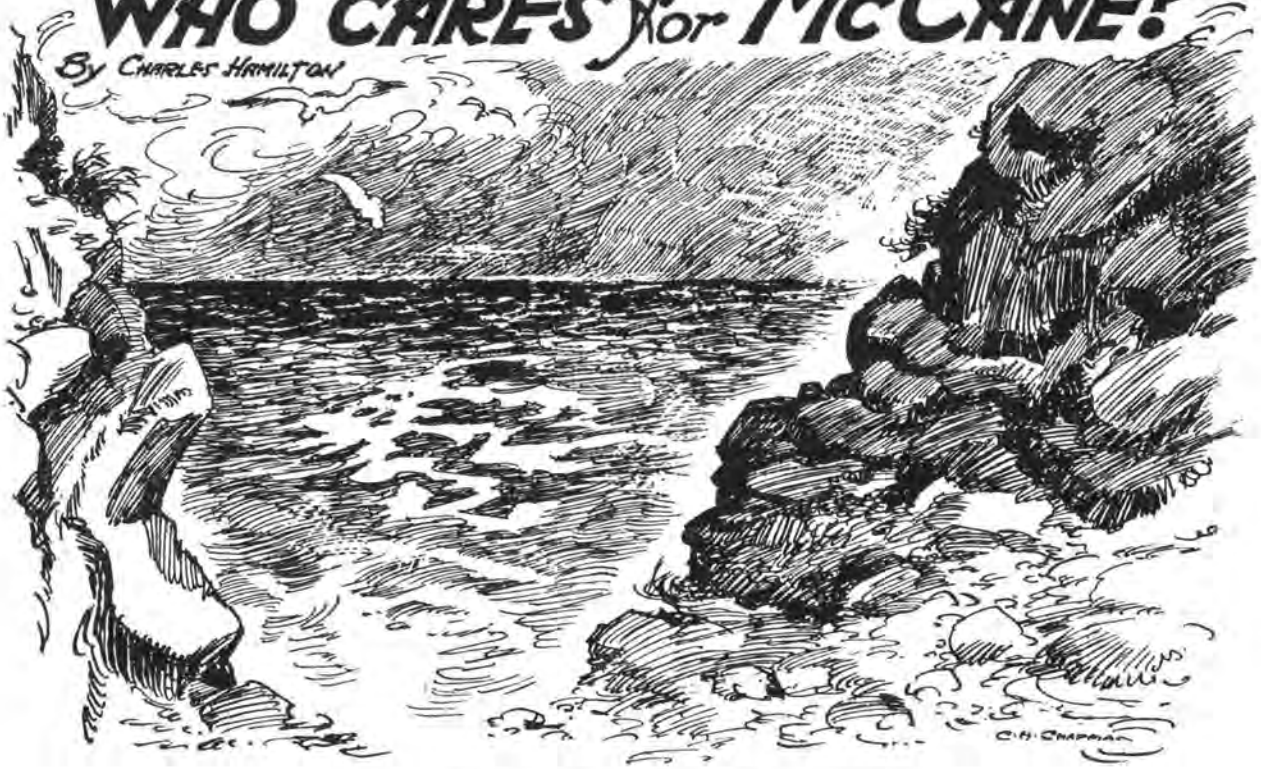


# WHO CARES FOR McCANE?

By CHARLES HAMILTON



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 boulder who's been sent here as head-master, 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 head-master 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 boulder 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 may 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 nick-named the School for Slackers?' snapped Bob.

'Why not?' smiled Aubrey.

Bob Darrell breathe 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 Darrell 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 McCANE, 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 Coomers: 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.’

‘Ooooooh!’ 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 it 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.

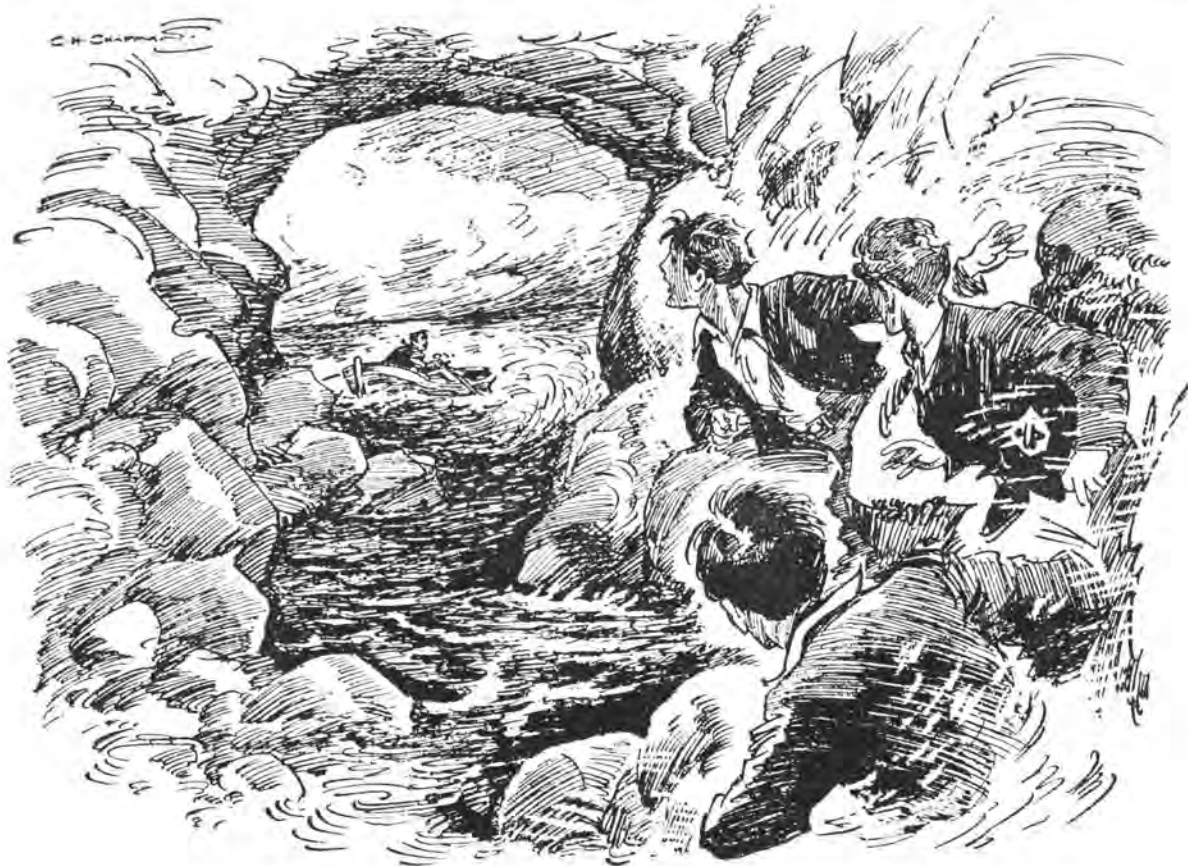
'Look-!'

'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 head-mastership might end under the rushing waters in the flooded coombe, Jimmy McCane 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 impinging, with considerable force, on Ferg's trousers.

*(continued on page 124)*

‘Wooooooh!’ yelled Ferguson, ‘Why—look here—keep your hoof away, you Fifth-form cad—Whoooooop!’

Aubrey did not 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?’