

The duchess advanced, smiling graciously. "These"—Rutford named the other boys—"are Egerton, Lovell, and—er—Duff."

Scaife, alone of those present, appreciated the order in which his schoolfellows had been named. Egerton—known as the Caterpillar—was the son of a Guardsman; Lovell's father was a judge; Duff's father an obscure parson.

The duchess shook hands with each boy. "Your father and I are old friends," she said to Egerton; "and I have had the pleasure of meeting your uncle," she smiled at John.

Duff looked unhappy and ill at ease, because it was almost certain that his last sentence had been overheard by the house-master. The duchess asked a few questions and then took her leave. She and her son were dining with the Head Master. Rutford accompanied her.

"Did the blighter hear?" said Duff.

"How could he help it with his enormous asses' ears?" said the tall thin Egerton.

Duff, an optimist, like all red-headed, freckled boys, appealed to the others, each in turn. The verdict was unanimous.

"He hates me like poison," said Duff. "I shall catch it hot. What an unlucky beggar I am!"

"Pooh!" said Scaife. "He knows jolly well that the whole school calls him Dirty Dick."

But whatever hopes Duff may have entertained of his house-master's deafness were speedily laid in the dust. Within five minutes Rutford reappeared. He stood in the doorway, glaring.