, and my pater's seen me doing it!'

'Oh, you chump!' groaned Tom.

'Yah!'

Minutes were fleeing. With deep, deep feelings, Tom King made up his mind. Either he had to let his team down or he had to come to Skip's terms – never had his feelings been so deep. But he made up his mind.

'Ten minutes to kick-off,' came Skip's fat voice through the keyhole. 'What about it?'

'You – you – you — !' gasped Tom.

'Do I play centre-forward?'

There was a last pause. Then Tom King gasped:

'Yes!'

'Honour bright?'

'Yes, you villain.'

'You can call me all the names you like, so long as I get goals for Felgate,' said Skip cheerfully. 'You'll be glad of this afterwards, Tom – after we've licked Oakshott to the wide.'

'Open that door, you blithering cuckoo.'

'Pax, you know,' said Skip cautiously. Skip was not very bright, but he was bright enough to guess that Tom King was feeling homicidal.

'Pax!' hissed Tom.

The key turned in the lock. The door opened. Skip grinned cheerfully at an infuriated face. Tom gave him one look, a look full of expression, and raced down the winding stairs. Skip, cheery and satisfied, puffed and blew after him.

'Mad?' asked Dick Warren blankly.

Warren asked the question, but every other fellow in the changing-room looked it. For unless Tom King had suddenly taken leave of his senses there seemed no accounting for this.

It was almost on time when Tom rushed into the changing-room, with Skip Ruggles puffing at his heels. There was no time to explain. He had given his word and had to keep it, and talk was superfluous. But the bald announcement that Stanley St. Leger Ruggles was going to play centre-forward, that Tom was going to play inside-right in place of Reece, and that Reece was not going to play at all, had rather the effect of a thunderbolt on the Felgate footballers. As Tom had not been quite satisfied with Reece on the wing, that did not matter very much – excepting to Reece personally! But Skip at centre-forward – Skip in the team at all!

'Mad as a hatter,' said Bullinger.

'Look here, King — '

'Where's my shirt? Find my boots, somebody! Don't jaw – no time for jaw! Do you

want to keep Oakshott waiting – they're in the field already.'

'But — !' gasped Dick Warren.

'I say it's all right,' said Skip. 'You fellows ought to be glad that Tom's doing the right thing at last! Only watch me!'

'You blithering dunderhead — !'

'Yah!'

'Get changed, Skip, you petty pilferer,' roared Tom. 'Shut your silly mouth, and cram your idiotic carcase into football rig – if it will go on! You other fellows ready?'

The footballers gazed at Tom as he rapidly changed. They glared at him. For once the Felgate football eleven trembled on the verge of mutiny. But there was no more time for mutiny than for talk. The footballers had to 'take it'. They 'took it' with deep feelings.

Skip crammed his fat person into shirt and shorts. It was not a rapid process with Skip; but Tom, having finished, gave him first aid. Skip roared, as a football boot thudded on him.

'Ow! Wow! Look here, stoppit! I — '

'Buck up, you fat frump!' roared Tom. 'I'm going to boot you all the while you're changing. You boot him, too, Dick.'

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Skip.

With such assistance Skip succeeded in changing in record time, though he was feeling more like a football than a footballer by the time he rolled out of the changing-room. However, he did roll out with the rest. There was already a crowd round the field, and every eye in that crowd popped at Skip among the footballers. In fact, the Felgate crowd could hardly believe their popping eyes. Only one of the many spectators gave a plump smile of satisfaction at the sight of Skip in the blue and white of Felgate. That was a plump gentleman recently arrived – no other, in fact, than the pater on whose account chiefly Skip had played that remarkable trick on the junior football captain. Mr. Ruggles, at least, was pleased. But it is safe to say that he was the only person present who was.

He waved a plump hand to his hopeful son, and Skip waved back, grinning.

Fellows could think what they liked, say what they liked, do what they liked – but there was Skip, playing for the school, under the paternal eye!

Perhaps it was just as well that Mr. Ruggles, keen as he was to see his son playing for

It was almost on time when Tom rushed into the changing-room, with Skip Ruggles puffing at his heels

Felgate, was no great judge of soccer. Had he been, he could scarcely have continued to feel pleased as he watched the game.

For Skip, in spite of his touching belief that he could play soccer, was indeed a sight for gods and men and little fishes. As a consumer of doughnuts and jam-tarts, he had no equal at Felgate or anywhere else; but as a footballer he was like nothing in the earth or in the waters under the earth. Charging and barging were Skip's long suit; and he did not seem to mind or even to see whom he charged and barged. Felgate men came in for quite as much of his attention as Oakshott men. That any side could win a match with a fat, heavy, wildly-excited fellow hurtling about in their midst like a mad elephant did not seem within the bounds of possibility. The only question was, by what awful margin of goals would Oakshott beat Felgate.

By great luck Oakshott were not in great form. Normally, Felgate would have wiped them off the field. That helped to some extent to save the harrowing situation. And Dick Warren in goal was a tower of defence, saving shot after shot. Amazingly, Oakshott did not score in the first half. Neither did Felgate. Twice, thrice, and four times, was an almost certain goal knocked out by the fat and fatuous Skip careering in the way.

Had Skip sat down on the touch-line and stayed there it would have been well. Felgate could have kept their end up a man short. But Skip was not the man to be idle. Skip was

Probably it was only the presence of the Oakshott men that saved Skip from being massacred on the field

full of beans, packed with pep, bursting with energy. Skip was the man to be in the thick of it, fighting all the time. He panted and gasped and spluttered for breath but kept up his mad-elephant tactics; and even when he barged over Tom King in the very act of shooting a goal, his only feeling was indignation that Tom had failed to centre, Skip having no doubt that he, Stanley St. Leger Ruggles, could and would have kicked a certain winner. At half-time there was no score for either side, a miraculous escape for Felgate so far.

'Oh, you fat idiot!' groaned Tom at the interval.

'If you'd let a fellow have the ball—'

'Shut up before I boot you.'

Skip indignantly shut up.

Probably it was only the presence of the Oakshott men that saved Skip from being massacred on the field. What was going to happen to him after the match might have made Skip's blood curdle, if he had thought of it. Luckily he didn't—he was thinking of the goals he was going to score in the second half, if only those silly asses would let him have the ball.

The second half was very like the first. Felgate's only hope was to keep goals down, which seemed possible as Oakshott were not up to their usual form. The utmost they could hope for was a draw. All round the field spectators were addressing impolite remarks to Skip, which he did not heed, even if he heard them. Fortunately Mr. Ruggles, who seemed to know as much about soccer as he knew about Sanskrit, continued to be pleased; and Skip was safe for a ten-shilling note as a tip after the game. Not that Skip was thinking of that. Felgate's centre-forward was only thinking of goals for Felgate.

The game went on ding-dong. Dick Warren luckily proved equal to anything that Oakshott could do when they got through. As time drew near, it looked more and more as if Felgate might miraculously pull through that remarkable game at least undefeated. Almost on the finish, there was a mix-up in front of the Oakshott goal, into which Skip charged wildly, mad-elephant to the last! Skip's weight in a charge was effective.

Tom King went spinning to the right, Preece to the left, and Skip's elbow jammed into Bullinger and winded him. Skip kicked, missed the ball by a good six inches, and landed his boot on Parrott's knee. The yell Parrott gave was heard all over Felgate. An Oakshott forward cannoned into Skip as he essayed a second kick. But Skip's foot contacted the ball before he spun over.

And then it happened.

Where Skip's kick would have sent the ball had it not been diverted by the Oakshott man's cannon nobody knew. It might have gone anywhere but in the direction of the Oakshott goal. But as it was, the ball shot out of the mêlée like a pip from an orange, straight for goal. There was at least plenty of force in Skip's kick. The Oakshott goalie missed it by a foot—perhaps because he was laughing—and came back to serious business a second too late. Anyhow, he did miss it. It landed in the net.

'Goal!'

It was a wild howl all round the field.

'Skip!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Skip struggled to his feet dizzily.

'Urrrggh! Where's that ball? Urrrgh!' gurgled Skip.

'Goal! Goal! Goal!'

'I–I–I say, is it goal?' stuttered Skip. 'Who kicked it?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'You did, you blithering idiot!' gasped Tom King. 'And only just in time to save your life, you dangerous maniac!'

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Skip.

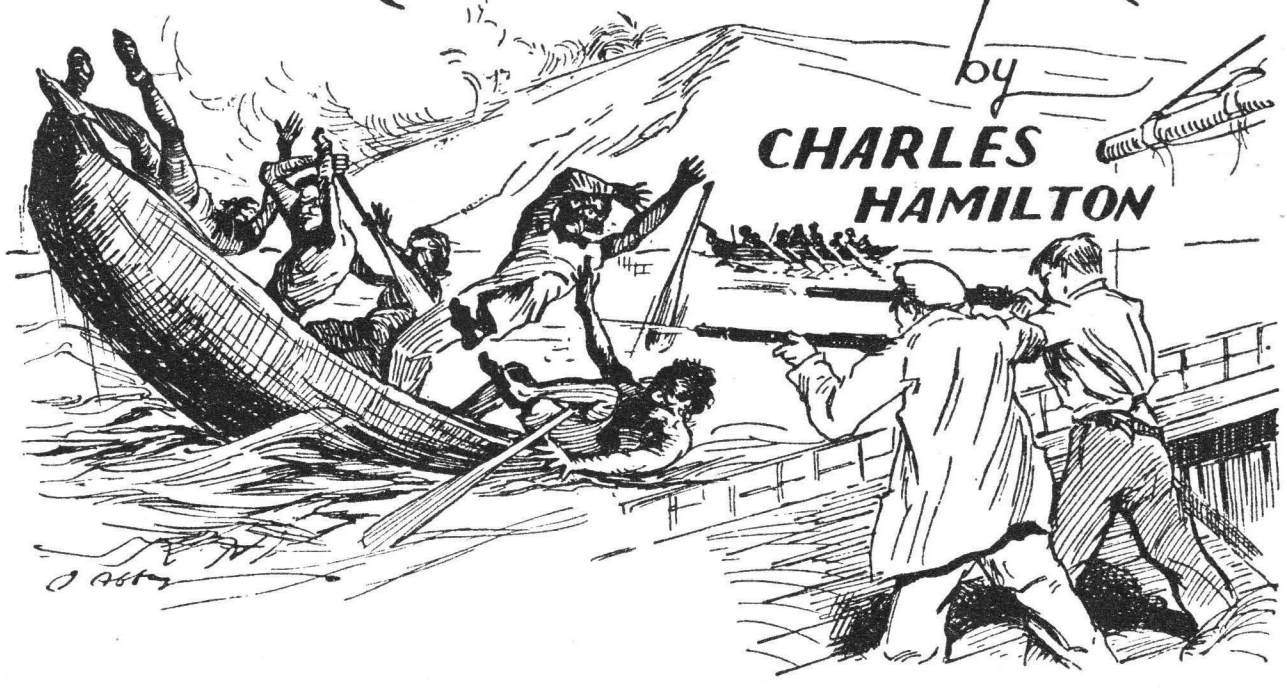
Why the fellows in the changing-room collared him, ducked his head in a basin of water, bumped him on the floor, and ragged him right and left till he hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels, Skip Ruggles just could not understand. Only that one goal was scored in the match, and Felgate had beaten Oakshott; and Skip, playing at centre-forward, had kicked the winning goal and won the game for his school. Naturally he would have expected rather an ovation, if not a triumph. He did not get either. What he got was the ragging of his fat life.

Skip was willing to admit that his method of getting into the team was a little irregular. In fact his only excuse was that the end justified the means. And hadn't the end justified the means? Hadn't he kicked the winning goal–the only goal scored in the Oakshott game?

Nevertheless, though Skip couldn't understand why they ragged him, he understood that they did. He understood that only too clearly. It was a breathless, winded, bedraggled and dizzy Skip that crawled out of the changing-room more dead than alive. Keen as he still was on soccer, more convinced than ever that he was a misunderstood genius at the game, Skip was never, never likely to try those methods again; his first game for the school was booked to be also his last. But he had at least one consolation: he had played for the school, and kicked the winning goal in the Oakshott match. Whatever fellows thought, or said, or did, it was Skip's Game!

A FORTUNE IN PEARLS!

by CHARLES HAMILTON



CHAPTER I

DANGER AHEAD!

'BLACK FELLER stop!' shouted Koko, the brown boatswain of the *Dawn*.

'What?'

'Solomon Island feller, sar, he stop!'

King of the Islands leaped to his feet. Kit Hudson, the mate of the *Dawn*, came running up from below. From the Hiva-Oa crew came a startled cackle. Even Danny, the cooky-boy, put a fuzzy head and a startled face out of his galley.

There was a light wind on the Pacific. The ketch was making a bare four knots on her course for distant Luvu. Ahead of her lay the channel in the Penguin Reef—a wilderness of jagged coral rocks that stretched for a hundred miles north and south. In its widest part the channel was a cable's length—in its narrowest, a few fathoms. But it was an easy run in fair weather, and the *Dawn* was gliding into it from the open sea, when the boatswain gave the alarm.

A minute before, all had been calm on the *Dawn*. Koko was at the wheel. King of the Islands sat at the taffrail, his eyes on the coral channel, and on the long lines of white surf that ran north and south. The Kanaka crew stood ready at the ropes. Danny was singing, in his galley. The mate was taking his watch below. Ken King, the boy trader of the Pacific, had no bigger worry on his mind than a light and variable wind, which slowed down his run to Luvu. But all was changed when Koko's

keen eyes, keen as those of an albatross, picked up the war-canoes in the channel ahead.

'Solomon Island boys!' repeated King of the Islands. He shaded his eyes with his hand from the glare of the sun, and stared ahead. 'You savvy plenty that feller Solomon Island boy, Koko?'

'Savvy altogether too much, sar.'

Kit Hudson jumped out of the little companion, with a rifle in his hands. He joined his ship-mate, staring past the bellying canvas at the distant shapes in the coral channel.

'Canoes!' he said.

'Aye, aye! But we're a long step from the Solomons,' said King of the Islands, 'they're war-canoes – but –'

'Solomon Island feller, sar!' said Koko, positively.

The ship-mates watched, keenly.

Far ahead, in the coral channel, they picked up the canoes – tall-prowed war-canoes, three of them, crowded with dark figures, and fuzzy heads. Here and there, in the sunlight, was the gleam of a weapon. From a great mass of reef that rose six or seven feet above the sea, smoke curled up against the blue sky, from a camp-fire or cooking-fire. The canoe crews, whether Solomon Islanders or not, had camped on the reef, and pushed out in their canoes at the sight of the white man's ship coming into the channel.

'Looks like a war-party, Ken,' said Hudson.

'Looks like a war party . . .'

'It does,' Ken nodded, 'but – I've never heard of a raiding gang from the Solomons coming so far east. I can't make them at this distance –'

'Me see that feller, sar, eye belong me,' said Koko, 'me savvy too much that feller Solomon Island feller, sar.'

'Danny!' called out King of the Islands.

'Yessar!' The cooky-boy came running.

'You fetch long-feller glass, along cabin he stop.'

'Yessar.'

Danny padded below on his bare feet, and returned with the binoculars. King of the Islands clamped them to his eyes, and focussed them on the canoes in the coral channel.

'My sainted Sam!' he ejaculated, as the distant figures rushed into clear view in the 'long-feller glass'. 'Koko's right! A war gang from the Solomons, Kit. Look!'

He handed the glasses to Hudson. The mate of the *Dawn* looked, and nodded. And the faces of the ship-mates grew grave and serious. Never before had King of the Islands heard of a raiding war-party from the Solomons so far from their native islands. But there was no doubting the evidence of his eyes and the binoculars. Three long, high-prowed canoes, packed with black cannibals, barred the coral channel ahead of the *Dawn*, and all the savage eyes in the canoe crews were fixed on her as she came. Likely enough, they had camped in the coral channel to watch for some passing craft – with all the more chance of success, because no man would have suspected the presence of raiders from the Solomons in those waters.

Kit Hudson whistled.

'They mean business, Ken,' he said.

'Looks like it!'

'Likee plenty takee head belong us feller. smokee along canoe-house along Solomons, sar,' said Koko.

'They won't smoke our heads in a hurry, in their canoe-houses,' said King of the Islands.

The ketch was gliding in. The canoe crews, in the distance ahead, grew nearer and clearer. The Hiva-Oa boys, on the *Dawn's* deck, cast anxious glances at their skipper. They hoped to hear the order to go about, and flee from the coral channel where three score of savages waited and watched to attack.

But no such order came from King of the Islands. He stood watching the distant canoes, his face grim and set.

Hudson gave him a rather dubious look.

'We could back out and go round the reef to the south, Ken,' he murmured.

'We've got a date at Luvu,' answered Ken. 'Hanson's expecting us.'

'Aye, aye! But –'

'We can't lose days going round the reef.' King of the Islands shook his head. 'We should be days late at Luvu. And that's not all. We've got to give the news. Every craft in these seas uses this channel, going east or west – any time a schooner or cutter from Luvu may come along, and fall into the hands of those head-hunters – we've got to put them on their guard, Kit, and spread the news, to save lives.'

'Right!' agreed Hudson.

'Break out the rifles,' said Ken. 'We'll run through them without firing a shot, if we can – if they attack us –'

'Not much "if" about that,' said Hudson, with a grin.

'Then they'll take what's coming to them!'

said Ken. 'They won't get on board the *Dawn*. This isn't our first scrap, old man, and it won't be our last.'

Hudson nodded, and went below to break out the rifles. There was a jabber of excitement from the Kanaka crew, as the rifles were handed out. Certainly the Hiva-Oa boys would have preferred to see the ketch go about. But there was consolation to the simple Kanaka mind in blazing away with any kind of firearm.

The *Dawn* stood steadily on her course, the canvas flapping in the light wind. The canoes were nearer now, and every detail was clear to the eye – black men kneeling at the paddles, others grasping spears and war-clubs, all eyes fixed on the ketch. That the savages intended to attack, there was no doubt at all: and the odds were heavy, for there were at least fifty or sixty black boys from the Solomons packed in the canoes. But Ken's face was cool and calm, and the crew had confidence in their boy skipper.

But every heart was beating faster, as the *Dawn* swept down on the war-canoes in the coral channel. A spear whizzed in the air, dropped, and stuck quivering in the deck. A loud, fierce, almost blood-curdling yell burst from the packed savages, and they came with a rush to the attack.

Ken's voice rang out, sharp and clear.

'Fire!'

Koko stood like a bronze image at the wheel. The *Dawn* surged on, with the three canoes round her. Crack! crack! crack! crack! Ken King and Kit Hudson, standing by the port and starboard rails, pumped bullets from their Winchesters into the canoes. The Hiva-Oa boys blazed away in wild excitement, hardly taking aim at all: but in the packed canoes it was scarcely possible to miss. Wild and frantic yells rose like pandemonium from the canoes, as the hot lead tore through flesh and bone, and black man after black man rolled over among bare legs and feet, or pitched headlong into the sea.

For a minute – a long minute – it looked as if the savage horde must come clambering and yelling up the low freeboard of the *Dawn*. But one canoe, with half its paddlers sprawling, fell astern: another backed from the blaze of rifle fire: and the third crunched under the sharp prow of the *Dawn*, going under and leaving the crew struggling in the water. The ketch surged on, followed by frantic yells and howls and screams, with one canoe in pursuit. But a volley over the taffrail stopped the pursuit in a moment more.

Kit Hudson dropped the butt of his rifle to the deck, and wiped a stream of perspiration from his brow.

'We're through,' he said.

'Aye, aye!'

Ken looked back. One of the canoes had sunk: the other two, crowded with howling savages, drifted and rocked on the water, dotted with swimmers. The *Dawn* was through, heading for the open Pacific beyond the reef. The howls of the defeated savages died away, as the *Dawn* sailed out of the Penguin channel: and sped on under the red sunset eastward for distant Luvu.

CHAPTER II

DANDY PETER'S PASSENGER

'PULL OUT – for keeps!'

Dandy Peter of Lukwe muttered the words aloud. He had muttered them a dozen times, and the three black Lukwe boys who formed

the crew of his cutter, looked at one another, and wondered of what the ' white feller master ' might be thinking.

The cutter *Sea-Cat* was moored at the coral wharf at Luvu. Peter Parsons, a dandy in his spotless white ducks and Panama hat, sat in a Madeira chair on the deck, with a chart on his knees.

Occasionally he glanced at the chart: and then lifted his eyes to the beach of Luvu.

The island baked in tropical heat. Natives in white lava-lavas lounged under the palms, back of the shining white beach. In the deep shady verandahs of the traders' bungalows, traders and planters sat, in dusky shade, but not in coolness. Dazzling beach, nodding palms, the bluest of the blue skies, blazing sunshine, made up a scene to which Peter Parsons was too accustomed for him to heed it. It was upon Hanson's bungalow that his eye continually turned, as if he expected to see someone emerge from the building. And then again his glance dropped to the chart on his knees. And then he rolled another of his numberless cigarettes, and smoked, and muttered.

The Lukwe boys lolled idly, and chewed betel-nut. They had nothing to do, but to watch their skipper curiously, and wonder what it was that was perturbing him so deeply.

Dandy Peter did not heed them. Whether the black boys overheard his mutterings, or understood them if they heard, he cared nothing—even if they guessed that he was thinking of pulling out of the islands. That would have surprised the crew, for they knew that the *Sea-Cat* was due to sail for her home port at Lukwe, taking on board a passenger for that island. Lukwe lay a good hundred miles to the east; but when Dandy Peter lifted his gaze to the sea, it was to the west that he looked. Westward, seventy miles from Luvu, lay Pita, where the Sydney steamer called. And it was of Pita, and the Sydney steamer, and of saying a long farewell to the islands, that Peter Parsons was thinking.

But he was uncertain as yet.

Dandy Peter of Lukwe, trader, pearl-poacher, kidnapper of Kanakas, and many other things in his time, had come to a parting of the ways. Unscrupulous, false to the core, ruthless as a tiger-shark, the dapper skipper of the *Sea-Cat* was the most desperate of the rough crew on the lawless island of Lukwe. But even the rough crew on Lukwe, he knew, would never stand for what he had in mind now—there was a limit, even on Lukwe. And even if they tolerated him there, it would not help, for the law had a long and strong arm that could reach even to that wild and lawless island. If Dandy Peter did what he now contemplated doing, Lukwe was no refuge for him—nothing could save his skin but pulling right out of the islands, and starting afresh in a new world across the Pacific. If he did this thing, he had to sail, not east, but west, from Luvu, and disappear from all who had known him.

Once more he dropped his eyes to the chart.

With his slim, nicotine-stained forefinger, he traced the long line of the Penguin reef, thirty miles west of Luvu. He traced the channel that cut through the heart of the reef. He traced the further course, from Penguin to Pita—forty miles on. A run of seventy miles in all: and where was the peril of pursuit? There was not another vessel in the lagoon at Luvu, even if any skipper had been

disposed to attempt running down a desperado who was known, on all the islands, to be as ready with a capstan-bar as a word, and as ready with a revolver as a capstan-bar.

Danger, if there had been danger, would not have deterred Dandy Peter of Lukwe. But there was none. Prado, the pearl-buyer, would step on the cutter, a passenger for Lukwe. The cutter would pull out of the lagoon, as if bound for that island. And then – !

Dandy Peter drew a deep, deep breath.

The wind that came over the Luvu reef was hot. That did not affect Peter Parsons, hardened to tropical suns. But he noted its direction. It had been variable all day: but it had veered more and more to the east, and now it was south-east by east. A contrary wind for Lukwe, necessitating endless wearing and tacking to get on his way: but a fair wind for the west – and Pita and the Sydney steamer! It was as if the forces of Nature were playing into his hands, tempting him to the last desperate deed of a desperate life.

'White feller master Prado comey, sar,' said Jacky, the boat-steerer of the *Sea-Cat*, and Parsons looked up sharply.

A little dark man in a white hat was descending the steps of Hanson's bungalow, back of the beach.

Dandy Peter's eyes fixed on him.

This was Prado, the half-caste Portuguese pearl-buyer: a well-known figure on every beach from New Guinea to the Marquesas. He was the passenger for whom the cutter was waiting. Pedro Prado had finished his business on Luvu – a pearl island where he had doubtless made good trade – and was ready to come aboard the *Sea-Cat*, for the trip to Lukwe, his next stop. Often Pedro Prado made his trips in a whaleboat with a native crew: sometimes he picked up a passage in a trader or pearler. This time he was taking a passage on Dandy Peter's cutter – little dreaming of the black thoughts that were in the mind of the sea-lawyer of Lukwe.

Peter Parsons' eyes glinted, as he watched the little Portuguese, in his white hat with the black bag in his hand. Only too well the Lukwe skipper knew what would be in that bag: pearls that Prado had bought on Luvu, added to the stock he had brought with him after visiting many other islands. The little, dried-up man, in his shabby clothes, was known to be one of the richest men in the islands: and the sea-lawyer of Lukwe did not need telling that he carried a fortune in that black bag.

Peter Parsons drew a deep, deep breath.

Up to that moment he had been uncertain. Now his mind was made up, all of a sudden: and once it was made up, his purpose was fixed and immutable.

He threw aside the chart, and rose from the Madeira chair.

'You feller boy!' he snapped.

'Yessar!' piped the three Lukwe boys.

'You stand ready, hand belong you, cast off, along that white feller master comey aboard.'

'Yessar.'

Once more Peter Parsons turned his eyes to the western sea, beyond the circling reef that enclosed the lagoon of Luvu. He gave a start, as he caught sight of a tall sail on the blue waters.

His even white teeth came together with a click. The tall sail was still distant on the sea: the hull below it invisible. But the sea-lawyer of Lukwe knew the craft that was

beating down to Luvu from the west – a craft that was good for ten knots, but that was now doing barely four in an unfavourable wind.

' King of the Islands! ' muttered Parsons.

His dark handsome face blackened in a scowl. There was no love lost between the sea-lawyer of Lukwe, and the boy trader: they had had trouble more than once, and Peter Parsons had not had the best of it. And King of the Islands was a friend of Pedro Prado, the little Portuguese pearl-buyer.

But the Lukwe skipper shrugged his slim shoulders. He would not have hesitated to carry out his purpose, now that he had formed it, if King of the Islands had been anchored in the lagoon within a biscuit's toss of his cutter. And King of the Islands was still far away – the wind, veering more and more to the east, was forcing him to make long tacks in bearing down on Luvu. Long before he sailed into the lagoon, the *Sea-Cat* would be outside the reef and away. And once on the open sea, with a following wind, Peter Parsons would have defied any wind-jammer in the Pacific to run him down.

He stood watching the tall sail on the sea for a minute. Then it disappeared on a long tack, hidden by palm groves on the island. Peter Parsons shrugged his shoulders again, and turned towards the coral wharf, to greet his passenger.

The little Portuguese came down the beach to the wharf, and crossed it to the moored cutter. Dandy Peter met him with a nod and a smile.

' Ready to pull out, Mr. Prado,' he said.

' Bon! ' said Pedro Prado. He stepped over the low rail. ' But the wind, senhor, he is not good for Lukwe, isn't it? '

Dandy Peter smiled. He did not expect ever to see Lukwe again, and if Prado saw it, it would not be from the deck of the *Sea-Cat.* But that was Dandy Peter's secret, till the time came to show his hand.

' Oh, we'll make it, Mr. Prado,' he answered. ' I reckon the *Sea-Cat* can lie as near the wind as any wind-jammer in the islands.'

' Bon! ' said Pedro, again.

Dandy Peter rapped orders to the Lukwe boys, and the moorings were cast loose from the bollards. Pedro Prado stood watching the shore, as the cutter got under way for the passage through the island reef to the open Pacific. He had laid his black bag on the Madeira chair, and stood rolling himself a cigarette. Peter Parsons glanced at him, several times, with a strange glimmer in his eyes, as the cutter glided away across the shining water. As the *Sea-Cat* entered the reef passage, he stepped closer to his unsuspecting passenger.

What followed made the three Lukwe boys leap with amazement. Toto and Kolo almost dropped the ropes: Jacky, who was steering, very nearly lost his hold on the tiller. Their startled eyes almost popped from their black faces, as Dandy Peter, with the sudden swiftness of a tiger-shark darting on its prey, closed in on the little Portuguese, grasped him, and whirled him off his feet – and, with one swing of his sinewy arms, tossed him over the rail, to sprawl on the reef.

Pedro Prado sprawled on rough and rugged coral, dazed by the fall. The *Sea-Cat* glided on. The Lukwe boys, in amazement and terror, stared at the desperado of Lukwe. Dandy Peter snarled to the boat-steerer.

' Keep her steady, you black swab, s'pose you no likee lawyer-cane stop along back belong you.'

' Yessar,' stammered Jacky.

On the coral reef, Pedro Prado staggered to his feet. Dandy Peter looked back at him–gesticulating, screaming, almost dancing with fury. Then he shrugged his shoulders and turned away, looking to the west: and the cutter, her tall sail full of wind, rushed out upon the Pacific, and the hapless pearl-buyer and the island of Luvu were left astern.

CHAPTER III

A FORTUNE IN PEARLS!

' WHITE FELLER stop along reef, sar.'

' My sainted Sam! ' ejaculated King of the Islands.

The *Dawn* was coming down on a long tack to the reef passage of Luvu. More and more the uncertain wind had veered against the ketch, after passing the Penguin channel. It was a slow and weary business, tacking down to the island: but it was all in the day's work to the boy traders, and they were glad, at least, that they looked like getting into the Luvu lagoon before the sunset faded into night.

The passage from the open sea into the lagoon was narrow, bristling on either side with rugged rocks and stretches of reef. Over the reef the seagulls circled and called. It was Koko who picked up the solitary figure on the rocks, and Ken and Kit, and all the crew of the *Dawn*, stared at it, in astonishment. What a white man could be doing out there on the lonely rocks was rather a mystery to them.

' Brain belong that feller no walk about, sar,' remarked Koko. And the Hiva-Oa boys grinned.

The little man on the rocks was wildly excited. Evidently he had seen the ketch coming in, and he was waving his hands waving his hat, gesticulating, almost dancing in his excitement.

' Suffering cats! ' exclaimed the mate of the *Dawn*, ' It's Prado! '

' Prado! ' repeated King of the Islands.

' That little Portugee.'

King of the Islands stared hard at the little figure on the rocks, and nodded.

' It's Pedro Prado,' he said, ' but what in the name of Davy Jones is he doing there? '

' Goodness knows! '

' He wants us to pick him off the rocks, at any rate,' said Ken. ' Something's happened to him – goodness knows what.'

He waved his hat to the little Portuguese. Prado waved back, frantically, and they could see that he was shouting and yelling, though as yet his voice did not reach them.

They watched him, puzzled, as the ketch drew slowly nearer. From where Dandy Peter had flung him on the reef, Prado could have regained the island beach, by a long and difficult clamber over rugged coral, indented with deep fissures and crevices. But he had seen the tall sails of the *Dawn* in the distance, and waited to be picked up. His excitement was so intense, his little black eyes popping, his hands waving and gesticulating, his swarthy face almost convulsed, that it was perhaps no wonder that Koko concluded that ' brain belong him no walk about,' which was the Kanaka's way of expressing that he was ' off his head '.

The sketch surged into the coral passage. Prado's screaming voice reached the shipmates at last, in a wild mixture of Portuguese and beche-de-mer English.

' Ahoy! The *Dawn*! Amigo meu King of the

Islands! Que pena! You stop along reef along you takee me along ketch belong you, amigo meu! Estou com pressa! Quick! I am rob! Sim, sim, sim, I am rob! O ladrao! O ladrao! O ladrao! Help! You stop along this place, amigo meu!'

'O ladrao!' repeated Ken. 'That's a Portugee word for thief! What on earth has happened to Prado?'

Hudson whistled.

'He carries a fortune with him, from one island to another,' he said. 'But – on Luvu – it's impossible! We'll soon know.'

It was not needed for King of the Islands to 'stop along reef'. The *Dawn* glided near enough the coral rock on which Prado stood, or rather danced, for the little Portuguese to make a spring at the low rail. Almost in a twinkling he was clambering aboard with the activity of a monkey and the ketch surged on towards the inner lagoon.

The Kanaka crew eyed the little man with grinning faces. Prado gave them no heed. He almost danced up to the ship-mates, and clutched King of the Islands by the arm.

'Amigo meu!' he panted, 'I am rob – rob – rob! O ladrao! My pearls – a fortune in pearls! O ladrao take along cutter belong him, and I – I – I am pitch on a reef – I fall on a reef, and o ladrao he sail for Lukwe –

'A Lukwe cutter!' said Ken.

'Peter Parsons – O ladrao –'

'Dandy Peter?' said Kit, with a whistle.

'Sim! sim! sim! Yes, and yes, and yes!' shrieked Prado, dancing again. 'I am a passenger to go to Lukwe, isn't it? I take a passage along cutter belong Dandy Peter! Often I take such a passage, isn't it? Porque nao? But I am rob – I am rob –' Prado waved wild hands and shrieked.

'By gum!' said Kit Hudson, with a deep breath. 'That's the limit, even for Dandy Peter of Lukwe. Pearl-poacher and nigger-stealer – but this –'

Ken stared blankly at the little Portuguese. He knew Peter Parsons only too well. But he could scarcely believe this, even of the sea-lawyer of Lukwe.

'Do you mean that Peter Parsons has robbed you of your pearls?' he asked.

'Sim! sim! Sim, senhor! Sim! As perolas! As perolas! As perolas!' yelled Prado. 'As perolas – the pearls – stop along bag belong me – stop along cutter belong Dandy Peter – me stop along reef along o ladrao fling over a rail, hand belong him! O ladrao! O ladrao!'

It was not easy, in the wild excitement and fury of the little Portuguese, to elicit exactly what had happened. Almost every other word was 'O ladrao' – the thief! But the ship-mates of the *Dawn* got the story at last, and their brows darkened. It was, as Hudson had said, the limit, even for the dapper desperado of Lukwe.

Prado had taken his passage on the *Sea-Cat*, as he might have taken it on any other craft trading among the islands. And Dandy Peter had coolly pitched him on the reef as he sailed out of the lagoon, keeping on board his precious bag containing 'as perolas' – the pearls. At a single stroke, Dandy Peter had made a fortune in pearls. But even now that they knew what had happened, the ship-mates found it hard to understand. Dandy Peter was none too good for such an act – he had sailed near the wind often enough before: but could he hope to get away with this – to find safety even on a lawless island like Lukwe after such a robbery of a white man? Scoundrel as he was, Dandy Peter was always

cool and calculating: but it looked as if desperate greed had caused him to forget prudence for once.

Pedro Prado was still telling his story, over and over again, with waving hands, his speech punctuated with 'O ladrao', when the *Dawn* sailed into the lagoon, and moored at the coral wharf.

The ship-mates were full of sympathy, but they could do nothing – the *Sea-Cat* was long gone, and doubtless well away on her course for Lukwe, far out of sight of Luvu. Indeed, there was no certainty that Parsons had headed for his home port: as likely as not, he might make another island, to dispose of his plunder before sailing back to Lukwe. The *Sea-Cat* had disappeared into the boundless Pacific, so pursuit was a hopeless proposition. The long arm of the law would reach him – he could not get away with this. That was little comfort to Pedro Prado, who was thinking less of vengeance on 'O ladrao' than of the lost pearls.

'I am ruin! I am ruin!' wailed Prado. 'O ladrao, he make fortune – it is seven thousand English pounds – a fortune! But I – I am ruin! Sim! sim, the law he shall get him – sim, sim, sim – mas as perolas – mas as perolas – but the pearls – but the pearls! As perolas no stop! Sete mil – sete mil – seven thousand – seven thousand of your English pounds! I am ruin! O ladrao! O ladrao!'

The little Portuguese stepped on the coral wharf, and went limply up the beach to Hanson's bungalow. Ten minutes later all Luvu knew of the robbery, and was buzzing with excitement over the desperate exploit of Dandy Peter. On the deck of the *Dawn*, King of the Islands clenched his hands, with a glint in his eyes.

'If one could get after the swab, Kit – !' he said. 'Poor old Prado! If one could get after that thieving sea-lawyer, Kit, before he can get shut of the pearls – '

Hudson shook his head.

'Nothing doing, ship-mate,' he said.

There was nothing doing, and King of the Islands had to admit it. But it came hard. Somewhere, far out on the rolling Pacific, was the swift *Sea-Cat*, and a fortune in pearls in the greedy grasp of Dandy Peter. And the shipmates of the *Dawn* could do nothing.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRACK OF THE PEARL-THIEF?

NIGHT ON LUVU – the lovely night of the tropics. Gleaming stars shone down from a sky of dark blue velvet. Southward, the Southern Cross hung like a necklace of glittering jewels in the heavens. The lagoon rolled glimmering in the starlight: ashore, the palm trees nodded their feathery fronds. Lights gleamed from the bungalows, and from the beach came the tinkle of music, where natives in lava-lavas danced under the stars, with the red hibiscus blossoms glowing in their dark hair.

Kit Hudson, stretched in a deck-chair, was thinking of his bunk. Koko sat on the coamings of the cabin skylight, gently twanging his ukulele. On the deck the Hiva-Oa boys lolled or slumbered, and the snore of Danny the cooky boy came from the galley, where Danny slept among his pots and pans.

But King of the Islands was not thinking of sleep.

He paced to and fro on the little after-

deck, his boyish brow wrinkled in thought, his lips hard set. He was trying to think out the problem – some hope of laying Dandy Peter by the heels, before the sea-lawyer of Lukwe could escape into the boundless spaces of the Pacific with Prado's fortune in pearls. The little Portuguese had gone ashore, the picture of despair: it was not likely that he was sleeping, at Hanson's bungalow. King of the Islands would have given much to help him.

And abruptly, the boy trader came to a stop, in front of the deck-chair where his comrade sat.

'Kit!'

Hudson smiled faintly.

'Heave ahead,' he said. 'There's nothing doing, old man – but if you've thought of anything –'

'I think I have,' said King of the Islands, quietly. 'Kit, we've got to help Prado if we can. He's a good sort, and he's done us more than one good turn. And that double-crossing scoundrel Parsons –'

'I'd be glad to see him within reach of my knuckles, Ken. But –'

'Look here, Kit, I've been thinking it out. Where do you think Parsons will lay his course from here?'

'Lukwe, I reckon. He was scheduled to sail for Lukwe – that's where Prado was taking his passage.'

'Aye, aye! But he knows that he will be looked for – he can't get by with a crime like this, and carry on, Kit. The law could pick him up at Lukwe,' said Ken.

Hudson nodded, slowly.

'That's true, Ken! More likely he will lay a course for another island – Tahiti, as likely as not – to sell the pearls, and keep clear.'

'The law would pick him up more easily at Tahiti, or Samoa, or in the Fijis, than at Lukwe, Kit.'

'That's true,' said Hudson, again.

'Dandy Peter has done a good many things, pretty desperate things, Kit, and walked round the law. But he can't get by with this. There's no safety for him in the Pacific, unless he maroons himself on some solitary atoll – and I reckon he did not steal Prado's pearls, to hide with them in a grass hut on some lonely island.'

'Hardly,' said Hudson. He looked puzzled. 'I don't quite get it, Ken! Looks to me as if Peter Parsons has forgotten his cunning, and landed himself this time. Prado may never get his pearls back – but Dandy Peter's booked for jail if he stays in the Pacific Islands at all.'

Ken's eyes glinted.

'That's what I've been thinking out, Kit,' he said. 'Parsons has gone a step too far for safety – the Pacific is big, but it won't hold him after this. He will be a hunted man all through the islands, Kit! Parsons knew that, as well as we know it, when he tipped Prado off his cutter and stole the pearls. He's too cunning not to count up all the chances. There was only one clear course ahead of him – to pull out.'

'Pull out!' repeated Hudson.

'Pull out of the islands,' said Ken. 'Pull out for keeps! And why not? He's made a fortune in pearls, to take with him. Kit, I've thought it out: and it's a ton of copra to an ounce of pearl-shell that Parsons, when he planned this, planned to pull out – and disappear from the islands for good and all.'

Hudson was silent for a full minute, thinking it over. Then he nodded.

'I reckon you've got it, Ken! Parsons is pulling out – he would never have dared otherwise.'

'I'm sure of it,' said Ken.

'But that gets us nowhere,' said the mate of the *Dawn*. 'If he's pulling out of the islands, there's less chance than ever of getting a bight on him, and getting back Prado's pearls.'

Ken shook his head.

'Think that over,' he answered. 'If Parsons is pulling out, he's got to hit some port of call for a steamer. What's the nearest?'

'Pita,' answered Hudson.

'And the Sydney steamer's due at Pita tomorrow,' added King of the Islands. 'Parsons would know that.'

'By gum!' said Hudson. He sat up, in the deck-chair, 'Ken, old man, you've worked it out. An Australian sovereign to an inch of shell-money that Parsons was going all out for Pita when he pulled out of here.'

'That's how I've figured it,' said Ken. 'And the wind's good for Pita.'

'But – where do we come in, all the same? Parsons slipped out under a good wind, while we were beating down to Luvu. I am sure we could never beat him to Pita, even if we tried it on.'

'No!' said Ken, slowly. 'But –'

'If that's his game, he will make Pita in time to pick up the Sydney steamer, with a wind like this behind him,' said Hudson. 'He's got too good a start for us to think of running him down, Ken. If that's his game, the steamer will be gone, with Parsons on board, half a day before we could raise Pita.'

'But – !' repeated Ken. His face set grimly. 'The Penguin Reef lies between Luvu and Pita, Kit. And there's a war-gang from the Solomon Islands camped on the channel through the Penguin.'

'Suffering cats!' exclaimed Hudson.

He leaped to his feet, his face ablaze with excitement.

'If Parsons doesn't know – ! he exclaimed.

'He can't know,' said Ken. 'I've put the traders here wise to it, when I went ashore to see Hanson. Nobody here had heard of that war-gang – some of them find it hard to believe now I've warned them – a Solomon Island war-gang so far from the Solomons. Parsons pulled out before we came in, and he can't know a thing. If he's making Pita, he will make it by the channel in the Penguin – and run right into that bunch of black cannibals.'

Hudson whistled.

'He won't get through as we did, Ken! That little cutter – a single man – they'll have him, Ken.'

'I reckon they've got him already.'

The mate of the *Dawn* whistled again. If King of the Islands had worked it out correctly, Peter Parsons had fled with a fortune in pearls, to fall into the hands of the black boys from the Solomons. He had sailed with a fair wind from Luvu, expecting to make Pita in the early morning – but he had known nothing of the deadly peril that lurked on the Penguin Reef.

'By gum!' said Hudson. 'He wouldn't have a dog's chance, Ken. If we've got it right – if he was making Pita – it would be after sundown when he reached the Penguin – he wouldn't even see them before he ran into them, not a dog's chance, Ken. By gum, he would have made a better guess to play Prado fair, and sail east for Lukwe. A bag of

pearls won't save him from the cooking-pot.'

Ken nodded.

'If we've figured it out ship-shape, we shall find Peter Parsons on the Penguin Reef–dead or alive!' he said, 'and if he's still alive, I reckon he will be glad to see the sails of the *Dawn*–for the first time in his life! He could never get through that war-gang and make Pita. If that was his course, we've got him–and Prado's pearls. Koko!'

'Yessar!'

'Show a leg, old coffee-bean! We're sailing.'

'Yessar.'

Koko laid down his ukulele, and jumped up from the cabin coaming. The Hiva-Oa boys rubbed sleepy eyes as the boatswain's whistle shrilled out. Under the stars, the *Dawn* glided away across the lagoon: the Kanakas wondering: Ken and Kit with eager faces.

Outside the island reef, the wind was fair for the west–the wind that had baffled them so long in beating down to Luvu, filled the canvas and drove the ketch swiftly westward.

Ken was sure, or almost sure, that he had divined the plans of the Lukwe sea-lawyer. If he were wrong, Pedro Prado's pearls were gone for ever, whatever might happen to 'O ladrao' afterwards. But if he were right, Dandy Peter's flight had been stopped at the Penguin Reef, and they would find him there, dead or alive, and a fortune in pearls with him.

And the ship-mates of the *Dawn* could only wait, and watch, and hope, as the ketch bowled swiftly westward under the glimmering stars and the jewelled blaze of the Southern Cross.

CHAPTER V

DANDY PETER'S LUCK!

'FORTUNE — FORTUNE at last!'

Dandy Peter grinned and chuckled.

In the dusk of the stars, the *Sea-Cat* was speeding before the wind, with mainsail and jib drawing full. Every minute now Dandy Peter expected to raise the Penguin Reef. Long sea-miles lay astern between him and the man he had robbed, and if he had thought of pursuit, he would have laughed at it. He was well away for Pita, for the Sydney steamer and a new life in a new world–with a fortune in his grasp.

His dark handsome face was exultant. Of the curious, half-scared eyes of the Lukwe boys, continually turned on him, he took no heed, or of their exchanges of glances and muttered words in their own dialect. More than one wild and lawless deed the Lukwe boys had witnessed, since they had sailed with Dandy Peter–but the robbery of Prado's pearls was the most wild and reckless of all–it had startled them, even in Dandy Peter. Jacky, at the tiller, Toto and Kolo at the sheets, watched Peter Parsons uneasily–unheeded by him. They knew what he had done, they could see Prado's pearls running through his greedy fingers, but Peter Parsons heeded a black boy no more than he heeded a flying-fish.

He sat with his Panama hat inverted between his knees, the pearls in the hat, running them through his fingers again and again, gloating over them as they glimmered in the starlight. Prado's black bag lay on the deck–where Parsons had tossed it carelessly after taking out the pearls–the other con-

tents had no interest for him. Like a milky stream the pearls flowed through his fingers in the hat. More than a hundred of them – some small, some large – several of them great pearls of great value. Parsons had counted on gaining a prize – but he had hardly expected so much. There was a fortune in the glimmering pearls that cascaded through his fingers. A fortune that ran into thousands – such a fortune as he had never dreamed of making in years of trading, black-birding, pearl-poaching, smuggling.

It was well worth pulling out of the islands for this! They would never see him again on Lukwe: Black Furley and the rest of the Lukwe gang would never set eyes on him again. He would vanish from the islands: and when Pedro Prado set the law in motion, they could look for him as long as they liked – they would not find him, a rich man under another name, in a far land!

All was plain sailing.

He had but to run the reef channel in the Penguin, and sail on to Pita – in ample time for the Sydney steamer next day. He could sell his cutter at Pita – he would not need to stickle about the price, with a fortune in his hands. Once he had stepped on the steamer, all was clear. At Sydney he could sell the pearls – at a better price than in the islands – ten thousand pounds, as likely as not, or more. Then a new life under a new name – and old Prado could whistle for his pearls, and the officers of the law could whistle for the pearl-thief. The handsome blackguard of Lukwe laughed aloud as he thought of it.

Toto's voice interrupted him.

'Feller reef he stop, sar.'

Peter Parsons jumped up, and stared across the glimmering Pacific to the west. Dimly, in the tropical dusk, long lines of foam leaped into view, stretching far to north and south. It was the Penguin Reef, barring the sea like a great barrier for a hundred miles or more from end to end. A break in the long lines of surf marked the channel.

Dandy Peter rapped an order to the boat-steerer. The cutter swept on. He knew the Penguin channel like the back of his hand: it was easy to run after sundown – he would have run it fearlessly at midnight without the gleam of a star.

Dandy Peter unbuckled the belt from his slim waist. On the inner side were little pouches, where he packed money, when he had any. Now he packed the pearls into them, buttoned them securely, and buckled the belt round his waist again. He replaced the Panama hat on his handsome head, and went to the binnacle. As soon as the *Sea-Cat* had run the Penguin, he would get a few hours' sleep – and turn out when Pita was raised under the light of dawn. Fair weather and a fair wind – a clear course before him: there was not a care on his mind.

North and south, starboard and port, stretched the long lines of surf. But the wide dark opening in the reef lay before the cutter. Dandy Peter sailed his craft into the channel, as care-free as if he been sailing it into the lagoon at Lukwe. His mind was dwelling on Pita – the Sydney steamer – riches and ease in a new land.

'Oh, sar!' came a sudden shout from Kolo. The black boy was peering into the dusk of the channel with a startled frightened face.

Dandy Peter swung round on him, savagely.

'You black swab! What name you sing out, mouth belong you?' he snarled.

'Oh, sar! Black feller he stop.'

'Oh, sar!' It was a yell from Toto, 'Canoe he stop!'

'Black feller along canoe he stop!' howled Jacky, at the tiller.

'You swabs, you plenty too much fright along black feller he stop along canoe belong him?' snapped Parsons.

But the next moment he knew. It was no native canoe from Luvu or Pita that the Lukwe boys had seen.

Two long dark shapes loomed in the gloom, closing in alongside the cutter, port and starboard. Fuzzy heads, black faces, glittering eyes, gleaming spear-points, showed up in the night. Dandy Peter caught his breath, staring blankly, with unbelieving eyes. A war-party in those peaceful waters – a war-gang from the far-away Solomons – he had never dreamed of it, could never have dreamed of it.

But it was only for a second that he stood spell-bound. Of danger on the Penguin he had never dreamed: he was taken utterly by surprise. But he was quick on the uptake, ac-

It was only for a moment that he stood spellbound. The next moment his revolver was spitting fire

customed to facing sudden perils, and facing them with desperate courage. His hand flew to the back of his belt, and the next moment his revolver was spitting fire.

'Steady, you feller Jacky!' he shouted. He rained bullets onto the mob of black faces, as the swarm of savages came clambering up the low freeboard. 'Keep her steady, you swab.'

But for once Jacky the boat-steerer did not heed the voice of his master. Toto and Kolo, yelling with fear, darted below: and Jacky, abandoning the tiller, darted after them. The cutter yawed as the tiller swung free, and Peter Parsons almost lost his footing, and the *Sea-Cat* lost way.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Dandy Peter's face was white. He knew that his fate was upon him. But with desperate courage he put up a hopeless fight. A howling black savage rolled over at every shot from the revolver. But they were swarming on board, port and starboard, yelling like demons. And as the last shot was fired, and the desperate man clubbed an empty revolver, they closed in on him. His last fierce blow stretched a savage at his feet with a cracked skull: and then brawny hands were upon him, and he was dragged down—still struggling like a tiger. In that dreadful moment, the thrust of a spear, the crash of a war-club, would have been almost welcome: for he knew why they were taking him alive. With his last breath he fought and struggled and tore: but tapa cords were knotted on his strong limbs, and he was thrown on the deck, a helpless prisoner.

And as he lay, panting, despairing, the howling savages spread over the cutter, plundering, rooting out the terrified Lukwe boys, and binding them hand and foot. Toto, Kolo, Jacky, sprawled on the deck beside their skipper, jabbering with terror, while the triumphant yells of the savages echoed and re-echoed over the coral reef. A grinning crowd dragged the prisoners, at last gabbling from the cutter to the reef where the camp-fire smoked. There they were flung down on the coral: and Dandy Peter, with a fortune in pearls packed in his belt, looked up at the dark velvety sky, and knew that he had given his life for that phantom fortune: that the cruel cords that bit into his flesh would never be unloosed, until he was led out to die under the shark's-tooth knife—his fate the cooking-pots.

CHAPTER VI

OVERHAULED!

SUNRISE ON the Pacific.

A glimmer of light in the gloom, and the sun leaped up in the eastern sky, and it was day again.

King of the Islands, with a rifle in the hollow of his arm, stared anxiously westward.

The Penguin Reef had been a dark, shapeless blur, marked merely by the long glimmering lines of white surf that foamed and boiled on the edges of the rugged coral. Now it leaped into view, and all eyes were turned on it, as the *Dawn*, leaning to the wind, glided swiftly on towards the channel in the reef.

Faintly, dimly, against the sky, a curl of smoke rose from the reef. It marked the spot where the ketch's crew had seen the camp of the Solomon Islanders: where they had beaten off the attack of the cannibals the day before.

'Smoke he stop along reef, sar,' said Koko. 'Along smoke he stop, black feller stop.'

Ken nodded.

The Solomon Island war-gang were still camped on the reef by the channel. That was enough to tell Ken King that Dandy Peter, if he had passed that way, had never got past the Penguin. Alive or dead, Dandy Peter's flight had been stopped on the Penguin Reef, if he had been making Pita.

'We've got him, Ken,' said Kit Hudson. 'If–'

'If he was making Pita,' said Ken.

'Aye, aye! And I reckon he was.'

'I reckon it was the only course he could set, to save his skin,' said King of the Islands. 'But we shall soon see!'

He drew the binoculars from the leather case, and focussed them on the reef. He was sure, almost sure, that Dandy Peter had set a course for the port of call of the Sydney steamer: and, knowing nothing of the war-gang from the Solomons, must have run the channel, and fallen into their hands. He was almost sure: and now that the sun was up, he would know whether the sea-lawyer of Lukwe was there, or whether he had wasted time in a vain pursuit. Even Koko's keen eyes could not pick up the savages' camp at the distance: but in the powerful glasses it was near and clear. And Ken's face set grimly at what he saw, in the strengthening sunlight.

Midway through the channel, where the reef was high, the camp-fire smoked. Two canoes were tied up–the tall-prowed war-canoes. Further off, a cutter lay, heeled over, mast and mainsail tangled in rugged rock, aground. It was Dandy Peter's cutter–Ken knew the *Sea-Cat* at a glance, though the cutter was almost on its beam-ends. On the reef, round the smoky fire of sea-weed, a score of dark figures, tiny in the distance, could be picked up. And near at hand, as King of the Islands searched the reef with the 'longfeller glasses', he made out four figures that lay motionless–three of the faces black, one white–Dandy Peter and the three Lukwe boys, prisoners of the cannibals.

Ken drew a deep breath.

'Look!' he said.

Hudson scanned the reef through the binoculars.

'That's that,' he said, with a nod.

'No doubt about it now,' said Ken. 'Dandy Peter was making Pita, and he ran right into them. And–!' He paused.

'And I reckon that when he raises our sail, it will be the gladdest sight he has ever clapped his eyes on,' said Hudson. 'Dandy Peter's for the cooking-pots–unless we save him.'

'Black feller makee kai-kai along that white feller master, sar,' said Koko, 'Black feller along Solomons likee long-pig too much.'

'We're in time to save his worthless life,' said King of the Islands. 'But–we're none too soon, Kit. They're banking up the cooking-fire–you can guess for what!'

The ship-mates were silent, as the swift ketche ran on before the wind. They had followed Dandy Peter for Prado's pearls: but they were in time to save him from the dreadful fate his lawless greed had brought upon him. So far, the savages did not seem to have observed the tall sail bearing down on the reef. They were occupied in preparations for the feast of 'long-pig': one or more of the prisoners was to be sacrificed, before the sun was an hour higher in the blue heavens. The *Dawn* was sweeping into the channel, when a sudden commotion among the Solomon Islanders told that they had seen her. Black faces stared

at the ketch as she came sweeping on: black hands grasped spear and war-club, and there was a rush for the canoes.

King of the Islands glanced round over his crew. Every hand grasped a rifle: every face was tense.

The savages were scrambling into the canoes. But the *Dawn* was within easy range now, and King of the Islands rapped out the word. A blaze of rifle-fire burst from the ketch as she swept down the coral channel.

Yells and howls answered from the Solomon Islanders. But if they had been thinking of attack, they abandoned that idea, as the volleys from the ketch crashed into the canoes.

No doubt their experience of the previous day lingered in their fuzzy minds. For a minute or two, there was yelling and howling of wild war-cries, brandishing of spears and clubs: then, as the hot lead from the ketch rained on them, the canoes paddled desperately down the coral channel, to escape to the open sea beyond. Whizzing bullets and gleeful yells from the Hiva-Oa boys followed them as they fled.

Ken dropped the butt of his rifle, and shouted to the crew. The firing died away as the fleeing canoes vanished into the blue Pacific. The *Dawn* hove-to: and the boy trader leaped on the reef.

And Dandy Peter, twisting painfully in his bonds, lifted his head, and stared with starting eyes at King of the Islands.

' They are banking up the cooking fire — you can guess for what! '

CHAPTER VII

HAND OVER!

'KING OF the Islands!' muttered Dandy Peter, huskily.

He stood unsteadily.

Ken's clasp-knife had cut through his bonds, and he was free. Koko was releasing the Lukwe boys. The sea-lawyer of Lukwe tottered as he stood. He was free, but his limbs ached from the cruel grip of the tapa cords.

He stared at the boy trader – at Kit Hudson – at the *Dawn* – at the grinning Hiva-Oa boys. For some moments he seemed hardly able to believe what he saw, or to realize that he has escaped the terrible fate that had been so close.

Through the long hot night he had lain despairing, dreading what the day would bring. And now –

Now he was free, and the canoes and the cannibals had vanished into the boundless Pacific. He pulled himself together. His cutter lay aground on the reef, looted fore and aft. But he could sail her again, now that he was free. And there was still a fortune in pearls in his belt. But – if the ship-mates of the *Dawn* knew! Did they know?

'You've saved me,' he muttered. He made a gesture towards the smoky fire of sea-weed, and the cooking-pots that lay where the savages had dropped them. 'You've saved me – from that!'

'Aye, aye,' said Ken.

Parsons eyed him, stealthily. Did he know?

He was pulling himself together, more and more. Did King of the Islands know about Prado's pearls? That question hammered in his mind.

Ken smiled grimly.

He could read the sea-lawyer's thoughts in his furtive face.

Dandy Peter had narrowly escaped a fearful fate. But he had escaped it – and it was already receding into the past in his mind. His thoughts had reverted to his loot. King of the Islands had saved him: but there was stealthy hostility in the sea-lawyer's eyes as he looked at him.

'You put in at Luvu?' asked Parsons.

'We did.'

'I reckoned you were making Luvu, when I raised your sail across the reef, before I pulled out for Lukwe,' said Parsons, casually.

'You pulled out for Lukwe? You're a long way off your course for Lukwe, Peter Parsons.'

'Contrary winds,' explained Dandy Peter. 'I reckon I'd have done better to stick in the lagoon at Luvu and whistle for a wind.' He gave Ken another stealthy look, 'You didn't make a long stop at Luvu?'

Kit Hudson grinned. He, like his ship-mate, could read the doubt in the Lukwe sea-lawyer's mind. Had they seen Prado – had they heard of the robbery of the pearls? If they had –

'Only a few hours,' answered King of the Islands.

Dandy Peter breathed hard. If the boy trader knew, he was not in a hurry to tell him. Did he know?

'Lucky for me you came on this course,' he said. 'I reckon you knew the niggers were here – you must have run this channel yesterday, making Luvu.'

'Oh, we knew,' answered Ken. 'We had a brush with them, running the channel, and sank one of their canoes.'

'Better luck than I had – single-handed, on a cutter, I had no chance. They got me.' Dandy Peter shrugged his slim shoulders. 'But a miss is as good as a mile. I reckon I'll give my cutter the once-over – it won't be easy getting her off the reef –' He made a movement.

Kit Hudson laughed. Dandy Peter gave him a quick look, and then his eyes shot round again to Ken King's grim face. Did they know?

'Is that all you've got to say, Peter Parsons?' asked the boy trader.

'If you want my thanks – !'

'You can cut that out.'

Dandy Peter caught his breath.

'What else?' he muttered.

'Nothing about pearls?' asked Ken, grimly.

The sea-lawyer of Lukwe started.

'Pearls!' he repeated.

'You thieving swab!' said Ken, contemptuously. 'We've saved you from the cooking-pots: and if we hadn't had word with Prado at Luvu, you'd walk off under our noses with his pearls in your pockets! You rat, we came after you for his pearls.'

'You came after me – ?'

'We figured it out that you were making Pita, to get out of the islands, and we figured it right!' snapped Ken. 'You were not making Lukwe, you rat – you were making Pita for the Sydney steamer, with Prado's pearls – and we came after you to pick you up here, dead or alive!'

Dandy Peter gritted his teeth.

Hudson laughed again.

'The game's up, Parsons,' he said. 'Cough up the pearls – and thank your lucky stars that we don't clap you in irons on the ketch and take you back to Luvu.'

The sea-lawyer stood panting.

'Make it a trade!' he said, hoarsely. 'What's Prado to you? I tell you, the pearls will sell for ten thousand pounds – make it a trade, share and share alike –'

'Oh, suffering cats!' ejaculated Kit Hudson.

'It's a fortune,' breathed Parsons. 'A fortune in pearls! Let Prado whistle for them – it's every man for himself, in the islands. Share and share alike in a fortune – we three! What do you say, Ken King?'

Ken looked at him.

'You rat!' he said. 'You thieving rat! Hand over the pearls – every one of them – hand them over, and don't say another word! One word more from you, and I'll order my Kanaka to give you six dozen with the lawyer-cane.'

Dandy Peter's lips opened – but they closed again. With a face of fury, he unbuckled his belt. Koko came back with the lawyer-cane – but it was not needed. In silence, breathing fury, the sea-lawyer handed over the pearls.

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The *Dawn* glided away from the Penguin Reef, making long tacks for Luvu, with good news for Pedro Prado when she sailed into the lagoon. The ship-mates left a savage, desperate man behind them. Through the long hot hours Dandy Peter and the Lukwe boys laboured to get the cutter off the reef: and when they succeeded, at last, it was a dismantled and dilapidated craft in which Dandy Peter sailed away. But he did not sail for Pita – the Sydney steamer was of no use to him now. Dandy Peter was not, after all, pulling out of the islands with a Fortune in Pearls.

A STORY OF THE 'SCHOOL FOR SLACKERS'

CHAPTER I

'WHY NOT?'

Aubrey Compton, of the Fifth Form at High Coombe smiled cheerily, as he asked that question.

Bob Darrell did not smile.

He frowned – indeed, almost scowled.

Teddy Seymour, sitting on the corner of the study table, looking at one of his friends and then at the other, mumbled.

Teddy was about to echo Aubrey's question, when he caught the black look on Bob's face, and mumbled indistinctly instead.

There was a difference of opinion – as there often was! – in No. 3 Study in the High Coombe Fifth. Teddy was prepared to follow the lead of either of his chums. But when there was a difference of opinion, what was a fellow to do? Teddy couldn't follow both. So he just mumbled.

'You'll come, Bob?' went on Aubrey.

'No!' growled Bob.

'Why not?'

'If you keep on asking why not, Aubrey, you'll be asking for a punched head before long.'

Aubrey laughed, and Teddy looked uneasy.

'I – I say – !' mumbled Teddy.

'I'm not coming, and you're not going!' snapped Bob Darrell. 'Coombe Cave is out of bounds – .'

'Dear me!' said Aubrey. 'Haven't we ever been out of bounds before!'

'Of course we have, lots of times, Bob!' said Teddy Seymour, 'Don't be a killjoy, old man.'

'This is rather different!' said Bob. 'Coombe Cave is a dangerous place. When the tide's in, it's flooded. And the tide sometimes comes quite unexpectedly in the coombe. That is why Mr. McCane put it out of bounds–.'

'It wasn't out of bounds in the old Head's time!' drawled Aubrey.

'It ought to have been.'

'Well, perhaps, Aubrey, old man–!' murmured Teddy, doubtfully. Teddy was generally swayed by the last speaker.

Aubrey did not heed him.

'I'm goin' this afternoon, and Teddy's comin' with me, Bob,' he said. 'If you're afraid of gettin' your feet wet, or afraid of that bounder who's been sent here as headmaster, you can leave us to it. I'm going to explore that jolly old cave.'

Snort, from Bob Darrell.

'A lot you care about exploring a cave!' he snapped. 'A fat lot you want to root about among sand and sea-weed and pebbles, like a fag of the Fourth. You're going to the cave, simply because Jimmy McCane has put it out of bounds, and for no other reason at all.'

'Why not?' smiled Aubrey.

'Look here–.'

'Well, dash it all, Bob,' said Teddy Seymour. 'Since McCane became headmaster here, he's been pulling in bounds right and left. A fellow can't go into Okeham on a half-holiday now, and now the cave down the coombe is out of bounds. He will be telling us to stick in our studies next, and never step out at all.'

'I tell you Coombe Cave is a danger-spot!' said Bob. 'and McCane's quite right to stop fellows going there. Any fellow caught there in the tide simply wouldn't have an earthly.'

'Tide's on this afternoon,' said Aubrey. 'I don't want to get drowned, any more than you do, Bob. All I want–.'

'All you want is to show the school that you don't give a hoot for McCane and his orders!' growled Bob. 'I know the tide's out and I know that it comes in all of a sudden round Westward Point, and I know that a man was drowned in that cave once. If you want to cheek McCane, think of something else.'

Aubrey laughed.

'Come clean, old chap!' he said, banteringly. 'You don't care a bean for the danger–if any!'-all you care about is backing up that bounder McCane, and trying to make other fellows toe the line as you do. You won't get away with it, dear man. All High Coombe is up against McCane. The Governors chose to appoint him head-master in old Dr. Chetwode's place, and we had to take it. But we're not toeing the line–not more than we can help! We're up against McCane all the time, and all along the line. There's a sportin' chance that we way make him as sick of us, as we are of him, and that he may go– .'

'Forget it!' snapped Bob. 'McCane's a sticker! He's come here to pull the School for Slackers out of its rut, and he's the man to do it. And he will get away with it in the long run however much you and the other fatheads kick. Jimmy McCane is a man!'

'A most unpleasant specimen!' drawled Aubrey. 'All pep and push and hustle and

rush! He gets on my nerves, and everybody else's.'

'Felt proud of High Coombe being nicknamed the School for Slackers?' snapped Bob.

'Why not?' smiled Aubrey.

Bob Darrell breathead hard. They were great chums, in No. 3 Study in the Fifth. Unlike as they were in every imaginable way, Bob would have gone through fire and water for his elegant and irritating pal. But that did not prevent him from very often feeling a strong inclination to punch Aubrey's handsome head!

Certainly they were never likely to agree about James McCane, the new headmaster. Bob Darrell regarded him as the right man in the right place, and backed him up all he could. Aubrey Compton regarded him as the wrong man in the wrong place, and was the life and soul of the resistance movement. And almost all High Coombe, reluctant to be shaken up out of its easy slack ways, shared Aubrey's views: and Bob Darrell's voice was really like unto a voice crying in the wilderness, on that subject.

'I've a jolly good mind–!' began Bob, breathing very hard.

'Look here, don't you fellows rag!' interposed Teddy, anxiously. 'Bother that man McCane! We never had rows in this study before he came.'

'And hardly anythin' else since!' sighed Aubrey.

'Whose fault is that?' snapped Bob.

'Yours, old man! If you back up that outsider, you'll always be in a minority of one, in this study and in High Coombe. I can tell you that you're not makin' yourself popular.'

'Fat lot I care about that!'

'Greasin' up to the Beak–'

'Who's greasing up to the Beak?' roared Bob.

'Well, that's how fellows look at it. Who the dickens are you, to stick up for the man when the whole school's down on him?' demanded Aubrey. 'Now you're backin' up his precious new order about Coombe Cave. Well, I'm goin' to the cave this afternoon, wholly and solely because McCane's put it out of bounds. You comin'?'

'No!'

'Please yourself,' Aubrey Compton rose elegantly from the window-seat. 'Time we were off, Teddy. Come on.'

'Don't go, Teddy!' said Bob.

Teddy looked from one to the other. He was ready to follow Aubrey's lead. He was equally ready to follow Bob's advice. Gladly he would have followed both, had it been practicable. It was quite a difficult position for a fellow who had practically no will of his own.

'I–I say–!' mumbled Teddy.

'Come on!' said Aubrey.

'Stick here!' said Bob.

Aubrey gave Teddy a look, and lounged out of the study.

Teddy Seymour hesitated dubiously in the doorway.

'I–I say, look here, Bob, why not come?' he argued. 'You won't stop old Aubrey, you jolly well know that he's as obstinate as a mule, about McCane. He's going.'

'No reason why one fool should make many,' said Bob.

'I wish you fellows wouldn't row!' almost wailed Teddy. 'Life ain't worth living in the study, with you fellows always rowing about

McCane. Look here, Bob, you said it was dangerous to go to the cave–'

'So it is!'

'Well, then, we can't let old Aubrey go on his own. Of course there ain't any danger really, but if you think so–'

'McCane knows there is, and that's why he's put the place out of bounds.'

'Well, old Aubrey thinks it's because he's a meddling ass–'

'Aubrey's an ass himself.'

'Comin', Teddy?' came Aubrey's call from the staircase.

'Oh! Yes! Wait a minute! I say, Bob, old chap–'

'On, go if you like, Teddy,' said Bob Darrell. 'Never mind me.'

'But won't you come?' urged Teddy.

'No, I won't!'

Teddy looked at him, glanced out at Aubrey on the staircase, and then looked at Bob Darrel again. His uncertainty was quite painful to witness. But the point was settled by Aubrey, who came back, slipped his arm through Teddy's, and marched him off. What poor Teddy would have done, if Bob had grabbed his other arm, was quite an open question. However, Bob made no move, and Aubrey carried off the prize, as it were.

Bob Darrell was left alone in No. 3 Study, with a lowering brow. But he did not remain there. He knew that James McCane was right: and he wanted to give his support, for what that was worth, to the headmaster who, as Bob knew if no one else chose to know, was doing his best for High Coombe. But his friends were heading for trouble. There was no doubt whatever that if Mr. McCane's new order was followed by immediate disregard and disobedience, McCane would come down hard and heavy on the offenders, if the transgression came to his knowledge. To keep out of that escapade, and leave his friends to it, was not an attractive idea. Angry with Aubrey, and angry with himself, Bob nevertheless left the study, and followed the two down the staircase. Aubrey smiled, and Teddy looked greatly relieved, as he joined them at the door of the House.

'Comin' after all!' purred Aubrey.

'Yes!' grunted Bob.

'Good man!'

'Oh, rats!'

'After all, it's a jolly day for going down the coombe,' said Teddy, brightly. 'They say there's bits of old Spanish galleons been picked up in that cave–left over from the jolly old Armada, you know. Might find something–'

'Fathead!' said Bob.

And they walked out of the House together.

CHAPTER II

JAMES MC CANE, the new headmaster of High Coombe, raised his eyebrows slightly, as his eyes fell on three Fifth-form men coming out of the House. Mr. McCane, at the moment, was standing at the door of the porter's lodge, talking to Liggins the old porter. Liggins was not enjoying that talk. Old Liggins, like almost everyone else at High Coombe, was slack in his ways. In old Dr. Chetwode's time, Liggins had performed many of his duties in a very perfunctory manner: the Venerable Beak had been very easy-going. Neither did old Liggins feel disposed to change his manners and customs, because a new and vigorous young man had replaced the venerable old gentleman who had been accustomed to let things slide. In

Dr. Chetwode's time, the rising-bell had often rung five minutes, or even ten minutes late: and there had been no song-and-dance about it. On this particular day, it had rung precisely one minute late. That was the subject of Mr. McCane's heart-to-heart talk with old Liggins. Apparently even one minute was a matter of importance in the eyes of the new Head.

Liggins had to take it. He took it with outward respect and inward resentment. McCane, indeed, was quite pleasant about it: only making it clear to Liggins that he expected punctuality. But he made that quite clear: and it was a relief to Liggins when something else attracted his attention. Liggins was glad to retreat into his lodge, leaving Mr. McCane to gaze, as long as he liked, at three fellows who were coming down to the gates.

McCane was interested, it seemed, in those three. Possibly he deduced something from the sarcastic smile on Aubrey Compton's face, and the dissatisfied frown on Bob Darrell's rugged features. Few things that went on at High Coombe escaped the keen eyes of Jimmy McCane: and he knew quite a lot about No. 3. Study. They were coming down to the gates: but their progress was leisurely. They stopped several times as fellows spoke to them. First there was Corkran of the Sixth, head-prefect. Corkran laughed at what Aubrey said to him, whatever it was, seemingly amused. Then Tredegar, the captain of High Coombe, spoke to the three, and Tredegar too laughed at what Aubrey had to say. Other fellows – Carter of the Fifth, Randal of the Sixth, and others, stopped to speak, and they all seemed amused when they had spoken to Aubrey. A much less keen young man than James McCane would have been apprised that something was 'on': something probably, if not assuredly, in the line of covert rebellion to the unpopular new headmaster. It was only that day that the Head had posted the notice placing Coombe Cave out of bounds for the school: and he did not expect certain members of the High Coombe community to take it like lambs. No doubt James McCane was capable of such simple arithmetic as putting two and two together: for which reason a slightly stern expression came over his face, as he watched the three.

They were quite near the gates when they noticed McCane: and then Bob Darrell gave a little start: Teddy almost a jump: and Aubrey Compton a stare. Considering that the three were going out to disobey directly the latest order from the headmaster, with the ink hardly dry on it, it was a little disconcerting to run into him in this way. Bob could not help colouring under the steady gaze, Teddy felt as nervous as a rabbit. Only Aubrey preserved his habitual aplomb. The dandy of the High Coombe Fifth was not easily disconcerted. He even ventured on a slight shrug of the shoulders.

They would have 'capped' the Head and passed, two of them glad to escape his searching eyes, but he called to them, in the quiet but incisive voice that had unquestionable authority in it.

'Stop a moment.'

Bob and Teddy stopped. Aubrey, never losing a chance of covert disrespect, affected not to hear, and would have walked gracefully on, passing Mr. McCane unheeded like some inconsiderable insect. Which might have had quite painful results for Aubrey,

had not Bob grabbed him by the arm, and dragged him to a halt.

Aubrey's eyes gleamed at him, for a moment, but he had to stop.

'Yes, sir!' said Bob.

His heart beat a little unpleasantly. Had McCane guessed what was on? He knew how very penetrating Jimmy McCane was. But McCane did not really need to be very penetrating, to guess that Aubrey, the rebel of High Coombe, would delight in disregarding his latest order, and letting all High Coombe, even Chard, the master of his form, know that he had disregarded it.

But if the Head had that idea in his mind, his face did not reveal it. His look was quite pleasant.

'You have seen the order I placed on the board this morning?' he asked. And then the three knew that McCane had stopped them, to give them a special warning not to hunt for trouble. Bob knew that it was kindness: he did not want to punish thoughtless, hot-headed fellows, if he could help it.

'Yes, sir!' muttered Bob, his colour deepening.

'Oh, yes, sir!' mumbled Teddy.

Aubrey did not speak. The keen eyes fixed on him.

'And you, Compton?' asked Mr. McCane.

Aubrey breathed a little hard.

'A new order, sir?' he asked. 'Is there a new order on the board?'

'There is, Compton! Have you not seen it?'

'There are so many new orders lately, sir!' said Aubrey, with cool and superb impertinence. 'There used not to be so many when Dr. Chetwode was head-master.'

Bob gave him a look, and Teddy trembled. But Mr. McCane did not seem to notice that Aubrey was being impertinent.

'I am referring to the notice respecting bounds, Compton,' he said. 'In case you may not have seen it, I tell you now that Coombe Cave is out of school bounds.'

'Indeed, sir.'

'The tides by Westward Point are uncertain and dangerous, Compton.' Mr. McCane was condescending to explain.

'Are they, sir?'

'They are, Compton! Anyone might be very easily, and very unexpectedly, trapped in that cave, and the result would be very serious. If my order on the subject should be disregarded, I should take an extremely serious view of the matter – especially in the case of senior boys,' said Mr. McCane.

With that, and a nod, Mr. McCane walked away to the House.

The three went out at the gates, in silence.

It was hardly more than a step to the coombe, that led down to the beach and the rolling Atlantic. They would have reached it in a few minutes; but Bob Darrell came to a halt.

'Look here, Aubrey – !' he said.

'Lookin',' said Aubrey.

'McCane was giving us the tip. He knows as well as we do what we're up to. Do you want to ask for six in his study?'

Aubrey's eyes smouldered.

'I've had six from the dashed usher, once or twice,' he said. 'I'd rather not call on him again. But I'm goin' to the Coombe Cave, if McCane were walkin' just behind me.'

'If – if he knows – !' mumbled Teddy.

'Even that bounder doesn't spy on fellows,' said Aubrey. He admitted it grudgingly. 'He won't know! All High Coombe

will know that we've just laughed at his order and taken no notice of it. But McCane won't know a thing – not officially. He can't act on suspicion. I prefer him to know, so long as he can't do anythin' about it.'

'Look here, chuck it – .'

'You're wastin' time!' pointed out Aubrey.

'You're asking for it.'

'Dear me!'

Aubrey strolled on. Teddy followed, and then Bob. They went down the rocky coombe, with the wide Atlantic stretching before their eyes. The tide was out, but it was on the turn. When it came in, the sea would wash right up the coombe – on rough days the wild waters would surge up almost to the level of the road. But it was fine weather now, and the Atlantic rolled in waves of gold under the bright sun. There was a dashing of foam at Westward Point – where even on calm and sunny days, the Atlantic broke in heavy surges. And sometimes, as the coast folk knew whether Aubrey knew or not, the tides were perilous there: there would be sudden rushes of wild water, flooding up the coombe almost without warning. If Aubrey knew, he did not care. He was concentrated on showing all High Coombe how little he cared for McCane and McCane's meddling: indeed, for no other reason would he have ventured his elegant clothes in a wet rugged cavern. Ferguson of the Fourth might enjoy grubbing about in a cavern,

looking for relics of a mythical Spanish galleon: but the elegant Aubrey had no such tastes. He was going into Coombe Cave purely and simply because James McCane had placed it out of school bounds.

The cave opened dark and gloomy at the foot of the coombe. To get into it, they had to scramble over and through sand heaped up by the last tide. Once inside, they were in semi-darkness: and wet sand, sea-weed, sea-shells, and rugged rocky walls did not look particularly inviting. Aubrey picked his way delicately, with a cheery smile on his face. He was going right up to the end of the great cavern that extended deep and far under the soaring cliffs, for excellent reasons of his own. Teddy, who knew those reasons, chuckled once or twice: Bob, who did not, tramped on in glum silence.

CHAPTER III

'HA, HA, HA!' roared Teddy Seymour.

Bob Darrell did not laugh.

He frowned.

Aubrey smiled complacently.

They were far up the great cave. Behind them, the opening on the shore looked like a small spot of light. Deeper and deeper gloom surrounded the three Fifth-formers of High Coombe. It had been rough going. The rocks were irregular, and slippery with wet: Teddy had stumbled over once, and sat in a bed of wet sea-weed. But they had reached goal at last: a wall of blank rock that shut in the extremity of the cavern. At that distance from the opening, there was just about light enough for them to see their surroundings.

Aubrey had taken two articles from his pockets, and Bob stared, and Teddy grinned, at a brush and a small pot of white paint. Why Aubrey had provided himself with those articles, Bob could not guess: until Aubrey set to work with them. He prised off the lid of the paint-pot, dipped the brush into it, and daubed on the wall of rock—Bob watching him in wonder, Teddy with a grinning face. Why Aubrey was painting the letters 'WHO', in large capitals, in white paint on dark rock, left Bob guessing. He yapped out a question which Aubrey did not trouble to answer. But he began to guess, when Aubrey added, still in large capitals 'CARES'.

He frowned, and his frown intensified, as Aubrey went on with his work, and completed it. Even in the gloom, the big white letters stood out and caught the eye. The whole sentence was

WHO CARES FOR McCANE?

Having finished, Aubrey tossed paint-pot and paint-brush into a crevice, and wiped a spot or two carefully from his fingers.

Teddy roared with laughter.

'So that's the game, is it?' growled Bob.

Aubrey nodded.

'That,' he admitted, 'is the game! That's to amuse fellows who come along and see it—and I'll bet there will be lots! Among them McCane.'

'You think McCane—?'

'My dear man, I don't think—I know!' drawled Aubrey. 'Isn't he jolly particular about fellows jumping to orders? Isn't he absolutely certain to poke his nose into this cave sooner or later, to see whether High Coombe men have been here? Even if he didn't think of it before, he will think of it when he learns that there's something to be seen here—and he will! My dear chap, this

will be the talk of High Coombe – no end of a jest up against McCane. Bet you the man will be reading this message in a couple of days at the most.'

Chuckle from Teddy!

Bob set his lips.

He knew that Aubrey was right. Aubrey's exploit would be the talk of the school: grinned over and chuckled over by every fellow at High Coombe, from Tredegar and Corkran of the Sixth, down to Ferguson of the Fourth, and the fags of the Third and Second. Even in Common-Room it would be heard of, and the Staff would smile: old Chard's light-blue eyes would glisten in his portly red face: Capes would indulge that unmusical cackle of his: even old Mace would contribute his doddering grin. Fellows of all forms would dodge into Coombe Cave, to see what Aubrey had painted up there, and grin and chuckle over it. Sooner or later James McCane would hear, or guess, or surmise, that something was 'up' in that spot he had specially placed out of school bounds: and he would investigate. And he would read this! It would be hidden when the tide was in, for the tide washed right up to the end of the cave. But the paint would survive a washing by the Atlantic waters and remain there to meet all eyes that cared to see, when the tide was out. It might last for days, or weeks: certainly long enough

Daubed on the wall of rock

for Jimmy McCane to see it, and for all High Coombe to enjoy the joke.

And the cream of it was that, though Jimmy McCane might very probably guess who was the author of that defiant impertinence, he could not be certain, and could not possibly pin its author down. McCane would have to 'take' this: and the fact that he would have to take it, and couldn't do anything about it would cause delight in every study at High Coombe: and even, sad to say, in Common-Room. Aubrey undoubtedly was the man for ideas.

Teddy's chuckles were explosive.

'It's the big idea, Bob!' he said, beaming. 'He will tumble to it that there's something here–bound to! He hikes along, and sees this! What ? Ha Ha! Bit of a facer for him! What? "Who cares for McCane" stuck up in the very place he's put out of bounds! Ha, ha! And not a clue.'

'Aubrey, you cheeky ass–!'

'We're through!' smiled Aubrey. 'May as well be gettin' back to tea. This isn't really a pleasant spot–I wouldn't be found dead in it, if that usher hadn't ordered us to keep clear. He will know exactly what we think of him and his orders when he sees this! What?'

'You can't cheek a head-master like that!'

'Can't I?'

'No!' roared Bob. 'If I'd known that was your game, I'd have shoved that pot of paint down your neck. McCane's Head, whether you like it or not, and you're not going to cheek him to that extent.'

'Forget it!'

'There's another thing,' rapped Bob. 'Hardly a fellow ever noses into this dismal hole–but that will bring a crowd here, when it gets out. Dozens of fellows will be breaking just to see it.'

'Why not?' smiled Aubrey. 'That's what I want, old bean! Rather a jolt for the McCane man, if his precious new order makes fellow come here who wouldn't have taken the trouble otherwise.'

'You mean that you don't care a hoot about anything except making trouble for McCane!' snapped Bob.

'Exactly!'

'Well, you shouldn't have dragged me into it, if that's what you want. I know there's a limit, if you don't! You're not leaving that cheek for McCane to see. I'm going to smudge it out.'

Bob looked round, stopped, and picked up a handful of sea-weed, evidently to use as a duster. Aubrey's eyes gleamed. Once the paint had dried, it was safe for a long time: but while it was wet, it was a matter only of moments for Bob to obliterate it–if he got going with that handful of sea-weed. Aubrey Compton stood between Bob Darrell and the inscription on the rock-wall, and he stood as firmly as the rock itself.

'You won't touch that, Bob!' he said, quietly.

'I'm going to smudge it out–.'

'You're not!'

'Stand aside!'

'Rats!'

Big, rugged Bob Darrell was twice a match for the slim and elegant Aubrey. One shove made the dandy of the Fifth stagger. But the next moment, he grasped Bob, with blazing eyes, and bore him back. Teddy, no longer amused, looked on in dismay and consternation, as his friends struggled. Both tempers were up now: it did not look, at

that moment, as if Bob and Aubrey were the greatest of pals. Bob exerted his strength, and Aubrey went over. But he held on to his adversary, and dragged him down too.

'Oh, I say!' bleated the unhappy Teddy, 'I say! Chuck it, I say. What's the good of ragging? I say–.'

Neither heeded Teddy.

'Oh you rotter!' panted Aubrey, as he found that he had to yield to superior strength. 'You rotter! You worm!' Aubrey sprawled on his back, and Bob jumped to his feet.

'Stop him, Teddy!' panted Aubrey.

'Oh, I–I say, Bob–!' bleated Teddy.

Bob did not heed either of them. With that handful of sea-weed, he smudged over the painted letters on the rock-wall. His face was set and determined: whether it meant a row with old Aubrey, or no row with old Aubrey, he was not going to allow that insulting message to remain, to meet the eyes of James McCane. Whether Aubrey knew it or not, there was a limit, and that was the limit.

Aubrey, panting, struggled to his feet. He leaped at Bob almost like a tiger. But he was too late. Every painted letter on the rock was smudged over: there was nothing but a smear of white paint of a dark ground: not a single letter remained decipherable.

'You rotter!' panted Aubrey. His face was white with rage, 'I'm done with you, Bob Darrell–you're no friend of mine–.'

Bob threw down the sea-weed.

'That's that, anyway!' he said. 'When you're cool–!'

'Put up your hands!' yelled Aubrey. He was hitting out the next moment, and Bob had to put up his hands.

Teddy wailed.

'Stop it, you fellows! For goodness' sake, stop it! Aubrey, old man–Bob, old chap–for goodness sake– OH!' Teddy broke off, with a gasping splutter, as he felt a sudden wash of water over his feet, 'I say–what's that–oh! The tide! Look out, you fellows, the tide's coming in!'

They knew it the next moment, as water washed round their feet. All unheeded in those exciting moments, a rush of water had come into the cave, and now it had reached them. It receded. Aubrey, furious as he was, dropped his hands: Bob, who had only been stalling off his enraged comrade, was almost glad of that sudden wash of water from the Atlantic: anything was welcome that stopped Aubrey. But his face became serious and alarmed as he stared along the deep cave towards the far-off opening on the coombe.

'The tide!' he breathed.

Aubrey panted for breath.

'It's not in yet–I tell you it can't be in yet! It's not due in for more than an hour–think I'm a fool, to come here if we could be cut off by the tide–.'

'Look!' said Bob.

'Oh, scissors!' gasped Teddy. 'You know how uncertain the tide is round that point, Aubrey–here, let's get out.'

'Come on!' breathed Bob.

Aubrey recovered his calmness.

'No hurry,' he drawled. 'I tell you the tide can't be in yet–not for an hour–that was just a wash–.'

'Come on, you ass!' roared Bob.

He started at a run down the cave, with Teddy at his heels. Aubrey followed, and he too ran. He was obstinately determined to

believe that the tide wasn't, and couldn't, be yet: but it did certainly look like it, for another wash of water came in, and wetted them to the knees. The three ran, and ran hard, to get back to the opening on the coombe. They reached it, and stood knee-deep in water as they looked out. And they looked out on a surging, racing sea, that was swelling up into the coombe, far past the mouth of the cave, dashing and foaming. They clambered on high rugged boulders that lay in the cave's mouth, and stared, at the surging waters that rolled past, and rolled in, and foamed against the rocks. And three faces were now as white as the paint Aubrey had used for his message to Mr. McCane. For all three knew what it meant. Only those rugged boulders on which they had clambered saved them from being washed away helplessly in surging waters. Even Aubrey, at that terrible moment, would have admitted that James McCane's new order, which he had been resolved to disregard and defy, was not without reason. For all three of them knew now that they were cut off by the tide, and that unless help came – and how could it come? – they were marooned on those rugged rocks for hours and hours and hours and hours while the wild sea surged round them, at the imminent danger every moment of being swept away headlong in surging waters.

CHAPTER IV

'COMPTON!'

No reply.

Mr. Chard, master of the Fifth, was calling the roll. It was six-o'clock roll, which, in the days of old Dr. Chetwode, had very often been sparsely attended. Prefects of the Sixth had the privilege of cutting roll, if the spirit moved them so to do: but all other High Coombe men were supposed to turn up and answer 'adsum' to their names. Under the Venerable Beak, that had been largely supposition. Fifth-form men would pass the roll-call bell by like the idle wind: even fags of the Fourth and Third would often chance it: and fellows who were marked absent seldom heard anything about it afterwards. So long as a High Coombe man was present at calling-over at lock-ups, all was well, as a rule, in the good old days.

But Jimmy McCane had changed all that. The new broom was sweeping clean in this matter as in others. Prefects retained their lofty privileges: but every other fellow in the school had to attend every roll, or take what was coming to him. A fellow could wander anywhere, within school bounds, after class: but he had to materialize in hall when the bell rang for roll. So in these latter days, hall was always crowded when the names were called, and it was becoming quite rare for a High Coombe man to fail to answer to his name.

However, on the present occasion, Compton of the Fifth did not reply: and Mr. Chard's light-blue eyes wandered over hall, and noted that Aubrey was not there. He had to mark Compton absent: but he smiled faintly as he did so. Possibly some whisper had reached Chard's large red ears, of something 'on' that afternoon. The Head's new order had irritated Chard: in fact everything that Jimmy McCane did, irritated Chard. Certainly Chard could not have approved, openly at least, of disregarding a head-master's order. But, looking on McCane, as he did, as an obstreperous

young man who was upsetting hoary tradition right and left, like a bull in a china shop, Chard really could not wish him an easy passage. If some fellows regarded the Head's order as not worth the paper it was written on, Chard after all was of the same opinion.

He was not surprised when two more members of the Fifth Form failed to answer to their names. Darrell and Seymour were absent, as well as Compton. All three members of No. 3. Study were missing from roll.

Mr. Chard finished the roll with a solemn face, apparently blind to whispers and grins among the Fifth, and some of the Sixth. Almost everybody knew that Aubrey Compton had made it a special point to visit Coombe Cave, simply because McCane had placed it out of school bounds: and some knew of the inscription he was going to paint on the cavern wall, to meet McCane's eyes if—or rather when—he investigated. It was very amusing to the High Coombers: undoubtedly a point scored against the new Head. Some wondered whether Aubrey had deliberately cut roll, in order to drive the nail home, as it were: actually wanting McCane to guess where he had gone. Of course he would be safely off the spot before McCane came, if McCane went there. The Blighter would not 'cop' him. He would know quite well, but he would be able to do nothing: it would be a great score.

Chard rolled out of hall. He caught a few words, uttered by Corkran of the Sixth, who was speaking to Randal as he rolled.

'Old Aubrey's keeping it up!'

'Good man!' said Randal.

'Think the Blighter will guess?'

'Sure to.'

'If he goes there—!'

'He won't spot old Aubrey. He will spot what old Aubrey's left for him, though.'

Corkran chuckled.

Mr. Chard rolled on, deaf to what he heard. He wasn't supposed to know that when fellows spoke of a 'Blighter' they were alluding to the new Head. But he smiled as he rolled. Certainly he hoped that, if Aubrey had kicked over the traces, McCane would not 'cop' him. He, Chard, would have to give Compton lines for cutting roll: but he might forget to ask for those lines.

The smile however, faded from Chard's red face, as he rolled on—to the Head's study. McCane had not been present at roll. But one of his new rules—that objectionable young man was always making new rules!—was that absence should be reported to him by the master taking roll. This caused Chard, and other masters, to regard Jimmy McCane as a meddlesome puppy, who could never leave things alone to drift on in the old happy way. Still, puppy or not, he was Head: and had to be obeyed. Unwillingly, but inevitably, Chard charged off to the Head's study to do as he had to do. He had been twenty years on the Staff: and this new man, this nobody from nowhere, had been put over his head by an undiscerning Governing Body: there was no help for it, but it was bitter.

Mr. McCane gave him a pleasant nod as he came into the study. If he was aware of Chard's inward feelings, he gave no sign of it.

'All present, I hope, Mr. Chard?' asked McCane, before the Fifth-form master could speak.

'All but three, sir!' answered Chard, heavily.

'Three!' repeated Mr. McCane, his brows knitting a little.

'Boys of my form, sir, with whom I shall deal, with your permission!' said Mr. Chard, not without an inflection of sarcasm.

'Three!' repeated Mr. McCane. 'Are they Compton, Darrell and Seymour?'

It was like that meddlesome young man to ask for the names, instead of leaving so trivial a matter to the form-master concerned, Chard reflected bitterly. However, he answered.

'They are.'

McCane's knitted brows knitted still further. He was frowning, evidently disturbed. He had not forgotten what he had witnessed from Liggins' lodge a couple of hours ago. Chard could hardly keep a sarcastic smile from his red face. The obnoxious young man was going to make a mountain out of a molehill as usual!

'I noticed those three boys going out of gates some time ago, Mr. Chard.'

Chard was not surprised to hear that. McCane seemed to notice everything. It was so unlike the days of the Venerable Beak. Old Dr. Chetwode had never noticed anything.

'They have not returned?'

'Apparently not, sir.'

Chard made a movement to leave the study. If Mr. McCane regarded this slight, this trivial, infraction of the rules, as a serious matter, he, Chard, did not: and his time was of value. But Mr. McCane motioned him to stop. 'One moment, Mr. Chard.'

Chard halted, breathing heavily.

'This may be a very serious matter, Mr. Chard: more serious than those unthinking boys imagine.'

'Indeed, sir!' Chard could not restrain his sarcasm. 'I shall deal with the boys, sir—if you permit me to do so!—but I really cannot regard absence at six o'clock roll as a matter of very deep import.'

'Not in ordinary circumstances, Mr. Chard: but if these boys have, as I have reason to suspect, gone to the Coombe Cave in disobedience to the order I placed on the board only this morning—.' McCane paused for a moment. 'I have not been here long, Mr. Chard, but I have made local inquiries into the matter of the tides, and have decided that Coombe Cave is a dangerous spot, owing to the suddenness with which the water sometimes comes in. That was my reason for posting the new order, as doubtless you may have guessed.'

Chard made no reply to that. He had not guessed anything of the kind. He had put down the new order to McCane's propensity for meddling. However, he could not very well say so: so he remained silent.

'Kindly wait a moment, Mr. Chard.'

'Very well, sir.'

McCane, to Chard's surprise, crossed to the telephone. Why, and to whom, he was going to phone at that moment, in connection with so trivial a matter, was a mystery to Chard. He was still more surprised when McCane called Okeham 1. That was the number of the coastguard station. Was he going to be so absurd, so frivolously absurd, as to make inquiries up and down and round about, on account of three boys having missed six o'clock roll? Chard could scarcely contain his impatience. But his red face changed its expression, as he heard the question Mr. Cane rapped into the telephone. He was asking the coastguard about tides!

McCane's face grew graver and graver, as he listened to the reply from the coastguard station. Chard stared at him, as he hung up, at last, and turned from the telephone. What was the matter with him?

'Mr. Chard!' Jimmy McCane's voice was short and sharp. 'If the boys have gone to Coombe Cave, they are in danger.'

'My dear sir–!' said Chard.

'The tide was early, and unusually strong. So the coastguard tells me. It has been in more than an hour at Coombe Cave. If the boys were in the cave when it came in, they are cut off. And you tell me that they have not returned to the school.'

'Oh!' gasped Chard.

McCane's eyes were fixed on the red face.

'It may be, Mr. Chard, that the boys have simply wandered some distance, and failed to return in time for roll. But if they went to the cave, the matter is urgent and must be seen to at once, without a moment's delay. Coombe Cave is flooded when the tide is in. If they were caught in the tide–.'

'Good heavens!' breathed Chard. The colour wavered in the red face. 'Mr. McCane, I–I cannot say for certain, of course, but–but–but I–I surmise that–that the boys may have gone to the cave–I–I think it possible –indeed probable–.' Chard's fruity voice trailed away. But he did not need to say more. He knew that Compton and Darrell and Seymour had gone to the cave, and he knew why: he did not know officially, but he knew. And McCane's keen eyes could read that knowledge in his alarmed confused face.

The young head-master of High Coombe set his lips.

'If–if they are there–!' stammered Chard

'I have no doubt that they are there.'

'Something–something must be done! But –but what? If the tide is in, and they are there–.'

'The tide is in and they are there,'

'Good heavens!' breathed Chard. The red face was almost white. 'A boat–but no boat could live in the surf, if the tide is in–what–what–?' Chard babbled.

Jimmy McCane did not stay to listen to babble. He strode from the study, with a stern set face: leaving Chard to babble helplessly.

CHAPTER V

'MY FAULT!' muttered Aubrey.

'Rot!' growled Bob Darrell.

'Oh, crikey!' mumbled Teddy.

They clung on to the mass of high boulders, at the mouth of Coombe Cave. Behind them, the cliff soared high to the sky, inaccessible. The cave was already flooded: water surging and echoing into its utmost recesses. Round them surged the sea, booming up the steep coombe. Rushing, dashing water, wherever the eye turned, and it was rising, and rising, and rising. The mere thought of swimming was hopeless. Only their perch on the mass of rock saved them from being swept helplessly away, tossed to and fro in the waters, dashed against the cliffs, or sucked out to sea. Far to the west stretched the Atlantic, red under the sinking sun, shining and dazzling, rolling in with a sullen incessant boom, breaking in hills of surf on the cliffs. Every now and then, a wash of water came over the mass of rock to which they clung, soaking them to the skin. And it was rising.

Aubrey's handsome face was white.

'My fault!' he repeated. 'Bob, old chap–.'

'We're all right, so far,' said Bob. 'We can hang on here – I believe I've heard that this rock is above high-water mark – .'

'Oh, crumbs!' mumbled Teddy. 'What fools we've been! I – I say, that man McCane was right, after all – oh, crumbs!'

'Stick it out, old boy,' said Bob. 'While there's life, there's hope! It's not rising so fast now.'

'Oooooh!' from Teddy, as a wash of water flooded the rock.

'Hang on!' panted Bob. He grasped Teddy's arm with one hand, holding on with the other.

The water receded again. But it was bubbling and foaming all round the rock: it seemed to them like some savage beast eager to devour them. Again and again it flooded and receded.

'We're done!' muttered Aubrey, 'and I dragged you and Teddy into this, Bob. My fault – my fault.'

'Oh, rot!' grunted Bob. 'We'll stick it out till the tide turns. And – and there may be help – !'

'Yes, yes,' breathed Teddy with chattering teeth. 'Everyone in the school knows we came here, except McCane – they know where we are – I'll bet you Chard knows – they can't leave us to it – .'

'They don't know the tide's early,' said Aubrey. 'It doesn't happen once in a blue moon! It had to happen to-day!' He gritted his teeth. 'All that man's fault – but for his rotten new order, the meddling usher, we shouldn't be in this mess at all – and now – now!'

Another rush of water cut him short. For a long minute the three wallowed in water, and then once more it receded. But there was an inch of water over the top of the rock now, and it was increasing.

'If they send help – !' mumbled Teddy, when he had his breath again.

'We'd better face up to it!' muttered Aubrey. 'Help couldn't come, even if they knew. No boat could live in that surf. We've got to stick here till the tide turns – if we're still alive then.'

'Oh crumbs!' moaned Teddy.

'We'll stick out all right!' said Bob, stoutly. He stared over the swirling, glistening waters. They could stick it out. Hours and hours of drenching in salt water: but they could hold on and stick it out. At least he hoped that they could. But the water was still creeping up. They clung on to the highest point of the great mass of rock. But they were half under water now.

Even if they knew at High Coombe – and did they? – help could not come. The water surging against the cliffs was too wild for a boat. Any man who launched a boat in the flooded coombe would take his life in his hands. Who would or could make such an attempt? Chard, who grinned in Common-Room over covert rebellion to the Head – was he the man to do it? Bob could have laughed at the idea. Jimmy McCane, perhaps if he knew – but McCane did not know. True, McCane had had sense enough – which Chard had not – to learn about the tricks played by the tide: that was why that new order had been put on the board. If McCane could have known of their peril – .

'That man!' Aubrey muttered angrily through clenched teeth. 'That man! If that man hadn't meddled – .'

'Oh, don't be a fool!' gasped Bob, roughly. 'If we'd had sense enough to toe

the line, we'd be answering to our names at roll this very minute. We've asked for this, and got it!'

'Dash it all, Aubrey, you can see now that McCane was right!' mumbled Teddy. 'Haven't we got caught in the tide? Don't be a silly goat.'

Aubrey made no reply to that. The fact that McCane had been, obviously, in the right, in posting that new order that had been so deeply resented, seemed in Aubrey's eyes an added offence. But even Aubrey, in those dire moments, perhaps wished that he had, for once rendered cheerful obedience to the authority of his new head-master, instead of taking the bit between his teeth, and being a law unto himself. Very gladly he would have been standing in hall, answering 'adsum' to his name, instead of clinging to a flooded rock in the midst of wild swirling waters.

'If they knew–!' mumbled Teddy. 'If they knew, and they'd send help–.'

There was a sudden shout from Bob Darrell.

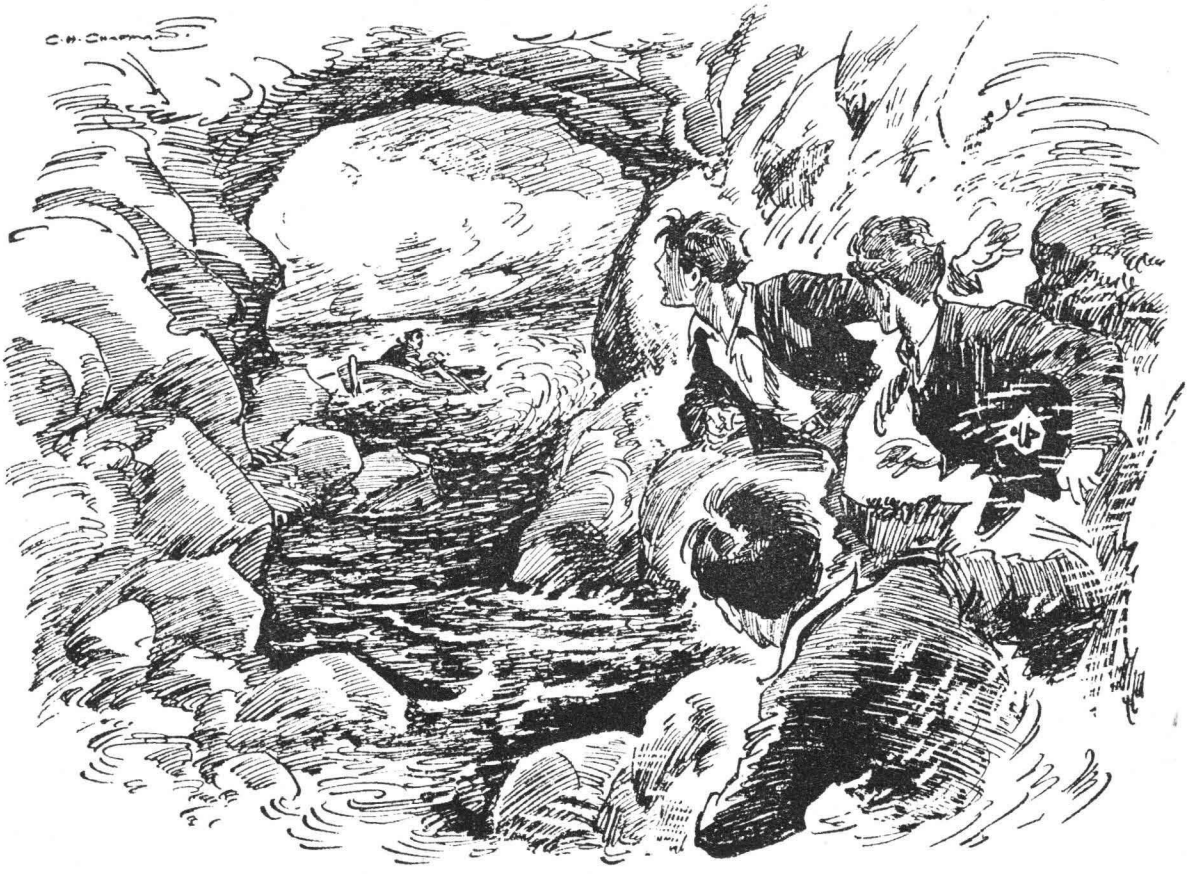
'Look–!'

'What–?'

'It's a boat!'

'Oh, gad!' gasped Aubrey.

It shot out of a swirl of waters. It was a boat, with a single man in it pulling. It tossed almost like a cork on the wild tide: it seemed a miracle that it did not capsize, every moment, or that it did not dash against



There was a sudden shout

the cliffs into fragments. Clinging to the half-submerged rock, with the water surging round and over them, the three Fifth-formers of High Coombe watched it, with starting eyes. The rower's back was to them: they could not see who it was. But whoever he was, he was pulling steadily for Coombe Cave.

'McCane!' yelled Bob, suddenly.

'What?' gasped Aubrey.

'It's McCane!'

'Rot!'

'Look, you ass! Look, you fathead! It's McCane!'

'That man!' breathed Aubrey.

Teddy set up a crow of joy.

'It's McCane! He's coming here! He knows – he's coming! It's McCane! It's the Blighter!'

It was McCane and he was coming. 'Blighter' or not, it was McCane and he was coming. They watched him with their hearts in their mouths. Every moment it seemed that the lone oarsman must be overwhelmed in the wild rush of the sea. But Jimmy McCane, it seemed, could handle a boat, as efficiently as he could handle High Coombe. That he was risking his life, that he was taking even chances that his new headmastership might end under the rushing waters in the flooded coombe, Jimmy Mc Cane must have known: but that knowledge did not affect either his nerve or his determination. Through a thousand perils the boat came on. They watched it, nearer and nearer, and Jimmy McCane's eyes flashed round at them for a moment, and he shouted above the boom of the tide:

'Stand ready to jump!'

'Ready, sir!' shouted back Bob.

It seemed a miracle that the boat did not crash on the rock and founder. But it did not. Somehow, McCane brought it within jumping distance, and they jumped, one after another. Three drenched and dripping figures rolled over in the tossing boat, and Jimmy McCane was pulling. Bob sat up dazedly: Aubrey and Teddy sprawled panting. McCane was pulling up the flooded coombe, with the roaring tide behind him now, driving him on. Five minutes later he grounded, high up the coombe, and Mr. McCane held the boat while the drenched and dripping three crawled out.

Bob gasped for breath. His feet were on firm soil once more: he had hardly hoped ever to feel them there again.

'Mr. McCane! Sir!' he gasped. 'You – you – we – we –.'

Mr. McCane interrupted him.

'Go back to the school at once! Run all the way, and change your clothes immediately you get there.'

'Yes, sir! Yes, yes! But.'

'This instant!' rapped Mr. McCane. 'Go.'

And they went.

CHAPTER VI

'WHO cares for McCane?'

Ferguson, of the Fourth Form, asked that question.

Donkin, of that form, nodded and grinned.

Three Fifth-form men looked serious.

It was the following day. No. 3 study had strolled out, after class, and gone down the coombe. It was very pleasant, in the green wooded coombe: though the recollection of what had happened there the previous day was not quite so pleasant, to Bob Darrell, Teddy Seymour, and Aubrey Compton.

From a little distance, they looked at the great mass of rock, near the mouth of Coombe Cave, where they had clung amid wild whirling waters till Jimmy McCane had come to the rescue. Teddy shivered as he thought of it: Bob was very grave, and Aubrey's handsome face was unusually thoughtful. Both Bob and Teddy wondered, a little, whether, after all that had happened, their obstinate comrade planned to carry on with his defiance of the Head's orders, and penetrate again into that ghastly cave. If he did, Teddy was ready to remonstrate: and Bob was considering punching his head. But Aubrey made no movement to approach the cave. He seemed content with regarding it, with a very thoughtful brow, from a distance.

Footsteps crunched on sand and sea-shells, and two fags of the Fourth Form came down the coombe. Ferguson had a bottle of ginger-beer under his arm. Donkin had a bundle in his hand. It looked like a fag picnic. And the two juniors passed on towards the cave: but they stopped and looked round, as Bob Darrell called to them. Evidently, Ferguson and Donkin were going into the forbidden cave, disregarding Head's orders as carelessly as Aubrey had done the day before.

'Keep out of that!' called out Bob.

Ferg gave him a look.

'We're going up the cave–!' he said.

'You know the Head's put it out of bounds,' said Teddy.

'I like that–from you!' grinned Ferguson. 'Why, you men were lagged there yourselves yesterday, and you'd jolly well have been drowned most likely if McCane hadn't come after you. Pack it up.'

'Keep clear of it,' said Aubrey, quietly.

'I'll watch it!' said Ferg. 'The tide's miles out now–think we'd be caught like you were? Forget it.'

'McCane's orders–!'

It was then that Ferguson of the Fourth asked that question, in Aubrey's own words of twenty-four hours ago. 'Who cares for McCane?'

'Yes, who?' added Donkin, nodding and grinning.

Aubrey coloured. His own words, his own mutinous question, did not seem to have a pleasant ring in his ears.

'Don't be a young ass, Ferguson!' said Bob. 'McCane's Head, and he's put the cave out of bounds. Keep out of it, do you hear?'

'Who's going to stop us?' demanded Ferg, independently. 'You Fifth form men ain't prefects, that I know of. Come on, Donkey.'

The two juniors moved on. Bob frowned: Teddy shook his head. Still, what Ferg said was very true: they were not prefects: Ferg and Donkey were not under their orders. And indeed, after the previous day's happenings, it did seem a little odd for them to appear so meticulous about McCane and what McCane had said. It was Aubrey who moved into action. Aubrey Compton stepped quickly after the two independent spirits of the Fourth.

'Stop!' he rapped. 'McCane's orders–!'

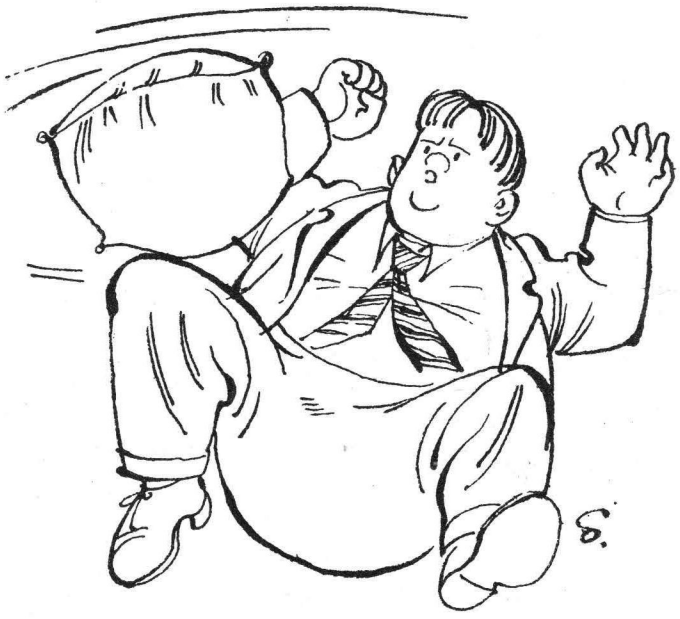
Ferg repeated his previous question, over his shoulder.

'Who cares for McCane?'

The next moment Ferg yelled, and the ginger-beer bottle, slipping from under his arm, crashed, spilling its precious contents. This catastrophe was caused by a very elegant foot impingeing, with considerable force, on Ferg's trousers.

(continued on page 124)

TRUANTS' LUCK!



By FRANK RICHARDS

'WE'RE going!' said Tom King.

'We jolly well are!' said Dick Warren.

They spoke with equal determination.

All the same, they looked – as they felt – dubious.

Skip Ruggles, sitting in the window-seat in Study Four, shook a fat head.

'You'll get into a frightful row with Charne, if you do!' he said.

'Bother Charne!' said Tom.

'Blow Charne!' said Warren.

'But you can't blow Charne, as he's our beak,' argued Skip. 'He would be as mad as a hatter. Send you up to the Head, most likely. After all, it's only a paper-chase. Better chuck it.'

It was sage advice. Skip handed it out with the best intentions. He did not want to see his chums landed in a frightful row with Mr. Charne, the master of the Felgate Fourth, and perhaps sent up to Dr. Leicester. But his chums appeared to have no use for sage advice. Tom King gave him a glare. Warren, more emphatically, picked up a cushion and hurled it. Skip received the cushion on a fat little nose, and collapsed in the window-seat.

It was all Skip's fault, really. When things went wrong in Study Four at Felgate, it was generally Skip's fault. They had been tearing up paper for scent in the paper-chase scheduled for Wednesday afternoon. Quantities of paper were wanted: and old newspapers, dog-eared books, and disused exercises, were in great demand. Skip – inadvertently, of course – had torn up three Latin proses that were due to be handed in to Mr. Charne. Not till they looked for those Latin proses, at the last minute, failing to find them, did it dawn upon the chums of Study Four what Skip had done. Then it was too late. Three Latin proses, torn to fragments and mingled in a bag with other fragments, couldn't be handed in to Mr. Charne.

The result was automatic. A fellow who did not hand in his Latin prose, at the appointed time, was booked for Extra School. Charne did not want explanations and excuses: he wanted Latin proses. It was Extra for all three that afternoon: French in Monsieur Pin's class-room, instead of a healthy, happy paper-chase by Fell Wood, the bank of the Fenny, and Hodden Heath.

It did not come so hard on Skip. Skip would have run with the pack, the first to tail off. But it was awfully hard on Tom King and Dick Warren, who were the selected hares. They talked it over in Study Four with glum faces. It was a bright, clear, cold afternoon – ideal for the run. The open spaces called them. Never had French verbs, regular or irregular, appealed to them less. And they felt the injustice of it. It wasn't their fault that Skip Ruggles was the biggest idiot at Felgate or anywhere else. How could they help Skip grabbing up the wrong papers and disintegrating them for scent? And so they came to that somewhat desperate resolution. Charne or no Charne, they were going to run in the Fourth Form paper-chase. Sage advice from Skip, the cause of the whole trouble, was superfluous.

'Urrrggh!' spluttered Skip, sitting up again. 'Look here —.'

'Shut up!' roared Tom King.

'But I say —!' persisted Skip.

Dick Warren looked round for another missile.

'You just can't cut!' urged Skip. 'Why, Charne will see the start, from his study window. Think he will stand for it? You'll have old Charne chasing after you and calling you back. Look here, take my advice, and – yarooooh!' A Latin dictionary, catching Skip under his fat chin, cut short his remarks. He wound up with a roar.

His remarks, all the same, carried weight. It was all very well for King and Warren to make up their minds to pass Charne by like the idle wind which they respected not. But was it possible to elude Charne's keen eye? That pin-point eye was well known to observe everything that went on at Felgate School. If it fell on them, going off against orders —!

'We're going!' said Tom. But he spoke a little haltingly.

'We are!' said Warren: but his voice, too, seemed to drag a little.

A 'row' afterwards they were prepared to face – even to risk being sent up to the Head. But to be 'copped' before they fairly got going – to get the row without the paper-chase – that was a disastrous prospect. And that was only too awfully, fearfully, dismally probable.

There was a step in the passage, and Bullinger looked into Study Four. He grinned at two clouded faces, and at Skip, rubbing his chin.

'What about Reece and Preece for hares?' he asked, 'as you fellows will be in Extra —.'

'We're not so sure of that!' grunted Warren.

'Eh? I heard Charne —.'

'Blow Charne.'

Tom King rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

'I – I – I wonder if it would be any good trying to explain to Charne?' he muttered. 'If he would listen —.'

'Catch him!' grunted Warren.

'Too late, anyway,' said Bullinger. 'Charne's gone out. Look here, Reece and Preece for hares —.'

'Gone out?' exclaimed Tom King. His face brightened. Dick Warren's followed suit. It was like the sun coming out of the clouds.

'Yes – one of his half-holiday grinds,' said Bullinger. 'What difference does that make?'

'Lots!' chuckled Tom King.

The chums of Study Four exchanged blissful glances. They knew Charne's 'grinds'. If Charne had gone out on a grind, his portly person was not likely to be on view at Felgate again for hours. The paper-chase would be well on its way long before that pin-point eye glinted about Felgate again. It might even be over, and hare and hounds back at the school.

The coast was clear! A row afterwards could be dismissed from mind, to be considered later, when it accrued. Why, it was even possible that Mossoo might omit to report absence from Extra: he did sometimes. Anyhow, Charne had gone on a country walk, and two rather thoughtless juniors of his form were free to do as they jolly well chose!

Tom King jumped up.

'Come on,' he said.

'Tain't time for Extra yet,' said Bullinger, staring.

Tom laughed.

'Never mind Extra! We're running in the chase — come on, Dick. Time we got changed.'

'I say —!' bleated Skip.

Skip, no doubt, had some more sage advice to hand out. But his chums did not stay to listen to it. Charne had gone out: and that was all that mattered. They cut out of the study, leaving Bullinger to stare, and Skip to waste his bleating on the desert air.

CHAPTER II

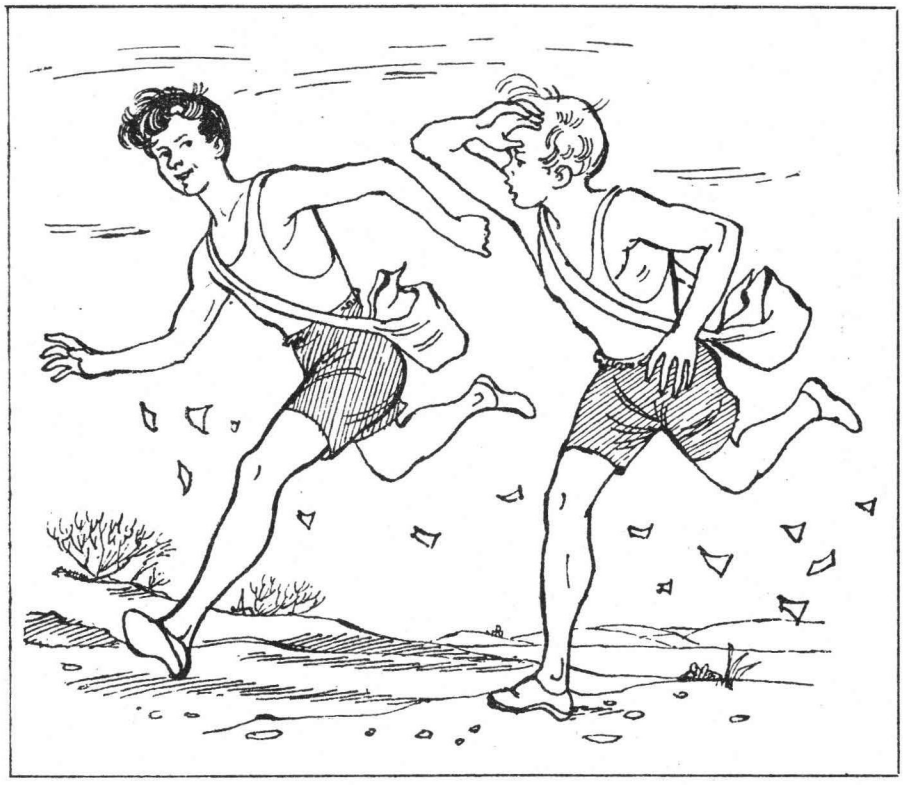
Tom King glanced back, from the slopes of High Fell, and smiled. Dick Warren mopped a spot of perspiration from his brow. It was a cold day but a warm run. Faintly from afar came the note of a bugle. The pack were streaming out of Fell Wood, and the hares had been sighted – but far in the distance – their shirts just two spots of blue on the hillside. There were some good running men in the pack – Bullinger, and Reece, and Preece, and Carton and Valence – but King and Warren were undoubtedly the best men in the Fourth at that game. The hares had had ten minutes' start: but they had very considerably improved on it: and half-way out, many of the pack had tailed off and given it up. By winding ways the trail of torn paper led those who were made of sterner stuff, and were still sticking it out: but now the hares were in view, and Bullinger called on the bugle. But both Tom King and Dick Warren smiled as they glanced back at the distant toiling pack.

'They've seen us!' said Tom.

'Let 'em!' said Warren. 'Give 'em a good look – they won't see us again before Felgate!'

And just to tantalise the distant pack, the hares stood where they were, looking back, and waving their hands. The pack came streaming up the hillside, Reece and Preece pulling ahead. Reece and Preece were very anxious to make a capture, and score over Study Four, if they could. The opinion of Tom King and Dick Warren was that they couldn't. For a long minute they stood there, in full view: and when they moved again, it was at a deliberately leisurely stroll.

That leisurely stroll, however, was only to tantalise Reece and Preece. As they plunged out of sight among the thickets on High Fell,



'They've seen us!' said Tom

they put on speed again. It was amusing to rag the pack: but they were not risking being caught, all the same. Scattering scent as they ran on, by winding paths, or plunging through thickets, they worked their way round the lower slopes of High Fell, and then downward to the bank of the Fenny. Their course lay along the river for half a mile, and then by Hodden Heath home. And neither of them expected to see the pack again, or to be seen by them, nearer than home.

It was easy going on the path by the glistening Fenny. They trotted on cheerily. That they were supposed by their form-master to be sitting in Extra, swotting at French under Monsieur Pin, they had quite forgotten, in the cheery excitement of the chase. There was plenty of time to think of that when the trouble came, later – if it came. Just at present they were enjoying the keen air, the vigorous exercise, and the pleasure of beating the pack. Charne and his edicts had quite disappeared from their minds.

They were suddenly, and unexpectedly, reminded of both.

'King! Warren! Stop!'

They jumped, in their surprise, almost clear of the earth.

It was a familiar voice.

It was, in fact, the voice of Mr. Charne, master of the Fourth Form at Felgate. They came to a startled and dismayed stop. They stared round. Charne was not to be seen. He was nowhere at hand. Really, it seemed for one amazed moment that the two truants were haunted by a disembodied voice.

'What — ?' gasped Tom King.

'Where — ?' panted Warren.

Then the voice came again.

'Stop this instant!'

This time it guided their eyes in the right direction. The voice came across the Fenny. At that point the Fenny, though deep and rapid, was not wide. It flowed swiftly between two high steep banks. Tom King and Dick Warren were on one bank. A portly form was visible on the other. Across the stream, two pin-point eyes glinted at two dismayed schoolboys.

'Oh, scissors!' gasped Tom.

'Oh, gum!' moaned Warren.

They gazed across the Fenny at Mr. Charne. It had all seemed so safe, so secure, when they knew that Charne had gone on a grind – one of his long country walks. It had not occurred to them that, in the course of a cross-country run, they might possibly fall in with a beak who was on a country walk! They had never thought of that. They thought of it now – too late!

CHAPTER III

Mr. Charne could hardly believe his eyes: keen as they were. There was a spot of the autocrat in Charne. He was accustomed, in his form, to speak as one having authority, saying 'Do this!' and he doeth it. Never could it have occurred to Charne that juniors whom he had assigned to Extra School could ever be spotted miles from Felgate, engaged in a paper-chase. But there they were – King and Warren, who should have been sitting in Extra with Ruggles – there they were, under his astonished and wrathful eyes, on the other bank of the Fenny. The wrath in Charne's face was terrific. Achilles' wrath, to Greece the direful spring of woes unnumbered, had simply nothing on it. He came to the edge of the bank – rather precariously on a rather crumbling edge of a steep drop – and stared across - or rather, glared across. Had King and Warren been on the same bank, Charne might have boxed their ears, at that moment. Luckily for their ears, the Fenny ran between.

'King! Warren! What are you doing here?' thundered Charne.

Really, it was a superfluous question. Running shorts and bags of scent were a sufficient indication of what King and Warren were doing there.

'We – we – we – it's a – a – a paper-chase, sir!' gasped Tom.

'We – we – we're the hares, sir!' stuttered Warren.

Thunder intensified in the brow of Charne.

'Did I, or did I not, give you Extra School for failing to hand in your Latin proses?' It was more like a roll of thunder than a voice.

'Oh! Yes, sir!'

'Yet you are here!'

They could only blink at him, across the Fenny. They, undoubtedly, were there: there was no denying that. They wished, from the very bottom of their hearts, that they were anywhere else. But – there they were!

'I shall deal with you most severely for this!' The thunder rolled on. 'In the meantime, return to the school at once, by the shortest route. Go back!'

'If – if you please, sir!' gasped Tom. 'Mayn't we finish the run?'

'What? what? Certainly not! You will go back by the way you have come, this very instant!'

'Oh, suffering cats!' moaned Dick Warren. Tom could have groaned. They had to go back – to walk fairly into the hands of the pack!

Tom made one more desperate effort.

'If–if you please, sir, we'd be back almost as soon if we go on, sir —.'

'Silence!' Mr. Charne stamped his foot. He stamped it hard, and most emphatically. 'Another word, and — Oh!'

Charne had stamped that foot, partly as an expression of his towering wrath, and partly to lend emphasis to his words. But he had stamped it not wisely but too well. On the very edge of a steep bank, it was an unwise proceeding. How unwise it was, Charne realised the next moment, as a loose clod slipped under the stamping foot, and he lost his balance.

Splash!

It happened so suddenly that King and Warren were as taken by surprise as Charne. Their eyes popped at a portly form-master, slithering headlong down a steep bank, accompanied by earth and stones, and then plunging into splashing water. Charne disappeared from their sight.

He came up, in the middle of the stream. Two hands were flung helplessly up–with the natural consequence that Charne went under again. King and Warren hadn't known that Charne couldn't swim. They knew it now.

'Oh!' gasped Tom. 'Quick!'

Bags of scent were flung anywhere. Tom King was the first to dive, but Warren was only a second behind him. Charne, struggling wildly, and adding to his danger by his blind clutches at the atmosphere, was swept along by the current. It was fortunate for Charne that those two members of his form were good men at ducker. They reached him and grasped him. They got his head up, and kept it up. Even then, it seemed a little doubtful whether Charne might not drown the whole party by his frantic flounderings.

But they edged him to the bank–their own bank. They dragged him out, and up that bank. He sat down there, streaming with water, his hat gone, his hair a wet mop–what there was of it!–gasping, panting, spluttering. King and Warren, breathless, stood and panted for breath, dripping from head to foot. From the distance came a sound of ta-ra-ra! It was the bugle–the hares had been sighted again!

'Urrggh! Wurrgh!' Charne gurgled. 'Urrgh! Upon my word! King–Warren you–you–you–urrrrrgh!' He recovered a little. 'Thank you, King! Thank you, Warren! You are two brave lads! Urrrggh! I am–urrgh!–much obliged to you! Urrrggh! Do not stand there dripping with water–you will catch cold! Run as fast as you can to the school–urrrggh!'

'May we go by way of Hodden Heath, sir?' asked Tom, meekly.

'What? what?' Charne glared, for a moment. But only for a moment. 'Oh! Yes! Certainly! You may finish your run! Oh! Certainly.'

They waited for no more.

CHAPTER IV

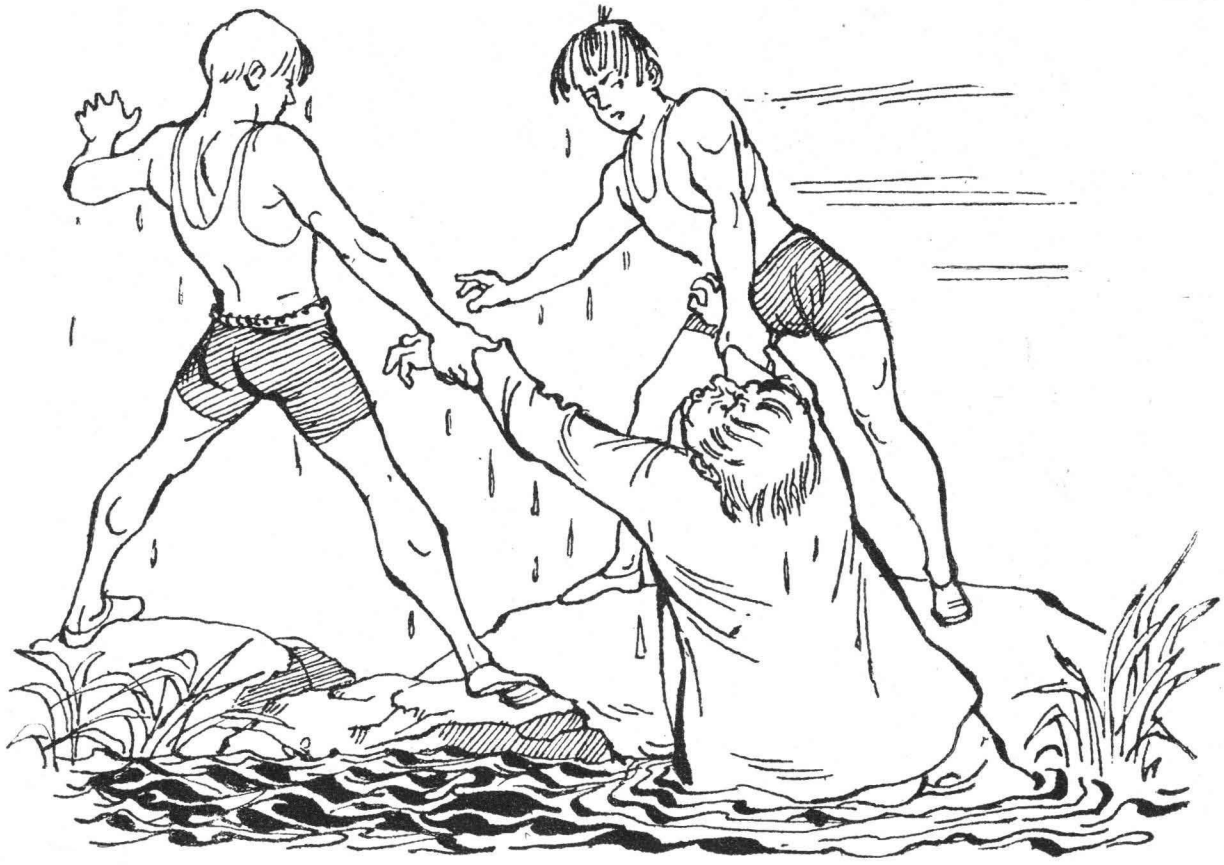
Skip came out of Extra, to find his chums in a crowd of fellows in the Felgate quad. Rather to Skip's surprise, they were looking merry and bright.

'Did you beat the pack?' asked Skip.

'Sort of! Miles ahead,' answered Warren.

'Yards, at least,' said Tom King.

'Well, that's all right,' agreed Skip. 'But you're booked for an awful row with Charne.



They dragged him out, and up that bank

I say, he's come in, and I saw Mossoo go to his study. So he will jolly well know you cut Extra.'

'He knows already!' chuckled Tom. 'You see, we met him, along the Fenny, and he told us we could finish the run, if we liked. Quite nice about it.'

'Jolly nice!' grinned Warren.

Which quite mystified Skip – till he heard the whole story of the truant's luck!

WHO CARES FOR Mc CANE? *(continued from page 117)*

'Wooooooh!' yelled Ferguson, 'Why – look here – keep your hoof away, you Fifth-form cad – Whooooooop!'

Aubrey did no keep his hoof away. It landed twice again on Ferguson, and once on Donkin, before the two juniors bolted up the coombe and sought safety in distance. If Ferg and the Donkey carried on with their picnic, that function took place in some safe spot than the Coombe Cave.

Aubrey rejoined his friends, with a rather flushed face. Bob Darrell grinned, and Teddy chuckled.

'After all, the man's Head!' said Aubrey.

He left it at that. For the nonce, at least, the rebel of High Coombe was in no mood to repeat, or to hear repeated, that impertinent question, 'Who cares for McCane?'