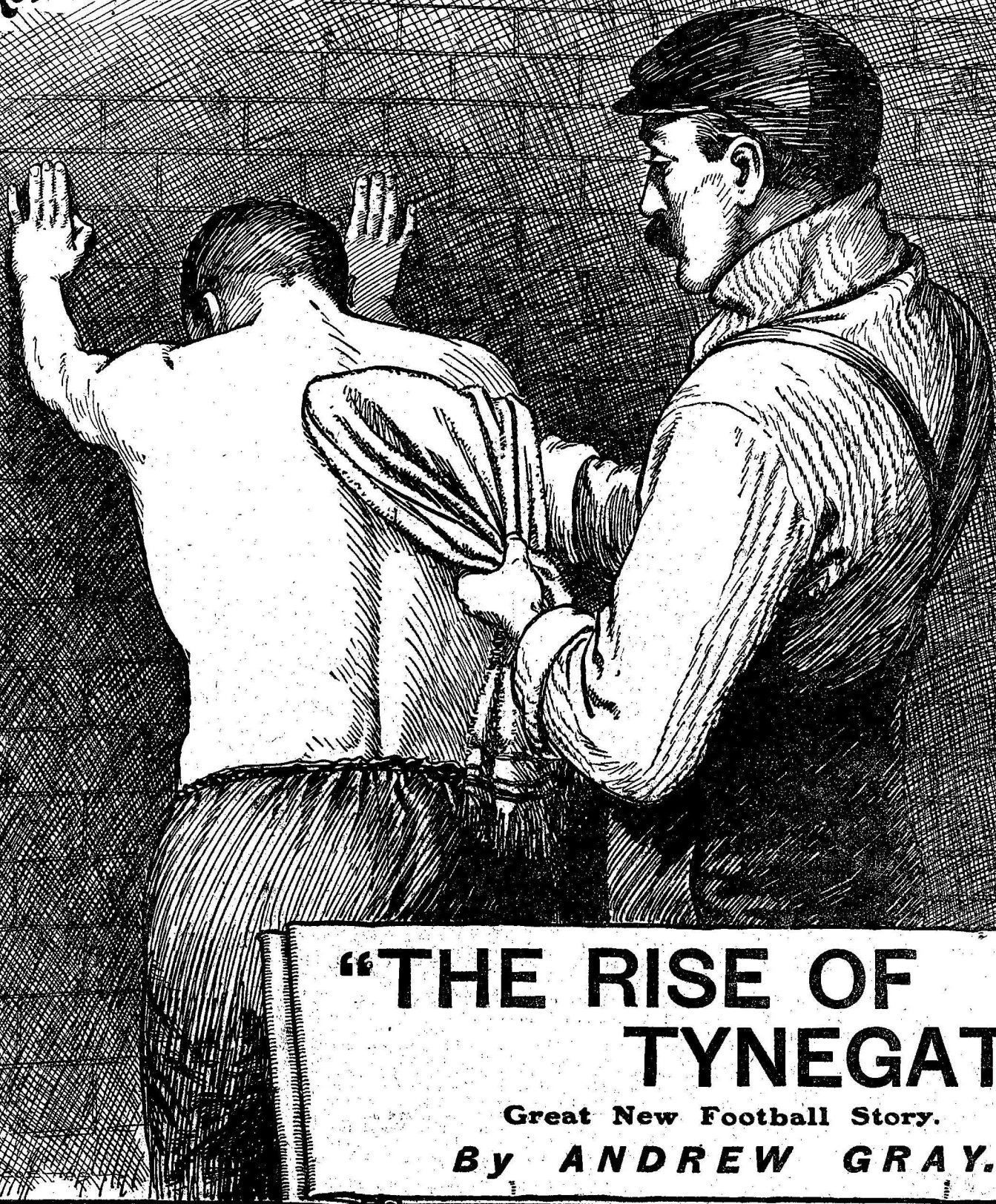


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By **ANDREW GRAY.**

ARTHUR REDFERN'S VOW.

A Rollicking Tale of School Life. By CHARLES HAMILTON.

THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS ARE:

ARTHUR REDFERN, a Sixth-Former and a prefect at St. Dolly's School.
 SIDNEY REDFERN, or "Redfern minor," Arthur's brother. A bright, fun-loving lad. St. Dolly's is divided into two educational sections—Modern and Classical. Sidney is a Classical, and firm chums with SKELTON and BROWN, of the Fourth. A deadly feud exists between the Classics and the Moderns, the latter being led by TAFFY MORGAN, VERNON, and RAKE of the Fourth.
 RANSOME, a Sixth-Former. A slacker and a good-for-nothing, who, exercising a strong influence over Arthur Redfern, gets the prefect mixed up with a betting gang. Thanks to his younger brother, Arthur gets clear of this unsavoury crowd, and promises Sidney that he will have nothing further to do with Ransome's shady transactions.
 Ransome, resenting this, vows vengeance, and seeks to draw other St. Dollyites under his wing.

The opening of a new term finds the school captainship vacant, and Arthur Redfern and another lad named Knowles are proposed for election. Additional interest is added to the election by the fact that Arthur is a Classical and Knowles a Modern.

Ransome, though a Classical himself, intends voting for Knowles, the Modern candidate, and endeavours to persuade other Classics to do likewise; but with no great success, thanks to Redfern minor and Skelton. The day of the election comes, and despite Ransome's efforts, Arthur Redfern heads the poll, and becomes the new captain of St. Dolly's.

Knowles, chagrined at his defeat, is an easy prey for Ransome, who lures him into his clutches, and encourages him to set at naught Arthur Redfern's authority.

Ransome sends an anonymous letter to the Headmaster of St. Dolly's, which Redfern minor is accused of having written. Complications ensue, and, to clear the matter up, the Head determines to send for a handwriting expert. Ransome fears discovery, and on hearing this determines to get the letter back before it is too late.

Redfern and his chums break bounds one night, and run down to the village to get some roller-skates which they have ordered.

On their return to the school they hear the stealthy sound of footsteps on the gravel path, and scuttle to cover just as the dim figure of a prefect creeps by.

(Now read this week's instalment.)

The Stolen Letter.

WITH thumping hearts the juniors crouched close in the ivy, while the footsteps became more distinct, and then died away.

They had passed; and the juniors had seen no one in the gloom—and they had not been seen, evidently.

Brown gave a gasp of relief. "Great Scott," murmured Skelton breathlessly, "that was a narrow shave!"

"My hat, it was!" "It must have been a prefect."

"I suppose so," muttered Redfern, in perplexity. "He must have had some hint that there was something on, you know; and must have come out to watch. But he never looked up at the dorm. window—he must have seen that it was open if he had."

"Careless of him—and jolly lucky for us!" "What-ho!"

The juniors waited a few more minutes; but there was no sound. Then they emerged from the ivy.

Redfern minor glanced once more towards the window of the Head's study.

A dark shadow was crossing it, and this time he caught clearly the outlines of the form.

It was that of a senior, he was certain; and

there seemed something familiar in the lines of the silhouette, but he could not recognise the figure. It appeared only for a second, passing the light, and vanished into the gloom.

"It wasn't the Head!" muttered Skelton. "No! Look! There's the Head!"

The handsome, portly figure of Dr. Cranston had suddenly appeared at the open window. The doctor had a pen in his hand, and he had evidently stepped there for a moment to refresh himself with a draught or two of the clear night air.

The juniors did not venture to move while he was at the window; but the dark form vanished from the light in a few moments.

Quickly enough now the three juniors clambered up the rope, and climbed into the dormitory window. They pulled in the rope after them, and closed the window. Benson coiled up the rope, and tucked it away under a mattress.

"Good luck?" he asked.

"Yes! It's all serene."

"You're looking jolly scared about something," said Benson, peering at them in the light of a wax match.

"There's a prefect out; and we were nearly spotted!"

"Phew!" "But it's all serene!"

"Good!"

And the juniors, tired and sleepy enough now, tumbled into bed.

Skelton and Brown were soon fast asleep; but Redfern was longer in closing his eyes.

The picture of that dark shadow, which he had twice seen crossing the light of the Head's window, seemed to haunt him.

Who was it? What did it want there?

It seemed to Redfern that he was upon the edge of a mystery—a strange mystery he could not penetrate.

It was some time more he slept.

Under a Cloud.

"SOMETHING'S UP!"

It was Benson, of the Fourth, who made the remark.

But the thought was already in many minds. That something was "up" was quite clear, though nobody seemed to have any idea what it was.

Some of the juniors had noticed it immediately they came down that morning. And when they went into the dining-room to breakfast the fact became more apparent still. The faces of the masters there were grave—very grave. Some of the prefects, too, were noticed to be looking absolutely solemn. Mr. Ford, at the head of the Fourth-Form table, wore a decidedly worried look.

Something certainly was "up."

The juniors wondered what it was. Redfern minor had a sort of uneasy twinge as he thought of the expedition of the previous night. Breaking bounds after lights out was a serious matter, if it came to the notice of the powers. True, the juniors had gone out for a perfectly innocent purpose, so their consciences were clear on that point. But rules were rules, and the penalty of breaking them was severe.

But, somehow, Redfern felt that it was not that. In the first place, if that escapade had become known, he would naturally have been called to account for it at once. There was no

reason why the matter should be left unreported to till after breakfast. Besides, seriously as breaking bounds at night might be regarded, it was hardly serious enough to cause this strange solemnity in all looks. There was something else.

What was it?

"Something's up!"

"What the dickens is the matter?"

"Blessed if I know!"

"Trouble ahead for somebody, anyway."

"What-ho!"

Mr. Ford seemed to be unaware that a whispered conversation was proceeding almost under his nose. His worried look seemed to deepen every minute. Once his glance turned upon Redfern minor, and there was something so strange in his look that the junior gave an involuntary start.

He realised in a flash that the "something" which was "up" was in connection with himself. He felt certain about it. Was it that escapade of last night, after all? But how could it have become known? If it was known, why had it not been mentioned? And why should Mr. Ford look at him so curiously, and not at Skelton and Brown, who were equally involved in the matter? It was very curious. Redfern minor felt a growing sense of uneasiness. Mr. Ford did not glance at him again. In fact, he seemed to sedulously avoid turning his eyes in Redfern minor's direction.

A kind of chill of painful expectancy fell upon the boys. As yet nothing had been said, but they all knew that something serious was on the tapis. It was in the very atmosphere.

After breakfast, as the boys were leaving the dining-room, Redfern minor was not surprised to hear Mr. Ford call to him quietly.

"Redfern minor, you will not go into the Form-room after prayers. Dr. Cranston wishes to speak to you in his study."

"Yes, sir," said Redfern, with a sinking heart.

Skelton and Brown stared at him blankly. They walked towards the chapel in gloomy silence. Skelton broke it.

"So it's out!" he said.

"Looks like it," said Brown, as Redfern did not speak. "That blessed shadow we saw on the Head's window last night, Reddy, it must have been a prefect, and he must have spotted us."

Redfern minor shook his head.

"I can't think it's that," he said slowly. "If a prefect saw me, he must have seen you and Skelton also, and you'd be called up before the Head with me."

"Then what can it be?"

"Blessed if I know!"

"Perhaps it's that confounded anonymous letter again," suggested Skelton. "That expert chap—Craven, I think his name is—is to be here this morning. He may be here now, if he's come by the early train."

"It's possible. Ford looked as if something serious was the matter. But, hang it all, I've done nothing, and I don't see why I should worry!" exclaimed Redfern.

"Hallo! Look at your major!" muttered Brown.

Arthur Redfern was striding towards the juniors, but he did not appear to see them. His face was clouded, the brows darkly contracted, and his eyes were on the ground. Redfern

glanced at his brother curiously. He had no doubt that Arthur was disturbed by the "something" which seemed to be hanging over St. Dolly's like a cloud that morning.

Redfern major started as he saw the juniors, and halted abruptly. His face seemed to flame into anger as he looked at Redfern minor.

"You young fool!" he exclaimed harshly. Sidney Redfern started.

"Arthur, what's the matter?"

"You—you duffer! Why did you do it?"

"I—I don't understand. Why did I do what?"

"Oh, don't fence with me!" exclaimed the captain of St. Dolly's roughly. "Do you mean to say that you don't know anything about it?"

Redfern went red, then pale. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "Has anything happened?"

"You don't know what happened last night?" demanded Arthur, and his eyes were fixed upon the junior as if he would read every secret in his breast.

"Last night?" stammered Redfern. "Yes. Don't repeat my words like a parrot. Answer me. Do you know what happened last night?" exclaimed Arthur roughly.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I put it more plainly. Were you out of the Fourth-Form dormitory last night after lights out?"

The juniors exchanged a quick glance. Redfern minor was silent. The captain of St. Dolly's waited for some moments, and then he burst into a bitter laugh.

"You cannot answer."

"It's according to why you ask me," said Redfern minor hotly. "A chap could get out of his dorm. after lights out, I suppose, without being talked to as if he were a criminal. What have I done?"

"Answer my question. Were you out of your dormitory after lights out?"

"I want to know why you ask first," said Redfern minor sturdily. "If you're asking as a prefect and captain of the school, you've no right to ask me to confess to a thing I should be caned for. If you're speaking in confidence as my brother, Arthur, then I'll tell you anything you like. Which is it?"

Arthur looked at him searchingly. "I'm speaking as your brother," he said. "Goodness knows, I'd be glad to see you clear of this! You can tell me anything you like without danger of its being used against you. I shall keep clear of the whole matter. Were you out of your dormitory last night?"

"Yes."

Arthur uttered a sort of cry. "You were! Then it is true!"

"Yes, I suppose it's true," said Redfern minor, in wonder. "I broke bounds; but, hang it all, that's been done before, and nobody was the worse for it. I suppose you broke bounds sometimes yourself when you were in the Fourth?"

Arthur's brow grew stern. "Don't prevaricate, Sidney. I don't care a rap if you broke bounds, if you did nothing worse than that."

"Do you think I did anything worse?"

"Look here, speak out plainly. Do you know what happened in the Head's study last night?" exclaimed Arthur.

Redfern minor looked bewildered. "In the Head's study?"

"Yes—quick! The chapel bell has left off ringing. Answer me."

"No, I don't."

"Did you enter his study?"

"Enter the Head's study?" gasped Redfern. "Yes," almost shouted Arthur. "Answer me."

"No, I didn't."

"One word more. When you were out of the dormitory, were you alone?"

(Continued on the next page.)

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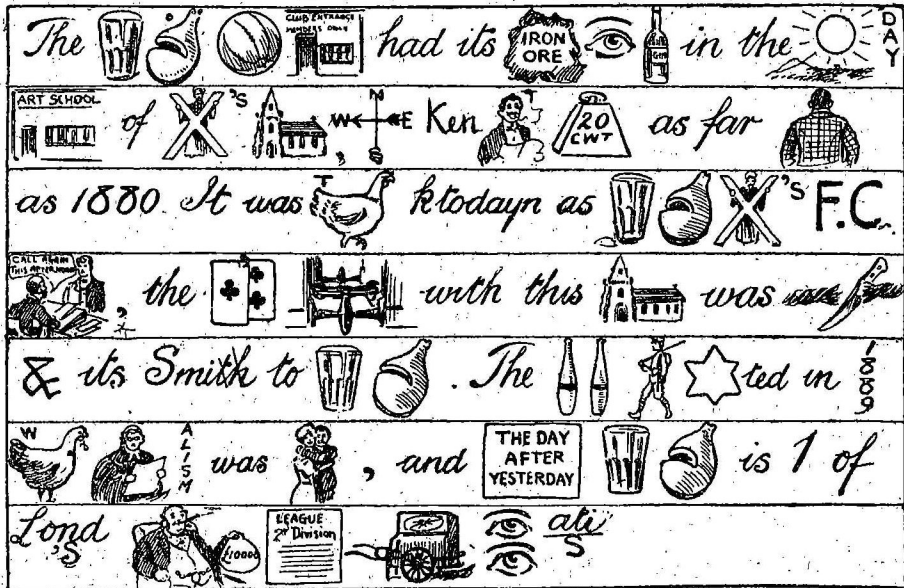
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THE BOYS' REALM, Jan. 22, 1910.

ARTHUR REDFERN'S VOW.

(Continued from the previous page.)

"Alone? No! Skelton and Brown were with me!"
 "All the time?"
 "Yes."
 "You are sure—quite certain?"
 "Of course! But why?"
 "Never mind. Thank Heaven you weren't alone, that's all. Go to chapel now—you're late already!"

And Arthur hurried on. The juniors, utterly bewildered, followed him into chapel; but it must be said that they heard little of the prayers that morning. What had happened in the Head's study the previous night? That was the question that was beating like a hammer in Redfern minor's brain. What had happened? What terrible accusation was hanging over him now?

Redfern Minor has a Narrow Escape.

REDFERN MINOR quitted the Fourth as they went to the Form-room after prayers, and made his way to the Head's study. He went slowly and reluctantly. In spite of himself, in spite of his knowledge of his own innocence, in spite of his actual ignorance of what could possibly have happened in the Head's study, he felt uneasy.

Innocence was not always a protection; he knew that by painful experience. He had not written the anonymous letter, yet he had been believed guilty of it by half the Form. What accusation was to be made now? What did Arthur's strange words mean?

It was clear that the captain of St. Dolly's had jumped to the conclusion that Sidney was guilty—hence his great relief on hearing that Skelton and Brown had been with him outside the dormitory the previous night. Sidney Redfern's heart beat painfully as he went slowly to the Head's study. He had noticed that the Head was unusually grave at prayers that morning. What was he about to hear from him?

He reached the study door, but it was some moments before he could muster up the courage to knock. It was very seldom that Redfern minor lacked the courage for anything. He tapped at the door at last, and the deep voice of the Head bade him enter.

Redfern entered the study. Dr. Cranston was seated at his writing-table. There were two other gentlemen in the study. One was Mr. Ford, Redfern's Form-master. The other was a plump, well-dressed person, whom the junior had never seen before, but whom he at once guessed to be the handwriting expert, Mr. Craven.

Dr. Cranston raised his eyes to Redfern as he entered, and fixed upon him a penetrating and disconcerting gaze. Redfern had intended to meet the doctor's eyes with perfect calmness; but he found his face growing hot under that steady gaze. The knowledge that he was colouring made him colour still more, and his face flamed under the gaze of the Head. He felt that he was looking guilty before he was accused, but he could not help it.

The Head gave a slight sigh.
 "Redfern minor, I suppose you know why I sent for you?"
 "No, sir!" said Redfern firmly. "I don't, sir!"

"You are unaware of what happened last night?"
 "Yes, sir! I have heard that something happened, but I do not know what it was. I have not the faintest idea."

"Were you out of your dormitory last night?"
 Redfern hesitated. It was the same question that Arthur had asked, and it placed him in an awkward position.

"Answer my question, Redfern!" said the Head sternly.

Redfern cast an appealing glance at Mr. Ford, whom he felt instinctively would understand. The master of the Fourth nodded slightly.

"It is possible, sir, that Redfern may have left his dormitory without knowing anything of what happened in this room," he suggested.
 "It might be advisable to assure him that any boyish escapade will be overlooked if he is guiltless of the serious charge."

The Head's brow cleared a little.
 "You are quite right, Mr. Ford. Redfern, you may answer me with confidence. I will tell you what has happened. You are aware that this gentleman, Mr. Craven, was coming this morning to examine the anonymous letter, with a view to discovering from the writing the real identity of the writer?"
 "Yes, sir!"

"It was discovered this morning that the letter had been removed."
 Redfern stared blankly.
 "Removed, sir?"

"Yes. The drawer of my desk, in which it was kept, was wrenched open with a chisel, or some such instrument, and the letter was taken."

Redfern could only stare. The news was utterly unexpected. Who could have broken open the Head's desk to take the anonymous letter? Like a flash, the answer to that question came into his mind. The writer of it, of course—who knew that the expert was coming, and was terrified at the idea of discovery.

"Now, Redfern, if you had nothing to do with taking the letter, you can speak without fear as to your movements last night. You understand that suspicion fixes upon you in the first place. You had been accused of writing the letter. An expert was sent for to establish the identity of the writer beyond doubt. The natural conclusion is that you were afraid of the consequences, and, consequently, purloined the letter. But I will condemn no one unheard. Did you take the letter?"

"No, sir!"
 "You do not know who has taken it?"
 "No, sir! I had no idea it had been taken."
 "You were out of your dormitory last night?"

"Yes, sir!"
 "Did you enter my study?"
 "I did not!"
 "Why did you leave your dormitory?"
 "To go to the village."

The Head started a little. It came as a little shock to him to hear the junior so quietly confessing that he had not only left his dormitory, but had broken the school bounds after lights out. But Redfern realised clearly that complete frankness was the best course now.

"For what reason?"
 "To fetch a parcel that was sent to the station for me from London."
 "In that case, the officials there will bear out your statement?"

"Yes, sir, certainly!"
 "Very good! Did you go alone?"
 "Oh, no, sir! Skelton and Brown were with me."

"They will bear out your statement, I suppose?"
 "Yes, sir! Ask them, and see."

"Yes, sir!" said Skelton, in his turn.
 "Where are the parcels now?"
 "We—we hid them in the wood-shed, sir, among the faggots."
 "Why?"
 "It's a—a wheeze, sir. I—I mean a jape!"
 "A what?"
 "A rag, sir. I—I mean a joke on the Modern cads—kids, sir," stammered Skelton.
 "We're getting up a little surprise for them, sir."

The Head smiled slightly.
 "The parcels are still there, I presume?"
 "Oh, yes, sir! We were going to get them up to the box-room after morning school."
 "Ah! Mr. Ford, will you send Phipps to bring the parcels here?"

"Certainly, sir!"
 "I—I say, sir, it's not a feed," stammered Skelton. "It's only roller-skates, sir. It's a rinking wheeze, and we're keeping it dark."

"If your statement is quite correct, Skelton, your secret will be kept, as far as I am concerned," said the Head, smiling. "It was very wrong of you to go out and fetch the skates at night; but I have decided to pardon this escapade for the sake of getting at the truth of a more serious matter. Were you with Redfern minor all the time he was out of the dormitory last night?"

"Certainly, sir."
 "You did not lose sight of him for a single instant?"

"Not a second, sir," said Skelton wonderingly.
 "Did he enter my study?"

"Y-y-your study, sir? Why, you were here all the time yourself," said Skelton. "We saw you at the window once."
 "You are sure he did not do so?"



Redfern rolled over with Skelton upon a heap of juniors. For a full minute there was a din in the box-room as of Bedlam broken loose.

"Mr. Ford, will you kindly summon Skelton and Brown?"

Mr. Ford left the study quietly. He was looking much relieved. He had evidently believed Redfern minor guilty, but was changing his opinion now.

"I am afraid, Mr. Craven, that your journey has been taken for nothing," said the Head courteously. "The thief, I imagine, has undoubtedly destroyed the letter. Of course, you will not be a loser; but I am very much disappointed. I had hoped to clear up this painful matter."

"I am sorry, too," said Mr. Craven. "If I may offer an opinion, Dr. Cranston, I should say that that lad is quite innocent. I am accustomed, in my profession, to read faces as well as handwriting, and I am sure that he was genuinely surprised to hear that the letter had been stolen. If it should be recovered, of course, you have only to call upon me for my services."

And the expert took his leave. The Head remained with a deeply-thoughtful frown upon his brow. Mr. Craven's words had impressed him very much. They coincided with his own opinion. He believed that Redfern minor was innocent. But who, then, was guilty? The Head was aroused from a gloomy reverie by the return of the Fourth Form-master. Skelton and Brown, both looking very much alarmed and uneasy, followed the Form-master into the study.

The Head fixed his eyes upon them.
 "You were both with Redfern minor last night when he quitted the dormitory?" asked Dr. Cranston abruptly.

Skelton and Brown gave a simultaneous jump.
 "Speak out, kids," said Redfern. "It is all right!"

"Yes, sir," stammered Brown. "We were with him."

"You went to the railway-station with him to fetch certain parcels?"

"Quite sure, sir. We kept as far away from your window as we could."

"At what time did you leave the dormitory?"
 "About ten, sir."

"And when did you return?"
 "I remember hearing the school clock strike eleven just after I got into bed, before I went to sleep, sir," said Brown. And Skelton nodded corroboration.

"Very good. Ah, Phipps, I see you have the parcels!"

"Yes, sir!" said Phipps, the houseporter, grunting as he came in carrying the three heavy parcels. "Ere they are, sir."

"Very good. You may leave them here."
 Phipps set down the parcels and departed. The paper of one of them had burst at the corner, and the wheel of a roller-skate was sticking out—an ample proof of the junior's statement as to what the parcels contained. The Head was looking very much relieved.

"I am quite satisfied, Redfern," he said.
 "You certainly did not take the letter. The theft was committed between a quarter to eleven and eleven o'clock last night, while I was temporarily absent from the study. After that the place was locked up, and no one could have entered. Had I glanced at my desk when I returned to my study, I should have seen that the drawer had been wrenched open, but I did not; and it was not discovered till this morning. You have succeeded in proving an alibi; but I may point out to you the unexpected dangers you may run by an infraction of the school rules. Had you been alone last night, the inevitable conclusion would have been that you left the dormitory to steal the letter, and you could have produced no witnesses. You may go. You may take your parcels with you."

"Thank you, sir!"

And the three juniors left the study.

The Rinkers.
 "So the letter's been stolen?" said Skelton breathlessly.
 "Yes."
 "The chap who wrote it, of course?"

"I suppose so."
 "Jolly lucky for you we were with you last night, Reddy," said Brown, with a deep breath. "You'd have been nailed this time."

Redfern nodded. His heart was still beating hard. He realised fully what a narrow escape he had had. He was thinking, too, of that dark shadow he had twice seen cross the light of the Head's window the previous night. It had not been a prefect on the watch; it had been the anonymous letter writer, on the watch for a chance of stealing the letter before it could fall into the hands of the expert.

Redfern minor understood that now. If he could only have seen who it was!

A suspicion was forming in Redfern's mind. But it was vague, intangible, and he would not utter it even to his chums.

Without a shred of evidence to go upon, it was not fair to mention Ransome's name.

The juniors carried the parcels to the box-room, and locked them up in an empty trunk. Skelton chuckled as they made their way to the Form-room.
 "We've been lucky all along the line," he remarked. "This has given us a chance of getting the skates into the house while the blessed Moderns are all in the Form-room grinding Latin. It's ripping."

"Yes, rather!"
 The three juniors entered the Form-room and took their places. The rest of the Form looked at them with great curiosity. They were simply burning to know what had happened, but they had to contain their curiosity till after morning lessons.

But when the Fourth Form were dismissed, and the juniors crowded out into the passage, there was a perfect hail of inquiries.

Redfern minor concisely explained.
 "My only hat!" exclaimed Taffy. "The letter stolen! Poor old Reddy! You'll have every ass in the school braying out that you took it now!"

Redfern grinned.
 "I've proved a giddy alibi," he said. "Skelton and Brown and Benson and Miller all know that at the time the letter was taken I was getting into the dormitory window, after going to the village."
 "Good! But I say," exclaimed Taffy, "what did you break bounds for? What's the wheeze?"

"Oh, nothing!"
 "What are you Classical worms up to?" demanded Taffy. "I know you've had some silly wheeze on for the past week."

"My dear chap, don't ask questions, and I won't tell you any whoppers!" said Redfern serenely. "If it's a wheeze, I dare say you'll hear all about it soon."

"Look here—"
 "Rats!"

And Redfern strolled away with his chums. Taffy & Co. looked at one another in great exasperation.

"There's something on, I know that," said Taffy.
 "Just what I was going to say," remarked Rake; and Vernon nodded.

"It must be a big feed," said Taffy. "They went out last night to get in the grub. That's the only possible explanation."

"Yes, rather, chappy!" said Vernon.
 "We'll jolly well give them a look-in in their dormitory to-night," said Taffy darkly. "If there's a feed, there'll be a raid, too."

"Good egg!"
 Meanwhile, word had been passed round among the Classics. In twos and threes, or singly, they made their way to the big box-room, which Redfern minor had selected as the scene of the commencement of the new scheme.

In ten minutes after morning classes were dismissed, the Classical half of the Fourth Form were in the box-room, and the door was locked.
 It occurred to Taffy & Co. that they might as well keep an eye on the rival juniors to ascertain where the supposed "feed" was hidden away. But when they started looking for the Classics, they found them missing. There was not a single Classical Fourth-Former to be discovered in the quadrangle, in the passages, in the gym, or in the playing-fields.

Taffy & Co. were amazed.
 "Where on earth have the bounders got to?" exclaimed Taffy.

"Hallo, you youngsters!" It was Arthur Redfern's voice. "Have you seen my minor?"
 "Oh, he's disappeared!" said Taffy crossly. "So have they all. The Fourth-Form Classics have all bunked."

"I want to speak to Sidney," said Arthur anxiously. "Sure you don't know where he is?"

"Haven't the remotest idea. We're looking for him ourselves."

Arthur walked away with a troubled look. He wanted to speak to Sidney, to tell him how glad he was he had been cleared, and how sorry he was to have doubted him.

But Redfern minor was not to be found.

(Another rattling long instalment of this fine school yarn will appear next week. Meanwhile, don't fail to buy a copy of "THE BOYS' REALM" FOOTBALL LIBRARY. On Sale Everywhere—1d.)