

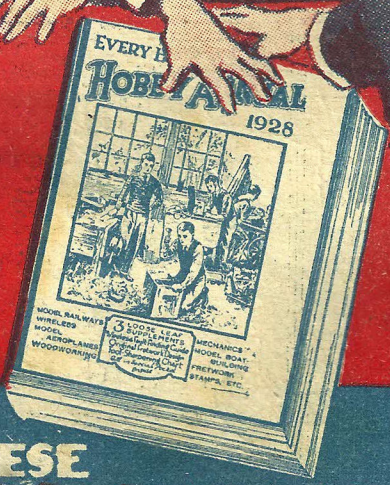
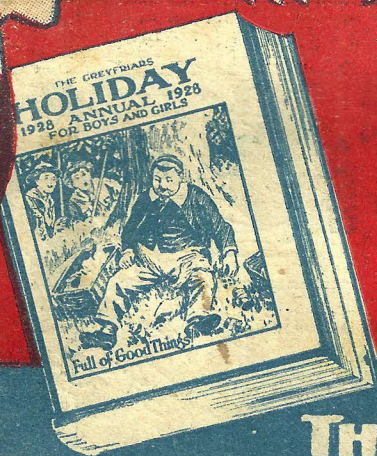
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THE MYSTERY MASTER!

With the coming of Monsieur Gaston to Rookwood a deep mystery develops—Is the new French master all that he says he is, or is he masquerading under false colours?

UNDER SUSPICION!

A STIRRING LONG COMPLETE TALE OF JIMMY SILVER & CO., THE CHUMS OF ROOKWOOD.

By
Owen Conquest.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.**Peele's Little Joke!**

CYRIL PEELE, of the Rookwood Classical Fourth, grinned.

Gower chuckled. The two juniors were loafing in a window-seat at the end of an upper passage, near the big landing. They seemed to be listening, and to be highly entertained. Every now and then they glanced along the passage, upon which several doors opened.

Jimmy Silver, captain of the Fourth Form, came up the big staircase, and paused to glance at Peele and Gower. He knew the ways of the two black sheep pretty well. When Peele and Gower were specially "bucked," it was probable that somebody else had been made very uncomfortable. So Jimmy Silver paused to inquire.

"What's the joke?" he asked. "The new Froggy!" answered Gower, grinning.

"Monsieur Gaston?" asked Jimmy. "Yes. Hang on a few minutes, and I expect you'll hear him. No end of a joke," said Gower.

Jimmy Silver looked puzzled. "His baggage came up from the station a little while ago," explained Gower. "He's gone into his room to unpack. That's his room—the first door in the passage." He chuckled. "Peele took the key out of the lock before he came up. Now we've locked it on the outside. He's locked in. Ha, ha, ha!" Peele chuckled.

"He will have to ring for the maids to let him out," he said, "and they won't be able to find the key. Rather a jest on the new Froggy, what?"

Jimmy Silver did not smile. He frowned.

The "new Froggy" was a young French gentleman who had come to Rookwood to fill—temporarily—the place of Monsieur Monceau, the French master, who was away after an illness. As it happened, the "new Froggy" had distinguished himself, on his way to the school, by pulling Tubby Muffin out of the river, incidentally showing that he was a first-class swimmer. The Rookwood Fourth admired pluck, and they admired athletic prowess, therefore the "new Froggy" had quite jumped into popularity at once.

For which reason Jimmy Silver frowned at Peele. A practical joke on the French gentleman seemed to him quite superfluous. Peele noted his expression, and sneered.

"Of course, you're down on it, (THE POPULAR.—No. 490.

Silver," he said. "The fact is, old bean, you're too good for Rookwood, if not too good for this world altogether. I can see a sermon comin'. Get on with it."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gower. Jimmy Silver looked at Peele and Gower, greatly inclined to take those cheery young gentlemen by their collars and knock their heads together.

But he refrained. A practical joke on a foreign gentleman, who had arrived at the school only a few hours before, was not in accordance with Jimmy's ideas; but other fellows were not so thoughtful and considerate as "Uncle James." Peele's jests were not generally as harmless as this, too.

So the captain of the Fourth turned away instead of knocking together the grinning heads of Peele and Gower.

"Won't you hang on here?" chuckled Peele. "It will be no end entertainin' to hear the new Froggy yellin'."

Jimmy turned back. "You've got the key?" he asked. "Yes."

"Better go and unlock the door before he begins yelling," said Jimmy. "Monsieur Gaston isn't a tame rabbit like old Mossoo Monceau. He looks like a man who can take care of himself. You will very likely catch a Tartar in pulling his leg. That's a tip, Peele."

Cyril Peele shrugged his shoulders. "Thanks for nothin'," he answered.

"I fancy I can pull a Froggy's leg without runnin' much risk. I'm goin' to pull his leg in the French class, same as I used to with Mossoo Monceau. I'll jolly well make him an apple-pie bed to-night. I'll make him wish he was back in his own country. Bother him! What the thump do you think I care for a blessed French master? Yaroooh!"

Peele broke off with a sudden roar, as a finger and thumb fastened on his ear from behind.

The grip on his ear closed like a vice, and it startled Peele as well as hurt him.

In speaking to Jimmy Silver he had had his back to the bed-room passage, and he had seen and heard no one behind him. But someone had come along that passage and taken possession of Peele's ear with a grip of steel.

"Ow! Leggo, you cheeky rotter!" yelled Peele, spinning round, under the

impression that some humorous fellow had crept behind him to pull his ear.

The next moment Peele fairly staggered in amazement.

The grip was still on his ear, hard as steel, and Peele, twisting round, saw who held him. It was not a Rookwood fellow—it was not one of the masters. It was the new Froggy, the man he had locked in his bed-room.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.**Mysterious!**

MONSIEUR VICTOR GASTON compressed his finger and thumb on Peele's ear, and smiled genially at him.

Peele gasped, and Gower, backing away, stared at the Frenchman. Jimmy Silver grinned.

Apparently the practical jokers had not locked the new Froggy so safely in his room as they had supposed. At all events, here he was, and he had evidently heard Peele's boastful words as he came along the passage from his room.

"Comment?" said the young Frenchman, smiling.

"Ow!" gasped Peele. "How—how—how did you get out?" gasped Gower, quite losing his presence of mind in his utter amazement at seeing the Frenchman there.

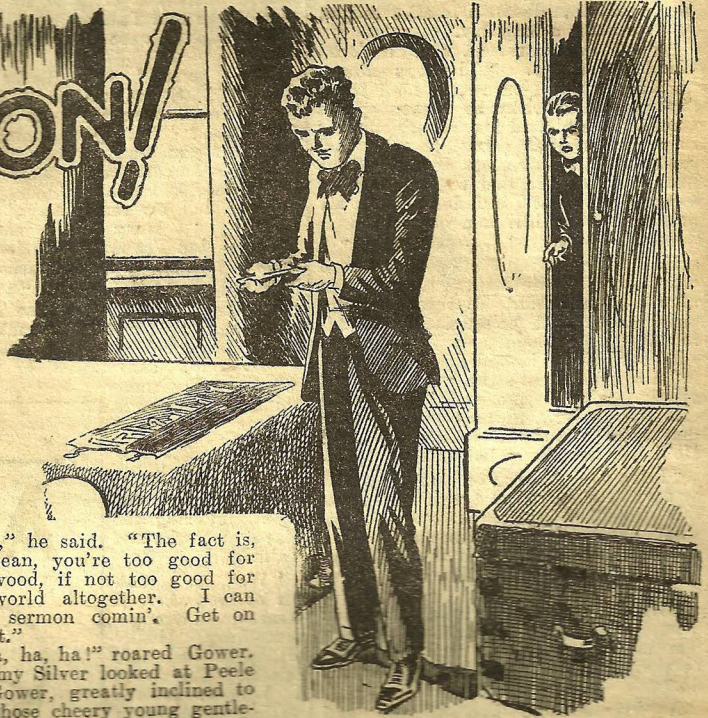
"You have played a little trick on me, isn't it?" said Monsieur Gaston, still smiling, and still compressing Peele's hapless ear between finger and thumb.

"Ow!" "One of you has the key to my room, I think?"

"Yow-ow! I—I'll give it to you! Leggo my ear!" wailed Peele.

"Give me the key!"

Peele jerked the key from his pocket, and handed it to the French master. Victor Gaston received it with his left hand—his right was occupied, as Peele's ear felt only too acutely.



"Merci!" said Victor Gaston genially.

"Now, my boy, what is your name?"

"Ow! Wow! Peele."

"Your Form?"

"Ow! The Fourth."

"Very good, Peele of the Fourth Form. You must not play these tricks on your master," said M. Gaston. "It is disrespectful, and it is discourteous to a stranger in the school. I hope you are sorry to have played this trick, Peele!"

"Ow! Yes! Leggo!"

"Very good! If you are sorry, I say no more about it," said Victor Gaston. "It is forgotten!"

He released Peele's ear, and crossed the landing to the staircase, and descended.

Cyril Peele rubbed his ear savagely. It was crimson, and felt as if it were burning. There was an unsuspected strength in the slim white fingers of Victor Gaston.

"Ow! The rotter!" breathed Peele.

"You've got off cheap," said Jimmy Silver, laughing. "Some masters would have reported you for a caning."

"Well, that's so," said Gower. "You might have been taken up before Mr. Dalton, Peele. The Froggy heard you give yourself away, you know."

Peele gritted his teeth.

"I'll make him sit up for it," he said. "The rotter! How did he get out of his room, I'd like to know?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jimmy Silver. "You shouldn't go in for practical jokes, Peele. You should leave japes to Putty. He can handle them. Of course, you couldn't have turned the key in the lock. Ha, ha, ha!"

Gower joined in the laugh. The joke had turned out very much against the practical joker, that was certain.

"I tell you I locked the door on the outside!" hissed Peele. "I heard the lock turn. It was locked safe enough!"

"Then he must have had another key," said Jimmy Silver.

"Rot! How could he have another key?"

"I suppose he was in the room when you locked the door on him?" asked the captain of the Fourth, laughing.

"We saw him go in," said Gower. "I say, I was sure that Peele had locked the door, too. I felt sure at the time. It's dashed queer how that dashed Froggy opened it again!"

"Well, he did," said Jimmy Silver, "and you'd better take my tip, Peele, and leave Froggy alone. He's too good for you."

Jimmy Silver walked away, smiling, leaving Peele still rubbing his ear and muttering vengeance. Jimmy went on to the end study in the Fourth Form passage, where he found Lovell and Raby and Newcome. He found his three chums with unusually grave faces, and looked at them inquiringly.

"Anything up?" he asked.

"You haven't heard?" asked Lovell.

"Heard what?"

"About the new Froggy."

"I've been over in Manders' House, speaking to Tommy Dodd about the cricket," said Jimmy Silver. "Anything new about Froggy?"

"Yes, rather!" said Raby. "There can't be anything in it, of course; but—well, it's jolly odd!"

"Well, what is it?" asked Jimmy. "He's a jolly good sort of man. He went into the river for Tubby Muffin like a shot when the fat duffer tumbled off the bridge. I think we're all going to like the new Froggy."

"It's Greely—" said Newcome.

"Mr. Greely, the jolly old master of the Fifth?" said Jimmy. "He hasn't

rowed with Froggy yet, has he? Hasn't Froggy realised what an important old joss he is? Has he treated him as if he were only a common or garden human being?"

The juniors grinned. Mr. Horace Greely, the master of the Fifth Form, was a gentleman of portly figure, fruity voice, and illimitable majesty of deportment. It was rumoured in Rookwood that little disagreements often occurred in Masters' Common-room, because the rest of the staff did not fully acknowledge the importance of Mr. Greely.

"I think Greely's going off his rocker, that's about what it is," said Arthur Edward Lovell. "Of course, we've only heard what the fellows are saying, and they seem to have heard it only from some talk among the masters. But it seems, too, that Hansom of the Fifth was going past the door of Masters' Common-room when it happened, and he heard some of it."

"Then what happened?" asked Jimmy Silver, mystified.

"Greely seems to have jumped on Froggy at once, when Mr. Dalton took him in to introduce him to the masters. He accused him—"

"Accused him!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver. "Of what, in goodness' name?"

"According to Hansom, he accused him of coming to Rookwood in a false name—"

"What?" gasped Jimmy.

"And of being a thief—"

"A—a—a thief?"

"A bank robber, or a cracksman, or something—"

"Great pip!"

"Man must be mad!" said Newcome. "As if the Head would let a master into Rookwood without going into his giddy character!"

"Greely's got fatty degeneration of the crumpet!" said Jimmy Silver. "That's certain, if this really happened. The Head must know Monsieur Gaston's history from the time he started teaching, and before, or he wouldn't have given him a job here."

"Of course!" said Raby.

"Only Greely went to the Head about it," said Lovell. "Putty saw him marching off to Dr. Chisholm's study, red as a turkey-cock. That shows there's something up. Of course, it's a silly mistake of some sort. Greely's seen somebody like him, or something of the kind, and we all know what a crass old ass Greely is!"

"Yes, rather!"

"The man's mad!" said Jimmy. "A French master in a school—and a giddy cracksman! My hat! Does he think Monsieur Gaston has brought a bag of tools here with him to crack the Head's safe! The awful ass!"

"Oh, Greely's ass enough for anything!" said Lovell. "The new Froggy is one of the best! Can't quite fancy him cracking safes and picking locks."

Jimmy started.

"Picking locks?" he repeated slowly. "He doesn't look as if that's in his line, does he?" chuckled Lovell.

Jimmy Silver did not answer. Only ten minutes ago Peele of the Fourth had been unexpectedly caught by the French master—whom he had believed safely locked in his room.

That strange coincidence struck Jimmy Silver almost like a blow. But he drove from his mind the disquieting thought. It was an odd coincidence, and nothing more.

"The Fourth are going to back up the new Froggy," went on Lovell. "He's a good chap, and I like him. Can't see old Greely jumping into deep water to

pull a fellow out, if you come to that. Gaston is the real goods, and this study is going to back him up."

To which the whole study agreed nem. con. The end study did not always endorse the opinions of Arthur Edward Lovell; but the Co. admitted that this was one of the rare occasions on which Lovell talked sense.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Facing the Music!

MR. RICHARD DALTON, the master of the Fourth, spoke to Monsieur Gaston, as the latter came down the stairs after his little encounter with Peele. Mr. Dalton was looking very grave, and there were traces of anger in his face. He had taken a liking to the French gentleman, and Mr. Greely's amazing outburst in Masters' Common-room had deeply annoyed as well as surprised him. Not for a moment did Richard Dalton think of crediting the amazing accusation Horace Greely had brought against the French master. He had never considered Mr. Greely bright intellectually. Now he wondered whether the man was an utter fool, that was all. Certainly no member of the Common-room attached much importance to Mr. Greely's statement.

"The Head would like to see you in his study, Monsieur Gaston," said the master of the Fourth. "Mr. Greely is there now."

"I am ready," said Gaston, with a smile.

"Believe me, no one takes any heed of Mr. Greely's extraordinary statements," said the Fourth Form master. "I am deeply sorry that you have had such a reception at Rookwood. I can only hope that Mr. Greely will recognise his mistake, and apologise."

"It is nothing," said Monsieur Gaston. "The good old gentleman has made a mistake. Doubtless he will see it sooner or later—sans doute, sans doute, mon ami."

"I trust so."

Mr. Dalton walked with the French master as far as the Head's door, and left him there. Many eyes were on them, especially on Monsieur Gaston; and the Form master was glad of a chance to show Rookwood generally that he, at least, disregarded the accusation that had been made. What had happened in Masters' Common-room was the talk of Rookwood by this time—and the general impression was that Mr. Greely, well-known to be a rather pompous ass, had exhibited himself as a greater ass than ever. Nevertheless, the incident concentrated attention upon Victor Gaston, and made him the one topic of conversation. Smythe of the Shell fixed his eyeglass curiously on him as he passed with Mr. Dalton; Snooks of the Second fairly stared at him, point-blank; Hansom and Talboys and several other Fifth-Formers glanced at him, more politely, perhaps, but just as curiously.

Victor Gaston seemed quite unaware of the general inspection.

He chatted cheerily as he walked down the corridors with Mr. Dalton, the cynosure of all eyes, but quite at ease in his manner. He knocked at the door of the Head's study, and entered, Mr. Dalton leaving him there.

Dr. Chisholm half rose, fixing his eyes upon Victor Gaston. Mr. Greely, who was standing, portly and important, beside the Head's writing-table, gave a slight snort. The calm and self-possessed manner of the Frenchman did not please him at all.

Right or wrong, Horace Greely was certain of the correctness of his information, and he regarded himself as fulfilling an important duty.

"Pray be seated, Monsieur Gaston," said the Head courteously. "You are aware, of course, that Mr. Greely has made a most extraordinary statement concerning you?"

"Quite so, sir."

"Kindly repeat what you have said," Mr. Greely.

"I am prepared to do so, sir, in monsieur's presence," said the Fifth Form master, in a deep voice. "I accuse him of being a man named Felix Lacroix, though he has come here calling himself Victor Gaston. I accuse him of being a bank-robber, or cracksman, by profession, well-known to the police of Paris. I accuse him of being a convict and a prison-breaker, as undoubtedly he should be in prison at the present moment. I do not mince my words, sir! I stand in the presence of a dangerous criminal, and I do not hesitate to tell him so to his face."

And Mr. Greely drew himself to his full height, and gave the Frenchman a stare of unutterable scorn and contempt. The Head knitted his brows.

The accusation was too astounding for him to believe it easily; but he knew that Mr. Greely was not likely to make such a serious statement lightly. The matter had to be sifted. But Mr. Greely's somewhat dramatic emphasis had a slightly irritating effect on the Head.

"You deny this, of course, Monsieur Gaston?"

The young man smiled slightly.

"Naturally, sir."

"Your name is Gaston?"

"My testimonials are in your hands, sir. My references, I presume, have been investigated. I can call a host of witnesses that I have always borne the name of Gaston, and that I have pursued my avocation as a French master for many years."

Dr. Chisholm nodded.

"No doubt! Have you any relation of the name of Lacroix, resembling you, for whom Mr. Greely may have mistaken you?"

"None."

"You have never—excuse the question—had any trouble with the law of your country?"

"Jamais! Never in my life, sir!"

Dr. Chisholm turned to the Fifth Form master.

"You persist in your belief, Mr. Greely—although I tell you that Monsieur Gaston's testimonials have been properly investigated?"

"I persist in stating what I know to be the fact, sir," said Mr. Greely. "Last year I was in Paris. A desire to observe the customs of the country in which I was sojourning, sir, led me to visit a French criminal court. I was present at the trial and condemnation of Felix Lacroix. The trial lasted several days—and I say the prisoner a dozen times at least, quite close at hand. That man is the man who stands here calling himself Victor Gaston."

"You say Lacroix was sent to prison?"

"Yes, sir—for three years."

"Then he would naturally be in prison still."

"Certainly he should be. Evidently, however, he has escaped, as he stands here."

The Head made a slight gesture.

"We cannot assume the point at issue, Mr. Greely. From what I know of Monsieur Gaston's career, it is cer-

tain that he has habitually used the name of Gaston, and that he has followed his present profession for many years. You are asking me to believe that at the same time he led a double life—following a criminal career under the name of Lacroix."

"So it would appear, sir, if you are certain that this man has any right at all to the name of Gaston."

"I am certain on that point."

"The register of my birth is accessible to investigation," said the Frenchman.

"My relatives in Paris may be questioned."

"Quite so."

Mr. Greely seemed a little taken aback.

"The man's name may be really Gaston, sir," he said after a pause. "In that case, he has led a double life. Undoubtedly—beyond the shadow of a doubt—he is the man I saw sentenced to

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prison under the name of Felix Lacroix."

"I cannot but believe, Mr. Greely, that you have been deceived by a chance resemblance. Nevertheless, the matter is so serious that it cannot rest here. I shall have an inquiry made as to whether the man Lacroix is still in prison in France. If he should prove to be so, you will admit that you have made a mistake."

"Certainly, sir. You will find that the man Lacroix is no longer in prison—I am certain of that," said Mr. Greely confidently.

"You have no objection to offer, Monsieur Gaston?"

"None, sir! I have never heard of Lacroix, and whether he is in prison or not is no concern of mine."

"We will, then, leave the matter at that," said the Head. "But I will say, Monsieur Gaston, that I feel assured that Mr. Greely has been misled, and that you are exactly what you assume

to be. If I entertained any doubt on the subject I should be compelled to ask you to retire from Rookwood during the inquiry."

"I am prepared to retire if it be your wish, monsieur."

"Not at all. I have said that I do not credit this story. I am only sorry that so unfortunate an accusation was ever made," said the Head graciously.

"Mr. Greely has done his duty in informing me of what he believes to be the truth. But I am assured that he is mistaken. I need not detain you any longer, Monsieur Gaston."

"Thank you, sir."

Victor Gaston retired from the study. There was a deep grunt from the Fifth Form master. Dr. Chisholm fixed his eyes upon him coldly.

"You allow that man to remain at Rookwood, sir?" broke out the Fifth Form master excitedly.

"I have said so, Mr. Greely."

"But the danger—think, sir—reflect one moment—"

"I am not in the habit of acting without reflection, Mr. Greely," said the Head, in his most chilling manner. "I regret that you have not been equally judicious."

"Sir!"

"You should have given me this information in strict privacy, instead of accusing that young gentleman before the whole Common-room, Mr. Greely. Then nothing need have been known in the school. Now, I fear, this unpleasant incident will become the talk of Rookwood, for a time, at least."

"But, sir, I—I recognise the man—I know—"

Dr. Chisholm raised his hand.

"You thought you recognised him—you supposed you knew!" he corrected.

"I am certain, Mr. Greely, that you have made a most egregious blunder."

"Sir!" stuttered the Fifth Form master.

"A most egregious blunder!" repeated the Head icily. "The accusation is absurd on the face of it."

"I stake my position at Rookwood on the truth of what I have stated, sir!" gasped Mr. Greely. "Investigate—inquire—if it shall prove that Felix Lacroix is still in prison, I will resign my position as master of the Fifth Form, and leave Rookwood."

"That would follow as a matter of course," said the Head coldly. "Only absolute proof of what you have said, Mr. Greely, could possibly justify your making such an unheard-of accusation. You have chosen to take the risk, and you must abide by the result."

Mr. Greely was quite purple, as he rolled from the Head's study. Possibly, for the moment, he felt a slight regret that he had taken it upon himself to expose a scoundrel—for that was how he regarded the matter. If he were mistaken—

After all, to err is human. Admitting even the remote possibility of error, Mr. Greely had acted rather hastily. It had not even occurred to his pompous and somewhat slow mind that the Frenchman might succeed in vindicating himself—that the accusation, whether mistaken or true, might fall to the ground. The result placed Mr. Greely in a most unpleasant position.

Jimmy Silver & Co. came under Victor Gaston's hands the next day, in the French class.

Probably M. Gaston drew the conclusion that the Fourth Formers of Rookwood were particularly well-behaved young gentlemen. For his class were good—very good—remarkably

good. There was no ragging in class—such as Monsieur Monceau, in his time, had had to contend with. There was attention, there was respect, there was even some interest in the instruction given—in fact, that class constituted a record for good behaviour.

M. Gaston was very pleased with his pupils. He did not know that Jimmy Silver & Co. had laid down the law on the subject, and solemnly warned the Fourth that Gaston was to be given no trouble. The Fistical Four had determined to "back up" the new Froggy, and as usual, the Form followed their lead.

All Rookwood, of course, knew by that time of what M. Gaston had been accused; and all Rookwood agreed in laughing the accusation to scorn. Certainly, it was difficult to connect the handsome, frank face of Victor Gaston with the thought of crime.

Indeed, in one day Victor Gaston had won more popularity than old Monsieur Monceau could have gained in a dozen terms. He did not speak a comic variety of English like many French masters—he did not pinch a spare figure into a tight frock-coat shabby at the seams. He was a young man, he was handsome, he was athletic, he had shown that he was a top-hole swimmer and a plucky fellow. Indeed, Arthur Edward Lovell declared that anybody might have taken him for an Englishman—which in Lovell's opinion was the highest compliment that could have been paid to anybody.

Peele had a natural inclination to be "against" anybody whom Jimmy Silver & Co. favoured. He was against anybody who wanted him to work. And he did not like having his ear tweaked. So from the beginning Peele was up against the new Froggy. Mr. Greely's story was too useful a weapon to be neglected by the cad of the Fourth. Probably Peele had not the slightest faith in it; but he wanted to believe it, all the more because he dared not "rag" in the French class, after the warning from the Fistical Four. So Peele made the most of the story, and believed it as much as he could.

He did not forget the incident of the locked door. He related that incident in the studies and the passages. According to Peele, M. Gaston had been safely locked in his room, yet he had opened the door from inside, without a key. He had picked the lock, according to Peele; which showed—again according to Peele—that old Greely, ass as he was, had got it right this time!

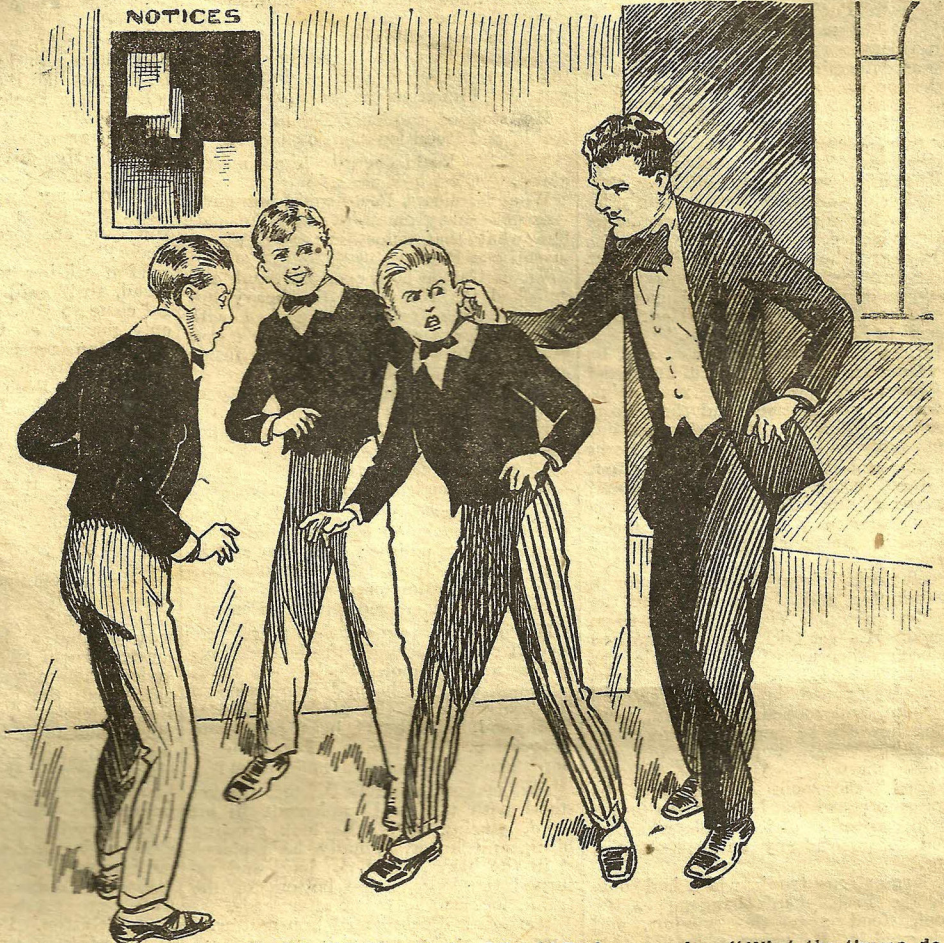
But as day followed day, and Victor

Gaston obviously showed no sign of the cloven hoof, Peele found fewer listeners to his tirades on the subject. Indeed, as the days passed Victor Gaston seemed to be winning golden opinions from all sorts of people; and even Mr. Greely possibly felt some misgivings.

The new French master was popular with his classes, liked in the Common-room, and on quite cordial terms with the Head. Only Mr. Greely was distant

study. Jimmy Silver & Co. were on the cricket ground that afternoon, playing a Form match with the Shell. Most of the fellows were out of doors; but there was no holiday for Cyril Peele that afternoon. An imposition from the new French master kept him indoors.

Peele's detention was just as well, so far as Cuthbert Gower was concerned. In Peele's company, he would probably have smoked cigarettes and played nap-



PEELE ASKS FOR TROUBLE! "Bother Gaston!" said Peele savagely. "What the thump do you think I care for a blessed French master—yarooooop!" Peele broke off with a sudden roar as a finger and thumb fastened on his ear. He swung round and found himself face to face with Monsieur Gaston! (See Chapter 1.)

and thunderous; and Mr. Greely realised that he was regarded on all sides as a pompous and blundering ass. Which was a distinctly unpleasant realisation for so majestic a gentleman as Mr. Greely, and helped to keep alive his conviction that he was in the right, and that time would show.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Startling Discovery!

"COMIN' down to the cricket?" asked Gower.

Peele shook his head savagely.

"Can't! I've got a book of the Henriade to write out for Froggy," he said. "The rotter is always down on me."

"Well, you're cheeky, you know," said Gower. "I can't see that the man's a bad sort. Why don't you let him alone?"

"Mind your own bizney!" snarled Peele.

Gower grinned and walked out of the

in the shady corner behind the chapel. Without Peele, he went down to watch the cricket, which was certainly much better for him.

Peele ground at his lines with a moody, lowering brow.

He had a heavy impot, and he deserved it. Peele, slacking in the French class, had been called out to write a sentence off-hand on the blackboard. He had written, "Monsieur est cambrioleur, n'est-ce-pas."

That direct and impudent reference to Mr. Greely's story made some of the juniors grin. M. Gaston had stared at the words in great surprise, and most of the fellows had expected him to lick Peele, or take him to the Head. Peele, indeed, as soon as he had been guilty of the brazen impudence of practically calling the French master a thief to his face, had trembled a little for the result.

But Victor Gaston had simply given him an imposition, much to his relief.

Now Peele was spending the sunny afternoon writing out lines from the

"Henriade." Peele hated poetry; he hated French poetry more than English. He hated work; in fact, that afternoon, Peele felt as though he hated everybody and everything. Certainly he hated Victor Gaston. Healthy fellows like Jimmy Silver, keeping themselves fit and cheerful, had no room in their hearts for hatred or bitterness or malice. But a weedy slacker, seedy with smoking at too early an age, found solace in nursing grudges.

As even Peele had a conscience, he had to find some reason for hating a man whom nearly everybody liked. So he was determined to believe the worst of Victor Gaston; and the curious incident of the locked door was evidence enough for him. To Peele's mind, by this time, Victor Gaston was a deep and wary rascal, leading a double life, deceiving everybody except—Peele. Possibly Peele was right; but certainly he came to his conclusion on very inadequate evidence.

He heard the shouts from the cricket field, through the open window of his study, as he dearly laboured over line after line. Never had the "Henriade" seemed to him such utter "rot."

But he was finished at last, and he rose from his table feeling stiff and tired and savage-tempered and revengeful. It was not yet tea-time, and the fellows were not coming in. Peele slouched out of his study and found the Fourth Form passage and studies utterly deserted. He stared from the passage window, and his eyes gleamed at the sight of Victor Gaston, who could be seen in the quadrangle in conversation with Richard Dalton.

Peele looked from the window for a few minutes, and then turned into the corridor on which Victor Gaston's room opened. His last trick in that room had not been very successful; but Peele was feeling too savage to care much about risks. He opened the door and entered the room, and looked about him, wondering how far he might venture to go in making things unpleasant for the French master. After all, if he "ragged" the room there would be nothing to prove that he had been there; and in case of suspicion Peele was prepared to put in any amount of hard lying.

A large strong trunk, which had come with the Frenchman's baggage to the school, stood near the window, and Peele eyed it. Believing, as he did, that Mr. Greely was right, and that Victor Gaston was, or had been, a cracksmen, Peele wondered whether any tools of his trade had been brought to Rookwood with him. If so, it was probable that they were in that stout trunk; and Peele tried the lock. But it was secure; Victor Gaston kept the trunk safely locked.

"If the brute only left it open some day—" murmured Peele. "Or if he left his keys about—"

Peele began to explore the room on the chance of finding keys. He was going through the pockets of some coats hanging in the wardrobe, when he heard a step at the door and the handle turning.

For an instant Peele's heart stood still.

He was caught!

But he was quick to act. The French master had come up to his room; he was at the door, and Peele had not a second to spare. He whipped into the big wardrobe, and drew the door partly shut. He had no time quite to close it; he dared not let it be in motion when the Frenchman came in, and the bedroom door was already opening. In a state of terror, Peele crouched among

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the coats, fervently hoping that Victor Gaston would not come to the wardrobe, and that he would not stay long, anyhow.

With the wardrobe door ajar, Peele could see the man. He was struck by the expression on Gaston's face.

Victor Gaston locked the bedroom door. That looked as if he meant to stay, and Peele suppressed a groan. Then he walked to and fro in the room, his face lined with thought and with a strange sadness in it. Peele wondered what he was thinking of. For ten minutes at least the Frenchman paced the room, unconscious of the uneasy eyes watching him from the wardrobe.

He stopped suddenly before the big trunk, and stood looking down at it.

"Soit!" Peele heard him mutter aloud. "C'est fini, alors."

What he meant Peele could not guess—except that something was finished; but what that something was was a mystery to Peele.

Victor Gaston bent over the trunk and unlocked it. He raised the heavy lid, revealing the tray inside packed with shirts and other raiment. Peele's eyes glinted. He was going to see the inside of the trunk, at all events.

Victor Gaston lifted out the tray of clothes and laid it aside. From the bottom of the trunk he took a leather bag.

This he laid on the table.

Peele watched him breathlessly.

The bag was unlocked and opened, and the Frenchman took out something—an article of polished steel, that caught the sunlight from the window and gleamed and glimmered.

Peele almost choked with excitement.

He could see vaguely that there were several such articles in the leather bag. It was a set of tools—Peele knew that; but such tools as he had never seen in the workshop on the Modern Side at Rookwood. His heart beat almost to suffocation. Was it a set of cracksmen's implements? What else could it be?

For several minutes Victor Gaston stood with the steel implement in his hand, staring at it, his look growing black and bitter. Finally he replaced it in the bag, locked the bag, and returned the bag to the bottom of the trunk, locking the trunk afterwards.

"Ce soir!" Peele heard him mutter.

That evening! What was the Frenchman planning for that evening? What could it be but an act of burglary, after that examination of his implements? What else could it mean? What French master ever came to a school with a set of steel tools hidden in his trunk? If the Head—or Mr. Greely—could have seen them—

Peele breathed more freely when Victor Gaston crossed to the door, unlocked it, and went out. A sense of danger had come upon him. His suspicions of Victor Gaston were verified now; a less suspicious fellow than Peele might have been convinced by what he had seen.

The Frenchman's steps died away down the corridor. Peele emerged from the wardrobe trembling in every limb, partly from excitement, partly from fear.

He was not thinking of ragging the room now. He only wanted to get safely out of it without leaving a trace of his visit.

He listened at the door; all was silent without, and the junior ventured at last to slip out into the corridor. Once there, he scuttled away like a scared rabbit.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

At Last!

MR. HORACE GREELY sat in the armchair in his study with a frown on his brow.

It was tea-time, but Mr. Greely was in no hurry to roll away to Common-room.

There was a tap at the door, and Mr. Greely almost snorted out:

"Come in!"

It was Peele of the Fourth that entered.

Mr. Greely eyed him morosely. He had nothing to do with the Fourth, and he did not like Peele.

But when Peele poured out his story breathlessly, Mr. Greely sat bolt upright, staring at him and listening intently. He did not interrupt Cyril Peele once.

"Upon my word!" he ejaculated, when the junior had finished. "You—you—you are certain of what you say, Peele?"

"I'm willing to swear it before the Head, sir!" said Peele. "I—I thought I'd come to you, sir, because you're the only master at Rookwood who knows what Monsieur Gaston really is."

Mr. Greely smiled genially.

"Quite so, Peele! You did right! In speaking to the Head, I shall see that your admission—that you intended what you call a 'rag' in the French master's room, is not held against you. The importance of this discovery outweighs such a trifle. Leave the matter in my hands, Peele. I must consider this."

"Yes sir."

Peele left the study a smile on his face. In Peele's opinion, Victor Gaston was finished at Rookwood.

Mr. Greely sat long in thought. He was justified at last. In the French master's room existed proof of his accusation. There was no need to wait for news from the French police regarding Felix Lacroix. The proof was at hand. He did not think for a moment of doubting Cyril Peele's story. The junior had plainly been in deep earnest, and must know, of course, that he would be taken before the Head to repeat his story.

Mr. Greely rose at last, and left his study with a feeling of elation. He trod ponderously down the corridor to Masters' Common-room. Most of the staff were there at tea, among them Victor Gaston. Peele, from the corner of the passage, watched him, and knew that the climax was coming. Then Peele scudded away to the Fourth Form passage, and looked in at the end study, where the Fistical Four were at tea.

"There's going to be a shindy in Common-room!" grinned Peele. "It will be worth watchin'. I'm givin' you the tip. Greely's goin' it."

"Gammon!"

"What will you bet that a peeler won't be sent for to take Gaston away in handcuffs?" jeered Peele.

Peele dodged away without waiting for a reply to that question, just in time to escape a cushion that whizzed out of the end study. Jimmy Silver & Co. looked at one another.

"It's all rot!" said Lovell. But he spoke uneasily, he hardly knew why.

"Let's go down, anyhow."

And the Fistical Four left their tea unfinished, and went downstairs, and headed, as they found that a good many other fellows were heading, for Masters' Common-room.

THE END.

(You'll enjoy reading next week's splendid long tale of Rookwood, entitled: "THE FRENCH MASTER'S TRIUMPH!")