
HOUSEMASTER

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The Right Stuff
A Man's Man
A Safety Match
Happy-Go-Lucky
A Knight on Wheels
The Willing Horse
The Lucky Number
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The Ship of Remembrance:
Gallipoli-Salonika
Their Name Liveth
(The Book of the Scottish National
War Memorial). Illustrated.
The Great Wall of India
Lucky Dog

HOUSEMASTER

By

IAN HAY

LONDON

HODDER & STOUGHTON, LTD.

TO
H L-W
THE BELOVED CHATELAINE
OF
THE HOSPITABLE HOUSE
WHEREIN
THIS TALE WAS FIRST TOLD

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*The characters in this book are
entirely imaginary, and have no
relation to any living person.*

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CHAPTER ONE
HOME FRONT

“ALL over! You can remove yourself now.” Mr. Donkin restored the cane to its residence in the locked cupboard below the study window. The very young gentleman addressed, Master Bimbo Faringdon, was at the moment occupying two chairs simultaneously. These were set back to back in the middle of the study, and Bimbo was kneeling on a Liddell and Scott laid upon the one with his head well down upon the seat of the second, his slender form thus presenting the maximum surface for chastisement.

Upon hearing his housemaster’s words, Bimbo gave a resolute gulp, straightened himself painfully, and descended from his lexicographical perch. The Moke had only given him a quick five, but the Moke was an experienced and conscientious performer over any distance.

“Did it hurt?” enquired Mr. Donkin, his back still turned. He possessed more tact than his House gave him credit for.

“Yes, sir,” replied Bimbo, applying clandestine massage.

“I meant it to. Otherwise we should both have been wasting our time. Shouldn’t we—hey?”

“Yes, sir.” One seldom says no on these occasions.

“I rejoice that we are in such complete agreement.” Mr. Donkin ceased to gaze out of the study window, and turned abruptly upon his pupil. He was a stocky, clean-shaven man of something over fifty, with greying hair, a good chin, and bright blue eyes. He habitually boomed at boys, and the boys always knew, from the *timbre* of the boom, the exact state of their housemaster’s intentions for the moment. Roughly speaking, the louder the boom the safer the situation.

“And now for heaven’s sake don’t get sent up to me again. Do you think I enjoy beating people?”

Bimbo was feeling a little better now.

“Some of the fellows think you do, sir.”

Mr. Donkin gazed down upon the small, freckled, deferential, impudent face before him.

“Oh, they do, do they? You have my authority to correct that impression.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And try to cultivate just a little common sense in yourself. When the Laws of the Medes and Persians say categorically that every boy caught trespassing in Culver’s

Coppice will be caned, what do you want to go trespassing in Culver's Coppice for—hey? And when you trespass, what do you want to go and get caught for?"

Bimbo's classical education at this period—he was not quite fourteen—had not proceeded far enough for him to know what a rhetorical question is, but his instinct informed him that no answer was expected to this one. So, having by this time almost ceased to tingle, and being of an incorrigibly chatty disposition, he took up the conversational opening just afforded him.

"We seem to be getting rather a lot of new Medes and Persians these days, sir, don't you think?"

"Meaning——?"

"All these new rules, sir, about——"

"Boy," enquired Mr. Donkin in a voice of thunder, "are you trying to lure me into joining you in a vote of censure on the Headmaster?"

"Oh no, sir!"

"Then get out! Beat it, vamoose, scam—or whatever the current vulgarism is! Go and examine your disgusting stripes before a mirror! Do you do that?"

"Usually, sir."

"So did I. Out!"

"Yes, sir." Bimbo was by this time at the green baize door which led to the boys' side of the house.

"And come to breakfast on Sunday!"

"Thank you, sir."

Bimbo slid from sight—he was one of those people with the curious habit of opening a door only just wide enough to permit of entrance or exit—and joined the other fifty-three assorted Bimbos who constituted the Red House of Marbledown School.

His Housemaster glanced at the clock. It was the kind of clock which few public-school masters escape—a miniature mausoleum of mottled marble, built on the lines of the Parthenon and furnished with the Westminster chimes. (Generally it has *Olim Meminisse Juvabit* graven upon its pediment like an epitaph, and a brass plate upon its base, beginning Presented to —— Esq., M.A.). Mr. Donkin had incurred this one some seven years ago, upon the occasion of his retirement from the Presidency of the Marbledown School Rowing Club and twenty-five years of active coaching of the School Eight. Under that tutelage the Eight had seven times won the Town Cup at the local regatta, and had once—*Io Triumpe!* wrested the Ladies Plate at Henley from a Cambridge College crew almost a stone a man heavier than itself.

The presentation had come as a complete surprise to its recipient; and instead of thanking the donors in words of sentimental gratitude and modest self-depreciation, he had devoted ten full minutes to a blistering condemnation of testimonials in general and conscripted contributions in particular. However, he had accepted the clock, which at the moment registered twenty minutes to ten.

This reminded him that his appointment with Bimbo Faringdon had deprived him of his after-breakfast pipe. He repaired the omission, and then, puffing contentedly, restored the two chairs to less suggestive positions and the Liddell and Scott to the top shelf.

After that he looked round his study.

It was a square comfortable room, of the type usually described as having a lived-in look. That is to say, there were too many pictures on the walls—mostly groups of young gentlemen with bare knees and severe expressions—too many books on the table, and too many loose papers lying about everywhere. Just below the picture-rail upon the wall opposite the fireplace hung an oar with a light blue blade, emblazoned with certain arms in scarlet and gold and inscribed with nine names. The first name on the list read:—*Bow, C. Donkin; 10 st. 10.* C. Donkin weighed more than that now.

Upon the Globe-Wernicke bookshelves which lined most of the room to a height of six feet or so were displayed an incongruous variety of what are politely called *objets d'art*—mainly the gifts of ex-pupils now engaged in bearing the white man's burden in distant parts of the globe and resolute in sending home undesired mementoes of the fact. There was a pair of lacquered Japanese vases; there was a little brown Buddha; there was an elephant's tusk, and a bronze statuette of the Winged Victory. There were also numerous silver cups and mugs, memorials of a strenuous youth, and photographs of boys everywhere.

In the very centre of the mantelpiece stood a photograph in an old-fashioned silver frame, the photograph of a girl of twenty, a girl with a little *retroussé* nose and a laughing mouth and considerably more hair than girls allow themselves in these days—such a girl as you might have seen, in a white frock and a tulle picture-hat, gracing a punt during any pre-War Commem. or May Week. Mr. Donkin's eyes came to rest upon this.

“Good morning, dear,” he said—almost formally. Then he sat down at his desk, and opened a portfolio marked ‘Reports.’ At least he had begun to do so when his eyes fell upon *The Times* newspaper, lying upon the corner of the desk and alluringly open at the Cross-word Puzzle—that standing menace to all pedagogic resolution. He laid the portfolio down again, and extended a furtive hand towards the

demoralising periodical.

“I’ll just do One Across,” he muttered. “Then not a thing till after prayers to-night! Let me see. . . . *Izaak Walton, in the eyes of his devotees, is a bird*—nine letters. That ought to be easy. Something about fishing. What bird fishes? Cormorant—that’s nine letters. Still, I don’t see where Izaak comes in.”

The telephone on Mr. Donkin’s desk rang. He answered it mechanically.

“Yes? Sanatorium? Yes. Good morning, Doctor. Maturin minor? Yes, how is he? H’m! Not so good. I’ll look in and see him in about half an hour, without fail.”

He hung up, and concentrated again on Izaak. But this time there was a knock on the green-baize door. It proved to be Travers, head boy of the House, asking for permission to administer a Prefects’ beating to one Hicks major, a notorious freebooter of the Middle School and a thorn in the side of the weaker vessels of the Prefects’ Room.

“What has he done?”

“He egged on some smaller fellows to rag Elmsley’s study last night, sir, when Elmsley was out for extra coaching at the Brown House.”

(Elmsley was the junior prefect, and new to his job.)

“You’re sure of your facts?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Right. Go ahead.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Good boy, that,” said Mr. Donkin to himself as the door closed. “He went for Goat Hicks himself, and not for the small fry. What a rare thing moral courage is! ‘Fry?’ Fish again! Could it be ‘flyfisher’? No, flyfishers aren’t birds. Come in!”

There was a single loud bang on the mahogany door which led to Mr. Donkin’s side of the house, and Mr. Beamish entered. Simultaneously Mr. Donkin thrust aside *The Times* and turned virtuously to the Reports.

“Morning, Victor,” he said.

“Morning, Donkin.” Victor Beamish was a well-set-up young man in his late twenties, and was Mr. Donkin’s House Tutor, or House-dog. He was also Games Master at Marbledown, and a demi-god in the eyes of such persons as Bimbo Faringdon.

“I want you to come down to the river this afternoon, and have a look at the Eight,” he announced.

“I thought you brooked no interference in that quarter.”

“Oh, I don’t mind your advice. Of course one needn’t take it.”

“I apologise for overlooking the fact. What’s the trouble?”

“That blasted young fool Stroke is worrying me. He doesn’t seem to be able to work up to anything faster than about thirty-two. I’m beginning to think he’s not strong enough for the job.”

“What does he weigh?”

“Nine stone eight. If he’s to be turfed out it must be done at once. The Regatta’s only three weeks away.”

“He’s got a lovely swing, and the crew follow him nicely. You might try shaving his blade; that would help him to get through quicker. It’ll do Flossie Nightingale no harm at all to work a bit harder at Six: he’s a lazy young devil.”

“The Town Cup’s in the bag for us if we can get him right,” continued the single-minded Beamish. “When can you come?”

“I can’t manage this afternoon. Look at these pestilential things.”

“Reports? I’ve done mine long ago.”

“All right; don’t be superior about it: form masters get them first. But this new idea of half-term Reports at all—who wants them? Doesn’t the end-of-term report cast sufficient gloom over the British breakfast table as it is? Why bung in a lemon at half-time?”

Beamish helped himself to a cigarette, unbidden, and slipped two or three more into his case. That was Beamish’s way in life.

“Yes,” he said. “I was telling them in the Common Room only last night that the Headpiece and his innovations are becoming a bore.”

Donkin chuckled.

“Another eminent authority made a precisely similar remark to me only a few minutes ago,” he said.

“Who?”

“Master Bimbo Faringdon. His wording was more tactful, but the import was the same. I’d just been tanning him.”

“What for?”

“He had disregarded one of the Head’s notices.”

“I don’t blame him. The Head puts up a damned sight too many of those things.”

“I agree. Legislation by typewriter does not appeal to the young: they prefer the spoken word, if possible in colloquial form. But the Head’s the Head. All the same, I don’t see why Culver’s Coppice should be put out of bounds. It’s in the School grounds——”

“He thinks the boys go there to smoke.”

“If I were Headmaster I’d let every one of them smoke. Pipes! Then they’d be so sick that they wouldn’t want to smoke again for years. Like the girls in

sweetshops. They get the run of their teeth from the very start, you know. Not one of them ever wants to see a sweet again after a few days.”

Beamish gazed contemplatively at his superior. Funny old bloke, the Moke. As hidebound a routinier as you could find in most ways, but always apt to spring some Bolshie idea or other on you.

“I sometimes wish they’d made you Head, Donkin,” he said—“when——”

“Me? Head? Nonsense! I’m too old—gaga!”

“Oh, not so very,” said Beamish handsomely. “Anyhow, you know your job. And you are comparatively human.”

“Thank you.”

“At any rate the Governors made a first-class bloomer when they appointed that _____”

Mr. Donkin decided that this conversation had run on long enough.

“I don’t think we’ll discuss the Headmastership,” he said, with a touch of stiffness. “The post is filled, and by a very brilliant man.”

But Mr. Beamish had by no means finished.

“What makes him brilliant? Tell me that!”

“Certainly. He’s a magnificent organiser; the routine goes on oiled wheels since he came here. He’s a profound theologian, a genuine scholar, a brilliant teacher—he’s taught me a thing or two about that, and I thought I knew everything——”

“And he hasn’t the faintest beginning of an idea what goes on inside a boy’s head!”

“My dear fellow, how many of us have? Anyhow, he’s the Head, and our business is to back him up.”

A distant bell began to jangle, and simultaneously through the green-baize door came the sound of hard chairs being pushed back, and the shuffle of reluctant feet over a linoleum floor. The Red House, having digested its breakfast, was upheaving itself for a return to the grindstone.

“Are you in School this hour?” asked Mr. Donkin.

“No, not till eleven. I’m going into the town, to see the Regatta Secretary about the entries.”

“Right. I’m not in till twelve: that gives me a chance to get on with these reports. I’ll look at the Eight to-morrow, at two fifteen.” Mr. Donkin produced a memorandum pad from one of his overcrowded pockets and scribbled on it. “Does it still contain three of my boys, or have you thrown them all out?”

“It contains four, if you count Bimbo. He’s coxing.”

“Well, if nerve is the essential qualification, he should steer you to victory. Hallo,

here's his report. . . . I wonder if he really went into Culver's Coppice to smoke."

"Much more likely bird-nesting. He can climb to the top of anything."

"That's more than Frank Hastings seems to think. Listen to Bimbo's mathematical report: 'Despite an inherent levity of disposition, he habitually gravitates to the bottom.'"

"The Headpiece will censor that one. You remember the elegant little typewritten notice he circulated last week, about the desirability of avoiding humorous or epigrammatic reports?"

"So he did: I'd forgotten. He sends round so many of these da—— Get out, Victor!"

"Righto," said Beamish, with a grin.

As he opened the mahogany door he almost collided with a small, grizzled, prim-looking man of about Donkin's age, attired in cap and gown—the latter flowing almost to his heels.

"Good morning, Beamish," said the newcomer.

"Was it?" Beamish strode out, banging the door behind him.

"An uncouth modern product," observed Mr. Hastings acidly. "Good morning, Charles."

"No, Frank, I will *not* play golf with you this afternoon, nor any other foolish game." Mr. Donkin began ostentatiously to initial reports.

"No one asked you to. Do you mind if I open one of these windows?"

"You dare!"

"But the atmosphere of this room——"

Mr. Donkin looked up, and surveyed his lifelong friend and sparring partner curiously.

"Frank," he said, "for thirty years you have been trying to open my windows. You have been frustrated on every single occasion, yet you persevere. Why? Who taught you such a woman's trick, I often wonder."

"An adequate supply of fresh air is essential——"

"Nonsense. A fondness for through draughts is a purely feminine foible. You and I are bachelors, and always will be. Sit down and thank God for the fact. Ah, would you? Drop it!"

Mr. Donkin sprang to his feet, but it was too late. Mr. Hastings had picked up *The Times*, and was deep in the cross-word puzzle.

"I see you haven't even done One Across yet," he said.

"I haven't even begun, as it happens."

"I finished it at breakfast, as usual."

“Clever, aren’t you? I suppose if you met Torquemada at a party you would simply spit in his eye!”

“*In the eyes of his devotees,*” read Mr. Hastings loudly and pedantically, “*Izaak Walton is a bird.*’ Ten letters. Simple! Use your brains!”

“I’m keeping it till after prayers to-night, when I may possibly have a few minutes to myself.”

“The word is ‘Kingfisher.’”

“I don’t *want* to be told!” roared Mr. Donkin, in justifiable exasperation. “Will you get out of here?”

By way of reply to this order Mr. Hastings took off his mortar-board and sat down on Mr. Donkin’s worn leather sofa. He looked up for a moment at the girl on the mantelpiece.

“Charles,” he asked, “when did you last set eyes on Barbara Fane?”

“Barbara—Barbara Fane?” Donkin laid down his fountain-pen and in his turn glanced up at the girl on the mantelpiece. “Not since the day of poor Angela’s funeral. Nearly fourteen years ago. Why?”

“I had a letter from her this morning.”

“Written from——?”

“Folkestone. She has just arrived from Paris, and proposes paying you an immediate visit.”

“Does she? Well, it will be interesting to——” He whistled, suddenly. “Great Scott, I’ve just flogged her nephew!”

“I don’t imagine that she’ll object to that in the slightest.”

“But why should she announce her arrival to you? I’m the boy’s housemaster.”

“It isn’t about the boy. It’s about the girls.”

“What girls?”

“His sisters. There are three of them, you know.”

“I’d forgotten.”

“No, you hadn’t, Charles.”

Mr. Donkin merely glared, and returned to his grievance.

“But why should Barbara communicate with me through you? I’ve known her as long as you have.”

“Not quite. I introduced you to her—at a May Week Ball. And Angela. Possibly you remember.”

Apparently Charles Donkin did remember.

“So you did,” he said softly. “Fancy you and me at a ball, Frank—you, anyhow! We wore sashes across our shirt-fronts—things about the size of the Ribbon of the

Garter—with the College crest on them, to show we were Stewards! How important we felt! And why not? We were young, and young people are important—infinately more important than battered wrecks like you and me.”

“Shall we return to the matter under consideration?” suggested Mr. Hastings coldly. He prided himself upon always keeping to the point, which Charles Donkin never did.

“The girls? Certainly. I wonder what they have grown up like? Have you ever seen them?”

“Only occasionally. Their father keeps them abroad with him all the time. Rome—Venice—Vienna—Paris—what an upbringing!”

“So long as they take after their mother they’ll be all right.” Donkin was standing up now, with his hands behind his back, thoughtfully considering the girl on the mantelpiece. She was not Barbara, as you may have been led to suppose. She had once been Barbara’s younger sister Angela—and the mother of Bimbo Faringdon and the three girls.

CHAPTER TWO
FOREIGN SOIL

WE are now in Paris, a few days previous to the pregnant conversation just reported, and I am going to introduce you to the Faringdon family without further ado.

But first of all we must track them to what a Chicago gangster would call their 'territory'—their operating area, in fact. That means that we must by-pass orthodox Paris, the Paris of the Rue de Rivoli, and the Champs-Élysées, and the Place Vendôme with its Hotel Ritz, cross the Pont-Neuf to the Rive Gauche, and penetrate into the Paris of Montparnasse and the Quartier Latin.

This done, if you stroll southward along that busy but bourgeois thoroughfare the Boulevard St. Germain, you will come presently to a narrow street called La Rue de Cherche-Midi, running away to your left—a street full of shops which cater for the daily wants of comparatively humble folk—shops whose contents have as a rule overflowed on to the pavement outside, and are all controlled by shrewd and garrulous ladies in felt slippers.

Turning into this and pursuing your way for a quarter of a mile or so, you will presently observe upon your right a species of archway, opening into what the English call a court, the Scots a close, and the French an *impasse*. The sonorous title of this particular dead-end is the *Impasse Théophile Blom*.

Who Théophile may have been, and why an *impasse* should have been dedicated to his memory, I do not know. One seldom does; one simply accepts the designation as part of the French system of street-naming. It is a picturesque and understandable system; for the French are intensely proud of their country, and of her children's triumphs in every field, whether of war or peace. (So are we of ours, for that matter: the difference is that the French have a working knowledge of their own history.) You have only to paint a name or date up on a French street-corner to arouse in every passing citizen a glow of patriotic and well-informed satisfaction.

Men and events are alike commemorated. The Street of the Fourth of September, the Street of the Twenty-Ninth of July—do not these intrigue in themselves? Then there are stately avenues dedicated to French military triumphs, mainly Napoleonic—Austerlitz, Jena, Eylau, Wagram. Also to the men responsible for them—Junot, Murat, Massena. Smaller victories and less celebrated victors are duly remembered in proportionately less conspicuous thoroughfares.

But France is above all the country of the Intellect. Paris is criss-crossed with

streets perpetuating the memory of poets, painters, philosophers, authors, musicians and scientists. Corneille and Racine, Molière and Beaumarchais, Meissonnier and Fragonard, Mirabeau and Renan, Gounod and Berlioz, Alexandre Dumas and Alphonse Daudet—each has his asphalt memorial. Victor Hugo has a whole boulevard. Gay-Lussac, who made the discovery (which I fear leaves most of us cold) that equal volumes of all gases contain the same number of molecules, has been allotted a considerable thoroughfare in the neighbourhood of the Sorbonne. Lavoisier, the co-discoverer (with the English Priestley) of oxygen, has a far smaller one; but it is in a much more *chic* district; and that makes up for a lot, as every dweller in a poky Mayfair flat consolingly reflects.

In our London street-naming we are less imaginative. We start off hopefully enough with a few provocative titles like London Wall, Barbican, and Aldermanbury. Then The Strand, which is called The Strand because it once was a strand—a strip of muddy foreshore running along Thames-side. Throw in the various Gates which once pierced the Wall—Ludgate, Aldgate, Cripplegate, and the like—add The Adelphi, commemorative of the genius of the four Adam brothers, and you have about exhausted London's achievements in the way of remembrance.

What is left? Well, innumerable London streets bear trite and evasive Christian names, like George, or William, or Charles. (There are said to be one hundred and nine George Streets in the Metropolitan Area alone.) Others, whole acres of them, are named after their ground landlord, or the ground landlord's numerous collaterals.

Surely there is an opportunity here. Could we not abolish a few score of the Streets of George and *his* collaterals and do something more stimulating to patriotic imagination? Why not start off with a Street of the Twenty-fourth of May and a Street of the Fifth of November? Then, instead of ringing the changes on the great houses of Grosvenor, Cadogan, Bentinck and Portman, give the Arts a chance. Begin with a Kipling Street, an Elgar Square, and a Gilbert and Sullivan Avenue. After that, what about Pinero Place, or Barrie Crescent—no, Gardens? And of course a Chesterton Circle. And what of our scientists—Darwin, Huxley, Oliver Lodge? So far as I can remember the only street in England dedicated to a scientist is a dingy thoroughfare in Manchester, called John Dalton Street.

Having established the principle, we could expand it indefinitely, until every Mews and Lane contributed a representative to the story of the past. We could start, in any case, by changing Leicester Square into Shakespeare Square. The statue is there already.

Of course one would not be expected to go all the way in this Gallic worship of intellectuality: there must be due consideration for our rugged island susceptibilities. I

once beheld two French cruisers in Toulon Harbour named *Voltaire* and *Jean Jacques Rousseau* respectively. Perhaps that is going too far. The imagination reels at the thought of a British Admiral's lady breaking a bottle of champagne upon the bows of H.M.S. *Bernard Shaw*.

This brings us back to Théophile Blom. Who was he, we wonder, and why was he allotted his *impasse*? Perhaps he was a politician, the district's representative, maybe, in the Chamber of Deputies or City Council. Perhaps he was the builder of the *impasse* itself. Or perhaps he was just a poet or artist who lived and died in this very *quartier*—died young, probably—in whose memory the *impasse* was named by those who loved him; a humble corner of La Rive Gauche which is for ever Théophile Blom.

II

Within the *Impasse* stands a house—old-fashioned, rather provincial-looking, with a flaky stucco face and the usual outside shutters and little iron balconies.

In the big bare studio at the back, Aubrey Faringdon, in a paint-smear'd blouse and a blue velvet tam-o'-shanter, worn less for ornament than to keep the top-light out of his eyes, stood at his easel engaged upon a preliminary charcoal study from a model. He was a strikingly handsome man of middle age, with the impulses and sense of humour of a generous and rather impish schoolboy.

To him entered his sister-in-law, Miss Barbara Fane, who has already been mentioned in this narrative, dressed for the street and equipped with a large string-bag. She was a well-bred, self-possessed, uncompromising English spinster, of the type which George du Maurier loved to depict; and several years in her present surroundings had invested her with an air, towards the Latin races in general and Paris in particular, of resigned disapproval.

Aubrey greeted her cheerfully, and asked if she was going shrimping.

"Or is it butterflies?" he added, as an alternative.

"I am going marketing, Aubrey, and you know it."

"Why not let Madame Mollard do the marketing?"

"Don't be silly. Cooks get commissions. I want to talk to you. Will you kindly ask that young woman over there either to put something on, or go away? She makes me shiver."

Aubrey addressed a brief direction, of a colloquial nature, to his model; who, after a pithy and fortunately unintelligible rejoinder, removed herself to the dressing-room in the corner of the studio.

“Now,” he said. “Which of them is it this time?”

“Chris.”

“I thought so; it’s her turn. Sit down and spill it, as our Chris herself would say.”

Barbara seated herself upon the edge of the model throne.

“Aubrey,” she enquired presently, “have you ever heard of the Girls’ Friendly Society?”

“Vaguely. Why?”

“I sometimes think your daughters must have founded it. There’s no vice in them, of course—that’s their mother coming out——”

“Why not their father?”

“Don’t make childish interruptions, please. Why *must* they be so friendly—no, intimate!—with every one they meet, from the word go?”

“That’s an easy one. They’re enormously interested in life, and being absolutely devoid of all fear of their fellow-creatures, they go straight to the point with them.”

Barbara nodded grimly.

“Yes,” she said; “I’ve heard them do it. Only yesterday, when old Muravieff came here with that little—but never mind her. Why are they only interested in *queer* people? Goodness knows, I do my best to introduce them to what decent society there is in Paris——”

“How gorgeous if only Paris could hear you say that, Barbara!”

“—And nearly every Sunday I take them to lunch at Madeleine Carey’s house in Passy, where they meet some—well, they’re only Americans, of course, but they’re respectable, and they and the children do speak the same language——”

“Barbara, I hotly dispute the imputation that my children talk through their noses.”

“—And what happens?”

“They over-eat themselves, in the first place. So do I, whenever I go there. American hospitality——”

“They usually get into a corner,” pursued Barbara, to whom, when she had something to say, irrelevant interruption merely acted as a stimulant, “and giggle, and make silly private jokes in some sort of *argot* which nobody understands but themselves. But set them down in this studio, at one of those cocktail parties of yours, and they’re blissfully happy. Why?”

“It’s not the cocktails, anyhow: they only shake them up. Damned well, too. And you must admit that their presence has a most restraining effect on the company. Why, the place is like a convent, when——”

“That is an overstatement, Aubrey.”

“Well, you know what I mean. Nobody gets tight—at least, not unpleasantly tight—and nobody talks tough or acts rough while they are there. Let me tell you something, Barbara: those children have got a rather rare gift. They instinctively, and without trying to, bring out the decent side of everybody they meet.”

“Have all your friends got a decent side?”

“Everybody has, somewhere—otherwise the world would have thrown its hand in centuries ago. I say, that’s rather well put. I must remember it and use it again.”

Barbara, as usual, was busy with the matter in hand.

“That’s just the point, Aubrey. These people only hold themselves in because the girls are so *young*; and——”

“How old are they now?”

“Rosemary is just twenty, and Chris is eighteen. Things may start getting really difficult soon. Heaven knows they’re difficult enough already. Think of Rosemary and that saxophone player!”

“Yes, that was unfortunate. One finds it hard to forgive her for a saxophone player. But what has Chris been doing?”

“You know that horrible little two-seater you gave her?”

“The Baby Peugeot? Yes. What has she done with it—run over a gendarme?”

“It has recently been the cause of her getting picked up—by a racing-motorist.”

“In what sense do you employ your verb, Barbara dear?”

“In the good old-fashioned sense. Yesterday she and Rosemary went for a run towards Chantilly, and the machine stuck. Chris, of course, is as clever as a monkey with cars: she got out all her tools, and opened the lid of the car——”

“Bonnet.”

“But finding nothing wrong there, got underneath. Rosemary, who is no more interested than I am in what makes machinery go round, went for a stroll down the road. When the racing-motorist drove up in his car Chris was alone. All that could be seen of her was her legs, but that was quite enough.”

“I should say so: my daughters have admirable legs. And he waited to see what the rest of her was like. Any gentleman would have done the same. Well?”

“Of course, when she finally crawled out and found him there, they fraternised at once. She told him all about herself and the car, and what was wrong with it; and he was so impressed with her knowledge of the thing that he offered her a job as his mechanic on the spot.”

“Which she accepted?”

“My dear Aubrey, don’t ask silly questions. Of course she accepted!”

“What was the racing-motorist’s name, if any?”

“Paul Richet. Have you heard of him? I mean, is he well-known as a racer?”

“Extremely well-known, as a speed-merchant in every sense of the word. Proceed.”

“Well, by the time Rosemary came back Chris had promised to be ready to start for Monte Carlo with him next morning. Paul was going there to compete in a Grand Concourse of Elegance, or whatever the French call these ridiculous affairs.”

“H’m!” said Aubrey. “Obviously Chris had failed to explore the situation in all its possibilities.”

“She wasn’t the only one.”

“You mean—Paul Richet——?”

“Exactly. They brought him straight to see me—I must say they’re very good about that—and he got the shock of his life. He got a bigger one still when I told him what I was going to do about it.”

“Namely?”

“Come to Monte Carlo too.”

Aubrey chuckled.

“And what was Master Paul’s reaction?”

“Well, you know what these French people are like when they’re frustrated over that sort of thing; they simply go off at ninety to the dozen. I gave up trying to follow what this creature was saying. But I fancy it was some sort of tirade about the English.”

“Perfidious Albion, and so forth. Can you blame him?”

“Chris and Rosemary understood him all right, though, and both lost their tempers. Chris, anyhow. Master Richet got as good as he gave, and finally went off with his exhaust open and tears running down his cheeks. And that was that. I suppose,” concluded Barbara gloomily, “it will be Button’s turn next.”

“But not for a little, surely. How old is Button?”

“Nearly fourteen. All the same, I’m more frightened of her than the other two put together. She’s a secretive child, and nobody could accuse Rosemary or Chris of being that. Inclined to be furtive, too.”

“Sinister is a better word,” said Button’s father. “I’m rather frightened of her myself. Where is she, by the way?”

“That’s another thing. She has taken of late to disappearing mysteriously, for about an hour in the middle of the day. Of course by rights she ought never to go out alone in this place; but I can’t be everywhere, and of course you’re in the studio as long as daylight lasts——”

“The patient breadwinner.”

“I’m not so sure about the bread. And Rosemary and Chris haven’t any more sense than she has. Much less, in fact. Luckily all the people round here know them, and keep an eye on them——”

“Haven’t you asked her where she goes?”

“Yes, and her answer is that she goes to see a girl friend!”

“Just that.”

“Just that, and a dazzling smile, and not a word more. Well, I’m a long-suffering woman, but there are limits. Button slipped out about a quarter of an hour ago, and went up towards the Boulevard. When I’ve done my shopping I’m going up that way too: perhaps I shall meet mademoiselle on her return journey.”

Barbara rose to her feet, and grasped the string-bag.

“You can call that creature in again now, Aubrey,” she said. “Good morning!”

III

It was high noon, and the pavement *cafés* were filling up with voluble gentlemen ordering bock and grenadine and café crème, and discussing the affairs of the nation over the midday papers. Hat-less little *midinettes*, with arms linked and chattering gaily, went hurrying by to eat their frugal lunch in the Luxembourg Gardens. Some of the smaller shops were closing up altogether, what time their proprietors retreated from behind the counter to the back premises, there to indulge in the customary *midi à deux heures* dinner and siesta.

A family party came drifting down the Boulevard, after a conscientious morning at the Cluny Museum. As this is their sole appearance in this narrative, we need not itemise them. It will be sufficient to call them Pop, Mom, Sister, and Junior.

Sightseeing with one’s relatives is a gruesome pastime at the best, and this quartette were frankly making heavy weather of their outing.

“Well, we saw that dump, anyway,” remarked Pop, with resigned satisfaction. “Where do we go from here?”

“I got to sit down some place right now,” announced Mom. “My feet went flat on me.”

“Sure,” replied Pop heartily—perhaps a little too heartily. “Junior, you take your Mom and Sister right along to that caffay on the corner, and set down outside and order yourselves ice-cream sodas or sumpun. I’ll be right after you: I gotta stop in at that news-stand. Maybe they carry *The Tribune*.”

Having watched the convoy come safely to anchor at an iron table under the striped canopy of the *Café des Trois Mousquetaires*, Pop betook himself to a

neighbouring newspaper kiosk of the undeviating Paris pattern, hung about, outside and in, with ephemeral literature of every type and colour.

In the square opening left in the front for the transaction of business was framed an agreeable vision—a small girl in a blue-linen frock, with a scarlet leather belt and a beret to match. She was perhaps fourteen. Her small nose turned slightly upward, and her shingled hair curled forward, in two sleek black whiskers, almost into her large, blue, trustful eyes. Behind her an elderly crone, oblivious to the literary feast around her, sat upon a pile of newspapers consuming spaghetti out of a handkerchief.

The vision greeted Pop with a seraphic smile.

“Monsieur désire——?”

“Say, can you speak English at all?” asked Pop nervously.

The vision smiled again, shyly.

“Un petit peu, M’sieur. A ver’ little. You like a nice journal—yes?”

“Sure. Got a *Chicago Tribune*?”

The blue eyes clouded sorrowfully.

“Ah, mais non, Monsieur! Je suis désolée. Pas de *Tribune* ici! You will get one on the Grand Boulevards only. But you like something else—yes?”

Pop gave a furtive glance in the direction of the Trois Mousquetaires, then leaned further into the kiosk.

“Say, you got any French papers? Pictures, and funny jokes?”

The vision dimpled all over.

“Mais oui, M’sieur! *La Vie Parisienne*, *Le Sourire*, *Fantasio*, *Plaisirs Parisiens*——” she handed these delectable journals out one by one. “Très, très chic! Regardez! Look at this picture. You like her—yes?”

“Sure,” mumbled Pop. “How much?”

“Twelve franc fifty, Monsieur. You buy some more, yes?”

Pop leaned still further into the kiosk.

“You got any postal cards?” he asked hoarsely.

“Mais oui. Verree funnee! I show you!”

Button Faringdon dived down below the little counter in search of the mirth-provoking stationery. When she came up again Pop’s flabby features and horn-rimmed spectacles had been replaced by the unbending countenance of Aunt Barbara—Aunt Barbara, with her umbrella in one hand and a bursting string-bag in the other.

“Come home, child!” she said—and Button came.

CHAPTER THREE

PLAN OF CAMPAIGN

MARBLEDOWN is not what is technically known as a Lord's School. That is to say, when it plays its annual cricket match against its hated rival Eaglescliffe, the contest takes place not in St. John's Wood, but at Eaglescliffe and Marbledown alternately. Note, however, that when the Lord's Schools play The Rest at Lord's in the first week in August, Marbledown and Eaglescliffe are usually well represented.

In other words, Marbledown is a good solid foundation of the old-fashioned type. Two hundred years ago it was, and had been from time immemorial, the ancient Grammar School of a small market town—a single building in the Market Square, wherein a dusty old gentleman in knee-breeches and a wig imparted knowledge and chastisement in about equal proportion to the sturdy and pachydermatous youth of the district.

The years rolled on. Old gentlemen in knee-breeches were succeeded by other gentlemen in nankeen trousers (assisted now by numerous starveling ushers), and still the School prospered. By the middle of Queen Victoria's reign it had hopelessly outgrown its accommodation. A move further afield was essential, but the School's endowment was too slight to bear the strain. However, a public-spirited landowner of the district, named Magsworth, head of a leather business in London, who had acquired a vast fortune by supplying boots to Her Majesty's Forces during the Crimean War—boots locally suspected of having largely been composed of brown paper—suddenly came to the rescue. He presented the School Trustees with a fair tract of land beside the River Marble—one of the lesser known tributaries of the Thames, but a considerable stream for all that—erected the necessary buildings, and threw in one hundred thousand pounds as an endowment fund. Having by this gesture stifled unworthy suspicions regarding the boots (or at any rate salved his own conscience), he departed this life, and the old School building in the Market Square was turned into a public Reading Room and called The Magsworth Institute. That is all about Magsworth.

The School achieved its present shape and constitution in the early seventies, that period of educational awakening and reform all round.

The teaching arrangements had been crying for help for several decades. The Sixth and Fifth had their own classrooms, but the Middle and Lower Schools, comprising no less than four forms of some forty boys each, were all herded together in School Hall, the amount of learning imparted to each pupil being in direct

proportion to the lung-power of his instructor. Now a block of modern classrooms was erected, and School Hall was reserved for ceremonial gatherings, such as Speech Day and concerts. A chapel and sanatorium had been in existence for some time; to these were added a Science Block, a gymnasium, and a swimming-bath. Later came a miniature rifle-range, one of the first in England, the gift of an old boy, a Mutiny veteran.

The Schoolhouse was supplemented by four new boarding-houses, which in course of time grew to eight. Other inevitabilities followed with the years, such as a Modern Side and compulsory games. The indeterminate and sanguinary mud-fight for the possession of an inflated pigskin which had occupied the leisure hours of the School during the winter months crystallised into orthodox Rugby, and rowing was added to cricket in the summer. In the late nineties Marbledown School achieved its first Rowing Blue, a sturdy Cambridge freshman named Charles Donkin.

To-day the School covers half a square mile of ground, sloping gently towards the south. School Hall itself stands roughly in the centre, with the classroom blocks grouped round it. The boarding-houses are scattered about the slope, snug amid trees and flower-beds. The old chapel is now a library; the School outgrew it long ago. The new chapel stands high on the topmost edge, a memorial to the Marbledown boys—and most of them were only boys—who fell in the Great War. Fourteen hundred and thirty-five of them joined up. The names of two hundred and seventy-three of these are now recorded, for all time, upon the Roll of Honour in the chapel porch.

On the flat ground at the foot of the slope lie the playing-fields, and beyond them the placid waters of the River Marble, over which you cross by an ancient stone bridge into the little town of Marbledown itself.

To-day no boy may use that bridge without written leave. Access to the town used to be free and open to all, but Mr. Ovington soon attended to that. It was one of the first things he put up a notice about.

And that brings us to Mr. Ovington himself.

He was at this time just thirty-one, a clergyman, bachelor, and ex-University don. He lived in the Schoolhouse with his sister Miss Janet Ovington, called by the School, for the simplest of reasons, The Spoon, because her brother was called The Egg. A nickname being a necessity for every Headmaster, Mr. Ovington had originally been christened 'Ovaltine.' This was obviously too unwieldy a sobriquet, and presently some classically minded person, realising the derivation of the term, condensed it, with general acceptance, to its present form. It suited its owner in more ways than one, for he was prematurely bald and cranially of the ovoid type.

He was no physical weakling though, being a powerfully built young man of six feet and over, who enjoyed some reputation in his hours of relaxation as a climber of Alps. Moreover he possessed that rare and peculiar gift known as 'presence.' He made a genuinely imposing figure in the pulpit, and when he entered a crowded room, people with their backs to the door knew he was there without looking round.

After sweeping the board at Oxford ten years before—though he failed, ominously, to achieve a Fellowship of All Souls—Edmund Ovington had been offered the post of Classical Lecturer at a Midland University, where he rapidly proved himself a brilliant expositor and born teacher. Two years later, to the general surprise, he threw the Classics overboard and was appointed (on his own request) Warden of the Local Technical College, itself a branch of the same University. The surprise was accentuated by the common knowledge that the Technical College was in a poor way. Its curriculum was out of date, its staff incompetent, and its numbers dwindling. The place, in fact, stood in need of a drastic overhaul.

The overhaul was duly forthcoming. At the end of five years of grim spadework—mainly systematic revision of schedules and ruthless elimination of inefficient instructors—Edmund Ovington had converted an academic lumber-room into one of the best-equipped, best-run, and most popular technical colleges in the country—and himself the most unpopular Warden it had ever possessed. Not that he minded, even if he knew.

Then, with equal suddenness, he resigned, disappeared into the shades of a theological seminary, and emerged in Orders. A year later he applied for the Headmastership of Marbledown School, and got it. The retiring Head, the Rev. Dr. Aloysius Adams, had hung on to his job just a little too long—about ten years too long, to be precise—and the Governing Body decided that what the School wanted now was a little stirring up. So King Log was suffered to depart, with blessings upon his palsied head and the usual marble clock in his trunk, and King Stork reigned in his stead.

Not that the latter had evinced any cannibalistic tendencies thus far: he had not yet completed his first year at Marbledown, and he was still taking stock. Certain somewhat drastic resolutions were already tabled in his mind, but the time for putting them into effect was not yet. But it was approaching.

He sat, this fine summer morning, at his broad desk facing his high study windows, alternately surveying the fair prospect before him and tapping out a few stray thoughts upon his ever-adjacent typewriter. Mr. Ovington did a good deal of his thinking on paper. It seemed to him tidier, and more methodical.

He had just typed the following:—

(a) *Physical strain unsuited to growing boys.*

(b) *Promiscuous intercourse with townspeople on towpath undesirable.*

(c) *Injury to cricket spirit.*

(d) *Subsequent saturnalia a definite menace.*

Cf. my experience last summer. (Diary.) Obstacles to reform.

(a) *Tradition. Henley, etc.*

(b) *Donkin.*

Yes, Donkin. Mr. Ovington's gaze travelled over the tree-tops till it rested on the roof of Mr. Donkin's House down on the right, near the foot of the slope. That stronghold would have to be invested—invested and reduced—sooner or later. He started a fresh line of type.

Staff—possible changes—

(1) *Donkin.*

Then he added—

(2) *de Pourville.*

(3) *Hastings.*

(4) *Kent.*

Yes, Donkin. Donkin would make particular trouble about a certain step upon which Mr. Ovington had just decided. He had better see Donkin before putting up the notice, and tell him firmly that there must be no opposition, covert or overt, this time. If Donkin disliked progress, Donkin had his own remedy in his own hands.

Mr. Ovington took up the telephone at his elbow, and calling the School exchange, announced in the fewest possible words that he wished to speak to the Red House. Presently Donkin's voice replied, in the studiously polite tones which he reserved for people whom he disliked intensely.

“Good morning, Mr. Ovington.”

“Good morning, Donkin. Can I see you for ten minutes?”

“At once?”

“You are not in School till twelve, I believe.” The Head was reputed to know the respective timetables of the thirty-five members of his staff by heart.

“No, but I have to go and see a boy in the Sanatorium before then.”

“Would it be beyond the bounds of possibility to postpone your visit until this afternoon?”

“Quite, I’m afraid. I have promised, you see. However, I might squeeze in five minutes on my way there. Will that do?”

“Thank you,” said Mr. Ovington coldly, and hung up.

How characteristic! A bilious boy in the Sanatorium. “I have promised.” So much fuss about an individual cog, and so little regard for the machine. Would this reactionary old gentleman never realise that in the science of government the institution must come first, and its separate members after—a long way after? Mr. Ovington’s thoughts slipped back automatically to the first pitched battle between himself and his Senior Housemaster on that particular ground. It was over a boy—a ne’er-do-well, who Mr. Ovington thought should be expelled.

“He is doing the place harm,” he had said, “and he must go.”

“The place is doing him good,” Donkin had replied, “and he must stay!”

And the boy stayed. The defeat still rankled. Still——

“You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” reflected Mr. Ovington broad-mindedly, and re-applied himself to his notes.

de Pourville—yes. A weak vessel. One heard disturbing rumours. And in these days Science was so important a subject—not so much in itself, but as a counterblast to the aggressive Classicism of ordinary public-school tradition. He would pay a surprise visit to the laboratory one day—perhaps during one of the Practical Chemistry hours. That should be an opportune, and perhaps fruitful moment.

Then Hastings. A brilliant mathematician—and an undoubted disciplinarian, with that blandly ironical tongue of his. That was no reason, though, why he should bring the same tongue to Masters’ Meetings. Moreover, his teaching methods must be a bit on the old-fashioned side by this time. Perhaps, in a few years——

Mr. Ovington put a mark of interrogation against Mr. Hastings’ name, and proceeded to the next, and last.

Kent—ah, yes. The time seemed to be ripening nicely for the abolition of militaristic influences in School life. Public opinion on that subject was veering round in a most satisfactory fashion. Probably the next Government would withdraw the subsidy and all camping facilities. That would mean the end of the O.T.C.—and of Mr. Kent. Well, these ex-Regular soldiers were always a difficulty. Conscientious enough, but utterly rigid in their ideas. They disturbed the atmosphere of the place, too, in some inexplicable way. Not that Kent was a swashbuckler; but his very presence in the School, with his limp and his D.S.O., was a menace.

At this point Mr. Ovington’s reflections were interrupted by the voice of what sounded like a reaping-machine. An ancient car was droning and whining its way up

the hill from the main gates. If Mr. Ovington had been one of his own pupils, he would at once have recognised the voice as that of The-Ford-from-the-Station. The-Ford-from-the-George was nearly an octave higher.

The deplorable vehicle rounded a final clump of laurels and drew up, with a tortured shrieking of brakes and much spurring of gravel, at Mr. Ovington's front door, which stood close to the study windows. Such parts of it as were not occupied by the driver and his fares were piled high with miscellaneous luggage.

The rickety door swung open, and a lady descended—a middle-aged lady of erect carriage and decisive manner. She was followed by a small girl, with large, blue, trustful eyes, and shingled hair which curved right forward in two sleek black whiskers.

The lady was about to ring Mr. Ovington's front-door bell, when her small companion touched her elbow and directed her attention to the majestic presence visible through the open windows of the study. She therefore diverted her course, and marched with characteristic lack of hesitation straight into the presence itself.

"Where can I find Mr. Donkin?" she asked, as Mr. Ovington, a little taken aback, pushed away his typewriter and rose to his feet.

"In his House, I should imagine."

"But this *is* his House. Isn't this Marbledown School?"

"This is the Schoolhouse, itself part of Marbledown School. It is also called the Blue House, in accordance with a system whereby——"

"I can't hear a word you're saying, with that noise going on outside. Child, run and tell that old man to turn that thing off. All I want to know is where I can find Mr. Donkin."

The racket outside died grudgingly away, and Mr. Ovington replied:—

"He lives in the Red House."

"Which red house? They are all red!"

"I was not referring to their external colour scheme, but to the fact that each House in this School is referred to, for the sake of convenience, by the name of its House colours. This, for instance, is the Blue House. It is also called the Schoolhouse, because I happen to be——"

"Yes, so you told me. But I'm in rather a hurry. Which is Mr. Donkin's House?"

Mr. Ovington moved to the window and pointed down the slope.

"You can see it above those tree-tops," he said.

"But how can I get there, with all that luggage? We can't go driving through hedges and over flower-beds."

"There is a path," said Mr. Ovington, patiently, "leading from the foot of my

lawn, past the Fives Courts, direct to Mr. Donkin's House. You will find it quite a short and pleasant walk. Your chauffeur should be directed to go back to the main gates, and to make a detour of about half a mile by road."

"Thank you. Cocher!—driver!—this isn't Mr. Donkin's House at all. That is it, past the Fives Courts, whatever they may be. I'm going to walk there: you drive back to the main gates, and round by the road. And don't attempt to charge me for the extra half-mile. Come along, child!"

ADVANCE GUARD

IT was past eleven, and Mr. Donkin, as you may remember, was due in school at twelve. He was deep in his half-term reports now.

The windows were tightly closed, and the air was thick with tobacco smoke. Mr. Donkin had lit the fire too. This bright morning in early June merely denoted to him that the English summer was setting in with its usual severity.

He was somewhat behind his points: that old bore Frank had wasted twenty minutes of his time. Still, it was just possible to polish the reports off before going up. No, it wasn't. Maturin minor—a weakly, brooding boy; he mustn't be disappointed. And he had to go and see the Head on the way. Well, he could manage half a dozen more of the things, anyhow. Who came next? Ah, *Nightingale, C. B. H.* One Flossie—a bone-idle youth, with charming manners. Mr. Donkin poised his fountain-pen, then wrote:—

A most agreeable boy to deal with, and invariably well satisfied with his own progress; but I should prefer to see a little more enthusiasm from his instructors.

“No parents,” he commented: “I wonder who'll read that. Uncle Barks, I suppose, if he's not too preoccupied with the cares of Statesmanship. Fancy old Barks in the Cabinet! Who's this? *Elmsley, J. B.* A nervous subject. Due to a pre-natal diet of dry martinis, one is given to understand. Decent father, though.” He wrote:—

I have recently made him a prefect: this added authority should be a help to him. Must cultivate confidence in himself all the time.

He crossed out ‘confidence,’ and wrote the word again, in printed capitals this time.

“Let's hope dry martinis aren't too hereditary,” he mused, as he lit another pipe.

Heredity reminded him of something else: Frank Hastings had left without telling him what Barbara had said in her letter about those girls. What were they like, he wondered. Could any of them be as lovely as their mother had been? Or as brilliant? Impossible.

Purvis, A. F., major. An easy one.

A real worker; at his present rate should have no difficulty over Sandhurst next year. A most warlike platoon commander in our O.T.C. Contingent.

Odd, how seldom brains and beauty went together in a woman. Angela had had

them. Barbara had brains too, of course—lots—but she had never been a beauty. Bit of a nagger, too. Never managed to get a husband, and no wonder.

Rumford, O., tertius.

Distinctly a personality, but young yet. Has still a good deal to learn in the way of punctuality and personal cleanliness, but is going to be a useful member of the House one day.

She would have been forty-one now—just forty-one. Her eldest daughter must be twenty. *Eheu fugaces!* But why should Barbara want to consult him about daughters? Wasn't Bimbo a sufficient nuisance?

There was a knock at the door, and Ellen the parlourmaid appeared—a young person of demure appearance but independent character, as Mr. Beamish had soon discovered.

“There's a lady came to see you, sir,” she announced, with the indulgent smile which the female sex reserves for fractious children and feeble-minded adults.

“Lady—at this time of day? Who?”

“Miss Fane, sir.”

Barbara already! Mr. Donkin screwed up his fountain-pen resignedly.

“All right; lead her in.”

Next moment he was shaking hands with Angela's elder sister.

II

“You haven't changed a bit, Barbara,” he said untruthfully.

“You have, Charles,” was the characteristic reply; “you'll have to be thinking of your blood-pressure soon. You're unaltered in one thing, though.” She crossed to the windows and threw them open. “You can't breathe the same air as you did yesterday, you know.”

A fresh breeze entered, and playfully blew several half-term reports from Mr. Donkin's desk on to the floor.

“And a fire, too—in June!” added Barbara, as her host hurriedly fielded the reports and clamped them to the desk with paper-weights. “We must see about that. I suppose I may sit down?”

“Certainly. Make yourself comfortable on the sofa.”

“I want to talk to you,” said Barbara, complying.

“Of course, of course. Hallo, what on earth is this?”

‘This’ requires no further introduction to the reader. She had inserted herself through the half-opened door, in a manner vaguely reminiscent (to Mr. Donkin) of

someone else, and was now sidling along the wall of the study like a strange Alsatian dog.

“Oh, I’d forgotten you,” said Barbara. “This is Button,” she explained. “A ridiculous name. Angela’s youngest.”

“How do you do, Button?” said Mr. Donkin, shaking hands.

“How do you do, Charles?” replied Button politely.

“You see—‘Charles’!” said Barbara. “That’s one of the things I’ve come to talk about.”

But the gentleman thus familiarly addressed did not seem to notice. He was gazing appraisingly down on Button, and Button was gazing wistfully up at him.

“Like her father,” he said at last. Then, to Button: “May one ask a lady’s age?”

“You ought to know, Charles. I’m Bimbo’s twin.”

“I had no idea that Bimbo could be duplicated. I apologise.”

“That’s all right. How is he?”

“As well as can be expected in the circumstances.”

“What’s the matter with him?”

“I have just flogged him.”

Bimbo’s unfeeling duplicate gave a squeal of delight.

“Oh, I say, what fun! Did he yell much?”

“No, no; not a sound! A man of iron.”

“Did you draw blood or anything?” continued Button longingly.

“*Button!*” This from the sofa.

“Sorry, Auntie!” Button took hold of her lips and pinched them together, then resumed her Alsatian posture against the wall.

“Couldn’t you do something with her for a few minutes, Charles?” asked Barbara. “What’s through that green-baize door?”

“Boys, mostly.”

“Can’t she go and play with them?”

“*Play?* Great heavens, Barbara, this is a monastic establishment. No female ever crosses that threshold during term-time, and only charwomen at others.” He pondered for a moment, then pressed a bell-button on his desk. “Are you hungry, Button?”

“Yes, Charles.”

“We breakfasted early,” said Barbara, “to catch the morning train to this place. The other two are coming by car. There was no room for us in it; it’s only a two-seater.”

Mr. Donkin looked up, startled.

“The other two?”

“Yes. Rosemary and Chris.”

“So—so the whole family are on their way?”

“Yes. That’s another of the things I want to talk to you about. Here’s your maid.”

Ellen had entered. Donkin turned to her.

“Ellen, take this young lady somewhere, and feed her for ten minutes, will you?”

“What on, sir?”

“What on, Button?”

“Anything.”

“The young lady is omnivorous, Ellen.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t mention it. Farewell, Button!”

“*A bientôt*, Charles darling! You’re sweet!” Button took a running-jump at her host and kissed him on both cheeks, then ran to Ellen.

“Come on, Ellen!” she said; and linking arms with that unruffleable young person, marched her from the room.

“She’s an affectionate little thing,” said Mr. Donkin, drying his left cheek with his handkerchief.

“Yes; I’m coming to that too. But I’ll start at the beginning, if you’ll stop fidgeting and sit down.”

“I am all attention.”

“Well—I’ve taken the children away from their father! And not before it was time.”

“May one ask what their father has been up to?”

“Oh, nothing—nothing that he hasn’t been doing for years. Painting pictures and running about with queer people. He’s a good enough father, according to his lights, but completely unobservant, like all men.”

“I apologise for my sex. What has Aubrey been overlooking?”

“First of all, that children grow up, and secondly that daughters can take after their fathers.”

“In what way?”

“Well, you know what Aubrey is.”

“Do I? It’s years since I’ve seen him.”

“Supposing he was one of your boys, and you were writing his report, or something, what would you say?”

“Let me think. ‘Generous, emotional, impulsive, and utterly irresponsible.’ How’s that?”

“That’s Rosemary!”

“His eldest?”

“Yes. Chris is much the same, except that she is even more emotional and less responsible. Button has more head than the rest of the family put together; but never mind her at present. I want to tell you about Rosemary. A few weeks ago her father took her, against my advice, to some sort of nightclub in Montparnasse. A party of about six, I think they were. It seems to have been a sociable affair, because about five o’clock in the morning the guests started fraternising with the band. Anyhow, Rosemary found herself at a table with several total strangers, including one of the saxophone players.”

“What colour was he?”

“Practically white.”

“Let us be thankful for small mercies. Proceed.”

“He told her the story of his life. People are always doing that to Rosemary: I can’t think why.”

“They used to do it to Angela too. Did he try to borrow money from her?”

“Not at first. He talked about his mother, instead.”

“A useful and usual alternative. Then?”

“Then he said he had lung-trouble, and if he didn’t go to Switzerland at once he would die. Of course that was enough for Rosemary. She determined to save the creature’s life.”

“Why should any one wish to prolong the existence of a saxophone player?”

“Don’t interrupt. I heard nothing about all this at the time: the first indication of anything wrong came from Button, who is an unpleasantly observant child. She asked Rosemary at dinner one night what had become of her bracelet. Rosemary got very red, but did not say anything. Neither did I: I always bide my time on these occasions.”

“You always were a sensible sort of woman.”

“*Listen!* Two days later Rosemary was wearing her bracelet again, and looking like a ghost. I tackled her in her bedroom that night, and she sobbed out the whole story.”

“Poor child!”

“Nonsense! I believe she enjoyed every minute of it. She had pawned the bracelet, and then made an appointment with the saxophone player, and given him the money to go to Switzerland.”

“It seems cheap at the price.”

“Unfortunately he had misunderstood her motives. He thought they were both

going to Switzerland.”

“Whereas the motives were purely maternal?”

“Of course. In fact, she told him that she was only doing all this because of the lovely way he talked about his mother.”

“And how did our cacophonist react to that one?”

“He made rather a scene, I fancy. He cried, and said rude things about the pudicity and perfidy of the English Misses. Very much what Paul Richet had said about Chris, in fact.”

“Who is Paul Richet?”

“I’m coming to him. Let me finish with the saxophone player. Finally, and fortunately, he threw the money on the floor, and rushed out into the street. She hasn’t seen him since.”

“Good! And you think she is now inoculated?”

“You’ll never inoculate Rosemary against doing stupid things for undeserving people. But she had a useful lesson, all the same. Well, that was that.”

“And Paul Richet?”

“He was Chris’s bombshell. He happened just three days later—but I’ll tell you about him some other time. It’s a long story, and he merely helped to fill up the cup, so to speak. Button was the final overflow.”

“Don’t tell me *she* tried to elope with anybody!”

“No. She picked up, in her helpful little way, with an old woman who kept a newspaper kiosk in the Boulevard St. Germain. One morning last week I found my youngest niece inside the kiosk, selling picture-postcards to an American tourist. They were only classical studies from the Louvre, but they might not have been. After that I decided that my Girls’ Friendly Society must close. I went straight to Aubrey, and told him that he was a complete failure as a parent, and that I was going to take the girls away from him and hand them over to you.”

“And how did he bear the blow?”

“He said he thought it was a thundering good idea.”

“A most unnatural comment.”

“And then he said something else—something quite true, but queer, coming from him. He said: ‘After all, if my darling Angela had known her business, these children would have been Charles Donkin’s and not mine at all.’”

“Oh, he said that, did he?”

“Yes. I thought it was rather handsome of him.”

“I call it infernal cheek. If Angela had married me, our children would have borne no resemblance whatever to these little horrors.”

“No, they’d have been pretty dull, I expect. Well, can you find room for us?”

“Barbara, be reasonable. How can I possibly find room for a pack of women in this house?”

“It’s an enormous house. I counted forty-two windows on one side alone.”

“There are fifty-four boys behind them.”

“Then it’s high time they had some female society.”

“Over my dead body! These brats of yours can’t come here. They must go back to Paris.”

“They must do no such thing. Paris is demoralising them.”

“Nonsense—they’re demoralising Paris, and you know it! And what they would do here——!” Mr. Donkin raised clenched hands heavenward. All his celibate soul revolted against this intrusion. “Barbara, why must you bring them to a public school, of all places?”

Barbara Fane contemplated her old friend for some moments before replying. She realised that his distress was genuine. Then she said composedly:

“Charles, I think it’s my turn to ask a question. Only one. What was it you promised Angela, during that last talk you had with her?”

Donkin’s eyes came to rest, rather self-consciously, on Barbara Fane.

“Did she tell you?”

“She did.”

“Then what do you want to ask me for?”

“You did promise, you know. And you meant it.”

There was a pause. Then—

“You’re a very selfish woman,” growled a voice. It came from the last ditch—and both of them knew it.

“And always was,” replied Barbara placidly.

“I’m talking like a cad,” exclaimed Mr. Donkin, suddenly contrite. “You’ve behaved like an angel to these children. Of course they must come. But on one condition. They must not go near my defenceless boys.”

“Are you quite sure your defenceless boys will not go near them?”

“I think I can guarantee that. I’m practically in my second childhood, but my discipline is still fairly good. You ask Bimbo! Now, about rooms.” He went to the house-telephone on his desk and demanded the immediate presence of the Matron.

“You can take the spare-room,” he said, as they waited.

“Thank you. I will take Button in with me.”

“You won’t mind?”

“I shall mind extremely, but I prefer to keep her under my own eye. What about

the other two? What accommodation have you?"

"There's a sizeable attic on the top floor of my side of the house, but it's not furnished."

"Why not?"

"Why should it be? Visitors only interfere with the time-table. I shall have to put this precious pair of yours into the night sickroom for the present."

"Where is that?"

"On the boys' side of the house, next to the Matron's bedroom. Ah, here she is"—as the green-baize door opened and the Matron appeared.

There are two classes of public-school Matron—known, rather invidiously, as Lady Matrons and Working Matrons. Both work for about sixteen hours a day: the only discernible difference in status between them is that the Working Matron usually remains standing in her employer's presence, while the Lady Matron does not; and that the Working Matron makes her own afternoon tea, while the Lady Matron has hers brought to her by a dormitory maid. In either case the boys, entirely indifferent to class distinction where the opposite sex is concerned, refer to her as The Hag.

Miss Wimble, the Red House Matron, was of the Working variety. She consequently remained upright, and as she stood about five feet ten and weighed eleven stone, the general effect was one of a massive and benevolent battleship standing by on guard duty. From her attitude towards Mr. Donkin, it was quite obvious upon what prototype Ellen had modelled herself.

"Good morning, Matron," said that gentleman. "This is Miss Fane. She has three nieces, and all four of them are coming here to live with us."

The Matron acknowledged this thunderbolt by a stately inclination of her head, and replied:

"Yes, sir. When?"

"To-day."

"Yes, sir."

"Miss Fane will occupy the spare-room, with her youngest niece. The other two young ladies had better go into the night sickroom for the present. There are two beds in it, aren't there?"

"Yes, sir," said the Matron. "Bullock major is in one of them."

"Since when?"

"I have just put him there, sir. Mr. Kent sent him down from school half an hour ago. I was going to report to you."

"What's the matter with him?"

"He's come out in a rash, sir. We'll know what it is when the doctor comes."

“You’d better send him over to the Sanatorium at once, and leave the room free for the young ladies.”

“To catch rashes in?” enquired a cold voice from the sofa. “Thank you!”

“My dear Barbara,” said Mr. Donkin testily, “most rashes are no more infectious than housemaid’s knee.”

“How do you know, Charles? Are you the father of a family?”

“Yes—a family of fifty-four—and have been for years!” He rose. “Very well; show Miss Fane to her room, Matron. By the way, Barbara, where’s your luggage?”

“On your doorstep, I imagine, by this time.”

“What do you mean—this time?”

“The cabman stupidly took us to the wrong house.” Barbara pointed through the window. “That place there, up that hill.”

“That’s the Blue House—the Headmaster’s House.”

“So I was informed when I got inside, by a rather pompous young clergyman. Who was he, Charles?”

“He was the Headmaster.”

“But he was a mere boy! Why have they——?”

“Matron,” said Mr. Donkin loudly, “see if Miss Fane’s luggage has arrived, please. I’ll show her the spare-room myself. This way, Barbara.”

Mr. Donkin and his guest departed upstairs, leaving the Matron to proceed in the direction of the front door.

“Why have they appointed that young man over your head, Charles?” pursued Barbara, as she followed her host upstairs.

“He was not appointed over anybody’s head. He came in from outside. An exceptionally brilliant choice.”

“You must stand up more for yourself, you know, or you’ll never get anywhere. I should have thought you, of all people, would have realised that long ago——”

“The bathroom is on your right!”

CHAPTER FIVE
LIGHT INFANTRY

THE duet on the first-floor landing died away, and the dining-room door below opened cautiously. Button emerged, with her usual economy of elbow-room, masticating her last mouthful of plum cake, and crossed the hall into the study, closing the door behind her. Like many other eminent explorers, she liked to play a lone hand.

Releasing the doorhandle gently, she turned, and uttered a startled exclamation in colloquial French. A small boy in white shorts and a red blazer had just entered by the baize door.

Button surveyed him for a moment, then screamed:—

“Bimbo! Angel!”

“Oh Lord—Button!” Bimbo’s response was a blend of incredulity and concern. “All right,” he continued, vainly endeavouring to free himself from a tempestuous and adhesive embrace, “you needn’t choke me! What are you doing here, anyhow?”

“We have come to live with you and Charles.”

“How long for?”

“For life, my child.”

“Oh *gosh!* All of you?”

“Yes. What’s the matter?”

Apparently a good deal was the matter, as Bimbo proceeded to explain. To possess sisters at all, he pointed out in a moving passage, was a kind of stigma in itself: to have these perpetually upon the premises, and to be compelled to endure their demonstrative presence *coram populo* amounted practically to social extinction.

“Lord, what a fool I shall look!” he wailed. “You’ll keep out of the way as much as possible, won’t you? I expect the Moke’ll see to that, though; but if he doesn’t, hold yourselves in, do! The fellows here are rather particular in their ideas about young girls; so no chasing me about and kissing me before a crowd of people, and all that sort of bilge!”

“Of course, my sweet!” said Button soothingly. This was not the first time she had been made aware of Bimbo’s rigid sense of propriety where the domestic affections were concerned. “What are all these silver cups and things, along this bookcase?”

“They’re the Moke’s prizes—for tricycling and chess. Do you know where he

is, by the way?"

"Do you want him?"

"Of course I want him! Do you think any one has the nerve to put his nose inside this room if they don't?"

"Sorry, sorry! What do you want him for?"

"I want to have a shot at getting leave off Physical Jerks next hour. He tanned me this morning, and I'm not in the mood for any flying-trapeze stuff."

Button was all maternal concern at once.

"Oh, *darling!*" she cried, embracing her resisting coeval anew. "Did it hurt?"

"Of course it hurt! Do you think the Moke doesn't know his job?"

"Any marks?"

"Five—and you *can't* see them!"

"Poor angel! Have some chocolate."

"Have you got any?"

"Yes. Imported from Paris direct."

"And sat on most of the way, I bet."

"Yes, I'm afraid it's gone a bit gooey," admitted Button, as she produced from the top of a long stocking something wrapped in tarnished silver paper. "It always seems to slip round behind."

"Never mind," said Bimbo amiably. "You can have a bit yourself if you like." He twisted off a corner of the warm and glutinous delicacy, and bestowed it upon his sister.

"Thank you, dear. What did the Moke beat you for?"

"Going into Culver's Coppice—out of bounds."

"Then why did you go, you poor chump?"

"There's a lovely magpie's nest in one of the trees."

Button was interested at once.

"Hoo!" she said. "Did you get an egg?"

"No. I got spotted, by the Egg himself."

"Egg? Magpie's egg?" enquired Button, not unreasonably puzzled.

"No, you silly kid: the Egg's the Head. A complete smear, and full of Medes and Persians. He reported me to the Moke, and the Moke had to tan me, though I could see he didn't half like doing it. He wouldn't grudge a man an egg or two."

"No, I'm sure he wouldn't: I adore him already." Button was off on another of her Alsatian excursions. "Like to see your half-term report, darling?"

"Is it here?"

"They're all here, on this desk. Here's yours. Come and have a dekko."

The pair squeezed amicably into Mr. Donkin's swivel chair, and jointly perused Bimbo's history sheet. It was not a flattering document.

"Can't you tear it up?" suggested Button resourcefully.

"No good. They'd only write a worse one."

Button ran a slim and sticky finger down the column in which Bimbo's traducers had penned their initials.

"Who are all these people?" she asked.

"Oh, various Ephesian beasts."

"Who's W A D?"

"Dexter, my form-master. Hated by all. One of those comic swine."

"*A singularly versatile pupil,*" read Button. "*He can translate English into a Greek not spoken in Greece, and Greek into an English not spoken anywhere, with equal facility.* That's not too bad, if you read it quickly. Rather complimentary, in a way."

"It'll get past Dad, anyhow," said Bimbo, taking another mouthful of chocolate.

"Who's F H?"

"You ought to know that—Uncle Frank. He's a sarcastic old bargee if you like. *Habitually gravitates to the bottom!* As a matter of fact, that's an absolute lie: I've only been at the bottom since another fellow went to the San a week ago."

"Who's P de P?"

"The Junior Stinks Beak. He calls himself de Pourville, or something. We call him Peter Poop. We rag his soul out."

"He says," read Button, with studied incredulity, "that you have a quick and intelligent mind, and are a very pleasant boy to work with. He must be potty."

"No, that's just funk. He daren't give anybody a bad report. We'd kill him if he did."

"I like his name, all the same. de Pourville! He sounds like a Crusader, or something. What is he like?"

"Like a fourpenny rabbit, and blubs if you look at him. Well"—as the mausoleum on the bookcase struck three-quarters—"I can't sit here talking to kids all day: I must biff off to Gym. So long."

Bimbo abandoned his half of the chair and made for the baize door.

"Can I come with you?"

"No, you can not come with me, anywhere at any time. Get that idea firmly fixed right off."

"Very well, dear: you know about these things. I suppose I can go outside and breathe the fresh air of heaven occasionally, so long as I don't do it in your

company.”

Bimbo shot a suspicious glance at Button’s deferential face.

“Yes—in reason. But don’t start trying to get off with any of the fellows. They don’t understand Paris ways here.”

“No, dear. What’s through this green door?”

“Our House. Keep out. This means You.”

“Can’t I even go in with you, darling? Just once—to peep?”

Bimbo considered.

“Everybody’s up in school. All right, you can look round now, quickly. Otherwise I suppose you’ll burst with curiosity; and we can’t have any messiness of that kind. Come along in—and it’s for the last time!”

They passed through the baize door, and through another, much stouter, immediately beyond, into the so-called Reading Room, a large and dingy apartment frequented by those members of the Red House who had not yet attained the dignity of a private study of their own. Round the green-distempred walls, upon varnished panels, were emblazoned the names of those who in their own brief day had done the Red House some service, whether of mind or matter. There was no other attempt at decoration and none at all at comfort. The furniture consisted of inkstained tables and upright wooden chairs. The day’s *Times*, clamped to a large sloping reading-stand in one of the windows, a locked bookcase containing the House Library, and a number of tattered magazines mostly lying on the floor, served to justify the room’s literary pretensions.

Herein a full fifty per cent. of the Red House spent most of their indoor leisure—reading, writing, playing ping-pong and small cricket, or simply bear-fighting, as nature directed. Probably an inmate of Borstal, transferred to such surroundings, would have caused a question to be asked in the House of Commons about it. But the Red House found no fault: what had been good enough for the names emblazoned upon the panels was good enough for them.

Bimbo next conducted his guest to the Prep Room—furnished with desks and benches this time—then to the dining-room, own brother to the Reading Room, except for some House Groups upon the walls and a permanent smell of gravy. An aged cottage piano cowered in one corner.

After that the pair proceeded down a linoleumed passage to a long, low room with tiled walls. A row of white shorts and red blazers hung along one wall; washhand basins and shower-baths occupied the other.

“This is the changing-room,” said Bimbo. “Where we change,” he added luminously.

“Haven’t you got any bedrooms to do it in?”

“If you mean dormitories, they’re upstairs, and nobody’s allowed there in the daytime at all, except The Hag and her gang.”

“Sorry again. Which is your peg?”

“Number 49—at the far end. I’m next to Rumford tertius.”

“What’s he like?”

“Oh, all right—except for his face, of course. Now come along and I’ll show you a study or two. There’s just time.”

Bimbo led the way down another passage, and stopped at the last door.

“This is Travers’ study,” he said. “I’m his fag.”

He opened the door with a proprietorial flourish, and displayed to Button’s gaze an apartment about eight feet square, which smelt strongly of bat-oil. The bat itself was leaning against the table, with its end in a saucer of the oil in question. A pair of white cricket boots and pads, newly pipe-clayed by Bimbo himself, lay on the floor. The walls were decorated with the usual portrait groups of Fifteens and Elevens. The little mantelpiece was adorned by a portrait of Travers’ mother, in a tarnished silver frame, and three picture-postcards of Miss Ginger Rogers.

“Of course this study is bigger than the others,” said Bimbo. “Travers is Head of the House—Captain of the Eleven, too. He’s leaving at the end of term: his farewell grub to his fags ought to be a real binge. I’ll just show you one other study—Goat Hicks’s. He’s not a prefect, but about the biggest swell in the House. No, I can’t: there’s the bell for twelve o’clock school. You can walk up towards the Gym with me for about a hundred yards, if you like. Then you must scam, or somebody might see us.”

They emerged from the side-door and proceeded towards the Gymnasium, Bimbo still pointing out objects of local interest.

“That’s the Green House over there, past the laurel bushes,” he said—“Uncle Frank’s. A complete zoo. Do you see those tall trees over on the left, beyond all the Houses and everything? That’s Culver’s Coppice, where the Egg nobbled me yesterday. It was mouldy luck: I was within a yard of the nest. And of course I simply can’t risk going again.”

“No, you can’t,” replied Button thoughtfully. “How big is Rumford tertius?”

“About my size. Why?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Well, don’t ask drivelling questions.”

“No, darling,” said Button meekly. “I suppose I’d better leave you now,” she added. “Good-bye!”

She turned on her heel and retraced her steps towards the Red House, with docility in her mien and silent purpose in her eye.

THE BONDS OF DISCIPLINE

THE power to impress one's fellow-creatures is one of the most elusive of human mysteries. Some people are born with it: they have only to walk on to a platform or a barrack-square, or into a classroom, and the meeting comes to order automatically. It has nothing to do with a man's personal appearance: some of the most insignificant creatures that ever breathed have been able to twist a crowd round their little fingers before now. Some of them are doing it to-day, with nations.

Few that are not born with the power ever achieve it. It can be done, of course, like everything else, by laborious persistence and an infinity of backbone: take Demosthenes, for instance. But in the main, no. You may be earnest, eloquent, shrewd, humorous—but the Thing, unless you are born with it, is not for you, and never will be.

The most effective, because the most effortless disciplinarian at Marbledown was the Headmaster himself—the Headpiece, as Mr. Beamish, in unconscious homage, had christened him. He was the most effective teacher too, though Mr. Donkin ran him a close second. But their methods differed as widely as rapier from bludgeon. The Head was all cold dignity, and clear, flawless exposition. Since his arrival at Marbledown he had organised the Sixth Form into a perfectly functioning machine for the acquisition of Open Scholarships.

Mr. Donkin's methods were less ornate.

"Keep boys in order," he said. "Kick them in the stomach if necessary. Don't let them play the fool or go to sleep, and they'll be so bored at doing nothing that they'll work like beavers to pass the time!"

That was what Mr. Donkin said. But there was more to his methods than that, as the Fifth Form could have told you—and as Mr. Ovington realised when Mr. Donkin's boys were promoted to the Sixth.

Other efficient disciplinarians on the Staff were Mr. Kent, who handled the Army Class like a well-ordered platoon—which was not altogether surprising, for he was an ex-Regular soldier; Mr. Beamish, whose Double Blue rendered homage among his small subjects of the First Form completely automatic; and that acid critic of other people's methods, Frank Hastings.

At the other end of the scale came the gentleman whom Master Bimbo had described as resembling a fourpenny rabbit—Philip de Pourville, the Junior Stinks Beak.

Mr. Ovington's predecessor, Dr. Adams, a ripe scholar and a deep but somewhat garrulous thinker, had once lamented at a Masters' Meeting the impossibility of procuring a Science master who was a gentleman. This *obiter dictum* had not gone too well with the scientists present, but it did express an undoubted truth—namely, that it is difficult to obtain a Science master anywhere who has been educated in the classical tradition; and to old-fashioned pedagogues of the Adams type a man with a mere Science degree, however superlative, can never attain to the same social plane as the public-school product who has scraped a Second or Third in Classical Moderations or Tripos.

And therefore when Philip de Pourville applied for the post of Junior Science Master of Marbledown, Dr. Adams appointed him on the spot, despite the claims of several highly qualified rivals, whose cardinal fault was that they had been educated at schools of which Dr. Adams had never heard. He had heard of de Pourville's school, however; in fact, he had once been a boy there himself. So de Pourville got the appointment over the heads of everybody else. It is not suggested that the appointment was in itself a bad one: de Pourville was the possessor of a perfectly adequate degree, and being an old public-school boy himself could fairly be expected to be familiar with the workings of that complex mystery known as public-school tradition.

For all that, he was Dr. Adams' last appointment; for not long afterwards the Governing Body, for reasons already stated, relegated that venerable diehard to a rural deanery, and installed Mr. Ovington in his stead.

Philip de Pourville had been at Marbledown for nearly two years now, and was gradually getting used to the place—as it is said that eels gradually get used to skinning. From which the acute reader will gather that he was not entirely enjoying his duties as Junior Science Master. And yet he could have enjoyed every moment of them if things had been just a little different. He knew his job, he was a natural teacher, and he was not afraid of drudgery. He had resigned his post as Assistant Demonstrator in his own College laboratory at Cambridge because he had not enough to do; because he felt himself a little too closely confined by the narrow, formal, and monastic life of a don. He wanted a wider horizon—a place where there was youth, movement, *joie de vivre*. He found all three at Marbledown.

The attitude of an English public-school boy to education is peculiar—you might call it paradoxical—but it is perfectly consistent. He says to his instructors, in effect:

“As a busily growing animal I am scatterbrained and entirely lacking in mental application. Having no desire at present to expend my precious energies upon the pursuit of knowledge, I shall not make the slightest attempt to assist you in your

attempts to impart it. If you can capture my unwilling attention and goad me by stern measures into the requisite activity, I shall dislike you intensely, but I shall respect you. If you fail, I shall regard you with the contempt you deserve, and probably do my best, in a jolly, high-spirited way, to make your life a hell upon earth. And what could be fairer than that?" What indeed?

Unfortunately Philip de Pourville did not know this—or rather, he did not remember it as he should. He had been a studious boy in his own schooldays—an incorrigible ‘groise,’ to employ the technical expression—with a passionate interest in Natural Science, of which in the classical strongholds of this country little is known either by boys or masters, except that you can take it as an alternative to Latin Verse.

But Philip honestly worshipped this despised branch of learning, and desired earnestly to raise its status and improve its teaching in the great schools of England. The next age was going to be the Age of Science; the Classics were dying on their feet; and unless the public schools were awakened to the fact, they would soon be dying on their feet too. So you can imagine something of the raptness and the vision which Philip took with him on this, his great Crusade. (Button had not been far out.)

And then, at the very dawn of battle, on the very threshold of adventure, he discovered that he had overlooked something—a liability—a hundred-per-cent. liability.

He could not keep boys in order.

II

The middle hour of morning school normally ended at noon, but the School clock still wanted ten minutes to the hour when Philip de Pourville left the Laboratory Block at the double, preceded by a yelling horde of light-hearted young scientists, and pursued by the fumes of the three smelliest gases known to inorganic chemistry.

His flock on this occasion were the Senior Moderns—as tough a collection of scholastic lambs as ever broke the heart of a young and apologetic shepherd—who had been undergoing nominally an hour's instruction in practical chemistry. The reason of their premature disbandment will appear later.

Their appointed task on this particular morning had been a fairly simple problem in qualitative analysis. de Pourville had issued each boy with a small quantity of sodium sulphate, and had bidden him, by the exercise of his wits and what chemical learning he possessed, to find out what it was.

But practical chemistry is a difficult subject to supervise, even if the practical

chemists take their task seriously, which the Senior Moderns were very far from doing. To be just, a laboratory offers infinite distractions from the path of rectitude. The class are scattered over a considerable area, and it is quite impossible to watch them all at once. They are surrounded by bottles containing liquids, and jars containing solids which, if surreptitiously mixed together in a beaker or test-tube and submitted to the influence of a Bunsen burner, can frequently be stimulated into some interesting reaction, of an odoriferous or, with luck, explosive character. Against such attractions as these routine tests of the constituents of a solution of sodium sulphate have little chance.

Moreover, it is almost impossible to prevent conversation, usually of an entirely untechnical character. In other words, the laboratory hummed with cheerful chat, punctuated by minor explosions and conflagrations.

However, Philip started conscientiously upon his round.

Having frustrated, with mild reproof, two of his younger disciples in an attempt to prepare a sample of nitroglycerine—by the simple expedient of shaking up some glycerine and nitric acid together, like a cocktail, in a test-tube—he came round the corner of a bench just in time to detect one Pop Ogilvie in the act of pouring mercury from the laboratory jar into a small bottle, apparently Pop's own private property. Uncomfortably accepting the explanation that Pop required the mercury for the construction of a home-made barometer, to be set up in his House study, Philip passed on, and presently arrived at the remotest and least supervisable end of the laboratory, popularly known as Bolshie Corner. Here were gathered Goat Hicks, of the Red House, already mentioned in this narrative, and his two particular cronies, Oily Boyd, a sycophant, and Mug Pollard, a humorist. The trio might without disrespect or inaccuracy have been labelled Public Enemies Number One, Two, and Three, of anything in the shape of ordered progress in the Senior Moderns.

Philip bade them a nervous good morning.

"Morning," replied Goat. "What's this muck that you've served out to us this time?" Goat was in the habit of addressing Mr. de Pourville in exactly the same terms as he employed toward Sam, the unkempt youth who cleaned up the laboratory: it all expressed his impartial contempt for Science in general.

"That is for you to find out, Hicks."

"How am I supposed to start?"

"Swallow it, and see if it poisons you," suggested Mug Pollard, the humorist. "Give it a chance, anyhow."

There was laughter at this, in which de Pourville feebly joined. He enjoyed a joke as well as anybody, he told himself. Then he replied:

“Ascertain if it is soluble in water. Test it with litmus for an acid reaction. Bubble some sulphuretted hydrogen through. You will find an apparatus in the draught-cupboard.”

“Is that the stuff that stinks like rotten eggs?”

“That is the characteristic odour.”

“The bigger the Egg the bigger the stink, I suppose,” said Pollard—and Oily Boyd sniggered offensively. de Pourville grasped the obvious allusion, but decided to ignore it. Schoolboys cherish the curious belief, he assured himself, that masters never know their own nicknames, or one another’s.

“What’s the stuff with the rotten-cabbage smell?” continued Hicks.

“I expect you mean carbon disulphide.”

“I expect so too. How do you make it?”

“In various ways. For purposes of simple demonstration I should heat some fragments of charcoal to redness, and pass sulphur vapour over them. Now you had better be getting on with your present experiment.”

He turned to go, but Pollard nudged Hicks and winked at Boyd.

“Isn’t there a worse stink still, sir?” asked Hicks, in what was clearly meant to be a conciliatory voice. “It’s fearfully interesting to hear these things from you. You make them so clear.”

de Pourville, a little taken aback by this unexpected testimonial, replied that Mr. Pollard was probably referring to phosphoretted hydrogen, which was released when fragments of phosphorus were boiled in a concentrated solution of caustic potash. It had a characteristic odour of decaying fish.

“Now I really must get on,” he said, and passed down the other side of the bench. Here he encountered a tall, fair-haired boy, mainly distinguished by a good-tempered smile and a lazy drawl. He was engaged in wiping down his next-door neighbour’s face with his pocket-handkerchief.

“First aid for a too-adventurous research student, sir,” he explained. “No harm done, except to the features, and they have been beyond hope since birth.”

de Pourville liked this boy, one Nightingale. He could hardly be regarded as an earnest seeker after knowledge, but he never gave trouble, and his easy familiarity was entirely devoid of offence.

“Thank you, Nightingale,” he said. “What have you been doing to yourself, Walpole?” he asked the recipient of first aid.

“I was trying a test, sir, and the thing blew up in my——”

“The premature ebullition,” Nightingale explained, “of the contents of a test-tube. Due to childish inability to distinguish between the respective properties of dilute and

concentrated HCl,” he added. “Isn’t the atmosphere in here getting a bit oppressive, sir?”

He hastily transferred his handkerchief from Walpole’s features to his own nose.

de Pourville’s more expert organ analysed the situation in a moment. He turned instinctively in the direction of Bolshie Corner; but before he could speak or move the air was rent by coughings and chokings from all sides, accompanied by imprecations as pungent as the combined odours of rotten eggs, rotten cabbage, and rotten fish which now assailed his senses.

Next moment there was a general stampede, headed by the authors of the outrage. The Junior Science Master, like Xenophon, “accompanied the rear-guard.”

“I suppose we needn’t go back, sir?” demanded his pupils, thronging round him in the quadrangle outside. “I mean to say—without gas-masks—well——!”

Philip glanced up towards the School clock, on its tower. It marked ten minutes to twelve.

“Very well,” he said. “Go to your Houses, and make as little noise as possible. We don’t want to disturb the—others, do we?”

The Senior Moderns promptly dispersed in joyous disorder. Philip, who was not due in school again until afternoon, sighed, took a nervous glance in the direction of the adjacent Sixth Form windows, mounted his bicycle, and pedalled off down the hill in the direction of the stone bridge and Marbledown Market Place, where his lodgings were situated. As already noted, he was, thanks to the successful collaboration of Messrs. Hicks, Pollard, and Boyd, some ten minutes before his normal time.

In all this that unpleasant trio were the instruments of an inscrutable Providence, as you shall see.

SHOCK TROOPS

“REMEMBER that notice outside Folkestone, darling,” said Rosemary. “*Tenez la gauche!*”

“I’m so sorry, darling,” replied Chris. “I keep forgetting. It seems so silly to keep to the left, somehow, when they keep to the right everywhere else.”

“Not everywhere. Not in Austria. Don’t you remember, in Vienna——?”

“Not very well. I was only thirteen when——Oh, *sorry!* No, it’s all right; I missed him! Darling, did I give you heart failure?”

“No; but you startled the old gentleman on the bicycle a bit.”

“Well, it was partly his fault. I mean, wasn’t it? He was right in the middle of the road. If only he had swerved *firmly* to one side I could have swerved to the other. As it was, he just wobbled. I’ll tell you what, perhaps we had better not talk any more. You look at the scenery or something, and then I can concentrate. I’ll go on saying to myself: ‘Keep to the left! *Tenez la gauche!* Keep to——’ I say, it was rather sweet of them, whoever they were, to put up a notice in French on an English road. I wonder if they do it all over, or just outside seaports. I mean——”

Rosemary murmured a tranquil reminder on the subject of her sister’s recent vow of silence, and turned to enjoy the prospect of the deep green English countryside, with its winding lanes and high hedges—grateful and comforting to young eyes long relegated to straight, poplar-lined vistas.

The two girls, comfortably tucked into Chris’s Peugeot *bébé*, with their smart Vuitton suitcases strapped on behind, had left Folkestone after breakfast, having spent the night there with Aunt Barbara and Button. They were now heading for Marbledown, and, according to Chris’s calculations, ought to have arrived there about three days ago. But topographical vagueness was ever a feminine failing, and Chris was feminine *à l’outrance*. They were running along a narrow country road now: it was long since they had seen a main highway.

“It’s after eleven, darling,” announced Rosemary presently. “Do you think we are nearly there?”

“Let’s ask somebody,” said Chris. “That woman over there at that cottage door, with the baby.”

A moment later the car pulled up with a jerk, narrowly missing the cottage doorstep, and Rosemary enquired, with her invariable friendly smile:

“We want to go to Marbledown, please. Do you know where it is? What a

perfectly sweet baby! What's its name?"

The woman replied that the baby's name was George, and that it was three months old. She was proceeding to further and more intimate details when Chris took up the tale.

"We haven't been in England for years and years, so we don't really know our way about very well. We're trying to find——"

"I suppose it hasn't got any teeth yet?"

"No, miss, not yet. You're about four miles from Marbledown. Bear left at the next road-fork."

"It's Marbledown School we really want," explained Chris. "We're going to live there."

"The School's over the old stone bridge, on the north side of the town. You go straight through the Market Place."

"Oh, thank you so much. Good-bye! Come on, Chris. Good-bye, angel!"
(George, apparently.)

The car shot forward.

"We shall be there in time for lunch," remarked Chris presently. "Did she say bear left or right?"

"I don't remember, darling."

"Never mind; it's an even chance. Here's the road-fork—*and* a signpost. Lovely! Let's stop and——Ooh! . . . No, it's only our bumper-bar, and the signpost isn't even scratched. We go left. 'Marbledown, three miles.' We're practically there. I wonder if Auntie B and Button have arrived. Do you think Charles will be pleased to see us? I wonder what he's like. It'll be too odd going to a place full of people we've never seen."

"Except Uncle Frank."

"Of course; *toujours* Uncle Frank. Hallo, I believe we're here!"

II

The old stone bridge at Marbledown is supposed to go back to Roman days. This may well be the case, for it possesses at least two of the characteristics of Roman bridgework in this country—it runs up to a high ridge in the middle, and is too narrow for anything but single-line traffic. Consequently a pair of over-enterprising charioteers are prone, in certain circumstances, to a mutually surprising encounter.

The now-distant School clock was chiming twelve when Philip de Pourville, ten

minutes before his time (as has previously been pointed out), having free-wheeled down the gently sloping School avenue, began to pedal vigorously up the short steep ascent of the northern side of the bridge.

Simultaneously upon the other side Chris, remarking cheerfully: "Here's the stone bridge she told us about, darling. One teeny hop, and we're home!" stepped smartly upon her accelerator.

The impact took place with mathematical exactitude on the very crown of the bridge. It was not quite a head-on collision, because the conscientious Philip was keeping as far over to the left as the width of the bridge would allow him. Upon his sudden appearance, however, the resourceful Chris pulled sharply over, with unflinching instinct, to her right, pinning Philip and his bicycle securely to the parapet.

There was a shrieking of brakes and a buckling of metal, accompanied by a slight tinkle of glass; then a mingled duet of apology and concern from the interior of the Peugeot *bébé*. After which the car disengaged itself, and ran giddily backward from the crown of the bridge to the level road, where it stopped. Then Rosemary and Chris leaped out and hastened to the succour of their victim.

"My fault entirely," announced Chris. "Blame it all on me, please! Just another half-witted blonde."

"Are you hurt?" asked Rosemary anxiously.

"I don't think so," said Philip, who was now on his feet, smiling resolutely. He had received Chris's offside mudguard in his right knee, and had scraped his left wrist against the rough brickwork of the bridge. He was also feeling dazed and giddy.

"My bicycle has suffered the most, I think," he continued. "If I could find my spectacles—Ah, here they are!"

He picked them up, fortunately intact, and put them on, and was thus able to focus the vision before him—two trim figures in spotless white overalls and two perfectly-planned young faces framed in white flying-helmets. One pair of eyes—the eyes of the self-confessed half-witted blonde—were deep brown, the others were as blue as cornflowers. Whether their owner was a blonde also Philip was unable to perceive, for her hair, like her companion's, was completely concealed by the helmet, which was buckled under her chin.

The helmets and overalls had been Chris's idea. They were modelled upon the regulation costume of those intrepid young females who race their own cars round Brooklands and other arenas of self-destruction. She had seen them in a Parisian fashion-paper and admired their undoubted *chic*. They would do admirably, she felt, for quiet excursions round the sleepy English countryside.

“Is your car damaged at all?” asked Philip.

“Nothing to cry about,” said Chris. “The offside head-lamp is broken, and this mudguard has sprained itself a bit; but that’s all, thank you.”

“Then I think I’d better be getting on. Good morning.”

Suddenly Rosemary exclaimed.

“Chris, he’s all bloody! Look! His left wrist! Oh, darling, what shall we do? He may bleed to death, or something! Have you got anything on underneath that we could make a bandage of?”

“Well, not much. Wait a minute!” Chris zipped open the top of her overall.

“It’s all right, really,” said Philip, apprehensively. “I’ll go home and get it done there.”

“Where’s that?” asked Rosemary.

“Over in the town Market Place—my lodgings.”

“But you can’t. Look at your bicycle: the front wheel’s got a permanent wave,” said Chris. “Get into the car, and we’ll drive you.”

“Why not drive him to one of those houses over there?” said Rosemary, indicating the School buildings. “They’ll be able to give us hot water and a proper bandage, and everything. Get in, please. By the way, what’s your name?”

“Philip de Pourville.”

“Mine’s Rosemary Faringdon. This is my sister Chris. Now we all know each other. (Evidently the Girls’ Friendly Society had triumphantly survived transplantation.) Now get into the car beside Chris: I’ll help you. Careful; you see, you’re quite weak and wobbly! *That’s* right! I’ll sit on the luggage behind. No, don’t argue: just relax, and leave the rest to us. Right away, Chris; I’m up. Drive to that house over on the left, among the trees: it’s the nearest. Go slow now, darling.”

Three minutes later the car drew up sedately outside a pair of open French windows.

“We’d better take him straight in here,” said Rosemary, “and ring the bell. That’ll be the quickest way to bring somebody. Come along, Philip. Take my arm.”

The gentleman addressed, who had rarely taken a girl’s arm in his life—certainly never the arm of such a radiant divinity as this—obeyed dumbly. He was conscious of a rising suspicion that the collision had killed him, and that he had woken up in Heaven.

The necessity of ringing the bell to summon assistance was obviated by the fact that the room which they entered was tenanted by a massive female of benevolent appearance, clad in white *piqué*, laying down the telephone.

“Good morning,” said Rosemary politely. “Do you know anything about first

aid?”

“A little, Miss. Why, Mr. de Pourville, whatever has happened to you? You can hardly walk.”

“She knows him!” said Chris, thrilled. “We hit him with our car,” she explained. “His left wrist is bleeding. I think he’s broken his leg or something, too.”

“You seem to know who he is,” added Rosemary.

“He’s one of the masters at the School, Miss. You’re in the School now: I’m Matron of this House. Lie down on the sofa, Mr. de Pourville; I want to look at that knee.”

The Matron began to busy herself professionally. Chris turned raptly to her sister.

“Isn’t this an act of complete Provvv, darling? We run somebody over, and the first place we bring him to is where there’s a perfectly marvellous hospital nurse!”

Rosemary did not answer. She had been surveying the room. A big desk, portrait groups, photographs of boys—all the regulation accompaniments of a schoolmaster’s study. A new world altogether.

“Which House is this, please?” she asked the Matron.

“The *Red* House, Miss. Are you the two Miss Faringdons that Mr. Donkin is expecting?”

“The Red House?” exclaimed Chris. “Rosemary darling, Charles’s House! We’ve walked right into it—first shot! No—it’s not possible! I don’t believe it!”

“You’ve got to, darling,” said Rosemary. “Here’s Mother, on the mantelpiece!”

AN AFFAIR OF OUTPOSTS

“THERE, Mr. de Pourville,” announced the Matron, as the mausoleum struck one; “I think you are all right now. Any more giddiness?”

“No, thank you.”

“Your wrist isn’t sprained; only scratched. If you’ll look in to-morrow I’ll dress it again. But if your knee gets any stiffer you’ll have to see the doctor about it. Can you walk all right?”

“Of course—perfectly.” de Pourville rose uncertainly to his feet. “I must be getting home now.”

He limped half-way across the room—to find his progress barred by a slim white figure. It was Rosemary, with determination written upon her features. Her helmet was off now, and de Pourville noted that her hair was as fair as her sister’s—that natural spun-gold effect which all the peroxide in the world can never achieve.

“Do you imagine,” she enquired sternly, “that we’re going to let you walk all the way to your lodgings, after we’ve smashed your push-bike, and everything? You’re going to be driven—isn’t he, Chris?”

“I should shay sho,” replied Chris humorously.

“Come along, Philip. I’ll run you over in no time.”

“I think I’d better take him,” said Rosemary quickly. “You’re still the least bit excited, aren’t you, darling?”

“Perhaps you’re right, dear. I’m the excitable member of the family,” Chris explained to de Pourville, “so I let Rose boss me.” This was something of an overstatement of fact; but Chris was nothing if not loyal, and it was quite evident that Rosemary had taken this shy, spectacled young man under her exclusive wing. “I’ll just go and turn round the car——*Is* it? Can it be? It *is*! Charles—our darling Charles!”

Chris found herself face to face with Mr. Donkin, entering by the window in cap and gown and carrying books. Next moment she had taken the now familiar running-jump of the Faringdon family, and landed fairly and squarely upon her host’s chest, scattering the books in all directions.

“I’m Chris,” she explained, kissing him on both cheeks. “This is Rosemary.”

She stepped back, revealing her elder sister for the first time.

Mr. Donkin gazed silently at Rosemary. Then his eyes travelled to the mantelpiece, then back. He took her by both hands.

“Your name is Angela,” he said decisively. “Look!” He indicated the photograph.

They looked. Of course there were differences. Angela, as previously noted, displayed more hair than her smoothly waved daughter had ever possessed, and the hair itself seemed a shade darker; but otherwise the likeness was uncanny. The same laughing mouth, the same little *retroussé* nose, and the same wide-set serious eyes, contradicting the other features.

Rosemary turned from the photograph to Charles, and kissed him gently.

“I’m afraid I *am* Rosemary, darling,” she replied; “but I’ll try to live up to the Angela part.”

“We have just run over this gentleman,” announced Chris, introducing de Pourville. “He says he doesn’t mind.”

Donkin surveyed his damaged colleague with a chuckle.

“Why should he, at his age?” he asked. “Hallo, Matron; I’m afraid I didn’t notice you. Do you want me?”

“Yes, sir,” replied that placid woman. “About Bullock major’s rash. He has developed a high temperature, too. The doctor’s with him now.”

“Right; I’ll come and see him at once. Can you two entertain yourselves for a few minutes?”

“I’m going to drive Philip home,” said Rosemary. “Come along, Philip! I shan’t be long, Chris.”

“That’ll be quite all right, darling. Charles, may I come with you and see Bullock major?”

“I think it would be more seemly and appropriate if you were to see your aunt instead. You’ll find her upstairs.”

“Righto. I’ll just help to pack up this young couple first.”

Two minutes later Chris re-entered the study, still re-echoing with the roar of the departing car’s exhaust. Mr. Donkin and the Matron had disappeared, doubtless upon their errand of mercy; but a most presentable young man had just entered by the green-baize door.

II

Chris forgot all about her proposed excursion upstairs.

“Hallo!” she said.

“Good morning,” replied Master Nightingale, regarding her with unqualified approval.

“Come in and sit down,” continued Chris, the spirit of the G.F.S. prompting her

strongly. "What do you teach?"

"Teach?"

"Yes. Aren't you a master here?"

"Me? A pretty thought, and I am sure well-intended; but I'm only in *statu pupillari*—Esperanto for Offscourings of the Modern Side."

"But you've got a moustache."

"You are the first person who has ever commented upon the fact. I am more moved than I can say. Thank you!"

"And you talk in such a grown-up way."

"So I am told. Put it down to constant association, during the formative age, with a somewhat pedantic male relative."

"What's your name?"

"You would ask that! Nightingale. Thank you for not laughing."

"What do the boys call you?"

"Flossie—short for the well-known ministering angel. What do you think of it?"

Chris thought it was utterly sweet, and said so. She added that she would call him Flossie too, and that her name was Chris Faringdon.

"Any relation to the notorious Bimbo?"

"Sister. I've come to live here. Will you smoke?"

Chris produced an enamel cigarette-case from her trousers-pocket, and proffered it. Flossie Nightingale upheld his hands in horror.

"Smoke? My dear, you mustn't offer smokes to the proletariat. It's practically a hanging matter in this place. *Statu pupillari*, and so on. Supposing the Moke came in?"

"It's all right," said Chris. "He's upstairs with the doctor, counting spots on somebody called Bullock major. Let's chance it. Open your mouth."

She inserted a cigarette between the lips of the plastic Flossie, and lit it for him.

"The woman tempted me," he observed complacently. "If you don't mind, I'll just put this ash-tray handy, in case the trusty old steed should come braying in."

"I'll say it was my cigarette, if he does." Chris lit a cigarette herself, dropped down upon the sofa again, and favoured her companion with a seraphic smile.

"This is fun," she said. "Your moustache worries me, though."

"But the recent kind testimonial to the same? I thought——"

"Oh, I adore it; but it makes you so old—for a schoolboy."

Flossie Nightingale surveyed Chris thoughtfully—from her friendly, confiding smile, her frank eyes, her white overalls, down to her silken ankles and little black-and-white buckskin shoes.

“Where were you brought up?” he asked.

“Abroad. Paris, mostly. I hardly know England at all.”

“So I gather. Let me explain. Under the English scholastic system we are immured in these places until an advanced age—dotage, in some cases. The idea is to keep us sober, and form our characters. Hence our apparent senility.”

“I see,” said Chris, nodding. “French schoolboys are quite different. They run about in little knickerbockers and white socks, even when they are quite big. They wear funny sort of yachting caps, too.”

“You won’t tell The Egg that, will you?” Flossie appeared to be genuinely alarmed.

“Who’s The Egg?”

“Our efficient and popular Headmaster. He’s what is known as an educational reformer—dead nuts on anything that will help to smash a few more of the hidebound conventions of the English public-school system. Little knickerbockers and white socks—and funny yachting-caps! Right down his street! He’ll enjoy meeting you, Chris.”

Chris, who liked to be liked, gave a gratified little wriggle.

“I’m so glad. Have *you* enjoyed meeting me, by the way?”

“You are, to date,” replied Flossie gravely, “the most satisfactory encounter of my life.”

“Oh Flossie, how sweet of you!” In the fullness of her heart Chris took Flossie’s hand, which that young gentleman made no attempt to withdraw. “But why will The Egg enjoy meeting me?”

“Because I imagine that once you get fairly down to it in this ancient foundation, you will do more damage to hidebound tradition than all The Egg’s reforms put together.”

Chris closed her eyes ecstatically.

“What fun Rosemary and I are going to have!” she sighed.

“Rosemary?”

“My sister. She’s twenty and I’m eighteen. And then there’s Button: she’s thirteen. We’re coming to live here for good.”

“Three all told?”

“Correct.”

“Without repressions or inhibitions of any kind whatever?”

“What *are* they?”

“What are they? Golly!”

Flossie shook his head; then rose respectfully to his feet as the door opened and

his housemaster entered.

“Come in, Charles,” said Chris hospitably. “This is Flossie.”

“Thank you; we have met.” Mr. Donkin glared at Flossie over his spectacles, then turned to Chris. “Have you, or have you not seen your aunt, as I suggested?”

“Not, darling.”

“Then out, baggage!”

“Whatever you say, angel. Good-bye, Flossie!”

The door closed, and Mr. Donkin sat down at his desk and began to scribble an order committing Bullock major to the Sanatorium. Flossie waited deferentially upon the regulation spot beside the baize door. Presently Mr. Donkin spoke, without looking up.

“What do you want, boy? I’m terribly busy. Tell me in two words.”

Flossie, it seemed, had come to ask leave to dine that night with his uncle (and guardian) Sir Berkeley Nightingale—a pillar of the Constitution upon a diplomatic visit to the district.

“He’s speaking at a big political meeting in the Corn Exchange, sir, in support of the Government——”

“God help him!”

“And he’s dining early, at the Spread Eagle——”

“Heaven protect him!”

“So I should be back in time for Prep, sir.”

“I see. *Nihil obstat*. Out!”

“Thank you, sir.” Flossie turned to go.

“Stop,” said Mr. Donkin, as he blotted Bullock’s commitment order. “Is Sir Berkeley alone?”

“I expect so, sir, except for a secretary or something.”

“I’ve known him for forty years. We were at prep school together. Give him my compliments, and say that if he would like to look in here after his meeting, I shall be glad to—smoke—a—pipe—with——”

The last sentence, after a marked *rallentando*, came to an abrupt stop. Mr. Donkin picked two cigarette-ends out of the ash-tray on his desk, and examined them thoughtfully. The tip of one of them was smeared a vivid scarlet.

He surveyed the apprehensive Flossie long and thoughtfully. Evidently he was considering sentence. Finally he announced:

“You must get a lipstick too, Flossie.”

“Yes, sir!” agreed that startled youth, and vanished.

SURPRISE ATTACK

MEANWHILE Marbledown School was proceeding from labour to refreshment. On the stroke of one o'clock various doors had burst open, emitting innumerable hungry boys and masters. The boys dispersed with the inevitable tumult to their various Houses. The Staff proceeded more sedately to the Common Room, where they deposited mark-books, talked a little shop, asked (or granted) permission for the execution of some malefactor, or merely arranged a *rendezvous*, at net or court, in the afternoon.

Thereafter the Housemasters betook themselves to their various strongholds, for luncheon and a highly probable nap—there would be no more School until four o'clock—while their juniors, except the House Dogs, whose duty it was to preside at House dinner, mounted their bicycles and sped away to various lodgings and chummeries in and around the town.

Mr. Donkin, as we have already seen, hurried down to his House the moment school was over, for the cares of compulsory hospitality lay heavy upon him. So preoccupied was he that his appointment with the Headmaster had entirely slipped his punctilious memory.

Mr. Hastings followed him five minutes later. He had decided to invite himself to lunch with Mr. Donkin, partly because he not infrequently did so, and partly because he wished to ascertain if the expected guests had made a happy landing.

He effected his accustomed entry through the window of the library, to find that room untenanted, for Mr. Donkin was at the front door, supervising the transference of Master Bullock to the School ambulance during the quietude of House dinner. Hastings rang the bell, and subsequently enquired of Ellen whether a Miss Fane had arrived.

Ellen, with an informative smile, replied that such was the case, and was proceeding to fuller detail when there came a heavy and hurried step upon the gravel outside, and Mr. Beamish entered the room. He was obviously charged with news of some moment.

"I say, Donkin——" he began. "Oh, it's you."

"Your eyes have not deceived you," replied Hastings acidly. "Ellen, will you be so good as to ask Miss Fane if she will see me, if convenient?"

Ellen withdrew, after her customary vote of thanks.

"Who is Miss Fane?" asked Beamish.

“An old friend of Donkin’s, and I may add, of myself. She is coming to stay in this House, with her three nieces.”

“Stay? How long?”

“Indefinitely, I understand.”

“Indefinitely?”

“Definitely. Have you any objection?”

“I should think I have! Women—in *this* house! I mean, damn it! Think of them!”

“Oddly enough, that is precisely what I am doing. More oddly still, the process fails to arouse in me any urge towards profanity.”

“But where’s he going to put them?” continued Beamish, in genuine alarm. “That’s what’s eating me! If he thinks I’m going to give up my sitting-room——!”

“Do not let us add blasphemy to profanity, Beamish. The idea of turning a Double Blue out of anything——!”

“Oh, don’t be so filthily sarcastic!” roared Beamish; and Frank Hastings chuckled quietly to himself. These ox-and-gadfly contests with his younger colleagues, from which he usually emerged successful on points, exhilarated him childishly.

The door opened, and Barbara Fane entered.

“Who is being sarcastic? Oh, you, Frank! I might have guessed.” She shook hands. “Yes, we’ve arrived. How are you? Not taking enough exercise, I should say. Who is this?”

“This is Mr. Beamish.”

“How do you do? Do you live in this House?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so, from the noise you were making.”

“That is all quite in order,” said Hastings placidly. “Schoolmasters always shout at one another after half-term. It is a useful alternative to homicide.”

Further natural history notes were cut short by the entrance of Mr. Donkin.

“Hallo, Frank; I thought I turned you out of these premises a couple of hours ago.”

“I have come to lunch with you and Barbara. By the way, Barbara, have the nieces arrived?”

“Yes; but only two are accounted for as yet.”

“Which is the defaulter?”

“Rosemary.”

“I have seen her,” said Mr. Donkin; “I have seen them all. Rosemary is all right——very much all right. Where is my friend Button?”

“As likely as not in the kitchen by this time.”

Mr. Beamish, who had obviously been containing himself with difficulty during this domestic symposium, now broke in.

“Donkin, I want to speak to you.”

“Private and confidential?” asked Donkin, a little surprised at his henchman’s obvious agitation.

“Private and confidential?” Mr. Beamish uttered a loud and angry laugh. “No fear! The more public we make this business the better: it’s been done behind our backs long enough. Even I knew nothing about it until the Regatta Secretary told me. It’s an outrage—a scandal! I suppose we shall be folk-dancing and playing croquet, and nothing else, in a year or two! The man’s mad, I tell you!”

“It would clarify the conversation considerably,” remarked Hastings, “if we knew precisely whom we are discussing—if indeed it is anybody in particular, and not merely some figment of——”

“I’m talking about the Head, of course!” said Beamish, vehemently. “The Headpiece! You’ve got to be firm with him this time, Donkin! You’ve got to tell him where he gets off, or else——”

The door opened, and Ellen appeared.

“If you please, sir, the Headmaster!”

Mr. Ovington stalked into the room. He was in cap and gown, which indicated that the visit was official.

“Good morning, Donkin,” he said. “As the mountain appears disinclined to come to Mahomet, Mahomet has adopted the only possible alternative!”

II

Rosemary duly deposited Philip de Pourville at his lodgings, after an entirely unadventurous passage. But not an inconspicuous one. As already related, it was after one o’clock, and there were boys everywhere, scurrying in all directions like ants off duty—which indeed they were—and almost falling under the wheels of the car in their anxiety to get what is known in cinema circles as a close-up of Rosemary. By the end of the dinner-hour it was universally known throughout Marbledown School that Peter Poop, the Junior Stinks Beak, had suddenly gone gay and eloped in a two-seater with a film-star in white tights.

Not that Philip had the slightest realisation of the publicity that he was incurring. He was oblivious of everything—his aching knee, his throbbing wrist, even the deeply interested young spectators who lined the way—of everything save the fact

that he was alone in some kind of fairy coach or magic chariot, with the golden young goddess who had suddenly come into his life. He was twenty-seven, and had never been in love: the impact of the arrears of emotion natural in the circumstances had temporarily numbed his faculties.

He recovered somewhat as they bumped over the stone bridge, and they laughed together over their recent adventure. By the time that they reached Philip's lodgings in the Market Place he was himself again—only deliriously happy as well.

"Where do you live?" asked Rosemary, as they traversed the ancient cobblestones.

"In that corner," said Philip, pointing. "The confectioner's shop."

"You live in a confectioner's shop?"

"Oh, no; over it."

"How clever of you! *Pâtisserie* always smells nice. How awful it would be to live over a fishshop! In Paris we had an *épicerie* at corner. Rather a jolly, mixed sort of smell, except for the cheese in summer. Well, here we are."

"It has been a very short journey," said Philip. It was his very first attempt at a compliment to a woman.

The car drew up opposite the shop, and Rosemary slipped from under her wheel and slid nimbly over the side. Philip disembarked more deliberately, partly because it hurt him to do so at all, and partly because he wished to prolong this moment as long as possible. He had no idea when he would see Rosemary again. His natural instinct at this moment—indeed it is the natural instinct of every inarticulate lover that ever breathed—was to pick her up in his arms and run. No matter where to—just run, with Rosemary in his arms. This being impracticable, he cast desperately about for a more convenable alternative. What could he do—or say—to postpone the clashing of the gates of Paradise? Of course a young girl could not be invited to visit a bachelor in his rooms—not without a chaperon——

"How do we get upstairs?" asked Rosemary. "Do we go through the shop, or have you a door of your own?"

Philip, with beating heart and husky voice, replied that the door was just round the corner, up the alley.

"I can't stay long," continued Rosemary, as they mounted the narrow linoleumed stairs, "because it must be nearly Charles's lunch-time; but I must have one look at your rooms. I wonder if you know how to make yourself comfortable." She entered the sitting-room, and gave one brief appraising glance round. "No. Oh dear! Well, I can't do anything about it now, but I'll come along in a day or two and see what can be arranged. I shouldn't be surprised if I had to have the best of three falls with your

landlady. Is this your lunch?"

"Yes."

"That also shall be attended to. Have you got a gas-ring, by any chance?"

"Yes, in the bathroom. I use it for shaving-water, and tea, and things like——"

"One day I'll come and cook you a lunch on it—a proper *déjeuner*. I'm not too bad. Meanwhile, I suppose you have got to eat this. You'd better have it lying down, and rest that knee. On the sofa: wait till I clear it. What are these books?"

"Chemistry and Physics text-books, mostly."

"I'll put them over on this walnut *chiffonnier*, or whatever the thing is called. Now lie down: that's right. I'll put your tray on this chair beside you. Is Chemistry and Physics what you teach?"

"Yes."

"It sounds fun. Is it?"

"It is for the boys."

"Then it must be for you too. You can give me a lesson one day: we'll have some lovely explosions! I must be off now. *A bientôt*, and have a nice nap after lunch!"

The door closed. Heels clattered down the brass-bound stairs. Presently the chug-chug of the Peugeot *bébé* changed to a bubbling roar. There was a clash of gears, then the sound of swiftly departing wheels, then silence.

Philip de Pourville lay beside his untasted lunch, gazing up at the dingy ceiling. He had taken his spectacles off.

"Oh God," he said earnestly, "please give me some pluck!"

III

Rosemary drove back to the Red House with a certain disregard for the speed-limit, for it was nearly half-past one, and probably schoolmasters were terribly particular about being punctual for meals and things.

She need not have troubled, for she found the study still full of people. At least it seemed very full, yet strangely silent, when she strode in through the window, whistling, just before the half-hour.

Mr. Donkin was sitting at his desk. A tall, spectacled, frowning young man in a stiff black silk gown was sitting in the armchair. The sofa was occupied by another young man, big, burly, and undeniably handsome. On the hearth-rug before the fire stood a small grizzled figure.

"Why, it's Uncle Frank! Darling!"

Frank Hastings received the Faringdon shock salute with less than his usual

sang-froid. He seemed to be somewhat uncomfortably conscious of the thundercloud presence in the armchair.

Rosemary proceeded to make herself affable to the rest of the company.

"I suppose you're all waiting for the cocktails," she said. "Are ladies admitted to this bar, please?"

"This is Miss Faringdon, Mr. Ovington," said Donkin hastily. "The Headmaster, Rosemary."

Mr. Ovington had risen to his feet, and now bowed coldly. Rosemary surveyed him in frank astonishment.

"Headmaster?" she said. "Good gracious! You *are* young, aren't you? How do you do?" She advanced and shook hands warmly, then turned to Mr. Donkin. "Charles, why is he so much younger than you?"

"This," said Mr. Donkin loudly, "is Mr. Beamish."

Rosemary had no need to advance this time, for Mr. Beamish was shaking hands with her almost before the introduction was effected. The Headmaster turned to Hastings.

"This young lady is your niece, I gather."

"Purely honorary, I assure you," was the hurried reply.

"A niece of Miss Fane's," explained Donkin. "Rosemary dear, will you go and join your aunt and the others at lunch? I shall be along presently: we have to talk shop for ten minutes."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Rosemary, disengaging herself from the still welcoming hand of Mr. Beamish. "By the way," she asked, as Donkin opened the door for her, "have Chris and I got a bedroom yet?"

"I'm not sure; but we'll find a corner for you."

"Why not let them have my bedroom, Donkin?" suggested an earnest voice—the voice of a Double Blue.

"Oh, but we couldn't turn you out," protested Rosemary.

"I'd be delighted, really. I can manage with a shakedown in my sitting-room."

"How sweet of you! Isn't he sweet, Charles?"

The Headmaster of Marbledown uttered a patient and audible sigh, and wandered over towards the window, outside which the Peugeot was eructating spasmodically.

"Sweeter than honey in the honeycomb," replied Donkin; "but we'll discuss it later. This way out!"

"Forgive me," interpolated a cold voice from the window; "but before joining her aunt could the young lady be persuaded to remove that rather unusual-looking

vehicle”—the Peugeot was a vivid scarlet, by the way—“to some spot a little more remote from the boys’ side-door?”

“I’m so sorry,” said Rosemary, running to the window. “Where shall I take it to, Charles dear?”

“You will find a little garage round on my side of the House. Leave it there, and then come in again by the front door. It is the most convenient way,” added Mr. Donkin pointedly.

“All right! Good-bye, Mr. Ovington! Good-bye, Uncle Frank. Good-bye, angel!” Mr. Beamish turned instinctively, to find that Mr. Donkin was being addressed. “Don’t let them keep you too long from your lunch!”

A moment later the car had roared itself round the corner, and silence reigned anew. Donkin turned to the Headmaster.

“Please sit down again, Mr. Ovington,” he said. “I do sincerely apologise for these interruptions, but we are in a state of siege to-day. There will be no more. You were about to say——?”

IV

The congress of fasting men was once more in session.

“I was about to say this,” said Mr. Ovington; “and by a convenient coincidence you, Hastings, and you, Beamish, are here, with Donkin, to hear me say it.

“I have just taken, after very careful consideration, a step which may have far-reaching repercussions in the life of the School. In future we shall dissociate ourselves entirely from all participation in the Town Regatta. I have instructed the Regatta Secretary not to accept any entries, and I am having a notice to that effect put up outside School Hall to-morrow morning.”

It is difficult to convey in cold print the full significance of this pronouncement, to Marbledown ears. If you can imagine some one abolishing the University Boat-race, or The Derby, or for that matter the British Constitution, overnight and by a single stroke of the pen, and further, visualise the effect thereof upon national susceptibilities, you may just be able to conceive what Mr. Ovington’s off-hand little bombshell meant to Marbledown, past and present.

The Regatta was an institution. It occurred upon the last Thursday in June, and the School looked forward to it with strained anticipation from the first day of term—oarsmen, cricketers, and groisers alike. The principal event was the Town Cup, for which the Eight competed not only with the Town crew, but with the crews of several prominent Thames-side clubs. The School had been represented in the event

for fifty-one years, and had won the Cup fourteen times. The Old Boys sometimes entered a crew as well, and upon one memorable occasion Marbledown School had beaten Marbledown Old Boys, stroked by an Oxford Blue, by three feet in the Final.

There were numerous other events, of course, less formal but quite as exciting and exacting; the Nightingale Plate, for instance, presented annually by the local Member of Parliament to the winner of the Junior Fours. There was a Senior Sculling prize, too, for which members of the School were not eligible to compete, but which had been won more than once by some lusty young Marbledown master.

The Regatta moreover was more than a mere aquatic fixture. It was Carnival time—a whole holiday, spent by the entire School upon the river-bank, yelling themselves hoarse over friend and foe alike. Altogether a day of days for healthy youth—a day to look forward to for weeks, and back upon for life.

But of course the Town Cup was the crown and summit of everything. The Eight were in training for it now, and the old boatmen down by the landing-stages said the boys were going to win it this year; and they usually knew. And here was a young clergyman of thirty-one demolishing the whole glittering edifice by a single tap of a typewriter-key.

Silence reigned in the study for a full half-minute. Then Beamish said, or rather barked:—

“The School will never stand it!”

“I think I am sufficiently strong, Beamish,” replied Ovington calmly, “to cope with any remonstrance that the School may think fit to offer.”

There was another uncomfortable silence; then Mr. Donkin spoke.

“Are you inviting our criticism of your action, Mr. Ovington?”

“Certainly.”

“Then I ask you to reconsider your decision. You see, you have never been here on Regatta Day, so perhaps you don’t quite realise what store the boys set by the occasion. It’s their annual gala——”

“I should prefer to employ the term Saturnalia. As it happens, Donkin, I *have* been here upon Regatta Day—last Regatta Day, to be precise. I was staying in the town—I had come to be interviewed by the Governing Body with regard to my candidature for the post of Headmaster here—and when I say Saturnalia, I speak deliberately, and from first-hand knowledge.”

“Then of course there is no more to be said,” replied Donkin calmly. “Do you propose to explain to the School why you are doing this?”

“Do you consider it advisable?”

“Yes. Boys are always reasonable if things are put to them straight.”

“I disagree. A boy is not a reasoning animal. Besides, his first duty is to do what he is told. But I have no objection to giving my reasons to you. That is why I made this appointment—or endeavoured to.”

“We are all attention, Mr. Ovington.”

“In the first place, rowing is thoroughly bad for schoolboys.”

“No boy here is allowed to row unless he is passed as thoroughly sound by the doctor.”

“I was not considering physical objections.”

“Are we going to be psycho-analytical about it?” croaked a raven voice from the sofa.

“No, Hastings; we are going to be severely practical. Let us ask ourselves a frank question: what is the real, fundamental purpose of school games?”

“Fresh air and exercise, in the first place,” said Donkin.

“You can get that by walking out two-and-two. What else?”

“Well, roughly, to breed the manly spirit. Teach a boy to take hard knocks—keep his temper—play for his side——”

Mr. Ovington waved an airy hand.

“All very admirable; but that is not the real reason, and we know it. We organise school games, first and foremost, to keep boys out of mischief during their spare time! Is that agreed?”

“In a sense, yes.”

“Very well, then. Rowing, from this particular point of view, is a quite exceptionally undesirable form of school sport.”

“Why?” asked Beamish, staring.

“Surely the answer is obvious. It is severe and concentrated exercise: an hour or so of it at a time is enough for anybody. Consequently, upon these long summer afternoons rowing is all over by three o’clock, and rowing boys are left to their own resources until tea call-over at six. Heaven only knows where they go, or what they do, during that time!”

“They go to the tuckshop; they play fives and lawn-tennis——”

“But not all of them; and in this case it is for the exception that we must legislate, and not the rule; or there may be a disaster.”

“There has been no disaster for forty years, to my knowledge,” said Donkin. “This School has always maintained a voluntary standard of——”

“Perhaps; but standards fluctuate, especially in these days. We must make our defences sure—and rowing is our weak spot. Now, cricket is a most satisfactory

game.”

“It’s a pretty dull one if you don’t happen to be able to play it,” remarked Mr. Hastings.

“I dare say; but one knows where everybody *is*! We must develop the cricket spirit.”

“At the expense of the rowing spirit!” snorted Beamish.

“That is my intention.”

“Is the intention to abolish School rowing altogether?” asked Donkin.

“Well, let us call it an ultimate ambition.”

“You will be putting the cat among the pigeons and no mistake when you put *that* notice up, Mr. Ovington!” observed Mr. Hastings, with grim relish.

“That will depend upon the wording of the notice—if and when it appears. *Festina lente!* I intend to allow rowing in this School to die a natural and gradual death, by the simple process of removing its material rewards. Having eliminated participation in the Regatta, I shall proceed, probably next summer, to the abolition of the inter-House races and the numerous School rowing and sculling events for which prizes are available. You shall still have your Eight, and your Fours, and your tub-pairs, Beamish; but in future your disciples must learn to love rowing for its own sake. Then we shall be in a position to plumb the exact depth of the foundations of the Marbledown rowing tradition. I think you will find them rather nearer to the surface than you expect!”

Mr. Ovington rose, and resumed his mortar-board, with what he plainly imagined to be a propitiatory smile.

“That is all, I think. I must apologize for keeping three hungry men from their luncheon, but I only learned this morning that it was customary to make the Regatta entries on this date. Good morning, Donkin.”

The door into the hall closed gently, and he was gone. Mr. Beamish sprang to his feet.

“Well of all the——!”

The green-baize door closed, not so gently, and Beamish was gone too, leaving a pair of middle-aged gentlemen staring blankly at one another.

Hastings spoke first.

“Behold how this man goeth about to destroy himself!” he remarked.

“The trouble is,” said Donkin slowly, “that he’s dead right.”

“What? This from you?”

“Up to a point, I mean. Rowing *is* an unsatisfactory form of school sport. It’s too severe on rapidly growing boys, and it does leave them too much spare time. But

you can't monkey with an institution—and rowing here is an institution. These efficient modernists haven't the faintest conception of the power of sentiment and tradition, especially among boys.”

Hastings nodded.

“I have never desired,” he said, “to participate in a form of exercise which the Ancients reserved for slaves and a later age for convicts; but I do know how a small fag must feel when he sees the School Eight beat a bigger and older crew than itself, and the Head doesn't. There'll be trouble over this. What are you going to do?”

“What ought I to do?”

“Recommend his Eminence, with everybody's love, to get out of the habit of being dead right at the wrong moment. Failing that, let me suggest a good serviceable paper-weight applied to the base of the skull.”

“I think I'll try sweet reason first. I'll tackle him this afternoon, before he puts up his infernal notice.”

“Suppose you fail? Suppose he puts it up?”

“Then we shall have to back him, that's all: he's the Head. But—but—oh, *Hell*, Frank! *Come in!*”

This last was bellowed, in true Donkinian fashion, in response to a knock upon the mahogany door.

It opened, and the Headmaster of Marbledown appeared again.

“Forgive a second intrusion, Donkin,” he said, “but I believe in striking while the iron is hot. Yesterday I reported a boy to you for trespassing in Culver's Coppice.”

“Yes. I dealt with him this morning.”

“Another boy of yours—or possibly the same one—has just repeated the offence. I saw him leave the Coppice not two minutes ago. Your House colours are unmistakable.”

“But—my House are all at dinner, and have been for the last twenty minutes.”

“That may be, but”—Mr. Ovington crossed to the window, and looked out. “Yes, here he is; he has just turned the corner of the house. I suggest that you should intercept him before he slips in through the side-door.”

“That hardly appears to be necessary,” remarked Mr. Hastings drily. “He is coming in here.”

Sure enough, a small figure in the regulation white shorts and scarlet blazer and cap of the Red House was advancing sedately across the grass plot which filled the angle formed by the boys' wing and Mr. Donkin's own domicile. His hands were in his pockets, and he appeared entirely unconcerned by the triple menace which presently confronted him.

He strolled into the room through the open French windows, and greeted the reception committee with a friendly nod. Then, cupping his small and dirty hands under his chin, he somewhat startlingly extruded from his mouth a rook's egg. This he handed to Mr. Donkin, with the shattering injunction:

“Give this to Bimbo for me, Charles dear. He said *you* wouldn't grudge a man an egg or two!”

The small boy was Button, third and youngest daughter of Aubrey Faringdon, Esq.—and the final squib in a somewhat pyrotechnic morning.

UNITED FRONT

MR. DONKIN did not often dine alone, for a Housemaster in term-time is seldom without company of a kind; a casual Old Boy, mayhap, or a parent, or a colleague, or an occasional member of the House in need of a tonic—and no one but an overgrown schoolboy who has supped for half a term on porridge-and-milk knows what an instantaneous tonic an unexpected three-course dinner, with a glass of claret thrown in, can be.

He was thoughtful, too, where the non-resident Staff—pithily described by the School as the O.B.'s, or Outside Bugs—were concerned; for he had been an O.B., a dweller in first-floor fronts and a corrector of exercises after a solitary and indigestible evening meal himself, so he made a point of inviting a couple of junior masters to dine at the Red House once a week. Visiting musicmasters, too, were always welcome to drop in for a hurried course or so between pupils.

The ancients had a sensible saying that the company at a feast should not be fewer in numbers than the Graces nor more numerous than the Muses. The descent of the Faringdon family upon the Red House had automatically tilted Mr. Donkin's quota from the minimum to the maximum figure. Upon the evening of the eventful morning already described, Mr. Donkin, his surprise-capacity now at saturation point, found himself presiding at a dinner-party of eight persons. (Nine, if you count Mr. Pollitzer, the violin teacher, who looked in for a plate of soup at seven-thirty, and returned in time for the savoury at five minutes past eight, having polished off a pupil in the meanwhile.)

The party consisted of Mr. Donkin himself, Aunt Barbara, the three girls, Bimbo (summoned from, but not excused, Preparation in honour of the occasion), Mr. Beamish, who was due to leave before the sweets on a tour of the House studies and Preparation Room, and Philip de Pourville. Donkin had invited him by telephone—upon whose maternal representations I leave the reader to guess. Altogether an unprecedented assemblage. Ellen, hard put to it, had been forced to conscript the assistance of the bootboy—a sterterous and unhandy creature at the best of times—with the vegetables. Button was twice reproved, in the course of the meal, for endeavouring to draw him into the general conversation.

The Misses Faringdon, with the easy adaptability of youth, were by this time perfectly at home. Rosemary and Chris were already installed in the lately disinfected night sickroom, *vice* Bullock major, but the sizeable attic had been visited and

surveyed, and a scheme of furnishing and decoration was well in hand.

During the afternoon, by the way, Aunt Barbara had insisted upon holding what she called a business conversation with Mr. Donkin, in which she had attempted to enforce his acceptance of an open cheque for five hundred pounds, extorted from Aubrey Faringdon at a propitious moment. Donkin had bidden her to bank the money and dole it out to her charges as occasion might demand—in dress-allowances, and the like. Their actual presence would throw no unbearable strain upon the resources of his establishment. Did Barbara know how many persons slept under the roof nightly? Seventy-three, no less. What perceptible difference did she and her three goggle-eyed chatterboxes make to a rabbit-warren like that? Besides, as Barbara knew, Charles Donkin was practically a millionaire in his own right. In any case, he did not take lodgers. And that was that.

Barbara replied to this characteristic ultimatum by saying that if Charles insisted on behaving like a child she was not going to prevent him.

In truth, she had only raised the question as a matter of duty, and Charles had given her the exact answer that she had expected. She appreciated the sense of his remark that she and the girls would add little to the net running cost of the Red House, and she also knew that although he was not a millionaire, Charles was the fortunate possessor of those few private hundreds a year which make all the difference to a member of an underpaid profession.

II

It is a known fact, and a source of acute concern to old-fashioned hostesses, that you cannot seat a party of eight round a table—a party of evenly divided sexes, that is—in such a way that the host sits at one end and the hostess at the other. So upon this occasion Mr. Donkin occupied the head of the table and Mr. Beamish the foot. On either side of Mr. Donkin sat Aunt Barbara and Chris: Philip de Pourville was on Aunt Barbara's right and Bimbo on Chris's left. Mr. Beamish was supported by Button and Rosemary. This arrangement placed Rosemary between the two assistant masters, and the twins, as usual, side by side.

We will take a brief survey of the table and its occupants, in rotation.

Aunt Barbara was feeling comparatively tranquil. Her flock were all present and accounted for for the first time that day, and the dinner was really admirable: she had no idea that schoolmasters could live so well. But then Charles had always been fussy about his comforts; so unlike poor Frank. What a noise the children were making, though! But of course schoolmasters must be used to that.

Philip de Pourville's reflections were less concise: in fact he was still uncertain whether he was awake or dreaming. In order to settle the matter he made a furtive attempt to touch the skirt of Rosemary's frock with the back of his little finger. He touched her hand instead. She turned for a moment from her conversation with Beamish, and gave him a friendly nod. His blood raced, and he swallowed a potato practically whole.

As for Rosemary, she had taken an instant and silent dislike to Mr. Beamish. Not that Mr. Beamish realised this: he was not accustomed to being disliked by ladies.

"Where is the little head going to be laid to-night?" he enquired, playfully. "Is it all settled?"

"Oh, yes. Chris and I are sleeping in the night sickroom. It's been disinfected just in time."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Why should you want us to catch rashes?"

"I mean, I'm sorry you haven't accepted my hospitality. Then I should have been next door—the faithful old watch-dog, and so forth. I could have looked in, too, and kissed you good-night."

"I see."

"The fact is," continued Mr. Beamish, in a confidential undertone, "I like kissing little girls good-night."

"Oh, do you?" replied Rosemary, all wide-eyed interest.

"Yes. How do you react to the idea?"

"I think it shows you must be a nice fatherly sort of person."

"I am, I am!" said Mr. Beamish earnestly.

"Then why not ask Aunt Barbara to let you kiss Button good-night? I'll ask her for you, if you like."

Mr. Beamish did not speak for the next course and a half.

The incident had, for once, escaped the attention of the young lady upon his right. She was engaged in a *sotto voce* but heated argument with her opposite number.

"You've *got* to speak to them," Bimbo was saying. "Supposing any of the fellows were to see them going about like that, with practically nothing on? Where should I be?"

"My dear," replied Button, "they've got to wear their party frocks our first night here, especially with people to dinner."

"Then why can't they wear a whole frock? Rosemary hasn't got a stitch on her back above the waist. I walked into dinner behind her: it was *awful*! And Chris isn't

wearing much more than a pair of braces, that I can see.”

“The fashion, my child—*très, très chic!*”

“Well, it’s not the fashion here! Tell them each to put on a sweater, or something, after dinner. And another thing. Why can’t Rosemary talk to Beef Beamish? Doesn’t she know who he is?”

“Perhaps she’s found out, darling.”

“She keeps drivelling to Peter Poop, instead—about music, and science, and general bilge. I heard her. What’ll Beef think? Is she trying to disgrace me on purpose?”

“I do not know, angel-face; but I do know that it is not usual to shout with the mouth full.”

Now Chris. It is sufficient to say of her that she was a young girl of eighteen, in a new frock, enjoying an entirely new experience. What more had life to offer? Nothing—except perhaps that nice boy—what was his name? Flossie!—by her side instead of her little brother. Meanwhile she would occupy herself with Charles—who was an undoubted darling and lamb, despite his advanced age.

Mr. Donkin himself completes the circle. As already mentioned, he had ceased for the time being to struggle against fate. He sat mutely at the head of the table, mechanically acquiescing in an occasional pungent comment of Aunt Barbara’s, or smiling at some ebullient confidence from Chris.

But his heart was heavy. He had fulfilled his promise and “gone to the mat” with the Headmaster that afternoon; and had only made matters worse—a good deal worse. The typewritten notice had been put up outside School Hall five minutes after the end of the interview: the news would be all over the School by this time.

And then these children—with their frank, fearless friendliness, and complete apparent unconsciousness of their own sex. How was he going to keep them away from the boys? How was he going to keep the boys away from them? If Rosemary and Chris had been a pair of ordinary gawks, in blue serge and pigtails, all would have been well. But these devastating, on-coming visions——! Well, he would have to be firm, that was all. A curmudgeon, in fact. He must lay down certain rules, and see that they were adhered to. After all, boys obeyed him without question; why not girls? Still, it was going to be a whole-time job.

“That Button business, for instance,” he said to himself. “Not an hour in the place, and the brat dresses up in a boy’s clothes and climbs a high tree and steals a rook’s egg, and then makes me an accessory before and after the fact in the presence of the Head himself! No wonder he and I got off on the wrong foot at this afternoon’s interview! Still, they’re Angela’s children; they *must* be all right!”

“I suppose you and Mr. Beamish are finished for the day now, Charles,” said Barbara, breaking into these reflections.

“Utterly—except that in about five minutes time Beamish has to take the second half of preparation, and then do a little trifling private tuition. I myself am expecting a call from one of the Governors; later, I shall take prayers and go round the dormitories. After that I have half a dozen letters to answer and twenty or thirty House Reports to write. I ought to get everything cleaned up by eleven-thirty or so. The rest of the evening I shall have entirely to myself.”

But elaborate irony was entirely thrown away on Aunt Barbara.

“Well, I suppose you must like it, or you wouldn’t be doing it,” she said composedly. “What time did you say prayers were?”

“I didn’t say any time, but they’re at nine-fifteen every evening.”

III

“Pipe or cigar, Barks?”

“Pipe, thank you. No, I’ll smoke my own,” replied Sir Berkeley, as Donkin proffered a jar of something which looked like black seaweed.

“Well, get on with it, because I’m taking you into House prayers presently.”

“Why?”

“It brightens the boys up to see an odd face occasionally.”

“My features are perfectly normal, so far as I know.”

“Barks,” said Donkin, ignoring this mild protest and lighting his own pipe, “have you ever considered the awful regularity of School routine? It teaches method and order and all that, but it’s pretty deadening to the youthful soul. A boy said an illuminating thing to me the other day. I was going round House breakfast, as I occasionally do, asking for complaints——”

“Isn’t that rather asking for trouble?”

“Oh, bless you, I never take any notice of the complaints, but it cheers them up to make them. Like Question Time in your House of Commons—except that you Ministers are mortally afraid of them and I’m not. The food here is first-chop, and the boys know it. But this boy put his finger right on the spot. He said: ‘Each morning of the week, sir, we know exactly what we’re going to get.’”

“I seem to remember. Bacon on Monday, ham on Tuesday, kipper on Wednesday, boiled egg on Thursday——”

“That’s right. Well, this lad said: ‘If only we could have a surprise every now and then, sir!’”

“We had ours every Thursday.”

“I’m telling this story, not you. I realised how dead right he was; so we have a surprise every Saturday now. Next Saturday they’re going to have sardines on toast.”

“Will they enjoy them?”

“No, but that isn’t the point. It’ll be a change: it’ll break monotony. That’s why I’m going to take you into prayers to-night.”

“As a sort of spiritual sardine?”

“That’s the idea. By the way, they always cheer distinguished visitors. Will you mind?”

“Mind?” Sir Berkeley chuckled. “My dear fellow, I’m a politician!”

“Well, they don’t often get a Cabinet Minister to make a fuss of. Besides, they’ll enjoy comparing you in the flesh with that caricature of you in *Punch* last week. Did you see it?”

“I did, thank you!”

“Flossie, of course, was bitterly ashamed. By the way, how do you find that young man?”

“Most refreshing.” Sir Berkeley extended his long legs to the fire and slipped further down into Mr. Donkin’s deep sofa. “Oh, Charles, what a blessed thing is Youth! No doubts—no half-tones—no compromise! Complete conviction all along the line! What a lesson to legislators!”

“What are Flossie’s outstanding convictions at the present moment?”

“One, that Miss Chris Faringdon is the most beautiful girl in the world; two, that someone ought to put an expanding bullet through the neck of your Headmaster.”

“Oh, he said that, did he?”

“He did. I am sorry to say that he referred to him as a smear—a septic smear upon the face of civilisation.”

Donkin nodded, and re-lit his pipe.

“Smear is the very latest word here. Last year it was tumour. I suppose he told you about the Regatta—about the notice that the Head put up this evening?”

“He referred to the matter at some length. I must say it seems damned tough, after all the crew’s hard work. Can’t anything be done?”

“I’ve done all I can,” said Donkin, rising and striding unhappily about the study. “I went and saw the Head about it myself, this afternoon. I practically went down on my knees to him. And he——” There was a low knock upon the green door. “What is it?”

The door opened, and a boy appeared—a boy with a really odd face. His name

was Crump—Old Crump of the Middle Remove—and his features were much used by his schoolmates for purposes of comparison when unusual objects were being described.

“What do you want, boy? Anything important?”

“No, sir.”

“Then out!”

“Yes, sir; thank you, sir.”

Crump disappeared, like a cuckoo into its clock. Sir Berkeley prompted gently:

—
“And he——?”

“He made me lose my temper, and I haven’t done that for five years. However, I made him lose his, too; and that was some consolation.”

Sir Berkeley surveyed his old friend curiously.

“Charles,” he said, “why should two grown men abandon their sense of proportion over an absurd amusement like rowing? Have you ever considered how really absurd it is? Eight men in an insecure boat—all looking one way and progressing another! They might as well join the Cabinet, and have done with it!”

“Oh, the Head and I might have got together on that. It was the line he took. He was so intensely genial and forbearing—rather implying that I was a dear old dog who couldn’t be taught new tricks, but that he was going to be most frightfully tactful with me. That started me breathing through my nose a bit, but I held myself in. Then, suddenly, he overstepped it: he imputed motives! He said he fully understood my pride in this year’s Eight, especially as four members of it came from my House—mark that one!—and that he sympathised with my disappointment; but that I must be sportsmanlike and unselfish, and co-operate with him and the rest of the staff for the ultimate good of the School. He actually quoted Macaulay on the subject—Party and State, and so on. That stuff to *me!*—me, who’ve been giving my body and blood and bones to the School for over thirty years! Pah! Bah! *Yah!* Well, Macaulay finished it: I let fly.”

“What did you say?”

Donkin smiled grimly.

“If my position in this School depended on Ovington, I should be out of a job at this moment.”

“Can’t he sack you?”

“No; Housemasters can only be sacked by the Governing Body. You ought to know that: you’re one of them.”

“I sit corrected. Continue!”

“That’s all,” said Donkin, dropping despondently into his chair again. “The worst of losing one’s temper,” he went on presently, “is that one gets it back again. Then one feels constrained to apologise.”

“Oh, you apologised?”

“I did.”

“And he accepted it.”

“Oh, yes, *yes!* He was dreadfully magnanimous about it all: we parted with the profoundest expressions of mutual esteem. He isn’t going to take down that notice, though. Hallo”—as a bell clanged down a distant passage—“there go prayers. Put out that pipe; you’re for it, my son.”

Mr. Donkin began to struggle into his gown. Sir Berkeley rose thoughtfully, and knocked out the pipe in the fender. Presently he asked:—

“Charles, who appointed this untimely gentleman Headmaster?”

“You did—you and your fellow-Governors! Aren’t you Vice-Chairman, or something?”

“I believe I am; but I rather think he was appointed during a General Election, or a Strike, or something. Anyhow, I’ve never set eyes on the man. I tell you what; I’ll go round after prayers and pay an informal call on him, and give him the once over.”

“Do. You’ll like him. He’s got brains and personality. He’s a man, too. I mean that.”

“You’re a fair-minded old bloke, Charles,” said Sir Berkeley.

“Hymns Ancient and Modern,” retorted Mr. Donkin, thrusting a small blue volume into his guest’s hand. “Let us go in and thank God for the End of a most Imperfect Day.”

“Do I have to sing?”

“Certainly. What is the number of the hymn, Travers?” This to his head boy, who had appeared through the green-baize door, and now stood holding it open.

Travers proffered a slip of paper.

“This, sir. I’ve taken call-over.”

“Right. Lead on, Berks! *Great heavens, what is this?*”

The other door opened, and Aunt Barbara entered, followed by Mesdemoiselles Rosemary, Christian, and Geraldine Faringdon—Button had been so baptised; Bimbo’s name was Gerald—in Indian file. Rosemary and Chris wore long, sheathlike, gleaming skirts: it need hardly be stated that they had not followed their brother’s advice in the matter of sweaters. Button was attired in an extremely short white frock and white socks. All bore prayer-books, and their fell purpose was instantly apparent.

“Wasn’t that the prayer-bell, Charles?” enquired Barbara.

“It was; but——”

“We’re coming in with you. These children have lived like heathens ever since they lost their mother: it’s high time they were reinstated in the Christian faith. Is this Sir Berkeley Nightingale?”

“It is; but——”

“Good evening, Sir Berkeley: these are my nieces. Are you ready, girls?”

“Yes, Auntie,” said Rosemary.

“Just a teeny moment, darling,” said Chris, busy with a lipstick. “I must look my best for Flossie, mustn’t I? Does anybody know where he sits?”

“Barbara,” exclaimed Mr. Donkin despairingly, “these creatures can’t go into prayers!”

“Why not?” asked Barbara calmly.

“Such a thing has never happened in this House before.”

“A lot of things are going to happen in this House that have never happened before.”

“But—dressed like that! Look at them! The boys will never stand it.”

“The boys will love it! All the same, Rosemary, you can pull down that child’s frock a little at the back. Now lead the way, please, Sir Berkeley. I’ll follow you, Charles.”

“Walk like a nun, darling,” hissed Rosemary over her shoulder to Chris.

“Right, darling.”

With folded hands and bowed heads our three damosels passed to their devotions, preceded by their three elders. The now permanently pop-eyed Travers brought up the rear.

A few moments later sounds of frenzied cheering came floating into the deserted study. Mr. Donkin had been right: the House did not often get a Cabinet Minister to make a fuss of.

DIGGING IN

THAT evening after prayers Sir Berkeley Nightingale, true to his undertaking, paid an informal call upon the Headmaster. What topics were discussed at the interview will never be known, but the typewritten death-warrant upon the screen outside School Hall survived Sir Berkeley's departure; and next day the School Eight gloomily distributed itself among various House Fours, destined to compete in the School's own little Regatta at the end of term.

Upon the same morning Mr. Donkin took certain steps. A night's sleep had partially restored his grip upon the Universe, and he was ready to cope with the new situation.

He began by sending for Button and Bimbo, and informing the former that if ever again she trespassed beyond the confines of the green-baize door he would beat the latter to death before her eyes. He then cast them forth, by separate exits, and summoned Rosemary and Chris. Upon them he laid the same injunction, in terms more suited to those of riper years.

"Of course, darling, anything you say!" replied the amiable Chris. "Is there anything else you wouldn't like us to do? You've only got to tell us. Hasn't he, Rose?"

"Of course, dear. We're here to *help*, Charles."

"Heaven forbid!"

"But there are so many little things that we could do. I mean, a bachelor ought to have some one to entertain for him. Oughtn't he, Chris?"

"Isn't there anybody you would like us to throw a party for?" suggested Chris, taking up her cue.

"No! Yes—wait a minute. Since you are here, I suppose I ought to break the news to Marbledown officially. A party might be as good a way as any: it would distribute the shock evenly, anyhow. But it shall be given, and not thrown. Let me think; next Saturday is the day of the Eaglescliffe Match—the day of days here, now that Regatta Day is no more. I'll invite the whole Staff and their belongings to tea and shrimps on my tennis lawn from four till six. Of course most of them will be busy down on the cricket-ground most of the time, but they'll be glad enough to look in here for twenty minutes in the course of the afternoon, if only to escape the boredom of the game and the infliction of boy's relations. What about it, ladies?"

The ladies, needless to say, thought it would be a perfectly divine idea.

The party was duly held upon the appointed date, upon the lines originally laid down, except that strawberries and ices appeared in place of shrimps. At the last moment, upon the representations of Chris, Mr. Donkin invited his six House Prefects to attend as assistant-waiters. Owing to the fact that two of these, Travers and Coke, were members of the School Eleven, and therefore tied to the pitch or the pavilion for the whole of the afternoon, only four were able to accept. The question of substitutes or understudies was promptly raised (in the same thoughtful quarter), and in due course Flossie Nightingale and a crony of his, a stout, pink-faced youth of benevolent appearance, usually addressed as Pop (previously introduced to the reader's notice as an amateur of barometers), attended the festivities.

It was a fine, hot afternoon, and the guests, possibly for the reasons shrewdly outlined by Mr. Donkin, attended in large numbers.

But there was a third and more potent attraction, the Faringdon family. Already their fame had gone abroad. It was of course common knowledge that there were three of them, and that the two eldest had torpedoed Peter Poop's push-bike with a sports model at the very moment of their arrival, and that one of them had subsequently conveyed the body home in the same vehicle. The following Sunday, too, the entire family had attended Chapel, and it was noted by his housemates, to the acute mortification of the young gentleman concerned, that the little one was the dead spit of Bimbo. They had also appeared at an inter-House cricket match, and had mingled freely with the spectators, whom they had not hesitated to address when they felt like it.

Contrary to fictional tradition, schoolboys are not in the habit of asking one another impertinent questions about their sisters, so in the presence of the flinching Bimbo query and comment had been equally mute. But this did not prevent the wagging of innumerable tongues elsewhere; for a boys' school, like every other celibate institution, is a hive of gossip, and ever grateful for a fresh topic.

Within three days it was known for a fact that the girls had no parents and had been educated almost from birth in a French convent, and had now been brought to England by the Old Girl, who was their aunt, to live with the Moke, who was some kind of distant uncle. Rumour added that they had been sacked from the convent, either for ragging the nuns or trying to elope—with whom, and in what numbers, was not specified.

The curiosity of the School was by no means limited to those in *statu pupillari*; the junior Staff attended the party in force, headed, needless to say, by Mr. Beamish, with Philip de Pourville playing his customary rôle of Xenophon. Housemasters'

daughters and wives were also well to the fore, in the capacity of jury and judge respectively.

But they found little cause for cavil. The Girls' Friendly Society, anxious to please and recently rehearsed, were on their best behaviour. Apart from the fact that their frocks were a little too aggressively Rue de la Paix and their lips much too vermilion, they made an unexpectedly favourable impression. Housemasters' wives were greeted with becoming modesty, and their daughters with the pretty deference due from newly arrived little schoolgirls to prefects of established eminence. The junior masters were received with radiant smiles—which was really all they required for the moment.

The Headmaster was unable to be present, which was not altogether surprising; but his sister was there. Button handed her a plate of strawberries, and dropped her an impromptu curtsy which took Miss Ovington entirely by surprise and momentarily deprived Button's elder sisters of speech. Frank Hastings came, and was much in request with his young hostesses as a bureau of information as to who, and what, everybody was. He replied with truth in the first instance and candour in the second.

"Who is the tall young man with the grey *suède* shoes and the puce pullover, darling, gobbling cucumber sandwiches?" enquired Chris.

"The most recent of the Headmaster's appointments. The name, I believe, is Grewby, or Screwby, or something like that. A distinguished Classical scholar, one hears, with leanings to the Left, whatever that may mean."

"And the woman with the two little boys?"

"Mrs. Kent, wife of our Army Class master. One of the few really agreeable members of her sex about the place."

"She looks sweet, and so do the children. I'll run and speak to them: perhaps they would like some strawberries. Here's Auntie B: she'll entertain you, Uncle Frank."

"On the contrary!" announced Aunt Barbara, arriving and overhearing. "Enlighten me, Frank. Who is that rather pleasant-looking clergyman, with the receding chin and two dowdy-looking girls, talking to Charles?"

"Clively, Housemaster at the Lavender House. A comparatively human being. His two daughters are locally known and esteemed as Spot and Plain."

"And the little baldheaded man, with the large wife?"

"Our Mr. Douglas. The boys call him Elisha—an allusion which you, with your pious upbringing, will have no difficulty in identifying. He is Housemaster at the Brown House, and possesses vast quantities of children. The boys cherish a legend

that he was once asked how many he had; to which he replied that he did not know, as he had not been home since breakfast. The children incidently act as inceptors and disseminators of all seasonable infectious diseases. You see the spindly-legged girl with him? That is Snorky Douglas, who was responsible last term for the cancelling of our annual football fixture against Eaglescliffe. Call our School Fifteen together, mention her name to them, and then run rapidly. Have you met Miss Ovington? That is her over there, disapproving of Charles' hollyhocks. Come and meet her."

"I can't endure any more at present, my dear. Come and play truant for a few minutes: I want to talk to you."

"Yours to command! There's a shady seat over there."

Meanwhile Chris was putting a pair of even less reliable authorities through a very similar catechism.

"I'm all mixed up, children," she said plaintively to Flossie and Pop, "after shaking hands with all that mob. Who was the shakee with the side-whiskers and brown flannel trousers?"

"That was our esteemed Mr. Dowsett," said Flossie—"our Humphrey, or Oomph. Lower School Maths. Little is known of him except that he comes from an Oxford College which produces Lacrosse Blues. He is suspected of being a Lacrosse Blue himself."

"Lacrosse," explained Pop, in answer to Chris's unspoken question, "is a game played by North American Indians and English Girls' Schools."

"But not, one imagines, against one another," added Flossie.

"It would be rather a thrill, all the same," said Chris—"only we've never been taught any games, never having been at school. Who is that rather snoopy-looking old man over there, in spectacles?"

"Another Housemaster—Shipway, of the Grey House. And 'snoopy' is right."

"His propensities, we may add," said Flossie, "have been transmitted to his offspring. He had a son in his House once—hadn't he, Pop——?"

Pop nodded, feelingly.

"Called the Nark," he said.

"He has left us now," continued Flossie. "In the next War he will most certainly be shot at dawn as a spy."

"Or blown from the guns at dusk," amended Pop—"whichever is the most lingering. Do you see that stout lady, with flat heels and three chins? Well . . ."

Thus then, and thus, were the Faringdons familiarised with their new surroundings.

II

All but Button. That aloof and independent child had achieved an unostentatious departure from the party shortly after it started, and was at this moment holding a reception of her own behind the Fives Courts—a retired locality much in favour for fights, unlawful assemblies, and clandestine business generally—now a desert, for the whole School were down on the Cricket Ground.

She was receiving a deputation composed of a judicious selection of Bimbo's personal friends; for that sorely tried youth had by this time bowed to the inevitable and abandoned his project, hopeless from the outset, of erecting a *pardah* barrier between his female relatives and Marbledown School.

The deputation consisted of some half-dozen gentlemen notable chiefly for their extreme youth. They represented, in fact, the lower depths of the Junior School, of which Bimbo himself was not by any means the senior member, and they were of an age which is frankly uninterested in Women, as such. They were present at this moment not from any tender or sentimental impulse, but simply because they wished to behold one who, though only a girl, and a skinny-legged, pigeon-toed little girl at that, could climb a high elm-tree and descend with a rook's egg in her mouth, without breaking or swallowing the egg.

They were all members at the moment (for the days of such institutions are apt to be few and evil) of a Secret Society—the M. M. M., or Marbledown Mass Murderers. The avowed aim of the Society was to vindicate the right of the Proletariat to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness in face of the tyranny and oppression of People Higher Up, by the employment of frankly violent measures; but like many other bodies of similar character, they had been better so far at promise than performance. The summit of their achievement to date had been the planting of a bomb in Mr. Dowsett's wastepaper basket during the Algebra hour. (The bomb, needless to say, had been manufactured in the School laboratory during one of Mr. de Pourville's Practical Chemistry lessons.) Unfortunately it had failed to explode, and the Society had felt constrained to pass a unanimous vote of censure upon its maker, one Stinker Green.

Button was presented to the President, Rumford Tertius, by the Honorary Secretary (Bimbo); then to the Vice-President, Ashley minor, and the other members present. Stinker Green, under a cloud by reason of the faulty bomb, was the last to be introduced.

These formalities completed, there was an immediate and prolonged lull in the conversation. Finally Bimbo, by way of setting the ball rolling, announced:

“Of course we can’t make you a member of the M. M. M., Button, because you’re not in the School, besides being only a girl.”

“I shouldn’t join it if you asked me to,” replied Button calmly. “You see, I’ve got a Secret Society of my own, and its members can’t join any other Society. They don’t deign.”

“What is your Society?” asked Mr. Rumbold suspiciously.

“The S. T. C. C.,” replied Button, without a moment’s hesitation.

“What does that stand for?”

“Ha ha!”

“If it stood for ‘ha ha,’ its initials would be H. H.,” remarked Ashley minor, a sturdy worker for Social Justice, but inclined to be literally minded.

“It doesn’t. Some day I may elect a few members, but I shall have to put you all under observation first,” said Button impressively—with a silent vote of thanks to Matron and Bullock major for the useful phrase. “Anybody want a macaroon? I couldn’t manage strawberries or ices this way.”

She produced a handful of the dainties in question from her usual repository, and distributed the same, amid gratified murmurs.

The deputation then withdrew.

DECLARATION OF WAR

MARBLEDOWN gradually assimilated the Faringdons, and Mr. Donkin's openly expressed fear that their presence would convert the side-entrance of his private residence into something resembling the stage-door of the old Gaiety was unfulfilled.

For this fortunate consummation he was largely indebted to the girls themselves. Their directness and candour were fatal to sheep's eyes and sentimentality. Being void of self-consciousness, they automatically abolished it in others. They took an enormous interest in masters and boys alike, called them by their Christian names, and expected to be similarly addressed. In short, they made the male world of Marbledown at once their parish and their playground—a sociable parish and a secure playground. Aubrey Faringdon had hit the nail on the head when he told Aunt Barbara that his daughters instinctively brought out the decent side of everybody they met.

What may be called the female routine of the School involved a little more formality. Aunt Barbara was duly called upon by Miss Ovington and various Housemasters' wives or sisters, and, accompanied by Rosemary, returned the call. Ceremonial afternoon parties followed, at which the girls played lawn-tennis with Spot, Plain, and the numerous progeny of Elisha Douglas. On Friday mornings the School swimming-pool was reserved for the ladies on the strength of the establishment from eleven o'clock till twelve-thirty. Here Chris won the hearts of the two Masters Kent (gentlemen were admitted up to the age of eight) by teaching them to dive. They attended cricket matches, and smilingly handed cups of tea to distinguished visitors upon the steps of the pavilion. They followed the progress of the House Fours upon the river. On Saturday nights they patronised concerts, lectures, and debates, in School Hall, sitting with Mr. Donkin in the basket-chaired front row; and on Sundays they regularly occupied stalls in that part of the chapel reserved for Beaks' Belongings, separated from the Sixth Form by a wisp of red rep curtain.

That nominally was all that Marbledown saw of its ladies in general, and that, to be frank, was all that Marbledown usually wanted to see. But the Faringdon girls enlarged the social horizon considerably.

In the course of a few weeks each had been adopted as combined mascot and tribal goddess by some appropriate section of Marbledown society.

The senior boys and junior masters united (but did not co-operate) in homage to Rosemary. Here the boys were definitely at a disadvantage, for they were confined under lock and key for much of the time during which their rivals were free for dalliance—prep, for instance. But Rosemary was quite impartial. She seemed just as delighted (and probably was) to partake of strawberries and cream with a group of self-conscious prefects in the School tuckshop as to attend a moonlight picnic on the river, organised in her honour by a group of romantically minded young form-masters.

Chris, needless to say, was the idol of the Proletariat, as Flossie and Pop were in the habit of designating themselves and their associates. She attended House matches, sculling-races, and even fights with regularity and enthusiasm. She learned to punt, and to play small cricket and squash rackets. She was the guest of honour at innumerable study grubs—wedged with some half-dozen solicitous hosts into a banquetting chamber which would have held four people uncomfortably, and consuming with genuine joy unlimited quantities of lukewarm tea and indigestible cake.

Button was well content with humbler but equally devoted prey. She admitted certain favoured individuals to her S.T.C.C., or Secret Tree-Climbing Club. These were mainly rowing coxes, whose labours upon half-holidays (as correctly pointed out to us by the Headmaster earlier in this narrative) were usually concluded by three o'clock in the afternoon, leaving them at liberty to get into what mischief they pleased until tea call-over at six.

The Club was by no means cramped or unilateral in its activities. Besides breaking bounds, scaling heights, and stealing eggs, it tickled trout and endeavoured, with entire lack of success, to shoot rabbits with an air-gun. Once, however, Stinker Green succeeded in bringing down a sitting rook, which Button undertook to convert into a rook-pie. Fortunately the fulfilment of this enterprise involved a preliminary consultation with Mr. Donkin's cook; and the cook, after a brief inspection of the corpse and its parasites, ordered an immediate interment.

Altogether a series of goings-on harmless enough in themselves, but unusual, and perhaps unprecedented, in the annals of a staid public-school.

Naturally, there were repercussions. Housemasters' wives sat up and took notice; their offspring whispered and giggled; Housemasters themselves began to wear a worried look.

The Spoon spoke to the Egg about it.

"Don't you think something ought to be done about those Faringdon girls, Edmund?" she said one morning at breakfast. "Is it wise to allow them to be so

utterly promiscuous? Of course it is no business of mine.”

“You are right; it is not,” agreed Mr. Ovington coldly. The Spoon was his senior by five years, and the memory of her domination of him in the nursery and schoolroom days still rankled.

“But couldn’t one speak to Mr. Donkin?”

“Indubitably one could speak to Mr. Donkin. What would one say to him?”

“One could say that these brats must be kept in their place.”

“To which Mr. Donkin would reply, with perfect justification, that his guests are his own concern, and that there is no School rule extant which precludes the family or entourage of a Housemaster from reasonable social intercourse with the members of the School.”

“But do you *approve*, Edmund?”

“I do not.”

“Then you know your duty.”

“I hope so. I also know Donkin. If you will be kind enough to leave matters in my hands, Janet, it is just humanly possible that a solution of the problem may be achieved.”

“Don’t be pompous. What do you mean?”

“There is a process known as filling up the cup. I am not without hope that it will prove effective in the present case. Meanwhile,” concluded Mr. Ovington, with a bleak smile, “perhaps you will be kind enough to attend to mine: it is empty!”

He passed up the cup, and the meal ended in silence.

II

The Regatta was only three days off, and the School, with great good sense, had decided to make the best of half a loaf. It would be rotten of course to see the Marbledown colours unrepresented upon the river, but there were definite compensations—the holiday itself, the jostling crowds on the towpath and, best of all, the fireworks and Fair in the evening.

There had been considerable competition for the company of the Girls’ Friendly Society upon the great day, and that thoughtful corporation, with an eye doubtless to the greatest good of the greatest number, had decided to distribute itself as widely as possible. Their ultimate dispositions were communicated to Mr. Donkin by Rosemary, that evening after prayers. She had dropped into the habit of keeping him company during his final pipe, when the labours of the day were over and conscience permitted an assault upon the current cross-word.

To-night she sat curled up as usual upon the sofa beside him, reciting Regatta plans, and occasionally offering an inspired but unscientific suggestion regarding the puzzle.

“Button and her gang have decided to watch the races from Druid’s Mound. Where is that, darling?”

“*They should not fail to catch the eye*,” read Mr. Donkin. “Five letters; begins with H. *Hooks*, of course: they catch eyes!”

“That’s very clever of you, angel: I could never have thought of it, although I use hooks and eyes and you don’t. Where is Druid’s Mound?”

“In a meadow beside the river: you get a good view of the start, but not the finish. *Operatic virtue*; eight letters. Probably the name of an opera. Who are her gang, precisely?”

“The S.T.C.C.”

“Which means——?”

“I don’t know: she won’t tell us. But Bimbo belongs, and somebody called Stinker Green. Is he in this House?”

“No—Brown House. A cretin. *Operatic virtue!*”

“Could it be *Manon*, or *Louise*?”

“More operatic than virtuous, my dear, both of them; and I want eight letters; but thank you all the same. Who else?”

“Rumford tertius and Ashley minor.”

“They are mine all right. Well, I can’t congratulate Button on her taste in intellectual companionship. Virtue? Aha! *Patience*, of course. Idiot! What are Chris’s plans?”

“She is going in a punt with Flossie Nightingale and Pop Ogilvie and Old Crump.”

“Pop and Flossie I can understand: they are chronic associates in crime. But what’s Crump doing in that galley?”

“I think he has fallen for Chris; he asked Flossie to ask her if he might come too. He didn’t like to ask her himself. He’s rather dumb, poor thing.”

“So far as I have been able to discover, he is blind and deaf as well. *Uproar over a busybody in Belgium*; six letters; begins with D. Uproar—din. Give me a Belgian town beginning with Din.”

“Dinant, angel? We went there once with Dad.”

“Dinant it is. Thank you. Only two more to do now! And they’re going in a punt?”

“Yes—under those osiers on the far side of the river. But I expect they’ll all be at

the Fair long before the Regatta's over—Button too. Neither she nor Chris can ever resist sideshows, and things like that. Will you have your whisky-and-soda now, dear?"

"Please. *German who made a big noise in the world*; five letters. Easy—*Krupp!*"

"Krupp? Who was he?"

"I hope you'll never, never know."

"Here's your drink: swallow it while it's fizzy. Merry-go-rounds, and scenic railways, and things like that. We once lost Chris and Button for a whole evening at the Foire de Neuilly. We found them in the *Maison de mystère* at last."

"What is that?"

"It isn't a house at all, really. You and somebody else go and sit in a thing like a small bathing-box, in the dark: then the bottom falls out, and you roll down an illuminated chute, all anyhow. It's rather embarrassing at first. Button and Chris had been down seventeen times: Button had practically no skirt left at all."

"Let us hope there are no such *maisons* at Marbledown Fair. Now for the last word. *Six balls and a heap of sand*; five letters; an E in the middle. It suggests a combination of cricket and golf to me. Tee-over—doesn't make sense! Well, Chris and Button seem to be accounted for. Now may I ask the exact nature and strength of my Rosemary's escort?"

"Just you, darling!"

"That's very pretty of you, my dear. But who am I to stand in the way of the combined youth and chivalry of Marbledown? Don't sit there and tell me that nobody has invited you. Where was the gallant Beamish? Hasn't he applied?"

"Well, you know Beamish. He doesn't ask people; he just tells them. He told me that I was going to the Regatta with him in the afternoon and the Fair in the evening, and I said I wasn't. So there we were."

"Quite. Six balls and a heap of sand. Over-tee? Too many letters, and means nothing. No, wait a jiffy: the tee is phonetic. *Overt*—got him!" Mr. Donkin scribbled the word, threw aside his *Times* and pencil, and smiled paternally at Rosemary.

"Of course we'll see the Regatta together," he said. "Does your Aunt want to come?"

"She's going with Uncle Frank. You and I will be completely *tête-à-tête*, darling. Won't that be lovely?"

"It will indeed. But you'll have to find another cavalier in the evening, my lass. Housemasters can't slide down illuminated chutes in the presence of their pupils."

"Can't they? What a shame!"

“Why not get de Pourville? I should have thought he would have invited you himself by now.”

“I think he would have liked to, but he’s rather dumb too. Especially before boys. Charles, is it *terribly* difficult to keep boys in order?”

“It all depends. Either you’ve got it or you haven’t. Our friend Philip hasn’t, I’m afraid.”

“But couldn’t he get it, *somehow*?”

“I’ve known it happen, but not often. It requires a miracle, as a rule. Have you been discussing the matter with him?”

“Yes; he’s dreadfully unhappy about it. You see, he doesn’t really have to do this work. He’s got a rich relation who makes boots: he offered Philip a big salary to be manager of one of the factories—and Philip refused, he was so keen on schoolmastering. He’s written a little book about the teaching of modern Science: he says the present way is all wrong. He read some of it to me: it was wonderful.”

“And yet the smallest fag in the School can get a rise out of him! By the way, where did this audition take place?”

“In his rooms, the other day. I went there and cooked some lunch for him, for a treat. His landlady gives him practically anything, and he eats it. We had an *omelette aux fines herbes* and some little sausages I had bought in the market. They were lovely.”

Mr. Donkin surveyed the philanthropist before him in some perplexity. Something told him that he ought to utter a word in season. Something else told him not to be an officious old fool. After all, it was so exactly what Angela would have done. Why not leave the child and her *protégé* and their preposterous *omelette aux fines herbes* alone?

“He says,” continued Rosemary, “that the mistake he made was in not being firmer at first. But he wanted to test his theory.”

“What was that?”

“That if you can really interest boys in their work, they’ll work ten times better than if you just order them about.”

“Yes; I believe there is a school of thought to that effect. Their ideas unfortunately are based upon the peculiar delusion that the average English schoolboy is a person who desires to be educated. He is nothing of the kind. You *can* educate him, but you’ve got to overcome what is known as his moment of inertia first. Make him toe the line, in other words. And that so far is what friend Philip has failed to do.”

“Yes, and he’d be such a splendid teacher if only he could get them to listen to

him. Couldn't *you* help him, darling?" said Rosemary, coming to the point. "Drop him a little hint or two? You're a perfectly wonderful disciplinarian yourself."

"How do you know?"

"He told me so. Bimbo thinks so too; he says the House are terrified of you."

"Nonsense! I bark at them, and they humour me, that's all. If they got up and threw books at me instead, I haven't the slightest idea what I should do."

"I don't see Philip barking, somehow."

"Neither do I. *Suaviter in modo* is the only method for him."

"What does that mean, angel?"

"The velvet glove. Sarcastic comment. Personal remarks, and so forth. Boys hate sarcasm worse than anything: that is why Frank Hastings can do what he likes with them."

"I suggested that to Philip myself. I said, couldn't he think up something *frightfully* subtle, and then fire it off at them unexpectedly? And he said he had tried that once, and all they did was to give him a round of applause and ask if he knew any more like that. Wasn't it hateful of them?"

"No; just boy, sheer boy. But I'm afraid Philip's got a tough row to hoe."

"What would you do in his place?"

"I would begin by picking out the ringleaders and twisting their tails right off."

"Cane them, you mean?"

"Good and hard."

Rosemary's alabaster brow wrinkled, and she shook her head.

"Philip doesn't believe in corporal punishment, he says. He thinks it's a relic of barbarism."

"My dear, so long as barbarians continue to exist—and they still exist, though in declining numbers; Goat Hicks, for instance—they must be dealt with by barbaric methods. At least that is my opinion, founded upon a not inconsiderable experience. I know I'm old-fashioned. A large number of schoolmasters disbelieve in corporal punishment—our own Head, for instance. His theory of education is that it must be entirely voluntary and unforced. He's dead against the competitive system—marks, examinations, prizes, *or* punishments. He doesn't believe in the form-system—putting thirty boys to work under a single master for a fixed period. 'Not elastic enough, and unfair to the slow worker.' He's all in favour of the new and fashionable system under which a boy is handed his week's work, say, on Monday, and permitted to do it in his own time and at his own pace, and show it up on Saturday. I may be a cynic, but I can't help feeling that Friday evening would be a fairly busy time. And to me this new voluntary system makes no provision for the first and most

important lesson in life—the performance of uncongenial duties. But as I say, I’m a back-number. The Head represents the new school of thought. He’s a big man, and takes long views; and in any case he was brought here to reform us and bring us up to date. The one trouble about reforms, even desirable reforms, is that everything depends on the manner in which they are applied. Am I boring you? Yes.”

“No!”

“Sure?”

“Certain.”

“Then I’ll tell you a story—a parable, if you like. Do you know a youth in this House called Warty Warburton?”

“Darling, I know all the House by this time.”

“I apologise. Well, three days ago Warty was conveyed to the Sanatorium for urgent facial repairs. He had blown himself up in the Chemical Laboratory—under the supervision of our mutual friend, I am sorry to say.”

“Poor Warty! What happened?”

“I am no chemist, but I gather that he was engaged in boiling up a jorum of some decoction or other, to which a strictly limited quantity of a powerful reagent—sulphuric acid, we’ll say—had to be added at regular intervals. A couple of cubic centimetres, very cautiously, every two minutes, or something of that kind. Well, Warty got chattering or bear-fighting with his neighbour, and neglected this routine contribution for a considerable period. Suddenly he observed de Pourville advancing upon him, and, in a misguided attempt to make up for lost time, picked up the beaker containing the stuff in question and tipped the whole concern into the boiling liquid. Result—an immediate geyser of sulphuric acid, or whatever it was, and Warty removed howling to the Sanatorium. Now, do you perceive the moral lumbering along? If you want to effect reforms, administer them in gradual and tactful doses, and not in one concentrated splash—or there may be Consequences. Come in!”

“This has just been handed in, sir,” announced Ellen, presenting a square grey envelope on a salver. “From the Blue House, sir.”

The door closed, but Mr. Donkin did not immediately open the envelope. He held it in his two hands, dubiously surveying the superscription, which was typewritten. In one corner were Mr. Ovington’s initials neatly written in green ink.

“What’s the matter, darling?” asked Rosemary.

“I don’t know that anything is, but a goose has just stepped over my grave. Let us see.”

The envelope contained a single flimsy typewritten sheet. It looked like a carbon copy; in fact, it was a carbon copy—and not the top copy, either. It said:—

To All Housemasters

There appears to have been some misreading of the notice which I recently issued *re* the non-participation of The School in the Town Regatta. When I said 'The School' I *meant* The School—and not merely the School Eight.

Upon Regatta Day, therefore, the usual hours of work will be observed, and the river-banks and town, including the so-called Fair, will be strictly out of bounds for all concerned.

A formal notice to this effect will be posted outside School Hall tomorrow morning. This memorandum is merely for your personal information and convenience.

E. O.

Silently Mr. Donkin handed the devastating document to Rosemary. Silently she read it, then looked up, bewildered.

"But what does it *mean*, darling?"

"It means," replied Mr. Donkin grimly, "that the Headmaster and Warty Warburton are of the same school of thought!"

SECRET SERVICE

“HALF-PAST ten,” said Rosemary. “You’d better put on your dressing-gown, darling. They may be here any time now.”

The sizeable attic was ready at last, and Rosemary and Chris had moved in three nights previously. From the observations just quoted the reader will gather, correctly, that they were expecting visitors. A house-warming, in fact.

Rosemary, in pyjamas and a pink embroidered kimono, was brewing cocoa over an electric stove. Chris, whose ideas of hospitality were a little more bohemian, was vigorously shaking a closed tin canister which had once held tea, and which now emitted a faint rattling sound. To facilitate this exercise she had reduced her costume to a minimum of three undergarments, two of which were stockings.

“In half a tick, darling,” she replied; “when I’ve got this shaken up. I do wish we had some gin, though.”

“I don’t suppose anybody will notice the difference but Flossie, and he’ll be much too polite to say anything.”

“Still, darling, a cocktail party isn’t really a cocktail party if you have to make the cocktails out of orange juice and cooking sherry and a piece of ice off the fish. I mean, is it?”

“Well, this is a semi-teetotal cocktail party, anyhow,” replied Rosemary, abandoning her cocoa to pick up a stray stocking from off the floor and put it tidily away. “Do you remember the last one we were at—the last real one?”

“At the studio? Our farewell to the old homestead! *Do I?* The cocktails were all right on that occasion; at least, most of Dad’s friends seemed to think so. Do you remember young Fleury, and the two girls from the Concert Mayol? We were really *very* young to be there. How long ago was it?”

“A month.”

“And we’ve been here three weeks! It seems like a century.”

“Haven’t you enjoyed it, dear?”

“I’ve adored every second of it, but I feel a hundred years old. Darling, these lads—is it possible for *anybody* to be so young?”

“I thought you liked them young. I suppose I can pour out the cocoa now. Will it matter all the cups being odd?”

“Not a bit: it’s to be a quite informal party. Yes, I suppose I do—young and pink, with enormous feet, bless them. Of course you like them more mature.

Dreamy, and rather helpless, and——”

“Look out!” said Rosemary quickly. “The door’s opening.”

Chris emitted a frenzied squeak, and dived for her dressing-gown. Rosemary hurriedly picked up an overlooked *brassière* and hurled it behind the screen which had been drawn round that mundane article of furniture the wash-hand-stand; then turned to the door, with a smile of welcome on her lips.

Button entered.

“Good evening, sisters!” she said affably. She was wearing Aunt Barbara’s dressing-gown, which trailed on the floor behind her.

Rosemary’s smile turned to a frown of dismay.

“Button, what on earth are you doing here at this time of night?”

“I’ve come to the house-warming, dearies,” announced the small gate-crasher sweetly. “And you needn’t try to chuck me out!”

“We can have a jolly good try, all the same!” retorted Chris, discarding her dressing-gown again and advancing into action.

“It’s no use, dear,” said Rosemary resignedly; “she’ll have to stay. She’ll only go and split.”

“Correct!” confirmed Button. “When does the show start?”

“How did you find out about it?”

“The kitchen-maid told me about the sherry. Can I have some cocoa?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks. What are these sandwiches?”

“Lobster,” said Rosemary, who had accepted the situation with her usual serenity. “But don’t start on them till the party arrives.”

“All right. I suppose I can have a mixed biscuit, though? Is Bimbo coming?”

“Yes.”

“The little cad! Why didn’t he tell me?”

“We’d have invited you, darling, but we didn’t see how you could get away from Aunt Barbara without waking her.”

Button gave a hoarse chuckle.

“Well, I’ve managed it!”

Chris, who was pouring cocktails into an assortment of tooth-mugs, medicine glasses, and egg-cups, looked up suddenly.

“What have you done to her?” she asked suspiciously.

“Doped her.”

“*What?*”

“I put a double kummel in her coffee after dinner. A little alcohol goes a long way

with a teetotaler: she's sleeping like a pot angel. Who else is coming?"

"Flossie Nightingale, and that fat friend of his, Pop Ogilvie. And Bimbo, of course."

"Isn't Travers invited, or any of the prefects?"

"No," said Rosemary. "We'd have loved to, but it wasn't safe."

"We daren't invite anybody official, or conscientious," explained Chris.

"There doesn't seem to be a thing for me at all," complained Button. "If I had been consulted in time I could have told Bimbo to bring along one or two members of the S.T.C.C. There's a perfect pet called Stinker Green——"

There came three cautious taps at the door.

"There they are!" said Rosemary.

"Just half a minute!" called Chris, once more struggling into her dressing-gown.

A moment later she opened the door, and the guests filed in—Flossie first, then Pop, then Bimbo. All wore pyjamas and the regulation School camel's-hair dressing-gown. Rosemary, having once more assumed her smile of welcome, shook hands formally with each.

"How do you do, Flossie? Will you sit on my bed, please? Come in, Pop. Sit close beside Flossie: I'm afraid we haven't very much elbow-room. Come in, darling." This to Bimbo, with an attempted embrace.

"Good evening," said Bimbo, shaking hands firmly, and joining Button on the other bed.

"We have come a long and perilous journey, I can tell you," announced Flossie.

"Beef was our first snag," corroborated Pop—"Beef Beamish. His rooms are right at the end of our passage——"

"And the worst of these dissipated ushers," continued Flossie, "is that they keep such irregular hours. One simply never knows when they'll go to bed."

"How did you manage?" asked Rosemary.

"We started down the dormitory fire-escape, and came in again by the scullery window. Then through various domestic offices to the backstairs; and so up—in gross darkness all the way. I'm a nervous wreck."

"Have a cocktail, then," said Chris, presenting her tray—"and a mixed biscuit. That's the first course.

"Thank you kindly, Miss," replied Flossie, helping himself. "Here's one for you too, Pop. Thank the pretty lady."

Pop thanked the pretty lady, and helped himself to cracknells, explaining that he was the only animal in captivity who liked them.

"I am greatly in request wherever a tin of mixed biscuits is running low," he

mentioned. Then, raising his graduated medicine glass: "Well, here's——"

"Don't drink it yet," said Chris; "I'm going to propose a toast in a minute. Here you are, kids; egg-cups for you."

"Won't it make them sick?" asked Rosemary warningly.

"Not more than anybody else, darling. We must face the grim future shoulder to shoulder, these days. The Head said so in his sermon, last Sunday. Now then, everybody!"

"Forgive a brief interruption," said Flossie. "Have you by any chance got a spare cocktail?"

"There's a nice dividend in the shaker. Why?"

"I think it would be a kindly and compassionate act to let Old Crump have one."

"Crump?"

"Yes. He's outside that door, keeping cave for us. He happened to be awake, and volunteered for the job. One of Nature's philanthropists."

"He'll do nicely for me!" said Button, jumping off Chris's bed.

Flossie put out a restraining hand.

"Safety first," he said. "Besides, he'll be happier outside, really. He has a faithful heart, but no social gift. We'll give him his cocktail, though."

He opened the door, and said quietly:—

"Oy!"

Old Crump immediately materialised from the darkness beyond, his natural plainness of feature distressingly enhanced by rumpled hair and protruding eyeballs.

"How do you do, Mr. Crump?" said Rosemary politely.

"Hallo!" replied Crump.

"We think it's perfectly sweet of you to come and watch over us."

"That's all right."

"Here's a cocktail for you, Crump darling," announced Button, at his elbow with a brimming tooth-mug.

"Thanks."

"Now then, everybody," resumed Chris, raising her glass—"very quietly, please—here's the toast. Success to the B.U.D.C.!"

"The what?" asked Flossie.

"B.U.D.C."

"Right! Does it mean anything, by any chance?"

"Never mind! Drink it!"

"Any toast of yours is a toast of mine," said Flossie courteously, and drained his glass. . . .

When he opened his eyes again he noticed that Rosemary and Chris, who had honoured the occasion with a mere ladylike sip, had not only laid down their glasses but pushed them some distance away. Bimbo and Button were licking their lips dubiously. Pop was groping blindly for a cracknell. Old Crump, with an empty mug in his hand, exhibited no change of expression whatever.

“Now we’ll all have some cocoa,” announced Rosemary cheerfully.

“Yes, let’s!” replied a full-throated chorus.

“Vote of censure on the cocktails!” proposed Chris, collecting the empty glasses as Rosemary distributed the cocoa. “Carried unanimously! Never mind; if a thing’s worth doing at all, it must be worth doing badly. Now, where are the eatables? Here we are: sandwiches, cake, bananas. Apply early to avoid disappointment. Help me to pass them round, Flossie dear. After that Rosemary and I want to talk to you all—about something private.”

“One moment,” said Flossie. “Crump, old face, I think it is time you resumed your vigil. Ooze out!”

“Right: so long!” replied the docile Crump, and departed to his post, taking with him a banana thoughtfully contributed by Rosemary.

“Now, are you all settled?” asked Chris presently. “Everybody happy?”

The gentlemen present hastened to express their extreme satisfaction with the arrangements for their entertainment—except Bimbo, who after a critical examination of the furnishings of a potted-lobster sandwich, disappeared for a moment behind the screen, to emerge with the pot itself. He nodded to Button, and the pair, adopting a recumbent position on Chris’s bed, proceeded to finish off the pot on a fifty-fifty basis, employing the handle of a tooth-brush as a spoon.

“Now, touching this confidential communication?” said Flossie, when all were settled.

Rosemary and Chris, sitting side by side on the little settee before the mirror, looked at one another enquiringly.

“You tell them, darling,” said Rosemary. “You’ll do it better than I shall.”

“Oh *no*, darling.”

“*Yes!*”

“Pray silence for a short address from Miss Christian Faringdon!” said Flossie, who, young as he was, knew that ladies like to have their minds made up for them.

“Well, it’s like this, children,” said Chris formally. “It has occurred to Rosemary and I——”

“Me,” suggested Flossie gently.

“No, Flossie, not you this time. Rose and I thought of it all by ourselves. Didn’t

we, Rose?"

"Of course, dear."

The pedantic Flossie shook his head resignedly.

"We first thought of it two or three weeks ago, when we heard how The Egg had turned down the deputation who went to him about the Eight not rowing in the Regatta to-morrow."

"It was a very good deputation," said Flossie. "I was on it."

"What does B.U.D.C. stand for?" enquired Button, who had finished her share of the lobster, and was now prepared to resume her normal rôle of gadfly.

"I'm coming to that," said Chris. "Meanwhile, I'm going to ask the class a few questions." She rose, and enquired briskly:—

"Who is the best Housemaster in the School?"

The answer came unanimously:—

"The Moke."

"And who is the School's best friend?"

"The same kind quadruped," replied Flossie.

"What does B.U.D.C.——?"

"And when The Egg put up that foul notice the other day about having school all to-morrow, instead of letting everybody go on the towpath in the afternoon, and to the Fair and the fireworks at night"—Chris paused for breath—"who went and begged and prayed The Egg to take the notice down and let everybody go after all?"

"The Moke did that?" asked Flossie.

"He did!"

"God bless his old heart! How do you know?"

"I can tell you," said Rosemary. "I was with him when his copy of the notice arrived. It was quite late at night; but as soon as he had read it he put on his hat and walked straight out of the house and over to the Blue House to see The Egg. I sat up for him, and he was away more than an hour. When he came back I asked him what had happened—he was looking dreadfully tired—and he said that nothing had happened, except that an elderly gentleman had made an exhibition of himself all to no purpose!"

Flossie rose to his feet.

"Three groans for The Egg," he said—"subdued, of course."

"It's all very well for us to sit here mooing like cows," said Chris, after Flossie's suggestion had been honoured; "but what are we going to do about it?"

"What can we do?"

"We can get behind our dear Charles and back him up."

“What does B.U.D.C. stand for?” reiterated the voice of Button. Chris turned to her.

“That’s just the point. It stands for the ‘Back Up Donkin Club.’”

“You cribbed that from my S.T.C.C.!” cried Button.

Nobody took any notice of this untimely irrelevance except Bimbo, who recommended his twin sister to close her face.

“How are we going to back him up?” asked Flossie. “I’m only asking for information.”

“You might all wear a badge, or something,” suggested Rosemary; “and when he asks what it’s for, tell him.”

“Tell him what?”

“What a darling he is.”

“Yes; I can see us!”

“And I can hear his answer!” added Pop.

“But he wouldn’t mean it,” urged Rosemary. “He’s terribly tender-hearted.”

“His tender heart,” said Flossie, “has never yet interfered with a strong right arm and a very straight eye.”

“Well, anyhow,” continued Chris warmly, “it’s up to you to do *something* to stop him from being oppressed—oppressed by a blotch like The Egg——”

“Smear, dear.”

“I said *blotch*! Can’t you hold a meeting, or something, and make plans?”

“Will you address the meeting?” asked Pop.

“Of course I will. So will Rose.”

Pop grinned delightedly.

“Then I’ll come! I’ll take the chair! It’ll be a rag, anyhow.”

“But it mustn’t be a rag. It’s got to be serious.”

“Righto. What about it, Flossie?”

“Where are you going to hold it?”

“Well, that depends on whether it’s a School meeting or a House meeting.”

“I think you’d better start with a House meeting.”

“Then what about our Reading Room? No; that’s next door to the Moke’s study. The dining-room would be safer.”

Rosemary turned to her sister.

“I say, Chris, we promised!”

“Oh gracious, so we did!” Chris addressed her male confederates. “Sorry, chaps; the dining-room is out. We girls have promised faithfully never to penetrate beyond that green-baize door. Isn’t there any place outside?”

“The back of the Fives Courts,” said a voice from Chris’s bed.

Pop turned approvingly in its direction.

“That’s a sound spot, Button. How did you think of it?”

“I use it for meetings of the S.T.C.C. I’ll lend it to you, though. In fact, I’ll attend the meeting myself.”

“No, you won’t,” said Chris.

“I shall attend the meeting myself,” repeated Button calmly; “or else, children——!” She glanced towards the door.

“She’ll have to come,” said Rosemary. “You can look after her, Bimbo.”

“I should prefer to be looked after by something a little more mature,” said Button. “By the way, Old Crump must know about this.” She went to the door, and called into the darkness:—

“Crump darling!”

Straightway the unsleeping sentinel appeared.

“Hallo!”

“Could you attend a meeting of a few friends behind the Fives Courts tomorrow?”

“Is it a fight?” asked Crump hopefully.

“No. It’s a sort of political meeting.”

“Oh!”

“Please come. I shall be there—and Rose *and* Chris.”

Crump’s face brightened.

“Righto!” he said. “Could I have another banana?”

His wants were supplied by Chris in person, and the debate continued.

“What time are we going to have the meeting?” asked Rosemary.

“After morning school,” said Pop—“just when we ought all to have been starting out for the Regatta. An appropriate moment. Don’t you think so, Flossie? Hallo, what’s the matter?”

Flossie had assumed, perhaps unconsciously, the attitude of one of Rodin’s best-known sculptural works.

“I’m thinking,” he said. “I hate to strike a note of doubt or gloom, but—— Gather round for a moment, and listen to your Uncle.”

Impressed by his unusual seriousness, the company obeyed, perching itself expectantly upon the edges of the beds and sofa. Old Crump, momentarily excused from duty, lounged in the open doorway, masticating his second banana.

“Let’s be a bit more explicit about this business,” continued Flossie. “What’s going to be on the agenda at your meeting? What’s the Club out to *do*, exactly?”

“It’s out to put The Egg in the cart.”

“Quite so. But The Egg’s no fool, and if we aren’t careful The Egg won’t be the only thing in the cart. Forgive these unworthy qualms,” he added, “but I come of a long line of political trimmers. Besides”—with a gallant inclination of the head towards the Faringdon ladies—“we have women and children in our ranks.”

“I love to hear you talk, Flossie!” said Chris, in genuine admiration.

“The tribute,” replied Flossie modestly, “is not undeserved, but the moment is untimely. Now, this B.U.D.C. business. We’ve *got* to emphasise the purity of our intentions. Old Charles is what is popularly known as a good scout, but he is not very highly gifted intellectually—one of those single-track minds, in fact—and if he mistook our well-intentioned demonstrations of loyalty, as well he might, for demonstrations of common cheek—well, Charles might get ratty. And when Charles gets ratty, he gets rough. Sadistic is the word, I believe. Have I said a mouthful, or haven’t I?”

“You have!” replied the voice of Mr. Donkin.

How long he had been there they had no idea. Neither, to be frank, had Mr. Donkin, so completely had he been absorbed in his pupil’s performance. Returning from his customary nocturnal tour of the House, clad in dressing-gown and slippers and carrying an electric torch, he had become suddenly aware, mounting the stairs to his own bedroom, of a dim light filtering down from the top-floor landing, and of the sound of a voice—a boy’s voice—uplifted in earnest discourse. He had reached the unguarded door just in time for Flossie’s peroration.

Upon realising his presence, the detected conspirators did what detected conspirators invariably do—started to their feet in a body. Chris, was the first to break the apprehensive silence:

“Hallo, Charles darling! *How* you made us jump!”

Mr. Donkin did not reply, nor did his expression invite further words of welcome. He was looking very grim indeed: his features were set in a way which the girls had never seen before, though the boys had, occasionally.

He pointed to the door.

“My study, to-morrow morning,” he commanded. “Ten—ten-five—ten-ten—ten-fifteen,”—as four unhappy youths filed past him into the outer darkness.

Then he turned to the Girls’ Friendly Society.

“Good night!” he said; and taking Button firmly by the collar of Aunt Barbara’s dressing-gown, led her quaking from the room, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
STAFF CONFERENCE

THE following evening Mr. Hastings strolled across from the Green House to the Red, for a post-prandial chat with his friend Mr. Donkin.

Darkness was falling, and the summer air was heavy with the scent of flowers and aromatic shrubs. Up from the town floated a subdued but continuous hubbub, as of a cheerful multitude making merry—or whoopee, according to the age and educational advantages of its components. The sky was illuminated by the glow of many arc-lamps and naphtha flares. A steam roundabout and at least one brass band were contributing what a film director would have described as auxiliary sound effects.

“*Dulce est desipere in loco*,” murmured Mr. Hastings to himself. “I’m only a Maths Beak, but I understand the significance of that quotation—and the Head doesn’t!”

He let himself in by the side-entrance of the Red House, and knocked upon the door of Mr. Donkin’s study.

“Come in, Frank!” shouted a voice from inside.

“Do you know everybody’s knock?” enquired Mr. Hastings, as he entered and laid down his hat.

“One cannot help becoming painfully familiar with some,” replied Mr. Donkin rudely. “What do you want?”

“*Imprimis*, a cigar.”

Mr. Donkin unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk.

“Haven’t you got any of your own?” he grumbled.

“I never buy cigars, on principle,” replied Mr. Hastings, helping himself, “and grateful and opulent parents are almost extinct as a species. Are these the best you’ve got?”

“They’re the best you’re going to get. Sit down, or something, until I’ve finished these letters. You’ve left your House to its own devices as usual, I suppose.”

“It happens to be my House tutor’s evening for duty. I imagine you are deputising for that incompetent loafer Beamish.”

“Mr. Beamish has taken the three girls to the Fair, at my request.”

“Fair—yes. It’s in full blast: I heard it as I came along.” Mr. Hastings, extended on the sofa by this time, blew a long cloud of smoke, and then exclaimed:

“What a damned fool that fellow is!”

“He’ll grow up,” said Donkin. “He’s quite an efficient House tutor.”

“The Head, man, the Head!”

“Oh, the Head?” Mr. Donkin laid a final envelope on the pile beside him and helped himself to a cigar. “I could call him a lot of things, Frank, but he’s no fool.”

“Of course he’s a fool. He’s been a fool over to-night’s business. Think of the golden chance he has thrown away. The boys have accepted defeat. They’ve gone into school to-day—a day which has been a whole holiday for them from time immemorial—without a murmur.”

“They’ve certainly behaved extraordinarily well about it all.”

“Exactly! Now was the moment for a gesture. If he’d let them go to the Fair this evening, as you suggested, he’d have relieved about fifty per cent. of the tension without sacrificing a single point of principle. But no, he’s got to be the strong man, and sit on the safety-valve! To-night the boys are all cooped up in their Houses, listening to the Fair instead of going there. That’s a lovely sight. Look!”

Donkin went to the window, which looked southward towards the river and town. Up into the darkening sky stole a long vivid thread of light; paused a moment, leaned over, and burst into dazzling flame. It was the first rocket.

“It’s asking too much of human nature altogether,” continued Hastings. “But the boys really have behaved well—uncannily well!”

“Yes; that’s just it. Their tranquillity is rather frightening. There’s an unhealthy hush about the whole place, and has been all day. There hasn’t even been the usual tale of petty crime. Look at these impositions that I’ve just initialled. A couple of them—a miserable couple! Why, de Pourville’s chemists alone are usually good for three or four thousand lines per diem. *I don’t* like it!” Mr. Donkin went to the green-baize door, opened it, and stood listening. “Not a sound! There’s mischief in the air: I can smell it!”

“I agree. But after all, what can they *do*, when all is said? They can’t go on strike, like a Trades Union.”

“I don’t know. But the young are like the rest of God’s creatures: if you drive them beyond a certain point they do sudden, unprecedented, rather efficacious things. More than forty years ago, just before I came here as a little boy, there was an upheaval over at the Brown House.”

“Who was Housemaster there?”

“Forbes. He’s been dead for years now.”

“I have heard legends of him. Proceed.”

“Well, his boys got tired of complaining about their food, which was beastly, and proceeded to direct action.”

“They lynched the cook?”

“They barricaded themselves into their own part of the House, and declined to come out until their grievances were redressed. It was an epic affair, I can tell you, though it’s all forgotten to-day.”

“In other words, they anticipated the now fashionable stay-in strike?”

“Exactly.”

“But what did they live on?”

“Oh, they had attended to all that. They had laid up provisions for a siege—their idea of provisions for a siege. For four days and nights they subsisted on sweet biscuits, anchovy paste, marmalade, and bath-water. They’d taken the precaution of filling all the baths the night before the show started, in case the water was cut off at the main.”

“Which of course it wasn’t.”

“No; but the gas was, and they lived in total darkness from dusk till dawn. They stuck to their guns, though, and won. The authorities had to make terms, and Forbes received the order of the bowler hat. The boys’ leader had to go too, of course.”

“What became of him?”

“He is now a most successful Colonial administrator.”

“Did the story get into the papers?”

“No, thank God; but of course nothing could keep such a juicy item off the front page nowadays. And that’s what’s frightening me, Frank. We mustn’t have an incident here. It would set us back ten years, and in these days of competition we might never recover from it. This is a damned good school. It’s not an aristocratic school, or a conspicuous school——”

“Not one solitary jest, to date, about our Old School Tie,” corroborated Mr. Hastings.

“But it has been turning out a good, solid, indispensable type—soldiers, parsons, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, engineers—with an occasional statesman and an occasional poet or artist thrown in, for a hundred years and more. And if this policy of sitting on the safety-valve ends in an explosion—well, it’ll mean something more serious, and tragic, than the mere scalding of our Mr. Ovington’s backside!”

“Good evening, Frank!” Barbara Fane entered the room in her usual brisk fashion. “Why don’t you answer him back,” she continued, “whatever the argument is? You can shout just as loud as he can.”

By this time she had reached the French windows, which she proceeded to throw open to their full extent.

“That’s better,” she said. “Have you a two-penny-halfpenny stamp, Charles?”

“No; but I can give you the component parts thereof,” replied Donkin, producing halfpenny stamps from a drawer. “Foreign correspondence?”

“Yes. I’ve been writing to Aubrey. It’s an answer to one I had from him. That was a surprise in itself: I hadn’t heard a word from him since we arrived here, and hadn’t expected to. May I sit down?”

“Of course. Frank, what are you prowling round the room for?”

“Where’s to-day’s *Times*?”

“Where you won’t find it, my lad.”

“Did you manage Seven down?”

“I haven’t started it yet. What made Aubrey write, Barbara?”

“He has nothing else to do. He is laid up.”

“Oughtn’t somebody to be looking after him?”

“Somebody is—about the one decent friend he’s got. Well, she’s my friend, really—Mrs. Carey, an American—a nice, sensible woman. It appears she went to call on Aubrey the other day, to ask if he had any news of us, and found him lying in bed drinking beer, with seven other people, of either sex, sitting on the bed drinking cocktails. He had broken his ankle, and they were nursing him.”

“How had he broken it?” asked Mr. Hastings, relinquishing a vain quest for the *Times* newspaper.

“He says he was getting into a taxi on the way to a party. My belief is he was getting out of one on his way back.”

“And how did Mrs. Carey cope with the situation?”

“She carried him straight off to her own house in Passy. A pleasant place: I used to take the children there for lunch on Sundays. I’ve just been writing to Aubrey about them, and their goings-on here. I’ll read some of it to you, if you like. Wait till I put on my spectacles. I’ve told him about our arrival, and the effect on the boys, and how things have now settled down a bit. Then:—

“Rosemary and Chris have just moved into their new room, which is a relief to me, because the Night Sickroom, where they have been for the last three weeks, is right in the boys’ part of the House. Button sleeps with me, so of course she is no anxiety. Did you say something, Charles?”

Mr. Donkin, who had suddenly emitted a low, involuntary, gurgling sound, shook his head vigorously.

“Nothing at all,” he replied. “Go on.”

“All three seem riotously happy. Charles spoils Rosemary horribly. That’s practically all.”

“I do *not* spoil Rosemary,” said Mr. Donkin firmly.

“Oh yes, you do.”

“All I do is to keep a magisterial eye on her. I know young people: it’s my job. Rosemary needs guidance: she’s at a difficult age.”

“Hoity-toity! Who told you all this?”

“My dear Barbara, she is twenty; and everybody knows that the most difficult five years of a woman’s life are from eighteen to twenty-three or so.”

Miss Fane surveyed the self-confident pundit before her with grim amusement.

“If you were a woman,” she remarked, “you’d ultimately realise that the most difficult five years in a woman’s life are from twenty-nine to thirty!” She rose, with the satisfied nod of one who has got off a good thing. “Is anybody coming with me to see the fireworks?”

“I’m afraid I’m on duty,” said Donkin. “Frank will escort you: he never has anything to do.”

“It’s a bit late, isn’t it?” objected Mr. Hastings feebly.

“Nonsense!” replied Barbara. “You’re getting old. Come along!”

“But the fireworks will be nearly over by the time——”

“The set-pieces don’t come on until nine-thirty. It’s nine-fifteen now.”

“You can see them perfectly well from the upper windows of this house.”

“Your hat!” said Barbara, handing it.

“Good night, old man!” chuckled Mr. Donkin, as Miss Fane sailed from the room, followed by her lagging escort.

But the chuckle died when the door closed. Mr. Donkin was in no mood for badinage: for once in his life he could not gauge the spirit of his House, and it worried him profoundly. Something was going on: he knew not what. Well, he must find out. He would begin by making his usual round of study visits, and perhaps have a talk with Travers. A reliable fellow, Travers. Or possibly a friendly pow-wow about nothing in particular with one or two of the unofficial Mandarins, like Flossie Nightingale.

He threw his cigar into the garden, an untidy bachelor habit, and closed the windows—his automatic reaction, by this time, to Barbara’s departure from any room in the house.

There came a rather timid and uncertain tap at the mahogany door, and Rosemary peeped in.

“May I come in?” she asked, in a very small voice.

“Of course you may, my dear. But—you haven’t gone to the fireworks?”

“No.”

“And now I think of it, I don’t seem to have seen you all day. Why not?”

“I rather fancy I’ve been hiding,” replied Rosemary meekly.

NIGHT OPERATIONS

MEANWHILE the Fair, as Mr. Hastings had correctly observed, was in full blast.

Victor Beamish was not quite sure whether he was enjoying himself or not. True, Chris was as attractive and stimulating a companion as any healthy young man could desire; but Chris was not Rosemary, and Rosemary had flatly declined Mr. Beamish's escort to the Fair that evening; and Mr. Beamish was not accustomed to having his invitations declined. The girl was just luring him on, of course; any man of the world could see that; but to-night's exhibition of coyness was annoying, because it had deranged certain carefully laid plans of his.

He had intended to shake off Chris and Button by some simple pretext—take them into the Magic Maze and lose them, or something of that kind—and then get Rosemary to himself for an hour in a punt on the river. He had been wanting that hour, because it was high time that this girl was taught some sense. She had entirely failed to appreciate the situation so far: she seemed to be labouring under the idea that he, Victor, was trying to start some funny business with her. That was the worst of being brought up in a rotten place like Paris; a girl couldn't recognise a white man when she met one. Why, he had told her he was going to marry her! What more did she want, for Gawd's sake?

Then a slightly more tolerant and forgiving temper descended upon Mr. Beamish. After all, the kid was very young, and a certain amount of maidenly modesty and shilly-shallying was excusable and natural. He must give her time, he supposed. Of course when they were married there would have to be no more ruddy nonsense. He could, and would, take her firmly in hand then, and form her character.

Meanwhile he was out for the evening with Chris; and Chris was a bit of all right. Unless Mr. Beamish was mistaken, she was rather more amenable to fun than her elder sister. A girl with ginger in her. She might prove a very amusing companion in a punt.

But then there was that blasted brat Button all the time. What could he do with her? Nothing, simply nothing. She would stick to them like a leech, especially if she suspected, as she might, that they wanted to get rid of her. She had the nerve of the devil, anyway: at this very moment Mr. Beamish was carrying three coco-nuts and a damned Mickey Mouse about the size of a full-grown baby, which Button had won at some tomfool cockshy or other and blarneyed him into carrying for her.

Supposing he met someone he knew? Lucky none of the boys were out to-night!

Absorbed in these characteristic reflections, Mr. Beamish failed to note that his charges were no longer with him. It was not until he had proffered a suggestion—or rather, issued an order—on the subject of patronizing a sideshow that the humiliating truth was revealed to him.

“This,” he announced loudly, “is where we go in and sample spooks. Professor Alf Salter’s Unrivalled Exposition of Spiritualistic Phenomena! You and I will sit and hold hands in the dark, Chris, while the Professor does his stuff. We’ll boot Button on to the platform, to help him. Take my arm; and then ho! for—I’m sorry!”

His gaze, descending from the Professor’s lofty and flamboyant signboard, revealed to him that he was not addressing Chris at all, but a giggling and totally strange young woman, escorted by a hatless and forbidding youth in a burberry. Chris had vanished, and Button with her.

But neither of the truants was far off: in fact, they were both crouching breathlessly behind the counter of a neighbouring lemonade-stall, where they had taken sanctuary just two minutes previously. Needless to say, the proprietor of the stall was by this time their firm friend and sworn ally.

“He’s a-moving off now, ladies,” he reported wheezily, after a short interval. “That young feller whose gel he nearly pinched by mistake didn’t ’alf give ’im a telling-off. I think if your young gentleman ’adn’t bin a bit on the big side ’imself ’e’d ’ave set about ’im.”

“Which direction is he going in?” asked Chris.

“Towards the river-bank, Miss. Perhaps ’e’s going to ’ave a look at the fireworks: they’re about due to start. You can stand up now: ’e’s out of sight.”

“Thank you so much,” said Chris, rising to an upright position. “We should like some of your lemonade, please.”

They were promptly served with two glasses of the arsenical green decoction, contained in a large glass carboy, which formed their host’s stock in trade.

“Are you going to keep up your little joke on ’im all night, ladies,” enquired the ancient, “or make it up, like?”

“We’ll keep it up for a bit, anyhow,” said Chris. “Thank you again”—producing an unnecessarily lavish half-crown. “You’ve been an angel to us, and your lemonade’s lovely. Let’s go to the Bumpety Bump now, Button. They ought to be there by this time,” she added mysteriously.

If Victor Beamish had been uncertain as to the desirability of the Fair as a pleasure resort, Philip de Pourville entertained no doubts on the subject whatever. He hated it.

He had drifted there alone, imploring himself all the time not to be a sentimental fool, because he knew that somewhere in the crowd he might find Rosemary. For days he had been nerving himself to invite her to be his guest upon this occasion, but his nerve had failed him, as it always did, and she was going with Beamish instead. He had heard Beamish say so, in a modest *fortissimo*, in the Common Room that very morning.

Still, he had not been able to keep away. He wandered about among the glittering booths and side-shows, past blaring merry-go-rounds and raucous orators, elbowed and jostled on every side, hoping yet fearing to encounter the Faringdon family (and escort) at some sudden turn. Hoping, because they might invite him to join them; and then, by some miracle from heaven, the party might break into two groups, Beamish leading the way (as he always did) with Chris and Button, while Philip walked behind with Rosemary. Fearing, because no such invitation might be forthcoming at all, and that would mean at least twenty-four hours in hell.

But if they did invite him, Rosemary would find him not unprepared. Finding himself incapable of anything but the baldest platitudes when *tête-à-tête* with his beloved, he had prepared a few conversational openings of a nature calculated to kindle interest or increase intimacy, and now had them all rehearsed for the next encounter. He had even jotted down cues on a postcard: they were in his right-hand jacket pocket at this moment. He felt bitterly ashamed at having to resort to such static methods of siege warfare, but needs must. It might have comforted him to know that innumerable diffident lovers have been driven to precisely similar tactics—not always unsuccessfully—since the world began.

Presently he found himself in the neighbourhood of that earnest expositor of the occult, Professor Alf Salter, who was engaged in an impassioned and final appeal to his public to pay their sixpences and walk in. And then, suddenly, he caught sight of Beamish towering above all others a few yards away from him. Where Beamish was Rosemary must be. His heart beat. Now to put his courage to the test! He began to work his way through a congested mass of rather smelly humanity towards the goal of his evening.

Soon he was close enough to distinguish Chris and Button, wedged together and engaged in earnest confabulation. Next he became a witness of that precious pair's furtive withdrawal from Mr. Beamish's society, and finally of Mr. Beamish's bewilderment and wrath at being thus deserted. But no Rosemary—no Rosemary

anywhere.

Well, if Rosemary was not at the Fair, she must be at home. Philip turned promptly on his heel and set off in the direction of the old stone bridge and the Red House.

She was in the habit, he knew, of sitting in the study with Donkin after House prayers. Sometimes the curtains of the French windows were left open—he knew that too. Perhaps they would be open to-night, and—one might get a glimpse. That would be something.

III

“And from whom were you hiding?” enquired Mr. Donkin sternly, depositing Rosemary on the sofa and taking up a magisterial stance before the fireplace. “From me, by any chance?”

“From Auntie B mostly, I think. How much did you tell her about—last night?”

“I fear I compounded a felony.”

“Does that mean you haven’t told her?”

“It does.”

“Oh, angel heart!” Rosemary vacated the sofa as if propelled by springs, and registered gratitude in the usual Faringdon manner.

“We rather guessed you hadn’t,” she continued. “She seemed all right at breakfast; and of course Button *had* got back into bed without waking her; but we couldn’t be sure—and we do so hate being scolded. I suppose we aren’t used to it.” She dropped back into the depths of the sofa again, and gazed up at Mr. Donkin.

“Was it all wrong, Charles,” she asked meltingly, “our giving a pyjama party?”

“A capital crime.”

“We thought so, from your face when you came in. Did you beat them this morning?”

“I did.”

“Bimbo too?”

“Bimbo was not overlooked.”

“Poor lambs! After all, they couldn’t help it being a pyjama party—at that time of night, you know. And they didn’t mean any harm.”

“I entirely agree. But Justice is blind, my dear. She takes no account of innocence of intention, either in school or out of it. She drops just as heavily on the people who meant no harm as on the deliberate malefactor. That’s one of the things that a school is for—to acclimatise the young to the general injustice of the world

that's waiting for them."

"Is it as unjust a world as all that?"

"To this extent, that it never gives you a punishment—or a reward, for that matter—entirely fitted to your deserts. Either you get too little or too much. It averages out, but it falls rather hard on the individual, sometimes. Your four guests of last night, for instance."

"Harder than you know about," said Rosemary, nodding her head vigorously.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, in a way, the party was in your honour. Flossie was making a speech about you when you came in—a very nice speech."

"Thank you; I dropped in just in time for the peroration. A noble tribute. Now, what were you all up to exactly? What was the game?"

"Oh, nothing, dear—only just rather a splendid notion that some of us had. It's all a kind of secret at present. But it's nothing that you need worry about, really."

"I'm relieved to hear that, especially at the present juncture of affairs. But I'm sorry you should be missing the Fair and fireworks.

"I'm not, one little bit."

"Thank you for the compliment."

"It's not exactly that."

"Then forgive my presumption."

"Oh darling, of course I adore being with you; but—but——Oh, *Charles*," cried Rosemary plaintively, "why do people make things so difficult?"

"This sounds like another secret," said Mr. Donkin, sitting down beside her.

"Well, it is and it isn't. Chris knows about it."

"Then it certainly isn't. Let me in."

"It's Victor—Victor Beamish. He was really why I didn't go to the Fair to-night."

"And what has my House tutor been up to?"

"He's fallen in love with me!"

"Oh, has he?"

"Yes. I mean, it's so stupid of him, isn't it?"

"On the contrary, it's the first really intelligent thing I've ever known him do. Not that I approve."

"Of course you don't. Neither do I. That's what I mean when I say it's so stupid of him. Why can't he fall in love with Chris instead? She likes it, and I don't."

"By that do you imply that Chris enjoys being made love to by friend Victor, or by the male sex in general?"

“Oh, by anything in trousers, practically. She says she knows it’s dreadfully common of her, but she does adore it so.”

“And her elder sister holds the opposite view?”

“Yes; but only in a way.”

“You don’t object to love-making on principle? You would be prepared to listen to the right applicant?”

“Oh, yes!”

“I suppose you have a definite picture in your mind of what this most fortunate young man is going to be like, when he materialises?” Mr. Donkin turned and surveyed the candid, childlike face beside him, and smiled. “What will he be like, Rosemary?” he asked.

“You!” replied that young lady promptly, and possessed herself of Mr. Donkin’s hand, Faringdon fashion.

“I thank you for this kind and unmerited testimonial. But I’m afraid my type is practically obsolete: they simply don’t turn out one-cylinder models any more.”

“Darling, you talk as if you were a hundred.”

“How old would you say I was?”

“About the same age as Daddy, I suppose. He must be nearly fifty by this time.”

“I’m fifty-five—and it sounds like Methuselah to you! To me it doesn’t even sound middle-aged. Give me your definition of middle age, Rosemary.”

Rosemary puckered her brow.

“Well, I suppose it’s the middle of a person’s age.”

“But who knows when he’s *in* the middle of his age, my cherub? Can any of us foresee his own length of days? Try again.”

“Well, fifty, then.”

“That presupposes that one is going to live to a hundred—an unnecessarily gloomy estimate.”

“Then you tell me, darling!” suggested Rosemary tactfully.

“I have given some thought to the matter,” said Mr. Donkin, “and I have come to the conclusion that middle age is the age of anybody about ten years older than oneself. To me to-day a man in his early sixties is middle-aged: to you, a middle-aged person is anyone over thirty. When you’re thirty yourself it’ll be forty. And so on, up the scale. On the whole a comforting point of view; because it prevents one from ever feeling really old. I expect the hundred-year-old parrot at the Zoo feels middle-aged every time it looks at the giant tortoise. Now, let us get back to this hypothetical affinity of yours. What is his type, exactly?”

Rosemary sighed forlornly.

“Not a very satisfactory one, I’m afraid.”

“I’m distressed to hear it. Why?”

“Because he’s the type that will never ask me to marry him.”

“What does that matter? If a woman really sets her mind to it, she can marry any man she chooses. You ask any husband.”

“But how, darling? She can’t very well go down on her knees and propose to him, can she?”

“Why not?”

“Why *not*?”

“Yes, why not, if she is sure? If she knows that they have found one another—that he is Jack and she is Jill, and a miracle from heaven has brought them together in a world of forty million people? Forty million—and they’ve met! Of course she mustn’t let him go. It would be a tragedy, and a crime.”

“It can’t happen very often, darling,” said Rosemary thoughtfully. “The two exactly right people meeting, I mean.”

“No. The average so-called love-match is almost bound to be lopsided—give on the one hand and take on the other; or shall we say, blind devotion from A and affectionate acquiescence from B? That’s the best that most mortals can hope for, I’m afraid, the odds being what they are. Yet they make a surprising success of it. They never touch the heights, of course; but that does not worry them, because they don’t know that the heights are there. Rosemary, my dear,” said Mr. Donkin earnestly, “give yourself a chance to touch the heights!”

The girl looked up at him.

“Have you touched them, darling?”

“No; but I saw them once, for a brief glimpse—and they’re there all right. And they’re gold—all gold!”

Presently Mr. Donkin went on.

“There will be a lot of men in your life, Rose, and most of them will make love to you; and it’s possible that you may feel inclined to say yes to more than one of them. But wait—wait until your heart tells you that here is the *one*! And once you are sure, don’t let any old-fashioned theories about maidenly modesty cramp your style. Freeze on to him: it’s the only way, sometimes. There really are men walking this earth who honestly believe that they’re not good enough for this girl or that, or couldn’t make her sufficiently comfortable. ‘No right to ask you to share the life of a poor man’—and other flapdoodle! Well, if ever you fall in love with that type, don’t stand any nonsense from him. Tell him to stop making low moaning noises over his pass-book, and take a chance—with you! And if he sticks his toes in after that,

hammer him over the head with a blunt instrument until you've let the daylight in—or you'll both regret it all your lives! Believe me, my dear, I know! I have been young and now I am old, and I know!”

“Yes, darling,” said Rosemary gently; “I think you do!”

For a moment she glanced up at her mother's portrait; then she took Mr. Donkin's hand again, and stroked it; then rose to her feet, somewhat bright-eyed.

“I suppose I'm wasting your time as usual?” she said, with an unsteady smile.

“Of course you are. Are you going to bed?”

“I think I'll wait upstairs in the drawing-room until the other two come home. I suppose they won't be long now? Are the fireworks over?”

“I should say so, but we'll have a look.”

Mr. Donkin opened the window, and descended a short flight of steps into the darkness of the garden.

“Yes,” he said; “the tumult and the shouting appear to be moribund. What a lovely night! Let's take a breath of fresh—Why—*hallo!* de Pourville?”

A spectacled and slightly embarrassed figure had risen, apparently from out of the ground, right under Mr. Donkin's feet.

“It's Philip!” cried Rosemary.

“Yes,” said the apparition lamely.

“Why aren't you patronising the Scenic Railway and the Flying Ostriches?” demanded Mr. Donkin.

“Because he's come to call on us instead,” said Rosemary; “and it's sweet of him. Haven't you come to call on us, Philip?”

“Well, I happened to be passing,” stammered de Pourville, who was an unready liar. “I had been over at—at the Grey House—to see Kent about some special Physics work for the Army Class—and on my way back I—I strolled round in this direction. I hadn't meant to come in.”

This last statement was approximately correct. The closed study curtains having deprived him of his hoped-for glimpse, he had spent the last half-hour sitting on a dew-covered stone step, gazing up at the stars and cursing his own lack of initiative.

“Well, you're coming in now,” said Mr. Donkin, taking his arm and leading him into the study. “Can you make conversation with Rosemary for a few minutes, while I go round the House?”

“I'll try,” said de Pourville, convulsively grasping a postcard in his right-hand jacket pocket.

“You'll find us in the drawing-room, darling,” said Rosemary to Donkin. “Come along, Philip!”

And taking that dazed and incredulous young man by his disengaged hand, she led him out of the room and upstairs.

Mr. Donkin watched them out of sight; then turned, with a look of sudden and whimsical enquiry in his gaze, as if to consult his little Oracle on the mantelpiece. But the Oracle merely smiled at him.

There came a knock on the green-baize door, and Travers appeared—with respectful concern written all over him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
REPORTED MISSING

“GOOD evening, Derek.” (Mr. Donkin habitually addressed boys by their Christian or nicknames when alone with them, but at no other time.) “I see emergency in your eye.”

“Yes, sir. The House butler has just given me the list of absentees from Lock-up. There are twenty-three of them. I thought I’d better tell you: it seemed rather a lot _____”

“It is.”

“Unless you had given them special leave for anything.”

“Which I had not. Is that the list?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Any prefects on it?”

“No, sir.”

“Good! It isn’t a case of high treason, anyhow, and nothing else matters—much. Let me see.” Mr. Donkin ran his eye rapidly down the list. “H’m! Quite! And I think I can guess where they have gone to.”

“The fireworks, sir?”

“Precisely. When they return, they’ll discover that there are such things as indoor fireworks. All right. Thank you, Derek.”

As Travers disappeared through one door, the other burst open and Mr. Beamish appeared, dragging with him a small, dishevelled, and unresisting figure. It was Master Bimbo Faringdon.

“About half the House are down at the fireworks,” announced Beamish.

“Twenty-three, to be exact. Is this one of them?”

“Yes.” Beamish reluctantly let go of Bimbo’s collar.

Mr. Donkin surveyed that flinching youth grimly.

“Boy,” he commanded, “report to Travers at once! Then go and wait in the Reading Room, and don’t attempt to communicate with anybody else until you hear from me. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Out!”

Bimbo slid unobtrusively from view, and Beamish turned to his superior.

“This is a murky business,” he said.

Donkin sat down briskly behind his desk.

“Tell me the details,” he said. “Where are the two girls?”

“I’ve lost them.”

“You surprise me.”

“Not more than I was surprised myself. Darned sauce!”

“What happened?”

“I took them into the Enclosure, and got seats for them—paid for them, too!—and told them to sit quiet until the fireworks began. But that didn’t suit them; oh no! They wanted to see the side-shows and things first.”

“And you saw the side-shows and things first?”

“Yes. And then what do you think? While we were standing in the crowd outside a booth, listening to some kind of ballyhoo-merchant doing his stuff, they walked out on me! Left *me*,” repeated Mr. Beamish almost tearfully—“flat!”

“Incredible.”

“I should say so!”

“How did you cope with the situation?”

“First I went back to our seats in the Enclosure. They weren’t there. After that I made a systematic search: naturally I wasn’t going to be treated like that. I thought I’d try the towpath first: that’s a sort of general promenading place on these occasions. And what do you think happened next? I walked slap into a gang of our boys!”

“Who fled at the sight of you?”

“No. They gathered round and gave me three cheers.”

“Why?”

“Well,”—Mr. Beamish coughed modestly—“I suppose some masters are more popular than others. But of course they were a bit over-excited as well: I heard some of them call for cheers for you, old man.”

“Did you?” said Mr. Donkin thoughtfully. “*Did* you? Were they boys from this House, or from others?”

“Oh, from all over the School. The place was stiff with them.”

“Did you ask them what they were doing there?”

“No; I thought possibly the Headpiece had climbed down at the last minute. Besides, I was too busy chasing those two brats.”

“Whom you failed, however, to find?”

“Oh no, I found them all right—in the Fair itself. They were on the Bumpety Bump.”

“What precisely is that?”

“A sort of long steep slide, with lumps on it. You come down sitting on a mat.

Chris was the first one I spotted, though I didn't know it at the time. She had lost her mat and was coming down on the back of her neck: I didn't recognise her until they set her on her feet again at the bottom of the slide. Then came Button and Bimbo, on one mat. You can bet I was waiting for *them*! I grabbed Bimbo by the collar and yanked him upright, and told him to come quietly."

"And his sisters expostulated."

"Expostulated? They tried to kill me! Chris kicked my shins and Button bit me—right through the sleeve of my coat! And when I shook them off and started for home with Bimbo, they followed me, calling me names."

"What sort of names?"

"Well, some of them were in French; but there were plenty more, from Chris especially. She told me that I was an interfering clown and a half-witted show-off, and that I was ruining *everything*—whatever that may have meant! Then the crowd began to take notice, and presently half the riff-raff of the Fair were escorting us. I kept my head, of course, and told the girls to stop making a show of themselves and keep close to me. And what do you think they had the gall to do then?" enquired Mr. Beamish, scarlet with indignation. "They did another bolt, and screamed out as they went that they would find their way home when they felt like it, without any help from a fussy usher! After that, of course, I simply ignored them. Is there anything else I could have done?"

"You have done everything that I should have expected of you, Victor."

"Thanks, old man."

"Now, would you mind going through into the House, and taking charge? Confine the boys to their studies or the Prep Room, and as the absentees come back, assemble them in the Reading Room. If they aren't in at the end of half an hour, notify me, and I'll go out and round them up myself."

"Righto!" said Mr. Beamish, rising and moving to the door. "I'd like to put that girl across my knee," he grumbled. "I'd fussy-usher her!" The baize door banged, and Mr. Donkin was left alone, with his reflections.

Well, it had happened. The safety-valve had been sat upon, and the inevitable had followed. This might prove a salutary lesson to Somebody. No, that was the narrow, spiteful view: the thing was serious. It was known in the town that the Fair and towpath had been put out of bounds to the School; yet the School had been there—and in large numbers, by all accounts. That would hurt the credit of the School as a whole. What was to be done? Presumably there would be a Masters' Meeting to-morrow, to settle things. What line would Ovington take about it all—cry *peccavi!* or harden his heart, like Pharaoh? The latter, one fancied. It was all very

perplexing.

But on one point Mr. Donkin was resolute. No one must be sacked over this. There must be pains and penalties, of course, but no scapegoats. If any one was fundamentally to blame for the whole sorry business, it was the Head himself. He had tried the boys past endurance, and that after being duly and emphatically warned. If Ovington endeavoured to shirk or shift responsibility now, he, Donkin, would carry the case to the Court of Appeal—to the Governing Body; and that would probably mean the end of Ovington as Headmaster.

That was just the devil of it. Ovington was a big man, and big men were all too rare in any profession. The School needed him. If only he could be taught *sense*!

Well, meanwhile the half-hour was up, and those young ruffians had not returned. He must go and look for them. To-morrow, presumably, since the offence had not been committed by the members of any single House, they would be tried, sentenced, and executed by the central authority as members of the School. But tonight, by golly, they were members of the Red House, and their Housemaster was going to remind them of that fact in immortal and immemorial prose.

The door opened, and Ellen appeared.

“If you please, sir, the Headmaster to see you.”

Mr. Ovington stalked in. He was wearing cap and gown.

“Official visitation,” noted Mr. Donkin, with a sigh.

SINGLE COMBAT

“GOOD evening, Donkin.”

“Good evening, Mr. Ovington.” Donkin motioned his visitor to a chair.

“I will come to the point at once,” said Mr. Ovington. “I am here—— What is that?”—as a bell jangled down a distant corridor.

“It marks the end of preparation. I am free until House prayers.”

“Thank you. I am here because a state of emergency has arisen.”

“So I have just learned. Some of the boys have broken bounds, and have gone _____”

“Some of your boys, Donkin.”

“And some from other Houses.”

“No, Donkin—none from other Houses!”

“But—Beamish was here a moment ago, straight from the river; and his information is that——”

“Beamish is a somewhat excitable subject. Or shall we say, a most loyal House tutor?”

Instantly Donkin rose to his feet.

“Was that necessary, Mr. Ovington?”

“Well, let us say that Beamish is an excitable subject. We are agreed on that point, I have no doubt.”

Mr. Donkin, who had had a trying day and evening, suddenly realised that he had been within an ace of losing his temper badly. With a great effort he controlled himself. If Ovington’s allegation was true, he was in for a difficult quarter of an hour. He must keep his head at all costs. So he nodded, and sat down again.

“We are most certainly agreed on that point,” he said.

“I have telephoned all the other Housemasters,” continued Mr. Ovington, “and they report complete normality within their respective domains.”

“In that case, of course, I have been misinformed. I’m sorry. I’m sorrier still that twenty-three of my boys should have broken bounds. I am waiting for them now, and when they come in I shall deal with them faithfully. That covers the situation, I think. It was good of you to take the trouble——”

He glanced towards the door. But the Headmaster did not move.

“Donkin,” he said, “you don’t appear to understand. I told you just now that a state of emergency had arisen. I repeat that statement.”

“And I repeat that I am about to take steps to deal with it.”

“No, Donkin; that is just what you cannot do. It is no longer your business. This is, so to speak, a case for the High Court.”

“Meaning yourself?”

“Precisely. I am the very last man, Donkin, to interfere with my colleagues—least of all with such an experienced and devoted servant of the School as yourself——”

“Thank you.”

“But this is not a House matter: it is a School matter. I shall deal with these offenders myself.”

“Will you?” Mr. Donkin began to breathe quietly and rhythmically through his nose.

“Yes. It will probably mean expulsion for one or two of the ringleaders——”

“Will it?”

“Yes. One can make certain allowances, of course, for youthful exuberance; but there are limits. I therefore——”

Mr. Donkin broke in.

“Mr. Ovington,” he said, “it may shorten this discussion if I tell you at once that I entirely deny your right to usurp my authority in my own House.”

The Headmaster gave a formal nod, as if noting the point, and proceeded, quite unruffled:

“I am aware that under the constitution of the School a Housemaster’s House is very rightly his castle, in the ordinary way of things. But—exceptional circumstances can, and do, arise.”

“As when?”

“As when a Housemaster deliberately incites his House to defy the authority of the Headmaster!”

So it had come. A State of War, formally declared—at last! Well, on the whole Mr. Donkin felt rather relieved: now he knew exactly where he was.

“That is a grave charge,” he said.

“Yet I make it. And I make further charges. Almost from my first entrance into this School as Headmaster, nearly twelve months ago, you have baulked and thwarted me in every possible way. I accepted the post with certain definite schemes in my mind for the reform and modernisation of the life of the place. You have never concealed your contempt for those schemes, nor your determination to frustrate them in every way possible to you. Do you deny that?”

“Most certainly I do. In fact, I am——” Mr. Donkin broke off.

He had been going to say ‘astounded’; and well he might, when he considered

the inner history of the last few months, and of his own continual efforts to render the Head's schemes of reform and modernisation palatable to a resentful Staff and intelligible to a rebellious School. He reflected for a moment, then leaned forward, and asked:

"Mr. Ovington, may I be brutally frank?"

"Candour is always welcome."

"Then I will tell you exactly what I think of you—and of your schemes."

Ovington stiffened in his chair, defensively. What was this man going to say to him? Was he going to add insult to insubordination? If so——

But he was wrong.

"Since you came here," said Donkin simply, "the work of the School has been remodelled and brought up to date quite admirably. You are a born teacher yourself, and you have taught us to teach. We shall win more open scholarships at the Universities next autumn, and get more candidates into Sandhurst and Woolwich, than ever before; and for that the credit is entirely due to you. You are also an exceptional organiser and a far-sighted administrator; and in addition a brilliant scholar and an eloquent preacher."

Mr. Ovington, who loved praise as a cat loves cream, thawed slightly, despite himself. This old obstructionist was a better judge of character than he had imagined.

"In fact," continued Mr. Donkin, "you possess every one of the attributes which go to make a great Headmaster——"

"You flatter——"

"Except one."

"Indeed? And that is——?"

"Humanity! And I'm afraid that's the only gift that matters at all in a place like this. Consider. You are set in authority over five hundred of the shyest, most observant, most critical, and least articulate creatures that God ever made; and you treat them as if—as if they were occupants of a particularly unsensitive oyster-bed! Believe me, they're alive—and kicking! You have trampled on their most cherished traditions——"

"It is sometimes necessary to trample on tradition."

"Yes, but not with hobnail boots! You have wounded their feelings——"

"Have boys got any feelings, Donkin? I often wonder. Aren't you rather exaggerating their capacity for resentment?"

"*Exaggerating?* Why——!" Donkin stopped short, and surveyed his superior thoughtfully, as if debating some point in his mind. Then he leaned forward again, and said quietly:

“Mr. Ovington, shall I tell you how I and my colleagues have been spending most of our spare time of late? In cleaning up after you!”

He had got home this time. Ovington’s frosty detachment vanished. He sprang to his feet.

“This is intolerable!” he cried.

But Donkin went on:

“In keeping the boys loyal and quiescent! In bolstering your authority! In saving your face! *And* we’ve had our work cut out, I can tell you!”

Ovington sat down again, rather suddenly. He was no longer angry. Donkin was not being gratuitously offensive: he was speaking with deadly sincerity.

“You are certainly frank,” he said, forcing a wry smile.

“I know, and I’m genuinely sorry. But it had to be said: perhaps, if I had had more courage, I should have said it sooner.” Donkin’s face lit up strangely. “It’s the School, you see. Marbledown is my father and mother. You and I both want to do our best for it, according to our lights, don’t we? I must be quite twenty years older than you. I suppose you regard me as a thoroughly tiresome old diehard—and I don’t blame you. But I’m not disloyal, really. You will absolve me from that charge.”

Mr. Donkin paused, and waited. He had made his final effort—risked all—exposed his heart to his adversary. What was his adversary going to do about it?

He was soon informed.

“No, Donkin,” replied Mr. Ovington deliberately, “I don’t think I can do that.”

“Why not?”

“Some time ago you opposed my decision to exclude the School Eight from the Regatta.”

“I did; and I should oppose it again, as you handled the matter. But my opposition was a private and personal matter between our two selves. The School know nothing about it.”

“The School know all about it. They also know that you endeavoured to curry popular favour by trying to obtain leave for them to attend the firework display to-night.”

“Who was your informant?”

“My own head boy. His informant was your head boy. You see, it is common knowledge that you have consistently opposed my intentions and wishes.”

Again this ridiculous accusation! Really, it was all too childish. Mr. Donkin found himself wondering why he had ever taken this pompous ass seriously. But he held himself in.

“My dear sir,” he said patiently, “surely it is possible to disagree with a law and

yet enforce it. Are you really suggesting that I have been inciting my House to mutiny?"

"I have thought things over carefully," replied Mr. Ovington in his most pontifical manner, "and I can arrive at no other conclusion. That being so, it is obvious, in the first place, that the punishment of these particular boys cannot be left in your hands."

Donkin regarded him steadily.

"In other words," he said, "you intend to deal with my House over my head?"

"I do."

Mr. Donkin rose to his feet.

"Then I shall fight you until I drop," he said. "Good night!" He crossed to the door and opened it. But Mr. Ovington did not move.

"Is this wise?" he asked. "Don't you realise what it will all lead to, ultimately? Why not accept the situation with dignity, while you may? I would endeavour to make things easy for you, Donkin."

Mr. Donkin turned from the door, and regarded him curiously.

"In what way, precisely? I don't quite——"

Mr. Ovington had risen from his seat, and now stood towering majestically over his colleague.

"You have served the School long and honourably," he said. "If you were to place your resignation in my hands——"

"Resignation?" Donkin stared up at him in genuine astonishment. "Great heavens, why?"

"You force me to be candid. Because you are obviously quite incapable of controlling your House."

Mr. Donkin chuckled, despite himself.

"Indeed!" he said. "Considering that you have been Headmaster of Marbledown for nearly a year, I think the way I control my House is a marvel!"

"To that," replied Ovington hotly, "I reply by asking why yours is the only House in the School which has disobeyed my orders to-night?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out. Meanwhile you can take it from me, for the last time, that it was entirely without my knowledge or cognizance."

"And for the last time I decline to accept that assurance."

"In that case, Mr. Ovington," said Donkin composedly, "perhaps it would be wiser to terminate this conversation. Let me see you out." He turned to the door again.

At the same moment he was conscious of a confused murmur outside the closed and curtained windows. Mr. Ovington heard it too.

“What is that?” he asked.

“Listen!” said Donkin.

The murmur came nearer—grew louder—swelled into a roaring tumult of trampling feet and uproarious voices. Presently lights danced upon the curtains, from electric torches hilariously brandished. A couple of firecrackers went off just outside the window itself. Then came a burst of cheering, prolonged and deafening, accompanied by the noise of rattles and squeakers. Pandemonium, in fact.

Mr. Ovington turned to Mr. Donkin.

“Your House appear to have returned home,” he said.

THE cheering outside suddenly stopped, and a new voice was heard—the voice of Beamish, uplifted in wrathful authority.

“Stop that infernal noise at once, and come inside, every one of you! Do you hear me?”

There was a moment’s silence. Then the cheers broke out again.

“Beef! Beef! Good old Beef! Hooray—ay—ah—ee—ooh! *Beef!*” Catcalls and detonations as before.

Mr. Ovington turned to Donkin.

“Out of hand!” he remarked, in a tone of what might have been described as resigned satisfaction. “Mass hysteria!”

Now Beamish was heard endeavouring, with gradual success, to shout down this demonstration in his honour.

“Shut *up!*” he roared. “Stop it! Come inside at once! Or else——!”

A single voice replied—the voice of Pop Ogilvie, who it may be remembered had volunteered to take the chair at the meeting behind the Fives Courts that morning.

“Just one more trifling ceremony, sir, please! Go on, Flossie: give them a lead!”

Then the voice of Flossie Nightingale.

“Back up the Chairman, gents! Three cheers for Mr. Donkin! All together! Split your faces! Hip, hip——”

But the cheers were never delivered, for at this moment the window-curtains were abruptly parted, the windows themselves thrown open, and the intended recipient of the tribute appeared upon the top step, sharply silhouetted against the brightness of the study behind him. There was silence, utter and complete. Mr. Ovington, standing unseen by Donkin’s desk, noted grudgingly that there was nothing wrong with his Senior Housemaster’s ability to command respect.

Donkin stood motionless, surveying the scene before him, and evidently weighing his words before he spoke. He was in full control of his audience, so he could afford to take his time.

And then a high clear voice rang out from the darkness—the voice of Chris Faringdon.

“Hallo, Charles darling! Button and I are both here! We’re just coming in.”

“A-a-ah!” said Mr. Ovington to himself softly; and Chris went on:

“Good night, all members: we’ve had a lovely time! But before we separate I think we ought to give three groans for The Egg. Come on, everybody! When I say three! One—two—— Oh, *gracious! Stop!*”

But the first groan had started. The second, however, was never delivered. A majestic vision in cap and gown had moved into the line of sight, and now loomed overwhelmingly from Mr. Donkin’s hearth-rug.

Mr. Donkin took not the slightest notice. He moved down a step, so as to command a complete view of his audience, and said quietly:

“You will all go into the House at once, and give your names to Mr. Beamish. You are not yourselves at the moment, so I shall not deal with this matter until the morning. Meanwhile I forbid you to discuss to-night’s events either among yourselves or with any other members of the House. Is that understood?” There came a subdued and almost automatic murmur of assent. “Then go! Thank you, Mr. Beamish!”

Mr. Donkin turned and re-entered his study, and dropped rather heavily into the swivel chair behind his desk. Outside the window nothing was audible but the shuffling of feet over a flagged pavement, as the chastened revellers filed into the House by their side-door. Mr. Ovington continued to lower impressively upon the hearth-rug.

Presently the side-door banged, and silence fell again—only to be broken by light footsteps and cheerful voices, as Chris and Button entered by the window.

It was evident at once that they were but moderately impressed by the solemnity of the occasion, and blissfully unconscious of the heinousness of their own crimes. Chris had lost her hat, and some of her hair hung down her forehead and over her nose. Button’s deficiencies of apparel were even more pronounced. She had parted with most of her already attenuated skirt, and was clad principally in blue-linen knickers and a canary-coloured sweater. Under her left arm she carried a monstrous effigy, in black velveteen, of that singularly repellent animal Mickey Mouse, and with her right hand she twirled a spring rattle which by this time, fortunately, had lost most of its spring.

“Hallo, Charles! Hallo, Mr. Ovington!” said Chris affably. “We want to tell you right off that this wasn’t the boys’ idea at all. Was it, Button?”

“Rather not,” seconded Button. “You needn’t beat *anybody*, Charles dear.”

“Except us, if you like,” added Chris. “It was our show entirely.” She turned to the hearth-rug. “And they wouldn’t have started on those groans at all if they had known you were here, Mr. Ovington. I mean, would they, poor kids?”

“I am inclined to agree,” replied Mr. Ovington drily.

“All the same,” continued Chris defiantly, “I would have given them just the same—because you’ve been oppressing Charles! We know all about it.” She advanced to the motionless figure in the swivel chair, and laid a protecting hand upon his shoulder. “You’ve been asking for this for a long time, you know,” she said, shaking a reproving and tousled *coiffure* at Mr. Ovington. “Of course the boys were much too sweet to do anything about it; so Rosemary and I decided it was time we stepped in.”

“Me too,” said Button.

“Shut up! You butted in!”

“Did I?”

“Yes!” This sisterly interlude being concluded, Chris took up her tale again, in greater detail. She informed the Headmaster of the origin and history of the B.U.D.C.: of the meeting held behind the Fives Courts that morning; of the eloquent speeches there delivered by herself and Rosemary; of their proposal that silly little rules and regulations should be ignored, and that everybody should go to the fireworks as usual, and have a good time as usual, in accordance with darling Charles’s known wishes upon the subject. Of the initial diffidence and growing enthusiasm of their audience, and of its final unanimous acquiescence in the suggested enterprise.

“So we all went, and we all *had* a good time—and here we are!” she announced triumphantly.

“Look what I won!” added Button, introducing Mickey Mouse to the Headmaster of Marbledown. “I got some coco-nuts too, but I lost them.”

“I commiserate with you,” said Mr. Ovington.

“Well,” concluded Chris, “I think that will be all from us to-night. Everything’s over, and we don’t bear any malice at all. But we just wanted you to know, Mr. Ovington, that in this House we all stick together, whatever happens! Hallo”—as the bell clanged down the distant passage—“is that prayers?” She turned to the silent figure in the swivel chair. “I don’t think we’d better come in to-night, darling, if you don’t mind: we’re not feeling too awfully holy. Or would you like us to?”

Mr. Donkin raised his head, for the first time.

“I think you had better go upstairs,” he said. “But before you do so, you will apologise to the Headmaster.”

“Apologise?”

“Yes.”

“Well, of course, darling, anything you say,” replied Chris amiably. “I apologise, Mr. Ovington! You too, Button! Go on!”

“Rather!” said Button. “I apologise, Mr. Ovington!”

“All the same,” concluded Chris, leading her fellow-penitent to the door, “the B.U.D.C. has had a divine send-off. I mean, hasn’t it? Come on, brat! Good night, everybody!”

The mahogany door closed. Mr. Donkin rose mechanically to his feet and put on his gown, then took up his Prayer Book from its accustomed shelf. Mr. Ovington put on his mortar-board and turned to go.

“Good night, Donkin,” he said.

Mr. Donkin turned, with his hand upon the handle of the baize door, and spoke:

“Mr. Ovington, I think it only remains for me to place my resignation in your hands.”

“I applaud your decision,” replied the Headmaster; and was gone.

UNOFFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

THE end of term was less than a fortnight away, but nobody was thinking about the Summer Holidays at all: too much was going on within the School itself. One sensational occurrence trod on the heels of another. Rumour was rampant, and the gossips were having the time of their lives.

Certain facts, however, were not disputed:—

(1) Nearly half the Red House had broken out on Regatta night and gone to the Fair.

(2) The Moke's Beauty Chorus had gone with them.

(3) Upon returning, the revellers had found both The Moke and The Egg waiting for them.

(4) Next morning The Moke had administered to the delinquents a carefully graded series of tannings, the number of stripes varying from eight apiece for the Flossies and Pops to a lenient three for the Bimbos and Rumfords. A hundred and thirteen of the best—and the old Moke had finished up as fresh as a daisy. A tremendous and memorable performance.

Thereafter fact exhibited a tendency to merge with fiction. It was asserted, for instance:—

(1) That the Beauty Chorus, upon finding The Egg in The Moke's study, had ticked The Egg off for interfering, in tones which had been clearly audible in The Moke's kitchen (the door being open), and the proceedings had terminated in a free fight between The Moke and The Egg, in which The Moke had been completely victorious.

(2) That in consequence of their participation in the evening's proceedings, the Beauty Chorus had been well slipped by the Old Girl, and confined to bed for several days. At any rate they had not been seen about the place much of late.

(3) That (as a not uninteresting side-issue) an intensive campaign was being waged between Beef Beamish and Peter Poop for the possession of the Senior Beaut, and that incredibly enough the Beaut rather favoured Peter Poop. In proof, Beef had commandeered her for the Fair, but she had sneaked home right in the middle of everything, to keep a date with Poop. She was known for a fact to have been in the Red House that evening during Prep, and Peter had been observed sitting on the steps outside The Moke's study windows, obviously waiting for her to come out. Q.E.D.

That, and much more. All of which would have been speedily forgotten in the approaching excitement of the end of term, had it not been for the occurrence of two further sensations of the first magnitude.

The first was furnished by Mr. Donkin himself; the second came from an entirely unexpected quarter.

But let us confine ourselves for the moment to Mr. Donkin, who now proceeded to set the seal of authenticity upon all that was supposed to have happened—all that and more—by publicly announcing his resignation.

It was done in the most casual way one night after House prayers. Mr. Donkin was accustomed to avail himself of these opportunities, when his flock were gathered conveniently together, to issue official notices or discourse informally upon matters of current interest.

On this particular evening, immediately upon rising from his knees at the final Amen, he had begun in his abrupt fashion:

“First of all I’m going to congratulate Purvis major for you.” (Deafening applause. The Shooting Eight, led by Purvis, had that evening returned from Bisley Camp, having only just missed winning the Ashburton Shield, after a tie with Winchester.) “He and his Eight have put up the best Bisley show that Marbledown has achieved yet. Next year you must keep your foresights a trifle steadier at the five-hundred-yard range, and you’ll bring the Shield home with you.” (Cheers.)

“Next, I’m going to improve the occasion. I’m going to say this—and some of you have heard me say it before. I would rather see the School win the Ashburton than the——” Mr. Donkin checked himself just in time: he had been on the point of saying “Town Cup”—“than all the matches against Eaglescliffe, any day. Yes, I’m quite conscious of the orthodox shudder that is going round this room! So I’ll give my reasons—again not entirely unfamiliar to most of you.

“I’m no Jingo, but we live in troublous times, and we’ve a deal of life and property to protect all over the world; and I believe that each one of us owes it to his country to learn at least to shoot straight and submit himself to certain simple forms of voluntary discipline. That is all that need be required of the rank and file—people like you and me. The big stuff we leave to natural-born fire-eaters like Mr. Kent, and Purvis major, and the rest of the Army Class.” (Appreciative laughter. The Moke was in exceptionally good form to-night.)

“Now we arrive at what P. G. Wodehouse would call the nub of the matter. Some of you so-called athletic swells are disposed to sniff at the O.T.C., because anybody can join it, and its distinctions are not individual; and of course the little boys, being howling little snobs and sycophants, copy them. But the O.T.C. is rather

a big thing, with rather a big record. Long before any of you were born there was an occurrence called the Great War. You may have heard of it. It took us as a people entirely by surprise, and there was considerable confusion and fuss. Armies had to be raised, and raised quickly. That was easy; you can procure raw recruits on these occasions by the hundred thousand. The difficulty was, and is, to find people to lead them. Fortunately those leaders were forthcoming, mainly from a practically unknown organisation known as the Officers' Training Corps. They are entirely forgotten now, of course—that is our national habit—and so is the man who founded the O.T.C. itself. His name, by the way, was Haldane. You have never heard of him, but give him a thought occasionally, because he saved England.”

Mr. Donkin paused, and suddenly lowering his head—a mannerism which the smallest fag in the House could, and did, imitate to perfection—glared at his audience over the top of his spectacles, as if rebuking them for inattention. As a matter of fact, one could have heard a pin drop.

“Yes,” he remarked, “I know I’m going on longer than usual. But there are two more things I’ve got to tell you—first of all why I’m talking like this at all, and secondly why I’m doing it now.

“The O.T.C.—not merely our own Contingent, but the O.T.C. in general—is on the danger list. To employ the only language which you really understand, the language of the Cinema, a lot of Big Bad Wolves are after it. The wolves are actuated by the highest motives, of course; they are idealistic wolves, in fact. They hold that such institutions as the O.T.C. are provocative and demoralising and conducive to Militarism. I don’t quite know what Militarism is, except that in times of national danger we call it Preparedness, and make a considerable commotion over it. The trouble is that if these benevolent gentlemen get their way with our system of national defence, when next the time comes to call Militarism Preparedness there won’t be anything left to defend. So watch out for the B.B.W., and hold fast to your O.T.C. Believe me, it’s worth doing. If you doubt my word, get down your *Lays of Ancient Rome*, and read the bit about Horatius again!

“Well, that’s that. (Yes, I’m nearly finished, Hicks.) But why am I rubbing all this in now? Because I may not have another opportunity. The fact is I’ve had about enough of you people, and I’m going to take a holiday—a permanent one. Next term you’ll have someone else in charge of you. I shall be living in a cottage on the Wye, fishing, and chuckling when I turn over in my bed at seven o’clock in the morning at the thought of certain old friends of mine crawling out of theirs for Early School. Who my successor is going to be is not yet decided, but in due course I hope to be able to tell you, and to ask you to do certain things for him which I shall

have asked him to expect of you. I know I shall not be disappointed: you're a stout lot on the whole.

“There are one or two other topics that I shall probably discuss with you in the next fortnight, but you've had enough for the present. You can go. I want to see Bates, then Purvis major, then Faringdon, in my study. Oh, by the way, any attempt to present me with any kind of testimonial will result in stern measures. And when I say stern measures, I am indulging in a *paranomasia*, or play on words! Good night.”

Mr. Donkin walked to the door, which was promptly opened, according to custom, by his head boy, and shook hands with his House as they filed past him, beginning with the junior fag and ending with Travers himself. The ceremony, for once, was conducted in complete silence, on both sides.

II

The Faringdon family were not at House prayers upon the historic occasion just described, being absent on their weekly visit to the town cinema. That Mr. Donkin should have selected this particular evening to spring his little thunderbolt on the House may have been more than a mere coincidence.

For thunderbolt it certainly was. For the rest of the evening the House were too completely taken aback even to talk about it, except to utter isolated, awe-struck, half-whispered expletives; but in the morning the news was all over the School, and everybody—Beaks, Beaks' Belongings, and Boys, was asking Why?

Among the Staff itself the general tendency was to seek inside information from Frank Hastings, as Mr. Donkin's oldest and closest friend. But the applicants met with what is technically known as a dusty answer.

“Yes; I am aware that Donkin has tendered his resignation, and that the Headmaster has accepted it; but why ask *me* why? Donkin has not confided in me, and I have no reason to believe that he will. In any case I am not an expert in the art of extracting information from an oyster, or of reasoning with a mule. Approach Donkin yourself, if you want to, but do not expect me to attend either the inquest or the funeral.”

The ladies of Marbledown mostly concentrated upon Miss Janet Ovington, The Spoon, and strove by tactful pumping to get from her what American journalists call the low-down on the situation. But they pumped in vain, for The Spoon knew no more than they did. She had been tersely informed by her brother, in response to a casually thrown-out query, that Donkin was leaving at the end of term, and would

probably publish his reasons for doing so if and when he considered it desirable.

But now certain things began to be remembered. The Meeting behind the Fives Courts, and the fact that ladies had been present; the attempted arrest of Bimbo at the Fair by Mr. Beamish, and the subsequent *fracas* between Mr. Beamish and two of Bimbo's sisters. Finally, the corybantic homecoming of the Red House roysterers, still in compromising company, at the precise moment when the Head was paying an evening call on Mr. Donkin. All these threw an immediate and revealing light upon the situation, and made it tolerably clear to the adult intelligence of Marbledown that Mr. Donkin's foes upon this fatal occasion—unwitting, well-meaning, but none the less deadly foes—had been those of his own household, or rather of his very fireside.

But the rank and file, unaccustomed to marshalling facts or sifting evidence, and averse to prosy realities, arrived at a different conclusion; or rather several different conclusions, according to their length of years and habit of mind. These can be roughly tabulated as follows:—

(a) *The Orthodox*. The Moke was retiring of his own free will and accord. After all, he must be fifty or sixty or seventy by this time, and could not expect to last much longer in any case.

(b) *The Romantic*. The Moke had fallen madly in love with the Old Girl, and intended to marry her. Obviously the pair of them could not go canoodling round the place under the noses of the School; so they were clearing out altogether, to start a girls' school in Merthyr Tydfil. (Flossie's solution.)

(c) *The Sophisticated*. One of the Beauty Chorus had blotted her copybook.

(d) *The Idealistic*. The Moke had rooted The Egg in the tail on Regatta Day, and was retiring because he had nothing left to live for.

To Barbara Fane and her nieces Mr. Donkin broke the news upon the same evening as to the boys, while the quartet partook of a light repast after their return from the cinema.

He explained, in the same off-hand way, that he had been considering the question of retirement for some time. He was heading for superannuation anyhow, and he was one of those unusual persons who prefer to leave decorously a few minutes before closing-time than to be ejected by the chucker-out.

Moreover he had just heard that a little house in Herefordshire, upon which he had long had his eye, had come unexpectedly into the market. He had made a bid

for it that very day, and hoped by the end of term to be its owner. Would the ladies therefore kindly prepare themselves for transplantation, at no distant date, to the banks of the Wye—a picturesque river, full of salmon and free from boys? The very thought of it all, he announced in conclusion, had entirely rejuvenated him. He felt a different man. (This latter assertion, as it happened, was true).

His audience received the news with less comment than he had feared. Aunt Barbara remarked that she was glad to hear that he had at last given up the pretence—absurd in any reasonable being—that he enjoyed being a schoolmaster. Rosemary and Chris said they were sure that Herefordshire would prove to be a perfectly divine place, and that it would be lovely to have their dear Charles to themselves all day long. Button said nothing, but at once decided to call an emergency meeting of the S.T.C.C., to discuss the surest means of frustrating this sudden and calamitous threat to an ideal existence. Wye salmon made no appeal to Button: she was essentially a fisher of men.

But that night, in the sizeable attic, the mercurial Chris crept into her sister's bed, as she had been accustomed to do upon occasions of stress or crisis ever since she was a little girl, and sobbed remorsefully, as she lay with Rosemary's arms about her:

“We're why he's going, darling! And he's feeling *awful* about it!”

And Rosemary could not gainsay her.

BERSERK

PHILIP DE POURVILLE walked into the Laboratory Block to undergo his weekly Gehenna, Practical Chemistry with the Senior Moderns.

Well, it was for the last time this term. Next week would be examinations, and the week after that—what?

Some time ago he had planned a walking tour in the Austrian Tyrol—with a little geology in the Arlberg Pass and a little opera at Salzburg thrown in. As a rule these solitary excursions of his had been entirely sufficient for Philip's holiday needs. He spoke good German—he had spent a year at Heidelberg University after taking his Cambridge degree—and was moreover inured to hard and prolonged exercise. For all his slight physique and short sight he was a wiry and resilient young man, and he always kept himself rigorously fit.

He enjoyed solitude—a not altogether surprising trait in one whose working life is spent in the company of exuberant and disorderly youth. Above all, he had never felt lonely in the presence of Nature. Or rather, not until now. Within the last few weeks Fate had brought him face to face with the Perfect Companion, and he knew that he could never find solitude enjoyable again. Without her Paradise itself would be a desert.

Only yesterday she had come to his rooms for tea, upon her own frank and friendly invitation as usual, and had made the tea herself, while the pair of them discussed the future of the School as affected by Charles Donkin's resignation—and more especially the future of Rosemary's beloved Charles himself.

"Of course he pretends to be fearfully thrilled at the idea of never doing any work again," she said, "but he's hating it all the time, really. Philip," she asked suddenly, "what do the other masters think—I mean, about his making up his mind to leave so unexpectedly?"

"The general idea seems to be that Donkin and the Head have reached a point where one of them has either to give way or go, if the School is not to be split into two camps. The School comes first with Donkin all the time, and if he thinks he can benefit the School by going—well, he'll go, that's all."

"Why can't the Head go instead?"

"Why should he? He enjoys his job—and the only way he can be got rid of is by being dismissed by the Governing Body. They'd hardly do that. In the first place he hasn't done anything, and in the second the sudden resignation of its Headmaster

would be injurious to any school. So Donkin's going, instead."

Rosemary shook her head dolefully.

"Of course everybody has known for a long time," she said, "about Charles and The Egg being at loggerheads; but oh, Philip, something tells me that all this would never have happened if *we* hadn't come here! Poor Chris is certain of it, and she's feeling *horribly* guilty about it all—although it's really my fault as much as hers. I helped to found the B.U.D.C., and I went to the meeting behind the Fives Courts!" She sighed. "Well, there it is. Presently you'll be quite, quite rid of us, and at peace again. But you'll promise to miss us, Philip, won't you? We couldn't bear not to be missed a little."

"I shall miss you at every hour and moment of the day," said Philip de Pourville simply.

Rosemary looked up and smiled at him.

"That's sweet of you. I shall miss you too; and when I say you, I mean you, and not just everybody here."

Now or never! Philip de Pourville took a deep breath, braced himself, and prepared to embark upon a set speech in which he had been word perfect for wellnigh six weeks.

But he was a fraction of a second too late. Rosemary was speaking again.

"You've no idea how I've loved being shown the laboratories, and seeing you do experiments, and hearing about the book you're writing. I've become quite a little scientist, thanks to you. How is the book getting on, by the way?"

It is doubtful if Rosemary really desired an answer to this question. Indeed, it is possible that she would not have been mortally offended if Philip had ignored it altogether and proceeded with his original determination. But his courage failed him at the critical point. He hedged: he would answer the question first, he told himself, and then work round again to——

But of course he never succeeded in working round again to anything. One never does. *Post est occasio calva*.

Still, he reflected, as he conducted Rosemary downstairs five minutes later, she had said she was going to miss him—*him*, above all the rest! His heart swelled.

They shook hands at the street door, and Philip watched the Peugeot *bébé* out of sight. That perhaps was why he did not observe a Marbledown boy, wearing the orange cap of Mr. Shipway's House, emerge from the School dentist's establishment on the other side of the Market Square.

The boy was one Oily Boyd, whose acquaintance we have already briefly made. He was a member of the Senior Moderns, and was rated as Number Three in the

Hicks-Pollard-Boyd triumvirate.

II

“Now you understand what I want you to do,” said Philip, somewhat optimistically, to his lounging, whispering, inattentive audience. “Go to your places in the laboratory, and get to work. You will find your apparatus all laid out.”

The Senior Moderns rose noisily from their seats, and proceeded without undue haste into the chemical laboratory, where they disposed themselves at their accustomed benches.

Only Flossie Nightingale was not present. He had been taken off regular work a week ago, and was now receiving intensive special tuition in the French language. He had accounted to his friends for this sudden change of occupation by explaining that he had recently been appointed British Ambassador to Paris, and expected to take up his appointment some time towards the end of August.

The truth was more prosaic. His Housemaster had sent for him, and announced:

“Sir Berkeley Nightingale, by dint of what appears to be some political wire-pulling of the shadiest description, has succeeded in getting you a nomination for the Diplomatic Service. I cannot imagine a less appropriate choice, but that, fortunately, is not my business. It means, however, that you will leave at the end of term, instead of staying on for another year, and will go to the Sorbonne. Do you know what that is?”

“It sounds to me like some kind of soft drink, sir.”

“It is a University, imbecile—the University of Paris! As the French are an obstinate and insular race, who persist in speaking their own language in their own country, I have arranged for you to spend the rest of your time here grounding yourself in the elements of French conversation. How does the prospect appeal to you?”

“Considerably, sir.”

“Don’t you want to stay on here?”

“Not since you have resigned, sir. If I may say so, the place will not be the same without you, so to speak.”

Mr. Donkin grunted.

“You appear to be slightly better fitted for a diplomatic career than I thought,” he said. “But you’ll have to work, you know, from now on; and the first lesson you will have to assimilate is that life is a staircase and not an escalator. All right. Out!”

To return to the laboratory. The inhabitants of Bolshie Corner were in a more

than usually jocular mood, for Mug Pollard, the humorist, had just had a happy inspiration (born of a recent experience of Oily Boyd's) which Goat Hicks was even now putting into practical shape.

When de Pourville arrived upon his round, Hicks had just finished chalking certain mysterious and apparently cabalistic signs upon the back of a large notebook. Upon Mr. de Pourville's approach he thrust the book aside, and resumed an affable converse with his two henchmen.

"Get to your places, please," said Philip. "I want you to work out this experiment separately."

Needless to say, Mr. Hicks took not the slightest notice, but enquired, with easy familiarity:

"I say, as man to man, what's the inside dope about The Moke and The Egg?"

You may judge of Goat Hicks' astonishment when Philip de Pourville immediately replied:

"Hicks, I'm going to take you into my confidence, and tell you that I'm getting just a little tired of you and your boorish manners. I don't object to a clown or two in my classes—they lighten the dullness of the proceedings nicely—but a clown must be funny: and you make me weep!"

So far, so good. His throat was dry and he felt slightly weak at the knees, but he had delivered his opening lines successfully. Now to press on, and justify Rosemary's faith in him.

"And," he continued, "if ever you refer to a master in that familiar and offensive way again, I shall take you straight to the master in question and tell him what you called him, and ask him to deal with you himself."

Goat Hicks and his two confederates exchanged incredulous stares. What was the matter with Poop? Was he tight?

"Oh, will you?" retorted Hicks, not very brilliantly.

"I will. And I rather fancy you will find some of those interviews a little painful."

"Oh, will I?"

"Yes. Meanwhile you will apologise to me for speaking of Mr. Donkin in this way."

"Of whom?" asked Hicks, seeing his opening.

"Mr. Donkin."

"Oh, is *he* called The Moke? We didn't know." The Goat turned to his fellows with a smile of innocent wonder. "I say, Mr. Donkin is called The Moke too. Isn't that comic?"

"I am waiting for you to apologise, Hicks."

“But why should I apologise? I was talking about a different Moke altogether—a fellow in the School. Wasn’t I, you chaps?”

Messrs. Pollard and Boyd promptly concurred, and de Pourville faltered. He had rehearsed this scene as far ahead as he could see it; now he must improvise. This wretched and unexpected quibble about another Moke—what of that? Should he answer it by telling Hicks that he was a liar as well as a cad, and press his demand for an apology; or—had he accomplished enough for a first attempt?

“Wait for me at the end of the hour,” he said. “And get on with your work, all of you!”—to the deeply interested gallery which had gathered round. “You as well, Hicks!”

He turned on his heel, and started miserably upon his tour of inspection, with his heart at zero again. He had made a complete mess of everything. The demeanour of the boys along the benches told him that: they were as idle and talkative as ever. Had he but known it, more than a few of them were feeling profoundly disappointed as well. Goat Hicks was anything but a popular character. For a moment it had looked as if Peter Poop was going to stand up to him and put it across him at last. But Poop had run away at the critical moment. Poor, knock-kneed blighter!

In due course Philip found himself back at Bolshie Corner. Here, apparently, all had been forgotten and forgiven. There was even some small appearance of a slight attempt to do a little work. Oily Boyd looked up briskly from a sheet of paper covered with chemical symbols and formulæ.

“I can’t get the hang of this business at all, sir,” he said deferentially. “I poured the caustic soda into the solution of copper sulphate as you told us, and I’ve got a sort of black mess——”

“A precipitate. What is it?”

“That’s what I can’t find out, sir.”

“Try to work it out on paper. Make a chemical equation of it. I’ll write down the first half: you ought to be able to do the second half yourself.”

Boyd winked at Goat Hicks, who moved up silently with a large note-book in his hand. Everything was going according to plan.

Philip de Pourville bent down over the bench and scribbled the first half of the equation. At the same moment he was conscious of a slight shock between the shoulder-blades, as if something flat had hit him. He stood up sharply, and the something fell to the floor. It was a large note-book—the book with the cabalistic signs chalked on it.

Hicks was full of apologies.

“I’m most awfully sorry, sir,” he said. “I was leaning over you to read the

equation, when that clumsy fool Pollard knocked my note-book out of my hand, right on to your back. I hope it didn't——”

But Philip did not answer. He was looking down at the book. Certain dim memories of his youth were coming back to him—of a simple and primitive pastime of his earliest schooldays. The actual word chalked upon the book was beyond the focus of his spectacles. He leaned down and picked it up, amid a slightly uncomfortable silence. Upon the back was written, in bold, reversed capitals:

YЯAMƎS0Я

Without a word Philip turned upon his heel, and hurrying the whole length of the laboratory, disappeared into a small room at the far end, usually called the office, where he kept his text-books and one or two specially delicate pieces of apparatus.

Once inside, he closed the door, and taking off his jacket, examined the back. The word ROSEMARY was roughly but legibly chalked thereon.

III

The office contained a work-table and a chair for Philip himself, another table which accommodated a microscope and a chemical balance in a glass case, and various cupboards. Philip methodically removed the microscope and balance to a place of safety, pushed the table into a corner, and drew his own table into the middle of the room. Then he went to one of the cupboards and took out a cane. It was a new cane, and he had bought it three weeks before, upon the occasion of his readjusting certain long-held views upon the education of boys. He laid the cane upon the table, threw open the door, and re-entered the laboratory. He was still in his shirt-sleeves.

The excited babble which had followed his disappearance died instantly, as de Pourville walked back, with marked deliberation now, between the long, stained working-benches, to the top end of the room. He was deathly pale, and his teeth were seen to be chattering slightly.

Presently he arrived at Bolshie Corner, where Goat Hicks, with an air of slightly uneasy assurance, was half-sitting on a bench, with his hands in his pockets.

Philip came to a stand opposite him, perhaps two feet away.

“You oaf! You bumpkin! You filthy scum!” he said quietly. “Stand up!”

Goat Hicks found himself standing up, with his hands out of his pockets. Philip pointed to the door of the office.

“Now go in there,” he said. He still spoke quietly, but there was a steely intensity

about what he said which sent a slight quiver up the spines of the more impressionable members of his deeply interested audience.

But Hicks had lorded it over Peter Poop too long and successfully to be capable of realising that this was not Peter Poop at all, but an entirely different person.

“What for?” he asked insolently.

“Because,” replied Philip calmly, “I am going to thrash you until you howl for mercy.”

“*Are* you? How do you think you’re going to——?”

“I am not prepared to argue the point. Come!”

“Oh, don’t be a damned fool!” said Hicks impatiently.

Next moment, to his extreme surprise, he found himself lying flat on the floor. Golly, what a wallop—and from a fellow a good stone lighter than himself! He picked himself up slowly, collecting his disordered wits, and caressing a half-closed eye. And in those brief, whirling moments, realisation was born within him. He was going to be severely hurt in a moment. He began to perspire icily, for he was an arrant coward.

“I say,” he announced plaintively, “you can’t do that, you know!”

“Don’t talk nonsense. I have just shown you that I can do it; and I am prepared to do it again unless you obey my orders.” Again Philip pointed. “In there, at once!”

“But look here, it was only a joke. I’ll apologise——”

Next moment a hand of iron took him by the collar and propelled him firmly down the laboratory, past a double row of goggling scientists, in the direction of Mr. de Pourville’s office.

The door closed. Presently there issued from within a muffled, scuffling noise, as of furniture being pushed about, and the voice of one engaged in earnest protest. Then upon straining and incredulous ears fell a rhythmic sound, as of a giant beating carpets. There followed almost immediately another sound of an entirely different kind—that of a raucous human voice, uplifted in continuous and agonised appeal.

It was Goat Hicks, howling for mercy, as Peter Poop had promised.

MENTIONED IN DESPATCHES

THE Peter Poop-Goat Hicks incident was the last sensation of major importance which Marbledown as a whole was destined to enjoy for the rest of an eventful term. And about time, too, as Flossie aptly observed at a meeting of the B.U.D.C., or rather of its Executive Committee, a few days later.

The meeting was held quite openly in a corner of the School cricket-ground during the final House-match between Red House and Green. (Clandestine assemblies at the back of the Fives Courts were now out of order, owing to certain recent and self-imposed vows of propriety and discretion recently undertaken by the two senior members of the Girls' Friendly Society.) The members present consisted of Flossie, Pop, Old Crump, Rosemary and Chris. Button was absent, with Bimbo, upon the farewell outing and field-day of the Secret Tree-Climbing Club.

The main item on the agenda was—or would have been if there had been any agenda—the winding-up of the affairs of the B.U.D.C. Obviously, as Mr. Donkin himself was leaving Marbledown, with all the most prominent of his admirers, nothing now remained but to pronounce a benediction and close down for good. But there were certain other matters to discuss, under the elastic heading of Other Necessary Business. Chris got to work at once.

"Tell us *exactly* what happened, Pop dear," she urged. "We've only heard Bimbo's version, and he only got it from Stinker Green, who *must* have made it up; and poor Flossie wasn't there, so you're our only hope."

"I was there," remarked a respectful voice.

"So you were, Crump dear. I was forgetting. Well, we'll let Pop tell the story, and you can corroborate—keep him right on the main points—can't you? Now then, Poppie!"

Pop turned to Rosemary.

"It all started," he said, "with Oily Boyd seeing you drive away from Peter Poop's diggings the other afternoon."

"Yes," replied Rosemary calmly; "I'd invited myself to tea."

"Oily of course rushed off to tell his gang about it, as a tremendous joke."

"One should add," interpolated Flossie, "that the Oily one's sense of fun leans to the bucolic."

"Anyhow," continued Pop, warming to his tale, "Goat Hicks, who has been inclined to run past himself of late, thought of a rather mouldy old gag——"

“Much in vogue,” said Flossie again, “in our preparatory schools during the late Victorian Era. You chalked something like ‘Kick Me!’ backwards on the cover of a book, and applied the same sharply to the shoulder-blades of the old chum, or crony.”

“That’s right,” said Pop. “Anyhow, Goat chalked Rosemary’s name on the cover of a big note-book and slapped it right on to the back of Peter Poop’s jacket. Poop spotted what he was up to; and then—oh, ye *gods!*”

In a terse and striking passage Pop described the scene of Homeric justice which had followed the insult.

“Peter must have nearly murdered him,” he concluded. “Of course, from the roars and yells which came trickling through the door we had gathered that a good time was being had by some one, and we found the cane in splinters afterwards; but it wasn’t until Peter brought Goat’s body out of the place of execution that we realised what a workmanlike job had been achieved. Goat was blubbering like a baby, and reeling all over the place. Peter was as white as a sheet himself, and shaking like an aspic, or whatever it is that shakes. After that he told Goat to get out of his sight—which Goat did. He simply *fell* out of the Lab, and downstairs. And then Peter gave us what you might call an encore verse. He made for the spot at the top end of the Lab where Oily and Mug were standing. Mug and Oily saw that they were for it, and turned a sort of emerald green; and I don’t blame them. I mean _____”

“I can’t bear any more,” said Chris. “Tell us what *happened!*”

“He went straight up to them, and said, as quietly as ever—that was the creepy part of it: ‘Down on your knees, you swine——!’”

“‘Hogs,’” amended the deferential Crump.

“Sorry—hogs! Anyhow, down they plumped, still emerald, and evidently expecting to have their heads bashed together, and glad to get off with that. But Peter slipped them a surprise item. He threw his jacket at them—he was carrying it on his arm—and a couple of clean dusters, and said: ‘Rub that out!’ And they rubbed it out. It would have made a cat laugh to see those two outsiders, with Peter Poop’s jacket spread on the floor in front of them, scrubbing away like a pair of old charwomen! Then the bell rang for the end of the hour, and Peter told us to scam—which we did, at the double double. That’s all, I think.”

“And I had to miss it!” observed Flossie gloomily. “But what was Peter Poop’s demeanour next morning, Pop? Was the fit still on him, or had he punctured by that time?”

“That was the rummiest business of all. It was the Physics hour. You could have

heard a fly sneeze as Poop came into the lecture-room. Everybody was prepared to dodge under a desk at his first war-whoop. I tell you, he had put the wind up the whole——”

“Yes; but get *on*, darling!” said Chris.

“Sorry! He told Goat to stand up—and then apologised to him before the whole Set for sloshing him in the eye! He was quite calm and matey about it.”

“‘I lost my temper,’ he said, ‘and I did two things. I knocked you down, which I had no right to do, and I caned you—which I had a perfect right to do, and would do again. But I caned you without allowing my temper to cool, and without obtaining formal leave from your Housemaster. The latter omission has now been rectified; so you have the satisfaction, Hicks, of knowing that what I did to you was done with the cordial though retrospective approval of Mr. Donkin.’

“We yelled at that one. I think it was the first time in all Peter Poop’s life that anyone had laughed with him and not at him. He went all over pinkish, he was so pleased. Then he told Goat to sit down, and resumed the recitation, still pink:

“‘Look here, you fellows,’ he said, ‘you’re a decent lot on the whole, and now we understand one another. Let’s forget this! Let’s make up our minds not to talk about it any more, either among ourselves or to outsiders. I’m asking you a favour. We don’t want to embarrass *anybody*, do we?’ Like that! And that concludes my entertainment, fellow-members!” said Pop.

The fellow-members sat silent. Flossie Nightingale directed a covert glance at Rosemary, the *fons et origo* of the whole strange episode. Throughout Pop’s recital she had been sitting a little apart, wrapt, apparently, in the contemplation of an extremely cautious performance by the Green House opening pair of batsmen. She had even applauded them once or twice, hated foemen though they were. Her eyes were unusually bright, and like Peter Poop, she had gone all over pinkish.

Flossie cleared his throat.

“We appear to have strayed from the original object of the meeting,” he said—“the formalities attendant upon the untimely decease of the B.U.D.C. Before life is officially pronounced extinct, I believe our little sister Christian has a motion to propose, of a financial nature. I call upon the honourable and eloquent member to address us.”

Public attention being thus diverted to Chris, her sister’s studied interest in the Green House batsmen visibly relaxed. Flossie Nightingale was making definite progress in the diplomatic art.

Philip's appeal to the Senior Moderns must have met with at least a partial response, for the full story never reached the ears of Authority, though certain incredible and therefore negligible rumours did so. It is to be presumed that nothing was reported to the Headmaster; or Philip, who as we know was already on the danger list, would most certainly have been brought to book for striking a boy, and would with equal certainty have received what Mr. Donkin was accustomed to call the Order of the Bowler Hat. On the other hand, Mr. Ovington, as will appear later, was much preoccupied with other matters about this time.

The only member of the Staff in full possession of the facts was Mr. Donkin, to whom Philip de Pourville, suffering acutely from reaction, had made full and remorseful confession immediately after the event. And it was Mr. Donkin who had advised Philip to make a direct appeal to the boys' sense of chivalry and good taste in the matter of Rosemary.

"You can afford to do it, old man," he said, as he showed the grateful Philip out of the house. "They'll eat out of your hand now. Like Ridley (or was it Latimer?), you have this day lighted a candle in Marbledown that will not easily be put out."

Mr. Donkin recounted the tale, with one tactful omission, to Barbara Fane and Frank Hastings that night after dinner at the Green House, where he and Barbara were dining, for the last time, with their old friend.

"I once told someone that a miracle would be required to set Philip de Pourville on his legs as a disciplinarian," he said—"and apparently miracles happen."

"Whom did you tell?" asked Barbara.

"Rosemary. We were discussing de Pourville's potentialities as a leader of scientific thought. Rosemary seemed to have been devoting some consideration to the problem."

"Well, she won't have to devote any more after Thursday, thank Heaven!" said Barbara piously. "The child seems to have managed to see a very great deal of that young man. What I should like to know is, how? Have you any idea, Charles?"

"None whatever," replied Mr. Donkin solemnly and untruthfully.

"Thursday—yes," said Hastings, to whom the mention of the day had brought a new train of thought. "Are you moving out right away, Charles?"

"Not for a few days. Barbara and her flock will leave on Thursday morning, though. They are going to spend August at Dinard, with Aubrey."

"So I hear. And during that period you will be digging yourself in on the banks of the Wye?"

"Yes. I ought to be ready for invasion by September. Talking of invasions, I suppose you are going off on your usual dismal Schoolmasters' Cruise to the Isles of

Greece, Frank?"

"He is," replied Barbara, and Mr. Hastings sighed.

"Why the dissatisfaction?" asked Mr. Donkin. "I thought you enjoyed these academic orgies."

Hastings shook his head despondently.

"Cruising is not what it was," he said. "In the old days there was elbow-room and no hustle, and plenty of deck-chairs, and the certainty of eupeptic contemplation of the horizon after lunch. But the Moderns have found us out. I have a horrid suspicion that our ship next week will be filled with young women clad in nothing but a pair of abbreviated shorts and a pocket-handkerchief, the latter diverted from its natural use. They may even invite me to join a nudist camp on the top deck."

"Well, don't," said Barbara. "You're getting to the foolish age as it is. Come along, Charles; it's after eleven, and you're in Early School."

III

When Barbara and Mr. Donkin found themselves outside, a fine rain was beginning to fall.

"We'll cut across through the Blue House garden," said Mr. Donkin. "It'll save us three minutes at least."

They passed through a gap in Frank Hastings' hedge, and presently found themselves skirting Mr. Ovington's lawn, just below his study windows. A waiting motor-car, with headlights ablaze, stood upon the terrace, outside the front door.

"The Head is entertaining a Rolls Royce to-night," observed Mr. Donkin.

"By the way," asked Barbara, "has he appointed your successor yet?"

"At the Red House? Not that I'm aware of. I fancy he's in a bit of a difficulty, because none of the eligibles are particularly eligible. All a bit too junior, in fact."

"There is no chance for Mr. Beamish, I hope."

"Your hope is likely to be realised. Beamish is a long way from promotion yet."

"I never did like that young man," remarked Aunt Barbara with satisfaction. "There is Mr. Ovington's guest leaving now."

Mr. Donkin glanced up curiously, as the front door of the Blue House swung open, and a tall man in a dinner-jacket was revealed in the act of accepting his hat from Mr. Ovington's butler.

"That's odd," he said.

"Why? Who is it?"

"Sir Berkeley Nightingale."

STRIKING CAMP

IT was Tuesday evening, and the School year would end on Thursday morning.

The Red House was in a state of pleasant upheaval. Upstairs the efficient Miss Wimble and her myrmidons were packing fifty-four trunks, sustained by the knowledge that in two days' time there would not even be a bed to make. Downstairs studies were being dismantled, fourteen of them for the last time by their present occupants. Mr. Beamish was taking Preparation—a work of supererogation when there is practically nothing left to prepare for, except the General Knowledge Paper to-morrow.

Mr. Donkin was writing end-of-term reports. His study was partly dismantled too, and a large packing-case half full of books stood in one corner.

On the stroke of eight forty-five the familiar bell went jangling down the study passage, and Preparation was over. Five minutes later a silent and slightly apprehensive party, consisting of Messrs. F. Nightingale, P. Ogilvie, O. Crump, and B. Faringdon assembled in the Reading Room, outside the door leading into Mr. Donkin's study, with their eyes on the Reading Room clock.

"Another five minutes," said Flossie. "Untie that string, Pop, so as to get the paper off smartly."

Meanwhile a smaller but better-looking party, consisting of the Misses C. and B. Faringdon, were standing outside the other door of Mr. Donkin's study—the mahogany door opening into the hall of his own house.

"Where's Rosemary?" whispered Chris.

"In the garden, with Peter Poop. She snuck out by the side-door after dinner. They're sitting on that seat by the tennis lawn, and they haven't spoken a *word* to each other for ten minutes!"

"How do you know?"

"I was there, my child. Well, we can count our Rosemary out of this."

"It's a blow," said Chris. "I was reckoning on her to ensure a kindly reception from Charles. She's teacher's pet all the time."

"Let's think of something that'll break the ice. I know: you put on these things: he's left them in the hall for once. I'll—Ellen darling!"

"Yes, miss?" enquired that damsel, emerging from the dining-room.

"Bend down for a moment, please. I want to whisper something in your ear."

The accommodating Ellen complied.

“Thank you,” said Button.

Exactly five seconds later the mahogany door was thrown open from without, and Button marched into Mr. Donkin’s study, wearing Ellen’s cap, slightly over her nose.

“If you please, sir,” she announced, “the Headmaster to see you!”

She stood back, and Chris strode in, wearing Mr. Donkin’s cap and gown.

“Good evening, Donkin!” she said in a deep bass voice.

Mr. Donkin rose despairingly to his feet, pen in hand. At the same moment the rightful owner of the cap dashed in, agitatedly plucked her property from Button’s head, and dashed out again, banging the door behind her.

Mr. Donkin sat down again, and Chris, favouring him with a seraphic smile, divested herself of the cap and gown.

“We’re just being silly, darling, to cheer ourselves up,” she explained.

“I was nearly blubbing,” said Button, untruthfully.

“The boys really are terribly sorry you’re leaving,” continued Chris. “I mean, aren’t they, Button?”

“Rather,” said Button, depositing herself on Mr. Donkin’s knee and extracting his watch from his waistcoat pocket. “It’s five minutes to nine, Chris. Shall I?”

“Right!”

Button rose, and opened the green-baize door.

“You can come in now,” she said; and the four young gentlemen already enumerated filed solemnly into view, headed by Flossie Nightingale. Chris wheeled them neatly into a self-conscious row facing Mr. Donkin’s desk, and announced:

“This is a deputation.”

“It’s the B.U.D.C. really,” said Button.

“Its last meeting,” added Chris. “We’ve come to salute you, like dying gladiators, you know. We’re all here, except Rosemary; and she would have been, only — You can start now, Flossie.”

Master Nightingale took one wooden step forward, and cleared his throat.

“Sir,” he said, in a voice which he entirely failed to recognise as his own—it seemed to be about two octaves higher than usual—“as the poet Virgil has so aptly observed, times change, and we too change with them. In other words, sir, we are here to-day and gone to-morrow.”

This highly original exordium had been delivered to a picture on the wall some three feet above Mr. Donkin’s head. Flossie now lowered his gaze, in order to ascertain the effect upon its recipient. Mr. Donkin, who had not spoken since the deputation had entered the room, was mechanically initialling some reports.

“He hasn’t bunged us out *yet*,” remarked Flossie to himself; and continued:

“Sir, sundry and manifold of these changes were——” He stuck dithering between ‘unavoidable’ and ‘inevitable.’

“Unevitable,” murmured Chris.

“Unevitable, sir. But there is a change imminent in the life of this School, and especially of this House, which was not un—— which was nothing of the kind,” extemporised Flossie skilfully.

It is superfluous to add that after this effort he stuck again. He was conscious in his heart that this speech was a terrible affair, and that he could have made a much better job of it if he had been left to himself. But Chris had undertaken to collaborate with him in its composition; and collaboration with Chris upon any subject had struck him as worth while on any terms.

“We are therefore assembled”——hisssed a ventriloquial voice in his ear.

“We are therefore assembled and met together, sir, to offer to you our humble apologies for the misfortune which we have brought upon this House; and to request ——”

“Though with the best?”——Chris reminded him, out of the corner of her mouth.

“Sorry! Though with the best of intentions; and to request your acceptance of a slight token of our deep respect and high esteem.”

Flossie reached a groping hand behind him, and Pop, who had been furtively fumbling with paper and string for some time, thrust something into it.

“I have here, sir,” he announced, rather in the manner of an amateur conjuror uncertain whether this trick is going to come off, “a silver inkstand——”

“We got it at Boots’,” mentioned Button, unnecessarily.

“Sh!”

“Which I will now ask Miss Christian Faringdon——”

“Me,” said Chris, smiling.

——“To place in your hand, sir.”

Flossie handed the inkstand to Chris, and took one highly relieved pace to the rear, for his duty was done; and the deputation waited in respectful and rather nervous silence to see what was going to happen next——in the light of Mr. Donkin’s known views upon the subject of testimonials. They observed that their Housemaster had ceased to initial reports. He was sitting motionless, with his eyes fixed on the desk before him. Chris proffered the inkstand.

“We’ve had our names engraved on it,” she said, “in our own handwriting. Look!”

But Mr. Donkin did not look.

"It's all quite, *quite* voluntary, darling!"

"And we really are awfully sorry, sir," added Flossie, impromptu this time, "to have messed things up for you like this." He turned to his colleagues. "Aren't we?"

There were murmurs of respectful assent. Then silence fell again, and everybody waited. Was The Moke going to blow up at last?

But The Moke did not blow up. He did not even look up. Instead, he extended a hand, and took the inkstand from Chris.

"Thank you!" he said, in a low voice.

"He's accepted it!" cried Chris ecstatically. "Hooray!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Donkin!" bellowed some one. It was Old Crump, suddenly beside himself.

Mr. Donkin looked up in a flash, and the deputation realised that whatever his emotions had been a moment ago, The Moke was himself again. The cheer died stillborn.

At the same moment the door opened, and Barbara Fane entered the room. She had an opened telegram in her hand.

"I'm sorry to intrude," she said, "but it's urgent. I want to speak to you and the children, Charles. Can't you send all these boys away?"

"Certainly," replied Mr. Donkin briskly. "Remove yourselves please, gentlemen. Not you, Bimbo."

II

The French windows opened, and Rosemary entered from the garden.

Rather to her surprise she found the Faringdon clan assembled in full strength. Aunt Barbara was sitting in the armchair, looking unusually preoccupied. Chris and Bimbo were kneeling over the back of the sofa, intently watching Mr. Donkin, who was perusing a rather lengthy telegram. Button had possessed herself of a large stone ink-jar, and was attempting, with disastrous success but without remonstrance from anybody, to fill a silver inkstand at the corner of Mr. Donkin's desk.

"Hallo, everybody!" remarked Rosemary serenely. "It's a perfectly lovely evening."

The only response to this incontrovertible statement took the form of a violent fit of coughing from Button.

"Shut up, Button," said Chris impatiently, "and stop messing about with that inkpot. Come and sit down, Rose darling. We're just going to hear some news."

She turned to Mr. Donkin again.

“What is it, Charles dear?”

Mr. Donkin looked up, thoughtfully.

“This is going to alter a good many people’s plans,” he said.

“I’m sure it is; but could we be *told*, please?”

“Your father,” said Mr. Donkin, “has done what appears to be a surprisingly sensible thing. He has married again.”

The female portion of the Faringdon family, after the wont of their sex, registered immediate and voluble gratification.

“Gosh, what a thrill!” said Chris. “Who is it? No, don’t tell us, Charles darling: let us guess. Let me see——” She turned to her elder sister. “Rose, what was the name of that red-headed model who used to——?”

“It may obviate a certain amount of futile speculation,” said Mr. Donkin, “if I inform you that no red-headed model, or any other kind of paragon is concerned. Your father has married Mrs. Carey.”

“Madeleine Carey?” cried Chris. “She’s an angel: I adore her. We all do.”

“She keeps lovely grub,” said Bimbo.

“Will they have any children, do you think?” asked Button.

She was duly shushed by not less than three persons, and Mr. Donkin turned to Rose.

“What is your reaction to the news, my dear?” he asked.

Rosemary’s eyes softened.

“I’m glad. He hates being alone—which accounts for a good many of his friends—and he hasn’t the slightest idea of taking care of himself. Now he’ll be comfortable for the rest of his life. Bless him!”

“He’ll miss a lot of the old fun, poor lamb,” said Chris. “He’ll simply have to push out some of the gang now. Is Mrs. Carey—I mean, our new parent—coming to live in Théophile’s Impasse?”

“No; they’re to live in her house in Passy,” said Rosemary, who by this time had possessed herself of the telegram. “And they want us all to go back to them.”

“At once?”

“At once.”

“For keeps?”

“For keeps.”

“Hoo!”

There was silence again, while all present adjusted their perspectives. Here indeed was a fresh turn in the road—a complete *bouleversement* of all the elaborately laid new plans of the past fortnight. Mr. Donkin found himself reflecting

that it might be worth his while to look for a smaller house in Herefordshire. Chris wondered if there was a convenient autobus service between Passy and the Sorbonne, and said so. Button and Bimbo began to gabble in a contented undertone of waffles and maple syrup, and other transatlantic delicacies.

Whatever Rosemary's thoughts may have been, they were suddenly interrupted by the sight of a silent, preoccupied figure in the armchair. It struck her that her aunt had made no sort of contribution to the present symposium: indeed, she had not spoken a word since Rosemary entered the room. She merely sat, upright and aloof, gazing uncertainly into space.

Rosemary went and put her arms round her.

"Auntie B," she said, "I've just realised what this means to you. You'll have us brats off your hands at last! And you've been so sweet and patient with us all these years."

"Fourteen of them," corroborated Chris, coming to her Aunt and kissing her. "How does it feel to breathe the air of freedom at last? Do you want to dance and sing—or has it gone on so long that you feel like the man who refused to be turned out of the Bastille?"

Aunt Barbara rose to her feet.

"I don't quite know how I feel," she said in an unusual voice. "I'm not so young as I used to be, and I don't like things that happen all of a sudden. I'm upset. Don't talk to me, please, anybody!"

And with that Barbara Fane walked rapidly through the open window and out of the room, disappearing down the steps into the soft darkness of the July night. The Faringdon family stood gazing after her.

"That's funny," said Chris softly. "Fancy any one being upset at the idea of getting rid of Us!"

The prayer-bell rang.

III

It was bedtime at the Red House, and the occupants of the sizeable attic were already far advanced in their preparations for slumber. Chris was actually in bed, sitting up and polishing her nails, while Rosemary, before the mirror, was anointing her ridiculous nose with cold cream.

"It all came to me in a sort of rush," Rosemary was saying. "She has taken charge of us ever since the day Mother died, when you and I were things in pinafores and socks, and Button and Bimbo were tiny babies. She has trailed round

with us ever since, wherever Dad has taken it into his head to go. She's been nurse to us, and governess, and chaperon, and everything. She can't possibly have any friends of her own: she must have lost sight of them years ago——”

“Except Charles and Uncle Frank, of course.”

“Of course; and the only people she has seen regularly are Dad's gang.”

“And she thinks they're all terrible—and doesn't mind saying so,” Chris summed up.

“No wonder she was upset this evening when that telegram came,” pursued Rosemary.

Chris laid down her nail-file and buffer, thoughtfully.

“Of course I could see she was,” she said; “but why? Surely she doesn't *want* to go on looking after us for the rest of her life?”

Rosemary concluded operations with the cold cream, and sat down on her sister's bed.

“It isn't that, darling. Where's she going to live? She would rather die than unload herself on Mrs. —— our new step, I mean——”

“But—can't she go and live with Charles in Herefordshire? It was all arranged; and anyhow, Charles wants looking after much worse than we do, poor angel.”

Rosemary shook her head sagely.

“Oh no, darling; they couldn't do that. It wouldn't be proper.”

This was evidently an entirely new line of thought to Chris. For all her frank enjoyment of male admiration, she was almost as sexless in imagination, even at eighteen, as her small sister. Moreover, with her somewhat broadminded upbringing, she had been used to the spectacle of irregular relationships since childhood; so used, in fact, that she had never troubled her head about them.

“There's a Cathedral in Hereford,” Rosemary went on—“and Archdeacons, and Canons, and things.”

“I see,” said Chris, doubtfully. “But Charles and Auntie B. are so *old!* I thought all that sort of thing ended when you were about forty.”

“They may not think so in Cathedral cities, darling.”

“What a shame!” Apparently Chris was referring less to Archidiaconal standards of propriety than to the fact that Aunt Barbara and Charles Donkin could not share the same domicile. “It would have been all right in Paris, of course. Think of some of Dad's friends. Do you remember Uncle Pushkin and his *petite amie*? They were pets.”

Chris was referring to a certain exiled Russian nobleman, one Muravieff, a frequent and favourite visitor at Théophile's Impasse, who for ten years had been

eeking out a livelihood as a dignified 'extra' in the film studios of Paris. The children called him Uncle Pushkin, and from the time of their earliest remembrance he had been accompanied by a blonde lady named Mignonette, who incidentally had taught Chris to do the splits.

Rosemary smiled.

"Of course. Do you remember the time you asked him if he was married to Mignonette, and he said——"

"Of course I do. '*Mais pourquoi, ma petite?* My Mignonette is a Frenchwoman. Why should she exchange her present estate, so emancipated, for the citizenship of my own unhappy country?'"

"It was a better reason for not marrying than most of them had," commented Rosemary.

"And then," continued Chris, "we asked him what would happen if he got tired of Mignonette and married somebody else. We must have been horrible children."

"He didn't mind a bit. He just stood up, and smiled"—Rosemary rose to her feet, and proceeded to enact the *rôle* of Uncle Pushkin—"and said: 'Such things do not happen, my little Chris, with Us! For the best years of her life my Mignonette has dedicated herself to me. For the years that remain I dedicate myself to my Mignonette!' Like that!" She sat down again.

"It's funny," remarked Chris, "how these things don't sound funny if you say them in French. '*Je me dédie à ma Mignonette!* Sweet!'"

"Still," remarked the practical Rosemary, "Charles and Auntie B. can't walk about a Cathedral Close talking like that. The Canons would be livid."

"I've got it!" cried Chris. "Why can't they come and live together in Paris, somewhere near us?"

"You can't fish in Paris, dear."

"Couldn't Charles fish from the *quais*? I've seen people do it all day long."

"I'm afraid the Seine isn't as good as the Wye. Besides, Auntie B. dislikes all foreigners."

"I was forgetting. What's to be done, darling?"

"There's only one thing to be done that I can see."

"What?"

"They must marry."

"Each other?"

"Yes. Why not? I mean—after all——"

Chris pondered.

"It seems so *queer*, somehow," she commented—"when they've known each

other so long.”

“They’ll get used to it. Anyhow, it’ll be better than being lonely. Lonely people *must* marry.”

“Even if they don’t love one another?”

Rosemary glanced at the little clock on the mantelpiece, rose, removed her kimono, and kissed her sister tenderly—a ceremony which the pair had never omitted for a single night in their lives.

“I think sometimes,” she said, as she slipped into her own bed, “that you can love a person just because they *are* lonely. At any rate it can start that way.”

“How do you know?” asked Chris.

“Oh, just a thought,” replied Rosemary carelessly, and turned out the light.

The two infant matchmakers lay silent in the darkness for a few minutes; then Rosemary said decisively:

“We must speak to Charles about it at once. Put the idea into his head, anyhow. What a relief if we could fix it before we go to Dinard!”

“Marvellous!” murmured Chris, who usually dropped off pretty quickly. Then she giggled sleepily:

“I had another offer to-day. My very last here, I fancy.”

“Who?”

“Old Crump!”

“*Darling!* Old Crump asked you to marry him?”

“No—only to wait for him!”

“And you said you would?”

“Of course. One doesn’t like—to disappoint—any—body.”

And with this characteristic sentiment Chris drifted off into easy, dreamless slumber.

But Rosemary lay awake, pondering many things in her heart.

ORDERLY RETIREMENT

IT was the last night of term, and Mr. Donkin was taking House prayers for the last time.

These seldom varied. The boys sang a hymn—a raucous torrent of bass to a squeaky rivulet of treble—after which Mr. Donkin offered up certain routine orisons, to which his flock made thunderous response—the louder the Amen, said tradition, the more virile and patriotic the House—concluding with the Lord's Prayer and a benediction. After which, as we know, the boys filed out upon their bedward way, shaking hands with their Housemaster as they passed.

School prayers have a way of lingering in the memory long after infinitely more pretentious forms of public supplication have ceased to make any particular impression upon us—partly because of their extreme simplicity, and partly because they occur at the most receptive period in human life. Many a schoolboy in England to-day, kneeling on a hard floor and mechanically responding, night after night, to the same familiar flow of words—some of the most beautiful words, incidentally, in the English language—would be surprised to know that in middle life he would be able, assuming he wished to do so, to repeat that same formula with absolute correctness. And possibly with no great harm to his own rather sophisticated soul.

But though the prayers did not vary, the hymn did. The choice thereof lay as a rule with the pianist, and depended upon that functionary's technical equipment. Generally his *repertoire* was more than adequate, for a House of over fifty boys can nearly always be depended upon to produce a natural musician or two; but of course there had been lean years. Once, during the *régime* of one Christie major, the House had subsisted for a whole term upon a diet of six hymns, served up in unswerving rotation throughout the week. For Mr. Donkin to give out the number of the hymn (which he always did most punctiliously, even putting on his spectacles to read the slip upon which it was written) was an entirely superfluous proceeding, for every hymnbook was open at the place before he spoke.

This too-ready acceptance of his limitations annoyed the sensitive Christie major considerably; and he set to work to cogitate a reprisal. Presently he hit upon one. His show-piece, because it is the easiest to play in all Hymns Ancient and Modern, was 'Sun of my Soul.' One day he made the discovery (which he might have made sooner) that there are quite a number of hymns which can be sung to the tune of 'Sun of my Soul.' Accordingly when, on the following Thursday, Mr. Donkin, instead

of saying 'Hymn number Twenty-four' as usual, announced, with just a suspicion of incredulity in his voice, 'Hymn number Two Hundred and Sixty-seven,' there was a gratifying sensation all round, and a hasty flipping of pages to the required place.

Then the thick fingers of the ingenious Master Christie began to thump out the air of 'Sun of my Soul!' Mr. Donkin used to quote the noble restraint of his House upon this occasion as the greatest tribute ever paid to his reputation as a disciplinarian.

There were hymns for special occasions, too, most of them unofficial. The House were addicted to singing 'Onward Christian Soldiers!' on the night before the Eaglescliffè match, followed by 'Conquering Kings their Titles Take'—or 'Art Thou Weary, Art Thou Languid?' the night after, according to the tactical outcome. They were of course profoundly unaware that their Housemaster was in any way cognisant of the significance attached to these exercises.

As a matter of fact Mr. Donkin had once or twice considered the question of vetoing the practice altogether. But then, he said to himself, why shouldn't they ask the Almighty to prosper their campaign? Perhaps it would inculcate a tendency to continue such appeals in later life, for more serious objects. He would leave them alone.

Certain hymns, however, were definitely *tabu*—some because they contained sentiments so utterly banal—H. A. and M. *must* be revised some day—that they made the House giggle, and some because of certain top notes so inaccessible as to throw ninety per cent. of the singers out of action at the critical moment. Mr. Donkin would never forget the occasion upon which he had once found himself, amid a respectful silence, attempting the ultimate 'Crown Him!' of a certain well-known hymn, alone in the company of one small but ambitious treble.

Memories such as these crowded thick on him to-night, as he stood listening to his boys singing their invariable end-of-term favourite, Thomas Carlyle's translation of Martin Luther's rugged *Ein Feste Berg*. Its sentiments were totally irrelevant to the occasion, but after all it is the tune that matters in these cases.

The last verse rose to a shout:—

*God's Word, for all their craft and force,
One moment will not linger;
But, spite of Hell, shall have its course—
'Tis written by His finger!
And though they take our life,
Goods, honour, children, wife—
Yet is their profit small;
They cannot take our all—*

Mr. Donkin himself was not singing: his thoughts were too involved. Besides, he cherished a dim suspicion that to-night his tongue might fail to perform its office. There was a certain unaccustomed tingling at the back of his nose. . . .

What grand boys they were, and had been, throughout these golden years. And now——! Well, he had run his course and put up, on the whole he thought, a good show. The Donkin standard meant something in Marbledown—and after Marbledown. He could read boys as most men can read the alphabet, and to-night, as he surveyed his House for the last time, he knew that his final vintage was as clear and sound as any that had gone before. Well, it ought to be. He had made a whole-time job of his work here—boys, first, last, and all the time. No chick or child of his own to distract him. And no woman. Presumably Providence had been right about that, after all. We are put where we can do most good.

He came to himself with the realisation that Martin Luther had shouted his final defiance to the powers of darkness, and that the House were noisily descending to their knees. He knelt with them.

When he had finished, he rose to his feet and said:

“Now for a few sordid business details. *Imprimis*, Mr. Beamish will shortly be among you with journey-money. Don’t ask him for more than is due to you, because he knows the exact amount in every case, and has a short way with extortionists.

“*Item*, the motor-coaches for the special train from Doddington Junction will leave at nine sharp. If any of you oversleep yourselves you will probably have to stay here till next September.

“*Item*, I want to remind the boys who are leaving not to forget about their photographs. Bring them to my study directly after prayers.” (It was the custom at Marbledown for boys on their last day to present their photographs to their sorrowing friends, and Mr. Donkin always made it a condition of granting leave to make the necessary visit to the town photographer that he should receive a copy.)

“Having made these routine announcements,” he continued, “together with the annual jokes associated with them—by the way, I thank you most gratefully for laughing at them—I come to something rather less usual. After to-night, you know, I shall cease to be your Housemaster. I propose to defer my formal farewell until later in the evening, when you re-assemble here to partake of certain insufficient and unwholesome refreshment at my expense”—on this last evening Mr. Donkin regularly entertained his whole House to a supper, followed by an informal concert—“and make unmelodious noises. But for the moment I want to say something else. As you know, it has always been my habit, whenever I have anything official or unofficial, pleasant or unpleasant, to say to you as a House, to say it here and at this

time. I have been doing that for a good many years: I was doing it long before any of you were born. And I have regularly and of set purpose repeated myself. I'm going to repeat myself now.

"There are certain—I won't call them traditions, because tradition is an overworked word—certain little habits of life and conduct that I have always tried to instil into you, and to those who have gone before you—three in all. Here they are, for the very last time.

"Never be false; or if you prefer it, always be loyal, even though it may sometimes be against your own convictions. In other words, obey a legitimate order without question, even though you know you are twice as clever as the man who is giving it.

"Be infinitely considerate of other people's feelings. I need not tell you never to be deliberately cruel, because few of us are ever that. But you'd be surprised how small the difference is between thoughtlessness and cruelty. Most of the unhappiness in life arises from the fact. So always be putting yourself in the other person's place, whether that person be a man, or a woman, or a child, or a dog.

"Lastly and very briefly, speak the truth. Believe me, it's so much simpler than any other way. You see, if you always speak the truth you never have to remember what you said last time!

"That's all, I think. Will you try to bear these little precepts in mind—not merely you who are going to face this big world for the first time to-morrow, but you who are coming back next year to help my successor, whoever he may be? I think you'll find them useful.

"Now clear out of here, while the Barmecide feast is spread. Everything should be ready in about twenty minutes. Mr. Beamish will be in general charge. I've a million things to do, but I promise to look in for part of the time. As hostages for my appearance I propose to send to you certain lady friends of yours." (Loud and prolonged cheers.)

II

Meanwhile, in Mr. Donkin's study, Aunt Barbara had been taking advantage of Mr. Donkin's temporary absence to get on with his packing for him. She was assisted by Button, who had just descended from a chair hugging a large emblazoned silver bowl—the trophy which Bimbo had once ascribed to Mr. Donkin's prowess at tricycling or chess.

"Shall I wrap this up in something, Auntie?" she asked helpfully.

“No, child; put it down at once. Prayers will be over in a minute, and it will be no use trying to do anything more to-night. What a noise those boys are making!”

“Bimbo says they always sing that hymn the last night of term.”

“Bellow it, you mean.”

“Well, why shouldn’t they? They’re going home to-morrow.”

“Don’t talk as if they were being released from Dartmoor! Oh, is that you, Frank?” This last to Mr. Hastings, who had appeared in the open window.

“It is. A post-prandial stroll. You seem to be busy.”

“We’re selling off,” announced Button. She extricated a couple of businesslike-looking canes from the cupboard by the fireplace, and proffered them. “You can have the pair of these for ninepence.”

“Sh, child!” said Aunt Barbara, as usual.

“Sorry! I was forgetting: you do it all by the power of the human eye, Frank, don’t you? I’ll unload these on Peter Poop instead. He broke his own one over Goat Hicks. Did you know?”

Aunt Barbara quoted a well-worn maxim regarding the desirability of visibility as against audibility in the young, and told Frank Hastings to sit down out of the way.

“I’ve been packing a few of Charles’ breakables before he has a chance to do it himself,” she said. “He’s taking Prayers.”

“For the last time.”

“Yes.”

“Heigho!”

“Can I pack Mother, Auntie?”

“Yes, but keep *quiet!* He’s feeling it, you know,” continued Barbara, as Button busied herself, to the accompaniment of much rustling of tissue-paper, with the portrait from the mantelpiece. “Of course he won’t admit it: he just snaps instead. And that’s not like him. Bark, yes; but snap, no!”

At this moment Button’s attention was distracted from her present task by a faint sound in the garden outside. She promptly deposited her mother’s photograph on a chair, and went to the window, where she stood peering. Then she gave a hoarse and guttural chuckle.

Her aunt broke off her conversation, and turned.

“Child, what are you making that disgusting noise for?”

“Thoughts!” said Button darkly.

“Then try to distinguish in future between meditation and flatulence. You’d better go to bed now.”

“Can’t I wait and say good-night to Charles?”

“Yes; but wait upstairs.”

“Oh why? Frank darling, why?”

“My dear Button, the gadfly is a stimulating little companion, but intervals of relief from its society are occasionally desirable. Your aunt is merely suggesting that you should alight somewhere else for a few minutes.”

Button considered. Then she grinned.

“All right,” she said; “I’ll go and alight on the Cook. So long, everybody!”

The door closed. Mr. Hastings gazed at Barbara Fane long and steadily; then smiled. Barbara smiled back. A shrewd observer (of the calibre of the departed Button) might have described it as a smile almost verging on the self-conscious. Then she took down Mr. Donkin’s little brown Buddha from its shelf, and began to wrap it in paper.

“You’re off to-morrow, I suppose,” said Hastings presently.

“Yes. I offered to stay on for a day or two and pack Charles up, but he said he was quite capable of conducting his own funeral.”

Hastings laughed.

“I should have thought the B.U.D.C. ought to have attended that ceremony,” he said. “After all, they’re responsible for it.”

“Yes. Mixed conspiracy is almost as dangerous as mixed bathing. By the way, they presented Charles with that! A farewell testimonial.” Barbara indicated the gleaming new inkstand on the desk.

“And he accepted it?”

“Without a murmur. He really isn’t himself at all. However, perhaps it’s just as well I’m free to take the children to Dinard. I can put Madeleine up to a few of their tricks. So far she has only seen them on their best behaviour.”

“But you’ll be back by the end of August?”

“Yes. Which day does your cruise end?”

The mahogany door opened, and Mr. Beamish entered importantly, carrying sundry envelopes and a large cash-box.

“Good evening, Mr. Beamish,” said Barbara. “Absconding?”

“I am going to give out railway tickets and journey-money,” replied Mr. Beamish with dignity.

Mr. Donkin came bustling in by the green door.

“Got your stuff, Beamish? Good man. Carry on with the supper and sing-song for me when you’ve finished, will you? I haven’t touched my end-of-term reports yet, and I had to listen to a sustained recitative from the Bursar on the subject this very afternoon.” He hung up his cap and gown, and went to his desk. “Here goes!”

he announced, with great heartiness.

Beamish disappeared through the green door. Mr. Hastings rose to his feet, and Barbara suspended her packing operations.

“I suppose all this means,” she said, “that I’m to go upstairs.”

“Of course it does.”

“Well, don’t bite my head off!”

“I’m sorry, Barbara. End of term, and so on!” Mr. Donkin opened the door with a penitent smile.

“All right; you’re forgiven. You’d better come too, Frank. You haven’t answered my last question.”

“In a moment,” said Hastings; and Barbara went out, leaving two old friends standing face to face.

“I suppose we’d better shake hands,” said Mr. Hastings, offering his. “It seems an odd thing to do after all these years. I’m off at the crack of dawn. You’ll be here for the best part of a week, I suppose.”

“It looks like it,” replied Mr. Donkin, gazing forlornly round his disordered little kingdom.

“Come back and see us occasionally,” said Hastings. “I’ll give you the Lower School Algebra to correct.”

Donkin shook his head.

“*Renovare dolorem?* No, thanks! I’ve been through a good deal in the last few weeks, Frank. Somehow I shouldn’t have felt it so much if I’d really served my time here; but—well, a clean cut is the only remedy. I shan’t come back—not till I’m dead, anyway. Then perhaps I’ll drop in and haunt you, in a friendly way.”

“Capital!” said Mr. Hastings. “Haunt my spare bedroom: it has central heating. Good-bye, old chap!”

They shook hands again, and Donkin said:

“Give my love to your harem on the top deck!”

“If I do, it’ll be for the last time.”

“I don’t believe it! The Isles of Greece would sink beneath the Ægean if you didn’t inspect them once a year.”

“They are perfectly at liberty to sink into the fires of Tophet, so far as I’m concerned.”

“Rot. You’ll be back there a dozen times yet.”

“What will you bet?”

“A box of cigars.”

“Done!”

A moment later Mr. Donkin stood surveying the closed door. He shook his head, pensively.

“Frank’s losing his *moral*,” he murmured. “Getting senile. Well, aren’t we all?”
He sat down at his desk and got to work on fifty-four end-of-term reports.

REAR-GUARD ACTION

THERE were interruptions, however.

First Ellen looked in and announced that a messenger had just come from the Bursar, and could the Bursar have Mr. Donkin's reports, please? And if he couldn't, when could he, please?

Mr. Donkin replied that the answer to the first part of the question was in the negative; to the second, about Christmas. Ellen thanked him warmly, and withdrew.

Then came the bearers of photographs, in a body, headed by Travers himself.

"An even handsomer lot than usual," commented Mr. Donkin insincerely, as he examined the portraits. "Are they all autographed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Some day, when one, or more, or all of you are in Madame Tussaud's Waxworks—in that interesting apartment in the basement, in most cases—I may be able to get five pounds apiece for these. Now go and revel among the sausage-rolls. I hope to join you soon."

But Fate had other views. No sooner had the deputation removed itself than there came a light tap at the window, which opened, and Rosemary peeped in—Rosemary, with smiling lips and dewy eyes.

"Are you busy, Charles dear?"

"On the last night of term?" replied Mr. Donkin, with entirely wasted sarcasm. "Ridiculous suggestion! Come in and spend a couple of hours."

"Ten minutes is all we want, darling."

"Why the plural?"

"Chris is the other one."

"Then bring her in out of the——"

"She's not in the garden. That's Philip. He happened to be passing, and Button saw him out on the lawn, and——"

"And it was a *lovely* evening——!"

"Yes. So I went out to him, and we've been talking about his holiday plans. He's off to the Austrian Tyrol to-morrow, on a walking tour."

"By himself?"

"Yes. It's funny you should be writing reports just now." Rosemary was sitting on the arm of the swivel chair by this time, with an affectionate hand resting on Mr. Donkin's shoulder.

“I am glad you see the humour of them,” he replied, grimly blotting the report of Goat Hicks.

“I mean, you were writing half-term reports the day we came, and you’re writing end-of-term reports the day we go. What a lot of things can happen in six weeks!”

“How true, how true!”

“It’s really six weeks and three days, though. Philip told me that just now, out in the garden.”

“No odd hours, minutes, or split seconds?”

“He didn’t mention them, dear. Somebody seems to have packed your clock. Is it ten yet?”

“It seems later.”

“Then Chris ought to be here. Oh, there she is.”

There was a brisk rat-tat on the mahogany door, and Chris entered.

“Charles, angel duck,” she enquired tenderly, “are you frightfully busy?”

Mr. Donkin laid down his fountain-pen resignedly.

“Very well,” he said. “As my dear pupils would say, you win. Come in and open a nightclub!”

The sisters Faringdon exchanged purposeful glances, and Chris came and sat upon Mr. Donkin’s desk. Rosemary continued to sit upon the arm of his chair. Mr. Donkin looked up first into one smiling face and then the other.

“What is the conspiracy?” he asked.

Chris leaned forward and kissed him.

“You see?” she said admiringly to Rosemary. “He’s too clever for us! He *knows* we’ve come here to tell him something. You spill it, dear.”

“Well,” began Rosemary; “the fact is, sweetest——” She hesitated.

“What are you two images up to? Out with it!”

“Oh, nothing, dear, nothing. Are we, Chris?”

“Oh *no!*”

“We’re just rather unhappy, that’s all,” said Rosemary, laying her cheek for a moment against Mr. Donkin’s——“about the future.”

“You don’t want to go back to Paris?”

“Oh, it isn’t that. We aren’t unhappy about ourselves. We’re always on the crest of the wave. It’s about——somebody else. About two people.”

“Two of the sweetest people in the world——”

“Who are going to be frightfully lonely——”

“And who don’t realise——*something!*” concluded Chris impressively.

“Very often it starts that way,” added Rosemary, with apparent inconsequence.

Chris gave her elder sister a reproving glance, indicating that she must not rush her fences. Mr. Donkin took up his fountain-pen again.

“You will forgive me, I know,” he said, “if I get on with some rather important work. But continue the duet: I enjoy the sound of your voices. If I might just have a few of those documents that you are sitting on, Chris——”

“Darling, I’m so sorry!”

Chris jumped to her feet and transferred herself to the back of the sofa. Then she addressed her sister.

“Rose, we’ve begun all wrong!”

“I know, dear. We’ll start again. Charles, we want to speak to you about yourself. We can’t bear to think of you all alone in Herefordshire, fishing in the What ——”

“The Wye.”

“The Wye—day after day, and pretending you like it. We know you’re being terribly brave about it all, but—well, Chris and I are simply *desolated!*”

Mr. Donkin laid down his pen for good, and looked up at each troubled face in turn.

“Your distress appears to be genuine,” he said. He looked again. “Yes, it really is. My dears!”

He rose, and keeping one arm round Rosemary, led her to the back of the sofa, extending the other to Rosemary’s confederate.

“Let me tell you something,” he said, “something incredible but true. There are people walking this earth, even in this gregarious age, who actually enjoy their own company—and I’m one of them. I don’t say I haven’t been happy in this ant-hill—hornets’ nest, if you prefer it. I’ve loved every hour of it, and I’d live it all again. But for all that, I’ve been looking forward most of my life to the day when I should be able to do just the things I liked doing—just when I felt like doing them, and not because I happened to be off duty for a moment—and do them by myself, myself alone! In other words, I’m that rarest of God’s creatures, a born bachelor, and a contented bachelor.”

“There’s no such animal, darling,” said Chris. “I mean, how could there be?”

“What are the things you’ve been wanting to do?” asked Rosemary.

“Chiefly the things I’ve never had time to do.” Mr. Donkin pointed to a long row of uniformly bound volumes in half-calf, on one of the lower shelves. “There are twenty-four of those. I want to read them right through, and I’ve never had a hope so far.”

“What are they, exactly?”

“Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Grand stuff, and I’ve been waiting thirty years for it. And then there’s a particular friend of mine—Hesiod.” Mr. Donkin rose, and took a small brown volume from a shelf. “You’ve never heard of him?”

“No, dear,” said Chris indulgently. “Does he live in Herefordshire?”

“He was an ancient poet.”

“Greek?”

“Yes.”

“I feared it.”

“About the same time as Homer. He wrote something rather jolly called *Works and Days*—Virgil cribbed a lot of it for his *Georgics*—which I’ve always wanted to translate into English verse, for my own pleasure. And in a more general way one would relish being able to tackle *The Times* after breakfast every morning, instead of waiting until bedtime, and to solve the cross-word without the assistance of officious colleagues. But of course,” concluded the speaker reassuringly, “I shan’t be a complete hermit. There will be a little shooting, and a little golf, and a little bridge, and a certain amount of dining and gossip. But in the main I just want to be lazy—static. I think I’d have made a first-class Hindoo fakir, sitting for months on end in a cave, rapt in contemplation of my own big toe. There!”

Having stated his case, Mr. Donkin sat waiting for the verdict, without much hope. He was not disappointed. Both of his judges rose to their feet and stood gazing down upon him, with arms entwined, mournfully shaking their heads.

“What are you goggling at?” he blustered.

“It’s no good, darling,” said Rose gently.

“You can’t get away with it, lambkin pie,” corroborated Chris. “He tried to be an old bachelor, and like it, and he failed!” she added, as if quoting from an obituary notice.

Rosemary came and sat down again beside her bewildered host.

“We’ll come straight to the point, dear,” she said. “You *can’t* live alone. You must have a companion—mustn’t he, Chris?”

“I see nothing else for it,” said Chris. “Of course it would have to be someone who knew his *ways*——”

“And would make him *really* comfortable.”

“She mustn’t be too young——”

Mr. Donkin rose suddenly to his feet.

“Are you two little fiends actually suggesting——?”

“Yes, darling,” said Chris. “A nice wee wifie, in a wee but and ben, and what

not.”

Mr. Donkin pointed a sudden and accusing finger.

“You’ve got one picked out for me!”

“But of course,” said Rosemary. “How clever of you to know! Perhaps you can guess who she is. Chris, let’s make him guess!”

A new and incredible thought broke upon the unhappy man.

“*Not* one of you?”

“Oh no!” Rosemary reassured him.

“We’d be rather sophisticated for you, dear,” said Chris indulgently. “The person we’ve thought of is thoroughly suitable.”

“She sounds like a cook-housekeeper. She isn’t my own cook, by any chance—or the Matron—or Ellen?”

“You’re getting warmer, dear,” said Chris encouragingly—“in a sort of way.”

“Then I’ll stop. This nonsense has gone on long enough. You’re making it all up. There’s nobody, and you know it!”

But the matchmakers refused to agree to any kind of armistice. The defence was crumbling, and they knew it.

“Are you *quite* sure there’s nobody, darling?” Chris asked him.

“There’s somebody for everybody somewhere,” announced Rosemary sententiously—“sometimes closer than we think!”

“You tell him, Rose!” said Chris, generously.

“It’s Aunt Barbara, Charles.”

Mr. Donkin stared at them both in blank astonishment, then laughed, loud and long.

“Do you know,” he said, “I was beginning to believe that you were serious. What a relief! But your unfortunate aunt—what a thought!”

“But we are serious, darling.” Rosemary’s blue eyes were full of earnest reproach. “And have *you* thought? About poor Auntie, I mean. About what is going to happen if—if——”

“If you forsake her,” said Chris, “now—*now*, after all her faithfulness? Darling, you *must* know how she has always felt about you! Are you going to ride away”—the advocate’s young voice trembled with genuine emotion—“and leave her flat—in a pension in Switzerland, or a boarding-house in Bayswater, or something?”

Rosemary took up the tale again.

“For the best years of her life,” she chanted, “Aunt Barbara has devoted herself to you. For the years that remain you can devote yourself to your little—to Aunt Barbara! Can’t he, Chris?”

“You’re telling us, darling!” Chris put both arms round the panic-stricken object beside her. “You will, darling, won’t you?”

“But I don’t want to marry anybody,” wailed Mr. Donkin. “I’m too set in my ways—and she’s always opening windows!”

The door opened, and Button appeared, importantly.

“If you please, sir,” she announced, “the Headmaster to see you.”

Chris promptly rose and advanced to the door.

“One doesn’t try the same joke twice in one evening,” she said coldly, “especially on the same people. Don’t trouble to shut the door as you go out. I’ll do it for you—— Oh, I’m *so* sorry! Good evening, Mr. Ovington! I thought it was just a gag of Button’s!”

Mr. Ovington entered the study. He wore cap and gown, and was accompanied by Sir Berkeley Nightingale.

POLITICAL INTERVENTION

“DO we interrupt?” asked Sir Berkeley, smiling at the girls—and who shall blame him?

“You do!” replied Mr. Donkin, with fervour. “And I was never so thankful for an interruption in my life! Good evening, Headmaster. You know these ladies, I think. And you too, Sir Berkeley?”

“I should like to know them better,” replied that incorrigible opportunist, shaking hands with Rosemary and Chris simultaneously.

“Can you spare us a few moments, Donkin?” asked the Headmaster.

“Of course.” Mr. Donkin turned to his charges. “Now you three”—needless to say Button had attached herself to the proceedings—“which is it to be, drawing-room or sing-song?”

“Sing-song,” said Chris promptly.

“Very well; run along. No, perhaps I’d better escort you there. Ah, here’s the very man”—as the green door opened to admit the deferential presence of Mr. Donkin’s head boy. “What is it, Travers?”

Travers explained that the House were now proceeding from refreshment to harmony, and were most anxious for Mr. Donkin’s presence.

“Tell Mr. Beamish I’ll be along quite soon. Meanwhile, here are the hostages I promised, the trio complete. No”—Mr. Donkin was conscious of a slight click, as the window closed upon Rosemary making an unostentatious exit upon her own account—“only two for the moment! Never mind; you have a quorum.”

The green door closed upon Travers and his babbling convoy, and Mr. Donkin turned to the new arrivals.

“Please sit down,” he said, wondering what on earth this surprise-party portended. “Have you come to remove Master Flossie in safe custody, Sir Berkeley?”

“No; I have been dining with the Headmaster. I came down from London specially.” Sir Berkeley upheaved his long, lazy length from Mr. Donkin’s sofa and took his stand upon the Englishman’s traditional rostrum, the hearth-rug. “The fact is, Donkin, an unexpected misfortune has befallen the School.”

Mr. Donkin looked up sharply, in sudden concern. Whatever touched the School touched him, and always would.

“Or perhaps,” continued Sir Berkeley smoothly, “I ought to say that an

unexpected piece of remarkably good fortune has come to a sudden termination. Mr. Ovington has found it necessary to tender his resignation to the Governing Body.”

“No?” cried Mr. Donkin incredulously. Then he pulled himself together sharply. “H’m—you surprise me! But”—with a half glance towards the presence in the armchair—“may one ask why?”

Sir Berkeley smiled.

“I take it you don’t keep in very close touch with ecclesiastical developments, Donkin?”

“I find scholastic developments as much as I can cope with, thank you!”

“Then you probably have not heard of the newly created Diocese of Outer London?”

“I’m sorry—no.”

“The creation of such a Diocese,” said Sir Berkeley, swinging into his best Front-Bench manner, “has long been overdue. Enormous new settlements, as it were, are springing up all round London—what are popularly known, I believe, as dormitory suburbs. These require organisation, co-ordination, on a vast scale. Parishes must be defined, new churches built. Fulham Palace cannot cope with this problem: it has enough on its hands already. A new authority must be set up. The situation calls for a superman—a Churchman possessed of the highest organising ability, combined with—ah—personal magnetism, a genius for leadership, and the gift of handling men. And women, of course.”

“I imagine so,” agreed Mr. Donkin, less because he imagined anything of the kind than to give the orator the friendly lead which he appeared to be asking for.

“The Archbishop,” continued Sir Berkeley, “was quite unable to think of any candidate sufficiently—er—endowed. So was the Prime Minister. They were in despair, when fortunately they thought of consulting me—and I was able to achieve the miracle for them.” He swept a stately arm in the direction of the armchair. “Donkin, allow me to present to you the Suffragan Bishop Designate of Outer London!”

Donkin rose from his desk and shook hands with the audibly purring Mr. Ovington.

“This is splendid!” he said, with complete sincerity.

“Thank you, thank you!” said Mr. Ovington. He glanced at Sir Berkeley. “And now——”

Sir Berkeley, who was enjoying himself hugely, favoured the Shepherd Designate of Outer London with a roguish smile.

“Before we proceed further,” he said, “may I make a confession, Mr. Ovington? I very nearly didn’t suggest you! Why not? Surely the answer is obvious.” He turned to Donkin. “Can you blame me for hesitating—hesitating in almost agonised uncertainty—over a step which would for ever have deprived this School of Mr. Ovington’s presence and leadership?”

Mr. Donkin replied “Quite!” and decided that his old friend was laying it on a bit too thick.

“But I forced myself to take the broader view,” continued Sir Berkeley. “The larger patriotism won. Who was I, I asked myself, to confine to a single small community what was obviously intended, both by Nature and Providence, for the North Circular Road? So—here we are!”

Sir Berkeley bowed formally to the Headmaster, who bowed back; and less formally to Mr. Donkin, who made no response at all, but wished to God that Barks would cut out any further monkey-business and enable him to get along to the sing-song. Marbledown had been relieved of Ovington’s presence: all else was anti-climax.

But he was wrong.

“Still,” resumed Sir Berkeley, “it’s all very sudden and upsetting, because we have to find a new Headmaster, and find him quickly. And that brings me to my second point. Donkin, Mr. Ovington and I have come to present a petition to you. Could you—would you—consent to postpone your well-earned—how shall I express it, Mr. Ovington?”

“Shall we say *otium cum dignitate*?” suggested Mr. Ovington with an indulgent smile.

“Precisely—and take on the Headmastership for a time? For as long as you feel like it, in fact. Of course we know you have made all your arrangements, but—couldn’t they be deferred? We understand that Miss Fane and her nieces are now permanently off your hands. Doesn’t that leave you comparatively free——?”

But Mr. Donkin was not listening, which was not altogether surprising. Ten minutes ago he was a beaten man, going into exile. Now the adversary responsible for his banishment was out of the way, and he had been called back, Cincinnatus-like, to straighten the place up, in his own fashion and in his own time, before betaking himself to final and honoured retirement.

But—was he equal to the job? He had never regarded himself as of the stuff of which Headmasters are made. He had no taste for high places, no flair for academic politics. Wasn’t he just a Housemaster, pure and simple—a noisy old Moke, who could keep boys in order, and nothing else? . . . It would mean taking the Sixth, of

course. Well, that would be simple enough: a man who can teach the Fifth can teach the Sixth, *à fortiori*. . . . But there would have to be reforms—many of them, to be just, Ovington’s reforms, only carried out in a different way—and at his age wouldn’t he be apt to be a bit half-hearted over reform of any kind? Perhaps a younger man——? Hadn’t he better——? After all, he had been *offered* the Headmastership, and to be able to feel that he had refused it would be almost as good as to have held it. He need not count himself a failure any longer. And then the *otium*—never mind the *dignitas*—and the Wye—and his own company——

But Sir Berkeley was still speaking.

“You see, Donkin, Mr. Ovington feels very strongly on the matter. In fact, he as good as told me at dinner to-night that if he could not get the right man to succeed him he *might* feel it his duty to—ah—stick to the old ship. And that would be a calamity—for Outer London! Add your persuasions to mine, Mr. Ovington!”

“Obviously,” said Mr. Ovington, addressing a once more thoroughly attentive Donkin, “it would be difficult to find a suitable successor to myself at short notice. There would have to be all the tiresome business of advertising the vacancy, sifting applications, examining credentials, and so on. And even then they might get the wrong man.”

“It sometimes happens,” said Sir Berkeley gravely.

“But if I could feel, Donkin, that I was leaving in my place a man who would carry on on my lines—well, I could proceed to my new task with a clear conscience and a light heart.”

“And immediately,” added Sir Berkeley.

“And immediately, of course.”

Sir Berkeley turned to Mr. Donkin. His eyes, which had twinkled considerably throughout Mr. Ovington’s appeal, were suddenly sincere and serious.

“Charles,” he asked, “will you come to our rescue?”

Mr. Donkin looked up.

“Barks, I don’t know whether it will turn out a rescue or a wreck, but I’ll try.”

Sir Berkeley turned impressively to the spiritual custodian of the North Circular Road.

“Mr. Ovington,” he said, “your words have turned the scale! I knew they would!”

Two minutes later Mr. Donkin ushered his visitors to the front door.

“We can discuss details in the morning, Donkin,” said Mr. Ovington. “I may be able to give you a few pointers,” he added graciously. “Good night, *good* night!”

He disappeared into the darkness, and Mr. Donkin was left alone with the Right Honourable Sir Berkeley Nightingale, of His Majesty's Privy Council.

"Good night, Mr. Donkin!" said that distinguished public servant loudly, as he shook hands.

"You wire-pulling old reprobate!" replied Mr. Donkin, without heat.

Sir Berkeley glanced at the receding back of Mr. Ovington. Then, frivolously erecting his two thumbs into a vertical position, he winked solemnly, and walked out into the night.

II

After that Mr. Donkin betook himself to the sing-song, where he informed his House that within the last ten minutes, under entirely unexpected circumstances, he had been offered and had accepted the Headmastership of Marbledown; which meant that they would have to endure his further company and supervision for an indefinite period—it might be for years and it might be for ever. He was sorry, but there it was. However, they were at least relieved upon the present occasion from the necessity of having to listen to his dying speech. That being so, he wished them all a good-night and an enjoyable summer holiday. Next term would start on September the twenty-third, and any member of the Red House who failed to report by six-thirty on that evening would be prosecuted with the utmost rigour of the law.

With this characteristic peroration he took his leave, followed by the frenzied cheers of a House rendered delirious by the double miracle of an Egg dethroned and a Moke restored, and returned to his study.

He found Barbara Fane knitting placidly upon the sofa.

FORLORN HOPE

“WELL, from that din, I presume you have accepted?” said Barbara.

“I have,” replied Mr. Donkin, sinking rather limply on to the sofa beside her. “But—who has been telling you?”

“Ill news travels fast. How do you like the idea of going back to your treadmill?”

“Don’t ask me at present. I’m not in a fit state to answer questions of any kind. I’m feeling rather queer—as if someone had come behind me and hit me on the back of the neck with a mallet. This is the second wallop in twenty-four hours. First comes the news that I’m to lose the children, and on top of that that I’m to be Headmaster of Marbledown, in my dotage. I suppose there’s a third little thunderbolt waiting for me round the corner. They usually come in—— *Oh!*”

Mr. Donkin stopped short, and gaped dumbly. Recent events had entirely swept from his recollection that shattering interview with Rosemary and Chris. Now everything had come back with a rush. And here was his Ariadne sitting within two feet of him. He rose dumbly to his feet, and turned to the far corner of the room, where the packing-case stood.

“What were you going to say?” enquired Barbara.

“Nothing, nothing,” replied Mr. Donkin, unwrapping the Winged Victory and restoring it to its proper shelf. “Nothing of importance. Hallo”—as his eye fell upon a framed photograph lying on a chair beside the wall—“here’s Angela. I can put her back now, can’t I?”

“But what are you unpacking for? Won’t you have to remove yourself to the Blue House immediately?”

“No; that’s not our custom here. The head of the table is where the McGregor sits, so to speak. The Houses are all of uniform size, so there’s no reason why the Headmaster should be domiciled in any particular one. The Red House will be the School House now, that’s all. I say—Barbara——”

He restored Angela’s portrait to its old eminence, and turned to Angela’s elder sister.

“Yes, Charles?”

Mr. Donkin sat gingerly down on the edge of the sofa. He must discover, by a few tactful enquiries, whether there was any truth whatever in the preposterous suggestion of those two young beauties. He must not commit himself, of course, or be precipitate in any way; merely try out the ground.

“Now that Aubrey has married again,” he began, “your occupation is gone, so to speak.”

“One occupation, certainly,” replied Barbara calmly. “But there are others, you know, open even to a decayed spinster.”

“You exhibit no sign of decay that I can see.”

“Thank you, Charles.”

“But what occupations were you thinking of?”

“There is only one which appeals to me at the moment. Marriage.”

Mr. Donkin fairly jumped. He had walked right into it! Enquired for it, as Chris would say. Well, this brought matters to a head. No need to beat about any longer. He drew a laboured breath. But Barbara forestalled him. She looked up from her knitting and asked:

“Does the idea of my marrying strike you as fantastic, Charles?”

“No, no, oh no!” replied Mr. Donkin, with great heartiness. “I mean, why should it? After all,”—he cast about for a helpful platitude, and to his surprise found one—“there is somebody for everybody somewhere. Er—sometimes closer than we think!”

Barbara regarded him with frank surprise.

“You appear to have been devoting some thought to the matter, Charles.”

“I have, I have,” said Mr. Donkin resolutely. “After all, it’s natural enough. Take ourselves, for instance. I have suddenly been left companionless. So have you.”

Barbara shook her head less patiently.

“No, I haven’t! I’ve been trying to tell you, but you make the thing more difficult by talking so much. Listen. Now that Aubrey has married Mrs. Carey and taken the children off my hands, I’m free to do something that I’ve been waiting to do for a considerable time. Marry Frank Hastings.”

“Wha-a-at? *That* old poop?” roared Mr. Donkin, in a combined explosion of relief, astonishment, and honest mirth.

“I don’t know what a poop may be,” replied Barbara coldly, “but Frank is the same age as yourself, Charles. And—I’ve been engaged to him for thirty-two years!” Her voice shook a little.

Then she told Mr. Donkin the whole story.

It dated back to undergraduate days, during a Cambridge May week. While that popular but inarticulate hero Charles Donkin had been dumbly worshipping Angela Fane, Angela’s practical elder sister had been arriving at an understanding with Charles Donkin’s less distinguished contemporary, Frank Hastings. They had exchanged vows, as many a young couple have done before and since, in a

Canadian canoe in the moonlit Backs during a College ball. Their engagement, like all the best engagements, was to be a delightful secret until they were in a position to proclaim it to the world—in other words, until a penniless undergraduate of twenty-one found himself in a position to support a penniless bride of twenty.

“Frank got his assistant-mastership here almost immediately,” said Barbara, “but of course we couldn’t marry on two hundred a year, which was all they gave them in those days; so we decided to wait until he got a housemastership.”

“But he got his housemastership fourteen years ago.”

“Yes. But other things happened as well, fourteen years ago.” Barbara glanced up at the portrait on the mantelpiece. “That was the year that Button and Bimbo arrived. Angela died three days later.”

“I see,” said Donkin slowly. “And she asked you——?”

“Yes. It was the very last thing she did. She didn’t know about Frank, and of course I couldn’t tell her, then. I *had* to promise. They were so *tiny*, Charles! So there was nothing for it but to postpone again. Frank was thirty-seven and I was thirty-six. . . . Those boys of yours seem to be enjoying their concert—if it is a concert and not a free fight!”

From the distant dining-room came the voices of Mr. Donkin’s House, in full cry after John Peel and his Coat so Gay. But Mr. Donkin hardly heard them. He was thinking, thinking of what that second postponement must have meant to a pair of lovers approaching middle age. But for that unsung sacrifice Barbara might be the possessor of a Button or Bimbo of her own to-day.

“Thirty-two years,” he said softly. “Thirty-two years!”

He leaned over and kissed Barbara Fane on the cheek. In a moment that great woman was herself again.

“What was that for, may I ask?”

“It was a tribute of very profound respect.”

“It was nothing of the kind! It was a tribute of very profound relief, and you know it! I’ve taken a weight off your mind, haven’t I?”

Mr. Donkin gave a shamefaced laugh.

“You saw through me, then?” he said.

“From the start. What on earth put the idea into your head?”

“I give you one guess.”

“Did those children——?”

“They did throw out a vague hint or two. In fact, they said you were consumed by an undying passion for me!”

Barbara rose grimly to her feet.

“Where are they?”

“One of them appears to be here.”

Rosemary stood in the open window, young, smiling, radiant. She went straight to Barbara and put her arms round her neck.

“Auntie darling,” she said, “Philip and I want to go to Vienna to-morrow and get married. Do you mind?”

“I should prefer you and Philip to get married to-morrow and then go to Vienna, child.”

“But you don’t mind my marrying him?”

“Not in the least, if you love one another. Has he got any money?”

“Well, not much; but——”

“Never mind. Marry him! Good night!”

Next moment Aunt Barbara was gone, and Rosemary was in Mr. Donkin’s arms. She buried her face on his shoulder.

“I’m so adorably happy!” she murmured.

“And so am I,” replied Mr. Donkin.

Rosemary looked up eagerly.

“Oh, darling, I was forgetting! How selfish of me! Aunt Barbara? Is it all right? Is everything settled?”

“Everything is completely settled,” replied Mr. Donkin exultantly. “But don’t ask me for details! Ask your Aunt: she’ll enjoy giving them! You’ll find her upstairs.” He impelled Rosemary to the door and opened it for her. “Good night, my sweet!”

For a moment he held her in his arms, this vicarious child of his; then kissed her very tenderly. Then he smiled.

“Did you employ the blunt instrument?” he added.

“No. But I would have!”

“You wise, wise Angela!”

“Rosemary!”

“Sorry—Rosemary! Good night!”

LAST POST

THE door closed, and Mr. Donkin, feeling supremely tranquil and thoroughly dazed, turned to survey the kingdom which had been so miraculously restored to him. Some end-of-term reports lay upon the floor, propelled thither by the tempestuous passage of Chris. Well, reports could wait till the morning, and if the Bursar made any fuss he, Donkin, would sack him. He chuckled: he had just realised that he could sack people.

He sat down on the sofa and tried to collect his thoughts, to the accompaniment of 'Widdecombe Fair,' discordantly wafted from the dining-room. Rosemary could hardly be married to-morrow, he reflected—but what about next week? Doubtless Barbara and the children could postpone the trip to Dinard. The wedding could take place from the Red House itself in the quietude of Marbledown in holiday time, and the young couple could go off to the Tyrol, or Heaven, or wherever their delirium took them.

What were they going to live on, though? Of course they would contrive to get along for a while on bread and cheese and kisses; but after that——

Ideas began to occur to Mr. Donkin. He was Headmaster of Marbledown: he could promote. He could be nepotic if he liked: but that would hardly be necessary: de Pourville was the right stuff, and moreover had recently established himself as a disciplinarian, thanks to a slip of a girl with no scruples and eyes like saucers. A good many of the Housemasters were getting a bit senior: there would have to be a shake-up fairly soon. He, Donkin, had been invited to stay on as Head as long as he liked. Supposing he made it five years, and then, as his last official act, appointed Philip to a House—possibly the Red House itself? It would be a good appointment by that time. And Rosemary in the Red House! That was the best idea yet. . . .

'Auld Lang Syne!' Yes, there they were, roaring away at it. The sing-song was nearly over, and so was a most eventful six weeks. He begged pardon: six weeks and three days, ignoring odd hours, minutes, and split seconds. Well, it had been a stirring time. He would miss those imps Chris and Button sorely; on the other hand, he would be master of his own fireside again.

Fireside—a good thought. The nights were getting chilly. He rose, closed the windows, and drew the curtains tight; then with a defiant glance towards the ceiling, as if daring Barbara to come down and stop him, he struck a match and lit the fire. Then his largest pipe. Then he mixed himself his nightly ration. After that he

extricated the current copy of *The Times* from behind the cushion where he kept it hidden (against possible officiousness on the part of Frank Hastings), extended himself at full length on the sofa, smiled up at Angela, and turned with a sigh of complete happiness to the cross-word puzzle.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Housemaster* by Ian Hay (John Hay Beith)]