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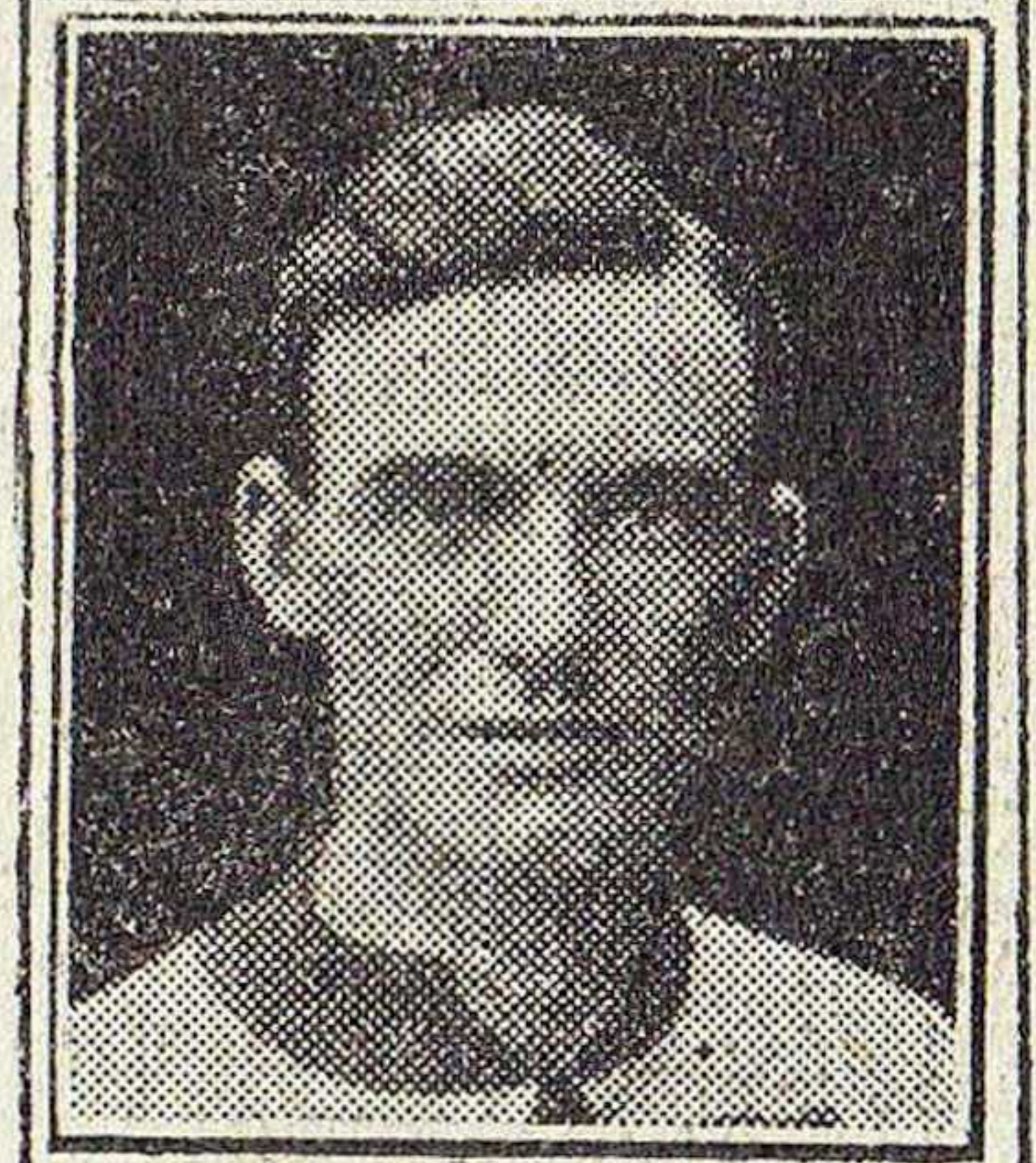
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THE BEST BOYS' PAPER IN THE WORLD!

[Week Ending December 16th, 1922.]



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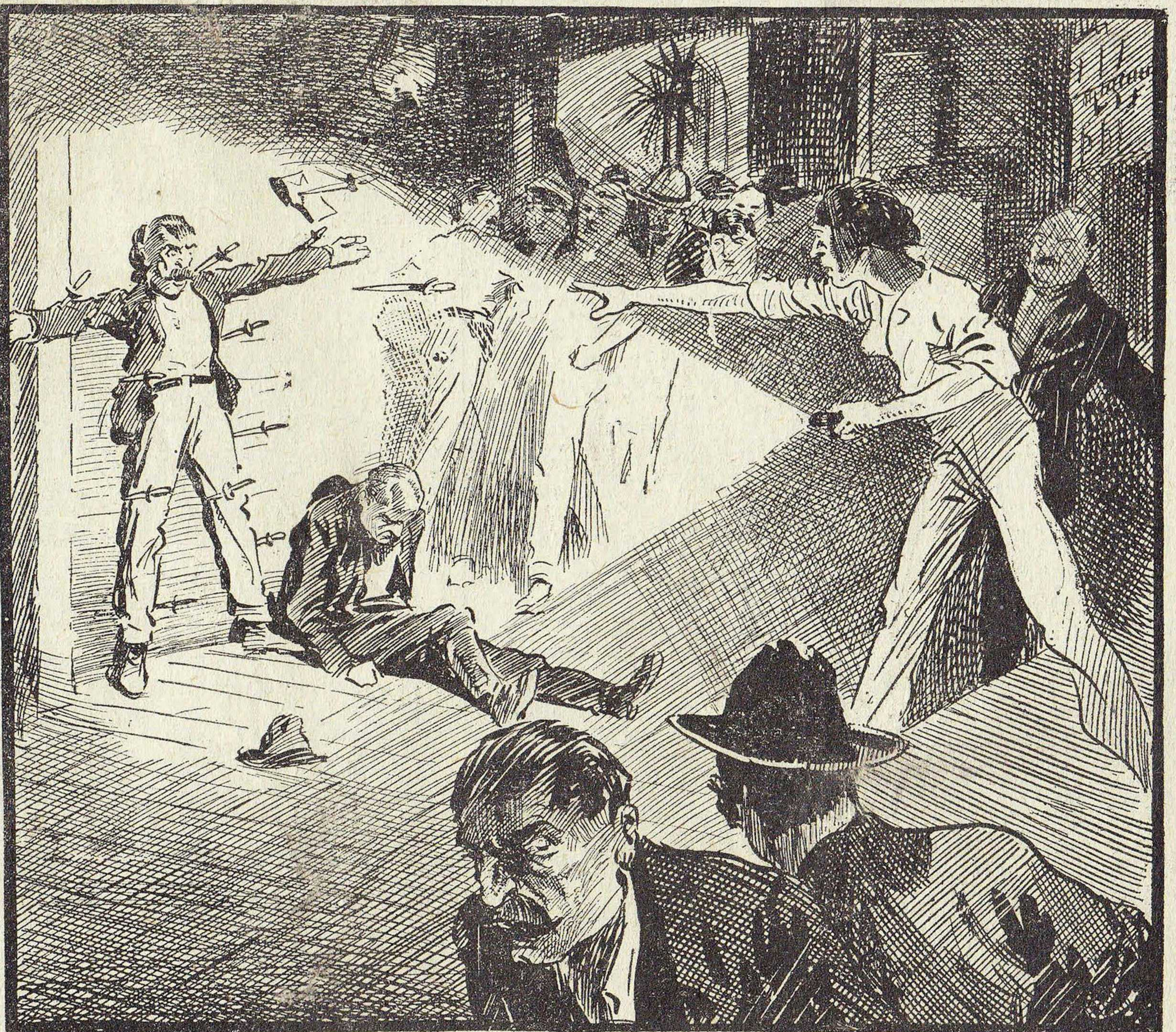
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A CORNERED ROGUE! Another and another silver-bladed knife shot through the air until, in less than five seconds, Pedro was framed in with quivering blades thrown with marvellous accuracy by the melancholy-faced Hooper. (A breathless incident from our great adventure story on page 272.)

SPECIAL IN THIS ISSUE!

"THE BLUFF THAT FAILED!"
A Great School Story.

By P. G. WODEHOUSE.

ALL YOUR OLD FAVOURITES OF ROOKWOOD APPEAR IN THIS GRAND YARN

The Invisible Schoolboy!

By Owen Conquest.

(Author of the Tales of Rookwood, appearing in the "Popular.")

The mystery of Mornington is still hanging over Rookwood, and Inspector Sharpe is unable to discover where the expelled junior is hiding.



The 1st Chapter. Painful for Peele!

Thump! Bump! Cyril Peele of the Fourth came into the end study in the Fourth Form passage. He came in quite suddenly, rather like a bullet from a gun. He landed on the study carpet, and roared. Four juniors followed him into the study—Jimmy Silver, Lovell, Raby, and Newcome. They were looking rather breathless. Peele had apparently required persuasion to pay that visit to the end study. He had been jerked along the passage and hurled into the study, and he looked considerably dishevelled as he sat up and roared. "Got him!" said Arthur Edward Lovell, with satisfaction. "Ow! Grough!" howled Peele. "You rotters! Ow!" "Your own fault!" said Jimmy Silver. "We asked you to come, and you refused. So we had to persuade you!" Jimmy Silver closed the door. There was a determined expression on Jimmy's face, and his chums were looking grim. And Cyril Peele, as he breathlessly picked himself up, eyed them in alarm. The Fistical Four of the Rookwood Fourth seemed to be on the war-path, and in deadly earnest. "Well, now I'm here what do you want?" snarled Peele. "I warn you that if there's any raggin' I'll yell for a prefect."

to agree not to give Smacke away to his employers." "Well, I won't agree!" "There's a cricket-stump in the cupboard, Raby," said the captain of the Fourth. "Would you mind sorting it out?" "Pleased!" grinned Raby. George Raby sorted out the stump and handed it to Jimmy. Peele watched that proceeding with apprehension. "A dozen of the best, to begin with," suggested Lovell. "I'll yell for a prefect!" shouted Peele. "Shove a cushion over his chivvy!" "Hold on!" gasped Peele, as Raby and Newcome collared him and jerked him towards the study table. "I—I—I wasn't going to say anything about Smacke." "I'm afraid that's a whopper," said Jimmy Silver, shaking his head. "It sounds too steep, Peele." "You fool!" said Peele bitterly. "I've got no proof against him. He would deny it, and you wouldn't witness against him, and where should I be? Licked, most likely, for spinning such a yarn!" "Oh!" exclaimed Jimmy. That was a new view of the case to the captain of the Fourth. It seemed that the stump might not be needed, after all. "Something in that!" grinned Lovell. "Peele hasn't got the reputation of a giddy Washington. Mr. Dalton would only think he was talking out of his hat, very likely, if he spun the yarn."

"But I know it's the truth, all the same," said Peele. "I'm not going to give that cheeky rotter away yet—not till I know where he's hiding Mornington. Then I'll show him up fast enough, when he can't wriggle out of it, and it will be the sack for him! Catch on to that?" Jimmy Silver eyed the cad of the Fourth in silence for a few moments. Then he laid down the stump. "You can get out," he said contemptuously; "but bear this in mind—if you meddle with Mornington you're booked for the licking of your life. It's no business of yours if Morny's come back to the school without leave, and if Timothy Smacke is hiding him somewhere. You can't butt in without the fellows getting to know it; and it means a Form ragging for you if you do. Now get out; you make me sick!" Arthur Edward Lovell threw open the door. Then he advanced on Peele, and the latter dodged round the table and ran for the doorway. But he was not quite quick enough. Lovell's grasp fastened on the back of his collar. "Let him go, Lovell," said Jimmy. "It's all right so long as he holds his tattling tongue." "He's going," answered Lovell. "But he's asked for the boot, and he's going to get the boot! Outside, Peele!" "Let me go!" roared Peele, furiously. Lovell swung the cad of the Fourth into the doorway. Then one of Arthur Edward's hefty boots came into play.

Crash! Cyril Peele departed from the study as suddenly as he had entered it. He landed on his hands and knees in the passage. "Now, all together, jump on him!" shouted Lovell. Peele was on his feet and in full flight in a twinkling. A roar of laughter followed him from the end study. "All serene!" grinned Lovell. "Smacke's all right, after all. He's been too careful to let that spying cad spot him." Jimmy nodded thoughtfully. "Peele's pretty keen," he said. "But he's too clever by half, as a matter of fact. I believe that kid Smacke is quite straight, and that he wouldn't tell lies if he was nailed. Peele is quite sure that he would—" "Judging by himself!" grinned Lovell. "That's it. Of course, if Smacke denied all knowledge of Mornington, there's no proof that he knows anything of him. That's how Peele looks at it, and he knows what he would do in Smacke's place. But I believe the kid wouldn't tell lies. Anyway, it's all serene, now, unless Peele catches him with Morny. We can't prevent that, if he does. But if the cad butts in and gives them away, we'll jolly well give him the ragging of his life." To which the Co. responded heartily: "Hear, hear!"

The 2nd Chapter. A Little Walk for Peele!

"It's the Sharpe bird!" "The jolly old inspector, by Jove!" Morning lessons were over, a day or two after the visit of Peele to the end study, which had ended so painfully for Peele. Jimmy Silver & Co. were sauntering in the quadrangle, when they sighted Inspector Sharpe, of Rookham, coming in at the gates. They knew the portly inspector by sight, and naturally wondered what he wanted at Rookwood. "I say, that's the inspector from Rookham," said Tubby Muffin, rolling up to the Fistical Four. "Something's up! Heard anything of a burglary?" "Only the burglary in the pantry yesterday!" grinned Lovell. "And I fancy it doesn't need a bobby to find out who bagged the pie." "Ha, ha, ha!" "I—I say, I didn't, you know," exclaimed Tubby, in alarm. "I never went anywhere near the pantry. I was on the football ground at the time the pie was taken." "How do you know what time it was taken?" asked Jimmy. "Oh! I—I mean—" "Ha, ha, ha!" "If you fellows think I raided the pantry, you're making a mistake. Besides, it was only a small pie, quite a small one. Hardly enough for one fellow. What are you grinning at? I say, Mrs. Maloney oughtn't to have mentioned it to the Head, you know. Mean, I call it. I—I—I say, you don't think the Head has

sent for a policeman about the pie, do you?" asked Tubby, in blank dismay. The Fistical Four exchanged grinning glances. The disappearance of the pie from the school pantry had annoyed Mrs. Maloney, the housekeeper, greatly. She had complained to the Head. There was a licking in store for the purloiner of the pie, if discovered. Any fellow in the Fourth could have told who was the guilty party. They knew their Muffin! But the idea of the Head sending for a policeman, to investigate the mystery of a missing steak-and-kidney pie, made the Fistical Four chuckle. Dr. Chisholm really was not likely to take such a step. But a guilty conscience had its effect on Reginald Muffin. His fat face was full of alarm as he watched the portly inspector cross the quad with ponderous strides. Mr. Sharpe disappeared into the School House, and Tubby Muffin turned a beseeching look on the Fistical Four. "I say, do you really think he's after the pie?" he asked. "Ha, na, ha!" "Taint a laughing matter!" gasped Tubby. "It means a licking. Not that I did it, you know. But you know that nobody's safe when the police begin making investigations. I—I say, if he's after the pie—" "Well, put two and two together, Tubby," said Lovell gravely. "Yesterday there was a pie missing. To-day a police-inspector arrives. What does it look like?" "Oh dear!" gasped Muffin. "See if he goes in to the Head!" said Raby. "He may have called simply to see the cook." "He would go to the back door for the cook," said Newcome, shaking his head. "It looks rather serious to me." "Oh dear! And it was only a little pie—such a small one!" wailed Tubby. "I wish I hadn't touched it, now. Nobody saw me, only Smacke, and he didn't see the pie. Not that I had anything to do with it, you know. Don't run away with that idea. I'm perfectly innocent. But—the bobby might think—" "He might, especially if he heard you explaining how you didn't do it!" grinned Jimmy Silver. "Ha, ha, ha!" "I—I'll see if he goes in to the Head!" groaned Tubby. "I—I say, it's a shame, you know. Specially as I'm perfectly innocent." And Reginald Muffin hurried away to the School House, to track Mr. Sharpe to his destination. He left the Fistical Four chortling. "But what does the bobby-bird want, I wonder?" remarked Arthur Edward Lovell. "Something must be up." Kit Erroll joined the Fistical Four, with a grave look on his face. "Know why Sharpe's here?" he asked. "Just wondering," answered Jimmy Silver. "I suppose it's Morny?" "Mornington!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver, with a start. Erroll nodded. "I'm afraid so. They can't find Mornington, and everybody knows that he's hidden about the school somewhere. Looks to me as if the Head has called in the policeman to find him." Jimmy Silver whistled. Now that Erroll mentioned it, he could see at once that that was the most probable explanation of Mr. Sharpe's visit. All Rookwood knew how bitterly annoyed the Head was by Morny's amazing defiance of his authority in returning to Rookwood after being expelled. "I suppose that's so," said Jimmy Silver slowly. "In fact, it's bound to be so. I fancy we'd better keep an eye on Peele while the inspector's here, you fellows. We don't want him to be giving Mr. Sharpe a tip to start his inquiries in the boot-room." "How's that?" asked Erroll, in surprise. Jimmy Silver explained. Erroll was a fellow who could be trusted with a secret; he had been Morny's best chum at Rookwood. "I knew Morny must be getting help from somebody," said Erroll. "Some of the fellows think I'm helping him, as I'm his pal; but I know no more than the others. Smacke's a good kid to stand by him, if he's doing it, though why he should do it beats me. Do you think Peele would be cad enough to give the inspector a hint?" "I'm jolly sure of it!" "Then we'll keep an eye on him!" The Fistical Four and Erroll went into the School House to look for Cyril Peele. Tubby Muffin met them in the hall. "I say, he's gone in to the Head!" he began. "Who, Peele?" "No, you ass! The inspector." "Oh, never mind the inspector. Have you seen Peele?" "Blow Peele!" growled Tubby Muffin. Tubby's fat thoughts were entirely centred on Reginald Muffin just then. Peele was soon discovered, however. He was discovered in the corridor upon which the Head's study opened. Jimmy Silver & Co. did not need telling that Peele had seen the inspector, and guessed the purport of his visit to Rookwood. "Waiting to speak to the bobby, old bean?" asked Lovell agreeably. "Mind your own business!" snapped Peele. "Like to come for a little walk till dinner?" "No." "Sure?" asked Lovell. "Yes. Leave me alone." "Dear man, we want your charmin' society again," explained Lovell. "A little walk will do you good." "Will you let me alone?" hissed Peele, as Arthur Edward Lovell took one of his arms and Jimmy Silver took the other. "Can't trust you, dear boy. Come on!" "I'll shout to the Head—" "You will get hurt if you do, you

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sneaking rotter," said Lovell. "This way, and don't jaw."

Peele ground his teeth; but he submitted to his fate. He was walked out into the quadrangle, in the midst of the five juniors, his arms affectionately held by Jimmy Silver and Lovell. And until the bell rang for dinner, the juniors sauntered in a distant quarter of the playing-fields, and Peele sauntered with them—Jimmy Silver & Co. wasting their valuable time on the cad of the Fourth, who did not seem in the least to appreciate their beneficence.

**The 3rd Chapter.
Tubby Talks Too Much!**

"A very extraordinary state of affairs," said Dr. Chisholm, peering over his glasses at the stout red face of the Rookham inspector. "Most extraordinary. If you can assist me, Mr. Sharpe, I shall be extremely obliged—very much obliged indeed!"

"Anything in my power, sir," said the inspector. "But what precisely has happened?"

"I think you probably know the name of Valentine Mornington, formerly of the Fourth Form here—"

"I have seen the lad, sir—a rather handsome lad, highly-connected, I believe," said the inspector.

The Head coughed.

"Ye-e. Just so. Well, last term Mornington was expelled from the school. This term he has had the audacity to return, without leave, and to install himself in Rookwood."

"Upon my word!" said the inspector, smiling. "The boy does not want for nerve. But what is the difficulty? You are at liberty to send him away if you do not desire his presence."

"He cannot be found."

"He is here—but cannot be found?" exclaimed the inspector.

"He has talked to me in this very study—and to Mr. Dalton through a locked door," said the Head. "On both occasions he made his escape. The two occasions were a week apart. Where he has been hidden in the interval—where he is hidden now—is a mystery. But I hear from his guardian, Sir Punct Stacpoole, that he has not returned home. Somewhere in the school is that insolent, lawless boy—yet the whole place has been searched again and again, without success."

"Well, upon my word!" said Mr. Sharpe.

He stroked his plump chin thoughtfully.

The Head's statement amazed him, as well it might. Certainly such an extraordinary state of affairs had never come under the Rookham inspector's purview before.

"Search for the wretched boy having failed," resumed the Head, "I have decided to request your assistance. Of course, I am aware that such a matter is outside the usual scope of your official duties, but I trust—"

"I am entirely at your service, sir," said the inspector. "You have a right to official aid if you are being annoyed by a person who is, in point of fact, a trespasser. But it is amazing that the boy has not been found."

"I cannot understand it," said the Head, "but with your training, Mr. Sharpe, it is probable that what may puzzle me completely may not present a very deep problem to you."

Inspector Sharpe bowed his portly head to the compliment.

"The matter should not really be a very difficult one," he said. "I take it that every nook and cranny has been searched?"

"Every corner and recess, sir, including the abbey ruins, the garrets, the old disused attics—everywhere."

"And no trace has been found of the boy?"

"None whatever."

"Is anything known of food being missing from the pantry or the boys' studies?"

"I have had some inquiry made on that subject, as, of course, Mornington cannot exist in his hiding-place without food. But nothing is known. Yesterday, certainly a pie was missing, and the housekeeper complained to me. But that would not account—"

"Scarcely. It is fairly clear, sir, that the boy has some confederate in the school."

"That suspicion naturally occurred to me," said the Head, "but—"

"Is there any boy here who was specially attached to him when he was a member of the school?"

"Yes—Erroll of the Fourth Form. But I have questioned Erroll, and he denies all knowledge of Mornington."

"He is a truthful boy?"

"Undoubtedly; he bears the very highest character. I am convinced that he has told me the truth."

"Yet a confederate certainly exists," said the inspector. "Is it possible that Mornington has bribed one of the servants to assist him in this hare-brained escapade?"

Dr. Chisholm started. That suspicion had not occurred to him. His face flushed a little.

"I can scarcely believe that a person employed by me would be guilty of such unwholesome conduct," he said. "But it is certainly possible. On the other hand, Mornington has little money—if any. He was once very rich; but now he is dependent on his uncle, Sir Rupert Stacpoole, who, I understand, does not treat him too liberally, having sons of his own to provide for."

The inspector pursed his lips thoughtfully. There was a silence in the study, which was broken by a tap at the door.

"Come in!" said the Head, rather snappishly.

Tubby Muffin entered the study. Tubby was very red, and his fat knees

were knocking together. He gave a little jump as the inspector's eyes turned on him.

"What is it, Muffin?" exclaimed the Head severely. "I am engaged at the present moment, as you can see."

"I—I'm sorry, sir!" stammered Tubby. "I—I thought I'd better come, sir! I—I own up, sir!"

"What!"

"I never meant any harm, sir!" babbled Tubby. "I—I—I never thought you'd send for a policeman, sir. Oh dear! I—I—I don't want to be arrested, sir!"

"You—arrested!" stuttered the Head. "Think of my people, sir!" gasped Tubby. "I—I didn't even know it was illegal, sir!"

"What are you speaking about, Muffin?" exclaimed the Head, in utter bewilderment.

Inspector Sharpe's eyes gleamed.

"One moment, sir," he said, lifting a plump hand. "Let me question this boy. I think, perhaps, we have not very far to look for the culprit."

"Oh!" exclaimed the Head.

Mr. Sharpe fixed his most stern and official frown upon Reginald Muffin. Muffin's teeth fairly chattered.

Already in his mind's eye, he saw himself handcuffed, and led away to Rookham gaol.

"What is your name, boy?" exclaimed the inspector.

"Mum-mum-mmmmmmm—"

"What!"

"M-m-mmm-Muffin!" gasped Tubby.

"Well, Muffin, what do you know about this affair?"

"I—I never meant—"

"Never mind what you meant, Muffin. If you make a full confession, I hope

"Do not utter ridiculous ejaculations in my presence, Muffin. Tell me at once where Mornington is."

"Oh, sir! I—I—I don't know!" said the bewildered Muffin. "I don't know anything about Mornny, sir! How should I?"

"In the name of all that is stupid, boy, why did you come here?" thundered the Head, in great exasperation. "You said that you had something to confess?"

"Yes, sir—about the pie—"

"The pie?" said the Head dazedly.

"Yes, sir. Now you've sent for a policeman to find out who took the pie, I—I thought I'd better own up, sir. I—I—"

Tubby Muffin's voice trailed away as he saw the expression on Dr. Chisholm's face. Inspector Sharpe was crimson.

"The boy is utterly stupid!" exclaimed the inspector. "Is it possible, sir, that this—this fool, this—this utterly obtuse idiot, supposed that I have come over from Rookham to investigate the—the disappearance of a pie?"

Tubby jumped again.

"D-d-d-didn't you, sir?" he stuttered.

"Muffin, leave my study at once!" thundered the Head, in great wrath. "I will deal with your greedy delinquency later. Go!"

"Oh lor!" groaned Tubby.

He rolled away, the unhappiest as well as the fattest junior in Rookwood. His obtuse brain realised at last that the inspector's visit had nothing to do with the missing pie. He had given himself away for nothing, and now he had the pleasure—otherwise—of looking forward to the time when the Head should be disengaged, and at liberty to deal with his greedy delinquency.

Which was a happy prospect for Reginald Muffin!

to find that confederate—a rather difficult task. If it was one of the boys, Mr. Sharpe had a couple of hundred to choose from—a sufficiently large order. But his suspicions were on the staff below stairs—a bribe to a servant was the easiest way of accounting for the mystery. So the inspector proceeded to question the inhabitants of the regions below.

Mrs. Maloney, the housekeeper, paraded them for his inspection; but Mr. Sharpe found little to reward him. If the servants knew anything of Master Mornington, they did not choose to say so. Tupper, the page, declared very emphatically that his mind was a "puffick" blank on the subject, and Timothy Smacke, the boot-boy, professed to have a mind that was as "puffickly" blank as Tupper's.

It was fortunate that Peele was at a distance, and could not give a hint to the inspector. As it was, Mr. Sharpe, on learning that Smacke was a newcomer, examined the boot-boy rather keenly. But Master Smacke declared categorically that Mornington had not given him any money, and had not spoken a word to him, and that he was not aware of any hiding-place that Mornington might possibly have, within or without the walls of Rookwood. That was clear enough, and would have puzzled Jimmy Silver, had he heard it, with his opinion that Master Smacke would not descend to a falsehood. Certainly the boot-boy looked truthful enough. He added that he did not believe for a moment that Master Mornington was hidden in the school at all, and that it was quite impossible for any person to remain hidden in Rookwood for a week undiscovered—which the other servants concurred.

"Have you ever let Master Mornington

and Mornny's seen him, and he hasn't seen Mornny! Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors roared over that new sample of the amazing "neck" of Valentine Mornington. How the hidden junior had got within reach of the inspector without being discovered, was an astonishing mystery. Yet obviously he had done so; only Mornington's hand could have hooked that ticket upon the official coat. And the fact that the inspector was walking into the Head's study thus ticketed, unconscious of the ticket, made the Rookwood juniors howl.

Inspector Sharpe frowned as the laughter rang after him to the Head's door. That he was somehow the object of the juniors' merriment, he guessed, though he could not see where the joke came in. Dr. Chisholm was waiting to see the inspector again before he went to his lunch; and he glanced in inquiry and some surprise at the frowning gentleman. Even into the sacred precincts of the Head's own study the yell of merriment had penetrated.

"What success, Mr. Sharpe?" asked the Head, hopefully.

"None," said the inspector; "excepting that I am now assured that the boy Mornington is not in the school."

Dr. Chisholm pursed his lips.

"You feel sure upon that point?" he inquired.

"Quite!" said Mr. Sharpe. "There is not the slightest doubt in my mind. Doubtless with the aid of a confederate, Mornington has penetrated the building on the two occasions you have described to me. But that he is hidden in a house thronged with schoolboys, and with a dozen servants, is simply impossible."

"Certainly it would seem so," said the Head musingly. "Yet—"

"I have questioned the servants," added the inspector. "Their answers seem satisfactory; but I think you will find that the boy's confederate is below stairs. If you wish me to look further into the matter—"

Tap!

The door opened, and Mr. Dalton, the master of the Fourth Form, looked in. There was a very peculiar expression upon his face.

"Pray excuse me," said Mr. Dalton. "But I caught a glimpse of you in the distance, Mr. Sharpe, and—and—"

"Mr. Sharpe is of opinion that Mornington cannot possibly be within the walls of the School House, Mr. Dalton," said the Head.

"Indeed!" gasped Mr. Dalton.

"Certainly," said the inspector.

"But—but excuse me—" To the inspector's amazement, Mr. Dalton passed a hand round to the back of his coat.

"What—what—" ejaculated Mr. Sharpe.

Mr. Dalton held up the ticket.

"This was pinned to the back of your coat, inspector," he said quietly. "I happened to catch sight of it from a distance, so—"

The inspector blinked at the ticket. The Head stared at it. Inspector Sharpe's face became purple.

"So that—that is why those young rascals were laughing!" exclaimed Mr. Sharpe. "Some impertinent young jackanapes—"

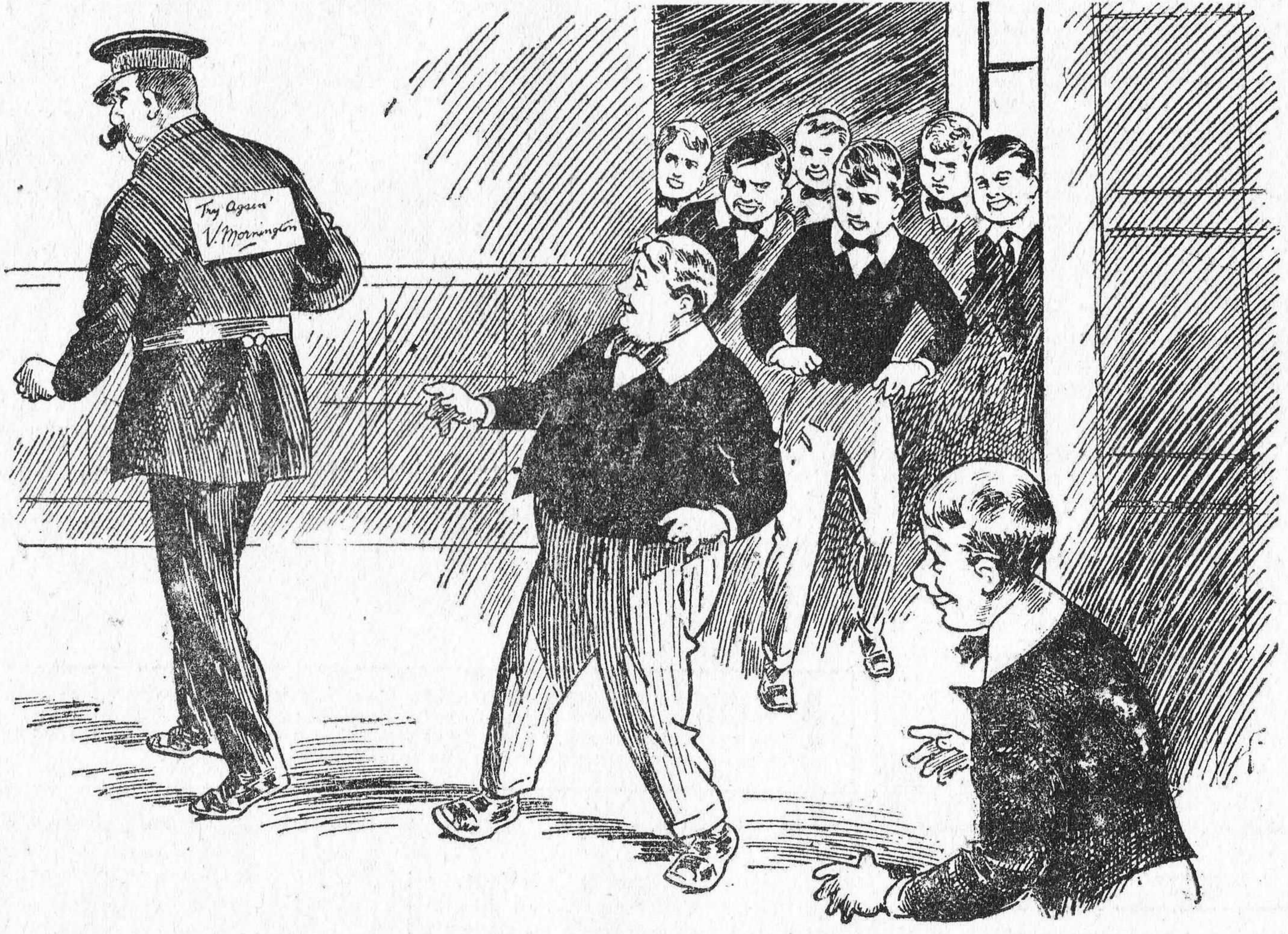
"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Head, blankly. "Then Mornington is here! That is Valentine Mornington's handwriting!"

"What!" almost shouted the inspector. "It is unmistakably Mornington's hand," said Mr. Dalton. "I know it quite well. Mornington has written this, and—and—"

"And pinned it on my coat," gurgled the inspector, blankly. "But—but I should know the boy if I had seen him—and I have not seen him. This is the work of his confederate!"

"But Mornington must be here, since this ticket was undoubtedly written within the last half-hour!" said Mr. Dalton. "By gad!" murmured the inspector. "He is here!" said the Head. "Here—in Rookwood! But—but where?"

But that was a question to which no answer could be given and Inspector Sharpe did not even attempt to give one.



MORNINGTON'S MESSAGE! Sublimely unconscious of the card on his back, Inspector Sharpe walked on amid the juniors' roars of laughter. "He, he, he!" shrieked Muffin. "Mornny must have pinned that there!"

that your headmaster may take a lenient view of the matter," said the inspector encouragingly. "Now, it is pretty clear to me that you are the culprit."

"Oh lor!"

"You had better make a clean breast of it, Master Muffin."

"That—that's why I came here, sir!" groaned Tubby. "I—I—I guessed you'd come, sir. I—I never meant any harm."

"You did not mean any harm," exclaimed the Head sternly. "Did you see no harm, Muffin, you stupid boy, in a reckless and insolent defiance of your headmaster's authority?"

"Oh crikey!" gasped Muffin, almost overwhelmed by that description of his conduct. Bagging a pie from the pantry had not seemed to Tubby so serious a matter as all that.

"Now tell your headmaster the whole circumstances," said the inspector sternly.

"Yes, sir!" groaned Tubby. "You—you see, sir, I—I never knew that—that the pie would be missed."

"What?"

"I—I thought that perhaps Mrs. Maloney would think it was—was the cat—"

"The—the cat?"

"Yes, sir; or she might have put it down to Smacke, or Tupper," said Tubby. "I—I wish I hadn't touched it now. And—and it was only a small pie, sir—a very small one."

"Is the boy out of his senses?" inquired the inspector, blinking at Tubby Muffin.

"What is he talking about?"

"I really do not quite comprehend," said Dr. Chisholm. "Muffin! Collect yourself, and answer me sensibly. Where is Mornington at the present moment?"

Tubby Muffin jumped.

"Mum-mum-Mornington!" he babbled.

"Yes. You are Mornington's confederate, I understand—"

"Oh crumbs!"

**The 4th Chapter.
Mornington's message!**

Jimmy Silver & Co. were still walking cheerily on the utmost borders of the playing-fields when Inspector Sharpe emerged from the Head's study, and Peele of the Fourth—unwillingly—was with them. But the rest of the Rookwood juniors were keenly interested in the movements of the Rookham police-inspector.

A rumour had spread that Mr. Sharpe had come to the school to find Valentine Mornington, the expelled fellow whose amazing record was the talk of Rookwood. Tubby Muffin confirmed the rumour when he related to everyone that would listen his hapless interview in the Head's study.

So crowds of fellows watched Mr. Sharpe from a distance, peering at him through doors and windows and banisters and round corners.

The Rookwooders were keenly interested in seeing the detective on the case, though nobody wished him luck.

Almost every fellow in the Lower School had the best of wishes for Valentine Mornington; and certainly there were very few who would willingly have helped Mr. Sharpe in his search.

The inspector himself was puzzled.

Where Mornington could possibly be hidden was a mystery to Mr. Sharpe as well as to everybody else; indeed, the inspector doubted whether the Head was right in believing that the junior was still in the school.

Mr. Sharpe considered it more probable that the expelled schoolboy was lurking in the vicinity somewhere, and obtained entrance to the school surreptitiously when he desired, with the help of a confederate.

In any case, it was clear to the inspector that the junior had a confederate; and it was Mr. Sharpe's duty

into the house?" asked the inspector, eyeing the boy.

"I've never let anybody into the house," answered Master Smacke.

"Would you recognise him if you saw him?"

"If he was standing in front of me this minute, I shouldn't recognise him," answered the sandy-complexioned, red-haired boot-boy emphatically.

And with that Mr. Sharpe was compelled to be satisfied.

He quitted the lower regions at last, in a very puzzled mood, but feeling pretty certain that Mornington was not in the school at all.

He made his way to the Head's study, and gave a sudden start as he heard a loud chuckle from a fat youth in the corridor. Tubby Muffin's eyes were on the inspector's plump, broad back as he passed, and that sudden chuckle had emanated from Master Muffin. The inspector glanced round.

Muffin became grave at once.

Mr. Sharpe, frowning, walked on to the Head's study. A dozen fellows, peering round corners at him, burst into a roar.

On the back of the inspector's coat was hooked a piece of cardboard about six inches square.

On the cardboard was an inscription, in a hand that those fellows who saw it closely recognised at a glance—the hand of Valentine Mornington, late of the Classical Fourth. The inscription ran:

"Try again!—V. Mornington."

Sublimely unconscious of the adornment on the back of his official coat, Inspector Sharpe walked on portly and important to the Head's study.

"He, he, he!" shrieked Tubby Muffin. "See it, you fellows? He, he, he! Mornny must have stuck that on."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

"What a neck!" yelled Putty of the Fourth. "He's been looking for Mornny—"

THE END.

(How the Mornington Mystery is finally cleared up is told in "By Pluck and Luck!"—next Monday's splendid story of Jimmy Silver & Co., at Rookwood School. Ask your newsagent to save a copy of the BOYS' FRIEND for you every week!)