

X JOIN THE BIRTHDAY **GIFT** CLUB TO-DAY X

# The POPULAR

Week Ending  
June 30th,  
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New Series  
No. 492.

EVERY  
TUESDAY.

2<sup>d</sup>



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## THE SECRET OF THE FRENCH MASTER!

Monsieur Gaston, the new French master, is liked by practically everyone at Rookwood, and none will believe the story that he is an impostor. But they are destined to find out their mistake!



A GRIPPING LONG COMPLETE TALE OF  
JIMMY SILVER & CO., THE CHUMS OF ROOK-  
WOOD.

By Owen Conquest.

### THE FIRST CHAPTER. Mr. Greely's Last Word!

"SIR!" Mr. Greely, master of the Fifth, enunciated that syllable in his most stately and ponderous manner.

Dr. Chisholm, headmaster of Rookwood, frowned.

He did not want another interview with Mr. Greely; in fact, he objected to it very much. And he was due in ten minutes to take the Sixth Form in Greek.

"Really——" he said restively.

Mr. Greely had entered the Head's study with a firm tread. His manner, always ponderous, was unusually determined.

"Sir, I claim a few minutes of your time!"

"Mr. Greely, I am busy now," said the Head. "As you can see, I am occupied with accounts."

Mr. Greely could see that. Books and papers were on the Head's table, the door of the iron safe behind the Head's chair stood half-open. But accounts or no accounts, Horace Greely had come to the Head's study to say his say, and he intended to say it.

"A few minutes, sir, seem to me little to ask, when I am leaving Rookwood to-day," said Mr. Greely.

"There is nothing further to discuss——"

"I am bound, sir, to say a last word before I go. I have accused your new French master, Victor Gaston, of being a cracksmen and bank robber, whom I saw condemned in a Paris law court last year, under the name of Felix Lacroix. He denies it—you do not believe me."

"Nobody believes so wild and foolish an accusation, Mr. Greely," said the Head tartly. "Victor Gaston is a known man—his testimonials are quite in order. But we have gone into this before; I refuse to reopen the matter!"

"I desire to draw your attention, sir, to the fact that the man Lacroix is known to have escaped from prison in France."

"A matter of no moment, sir."

"A matter of great moment, to my mind, sir! My conviction remains unshaken that Victor Gaston and Felix Lacroix are one and the same."

"Nonsense!"

Mr. Greely breathed hard and deep.

Dr. Chisholm regarded him, over his pince-nez, coldly, icily.

"There is nothing more to be said, Mr. Greely. You accused Victor Gaston on the ground of some chance resemblance to a man you saw once or twice a year ago. Instead of speaking to me privately on the subject you allowed this to become the talk of the school. Later, on a tale told you by a junior boy, you accused him of having burglarious implements in his trunk. The trunk was examined—nothing of the kind was revealed. I warned you, seriously, that if your second accusation fell to the ground I should expect you to resign your position here—the situation had become intolerable. I was prepared to allow you to leave at the end of the term, but yesterday, sir, you allowed yourself to lose your temper, and actually to raise your hand against another master in the school. You struck Victor Gaston in the sight of a crowd of Rookwood boys——"

"I——"  
Dr. Chisholm raised his hand.

"Nothing can excuse such an outbreak—such a scandalous outbreak. It is imperative that you should leave Rookwood at once—to-day, in fact. I have nothing to add."

Mr. Greely's purple face became more purple.

"I did not come here, sir, to ask for consideration!" he boomed; "nothing was farther from my thoughts. It will be a blow to me to leave Rookwood—a heavy blow. But I ask for no consideration."

"Then why this unnecessary interview?" snapped the Head.

"I feel it my duty, before I go, to warn you once more, sir, in the most solemn manner, that you are entertaining a dangerous character in this school—that you are nursing a viper, sir, who will sting you in return," said Mr. Greely, in his most impressive manner.

"Nonsense!"

Mr. Greely made a gurgling sound. It was really hard to have his impressive warning characterised as nonsense.

"Is that all you have to say, sir?" he ejaculated.

"That is all."

"You persist in trusting this man—this scoundrel who has led a double life—openly as a teacher of French, secretly as a skilful and dangerous cracksmen."

"Nonsense!"

"Your own safe, sir, is the man's

object here. I am convinced that he waits only till he can discover that there is plunder worth his trouble. Strong as your safe is, sir, Felix Lacroix will open it with ease. At his trial, sir, it was mentioned that he possesses a wonderful skill—that no safe, howsoever cleverly constructed, presents any difficulty to him. Some night, sir, you will be robbed, and the man you know as Victor Gaston will disappear."

Dr. Chisholm made an angry gesture.

"I have heard such tirades as this before from you, Mr. Greely, and I desire to hear no more," he said. "I shall be gratified, sir, if you will quit Rookwood at the earliest convenient moment."

"I have done my duty," said Mr. Greely. "Some later day, sir, you will remember my warning."

With that the master of the Fifth Form strode ponderously from the room.

Dr. Chisholm frowned impatiently. He glanced at his watch and turned to his papers again; but there was another knock at his study door. It was Mr. Richard Dalton, the master of the Fourth Form, who entered.

"Well, Mr. Dalton?"

"You asked me to see you, sir, with regard to taking the Fifth Form, as Mr. Greely is leaving so suddenly," said Richard Dalton.

"Oh, yes, quite so—quite so! Mr. Greely has just been here, repeating once more his absurd statements concerning Monsieur Gaston. It seems to be quite an obsession."

"Quite an obsession, sir," said Mr. Dalton. "I am glad that he has not succeeded in shaking your faith in Victor Gaston."

"Not in the least," said the Head. "The story is too absurd for a moment's attention. Bless my soul! It is now time that I was in the Sixth Form-room; but we must arrange about the Fifth. It is very awkward that Mr. Greely is leaving so suddenly; but after the scandalous scene in the quadrangle yesterday it would be impossible to allow him to remain after to-day. Please come with me to the Fifth Form-room, Mr. Dalton, the Sixth must wait a few minutes."

"Very well, sir!"

Dr. Chisholm, a little perturbed, walked from the study with the Fourth Form master. The sudden loss of a

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member of the staff necessitated several changes in the school time-table, and the Head detested any departure from the normal. Fortunately, Mr. Dalton was able to take the Fifth; and the Fourth, his own Form, could be allotted to other masters for a time—"whacked out" among the staff, as Mornington had described it.

The Head was with Mr. Dalton in the Fifth Form-room for a few minutes, and when he left it he went direct to the Sixth, where he was already late. And for the time, in the stress of other occupations, he did not remember that Mr. Greely had interrupted him while the door of his safe stood open—that he had omitted to close and lock it before leaving the study. That little incident was destined to have far-reaching consequences.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.

**Peele Looks for Trouble—and finds it!**

**J**IMMY SILVER & CO. greeted Monsieur Victor Gaston cheerily as he came into Class-room No. 2 to take his class.

"Good-morning, sir!"

"Bonjour, monsieur!" added Lovell.

"Good-morning, my boys!" said Victor Gaston, with a pleasant smile.

The young Frenchman had a very agreeable smile, and he had a way of making himself liked by his boys. Even Peele would have admitted that Victor Gaston was an improvement on old Monsieur Monceau. Most of the Fourth hoped that Monsieur Monceau, now away for his health, would remain permanently in "La belle France," and leave his place to Victor Gaston. They liked old Mossoo in a way, but they liked and respected and admired the "new Froggy."

Jimmy Silver & Co. and the rest of the Fourth, Classical and Modern, were on their best behaviour. They knew that, in the present deranged state of the time-table they were "in" for extra French—many extra French classes were to fill up the time Mr. Dalton could not spend with his Form. But they resolved to bear it with fortitude.

There was only one fellow in the class who was bent on trouble, and that was Cyril Peele.

Peele was in his blackest temper.

He detested Victor Gaston—partly because the French master expected him to work, and had little mercy on slackers, partly because he had expected to be able to "rag" the new Froggy as he had been used to rag the "old Froggy," and that expectation had been disappointed. Victor Gaston was not the man to allow rags in class, as Peele had discovered to his cost.

But, apart from malice, Peele had really some grounds for his bitterness. He had spied on the French master, and had seen the contents of the trunk in Victor Gaston's room. He knew, from the evidence of his own eyes, that in that trunk there had been a set of steel implements—though they had not come to light when the search was made. He had informed Mr. Greely; and Mr. Greely, nothing doubting, had taken the story to the Head. How the Frenchman had escaped the danger Peele did not know. It had dawned on him that perhaps there was a false bottom to the trunk; and in Gaston's absence he had taken the desperate step of smashing in the bottom of the trunk, hoping to find there the hidden cracksmen's tools. He had found, indeed, a cavity in the trunk, but it was empty. There was nothing there to

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cast suspicion on Victor Gaston—nothing.

Peele was puzzled, perplexed, enraged. It was not likely to occur to his mind that a man who had been a cracksmen, who had led a double life, might have repented—that repentance had led him to cast away the implements of his nefarious trade just in time to save himself from discovery.

But Peele knew—he knew that Mr. Greely's accusation was true—and yet the man had escaped. Peele had been flogged. He deserved his flogging for having played the spy. But that was no consolation to him. No one in the school believed a word of his story—his character for untruthfulness was too well known. No one doubted that Mr. Greely's accusation had put the idea into his head, and that he had invented his story from beginning to end. It was hard, perhaps, but Cyril Peele had only himself to thank. It was well known that he never hesitated to lie when a lie would serve his turn. He was, in fact, a dog with a bad name.

Victor Gaston took no special note of him. But when the juniors handed in their exercises the French master found that Peele had adorned his paper with a little drawing.

Peele was clever at drawing, as at many things. He could have made his mark in the Form easily enough had he not been an incorrigible slacker.

His little sketch represented a man being led away between two gendarmes. The French policemen were drawn with a comic touch—and the man who walked between them, with handcuffs on his wrists, bore a distinct likeness to Victor Gaston.

The French master looked at the paper, and a grim expression came over his handsome face.

"Peele!"

"Hallo!" said Peele.

Arthur Edward Lovell gave Peele a glare.

"You are not respectful, my boy," said Victor Gaston mildly. "You must not answer me in that manner, Peele."

Peele grunted.

"You have drawn this?" said Victor Gaston, holding up the paper for all the class to see.

"Yes, sir!" said Peele.

"It is intended, I suppose, as an insult to me, Peele," said Victor Gaston quietly.

"Oh, no, sir," said Peele airily. "I had finished my exercise, sir, so I thought I would draw a little. I didn't want to waste time, sir."

Some of the Fourth grinned at the idea of Cyril Peele not wishing to waste time.

"I shall not deal with this incident myself, Peele," said Victor Gaston in the same quiet manner. "But there must be an end to this. You will take this paper, as it is, to the headmaster, and hand it to him. Tell him I have sent you. Dr. Chisholm will deal with you as he thinks fit."

Peele came out sullenly before the class. He took the paper, and left the class-room with it in his hand.

In the passage outside he shook his fist at the closed door, and tramped away savagely.

He knew that the Head would be in the Sixth Form-room at that time, but he did not choose to go there. He made his way to Dr. Chisholm's study.

He was in no hurry to take his licking. And by affecting to believe that he was to wait for the Head in his

"1928" ANNUALS AS BIRTHDAY

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study, at least he would escape the rest of the French lesson.

He entered the Head's study with a sullen, scowling face. The Sixth did not come out till twelve, so he had at least twenty minutes to wait. Peele looked round the study with mischief in his look. He was quite ready to "rag" even the Head's study if he could do so without danger of being found out. He noticed that the big door of the iron safe was open, and the key in the lock, and crossed over to it to peer in. Peele had never seen that safe open before, and he was curious.

There was nothing in it, however, to interest him. Bundles of paper on the shelves, and two or three locked dispatch-boxes and similar things.

Peele wondered viciously whether he should venture to disturb the papers; undoubtedly it would give the Head plenty of trouble if the bundles were unfastened and the papers mixed in a heap on the floor of the safe.

He grinned at the thought.

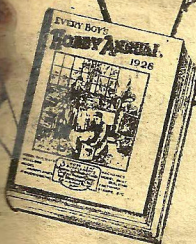
The Head was away till twelve. He had a quarter of an hour. He needed only a few minutes—a couple of minutes—to do almost irreparable damage to the Head's orderly collection of papers. Then he could march into the Sixth Form-room to report himself, and re-

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turn to the French class. Who was to know that he had ever been in the Head's study at all?

"Safe as houses!" muttered Peele. He remembered the flogging he had received in that study the day before and gritted his teeth. He reached into the safe and seized bundle after bundle of papers, tearing them loose and throwing them down in a heap. Among them he found a bundle of banknotes, and another bundle of currency notes, and he scattered them as recklessly as the rest.

In one minute he had done enough to give the Head hours and hours of laborious sorting. He jerked out the key of the safe, and added it to the heap, covering it with more and more papers. The lock closed with a spring, and if the Head had no second key he was likely to have some difficulty in getting the safe open, if Peele closed it. And he meant to close it when he had finished.

"Serve him right for leaving the safe open and the key in the lock!" murmured Peele. "Careless of him—jolly careless! I've been caned for carelessness myself—this is the Head's turn!"

And he threw down another scatter-

ing bundle of paper, with a chuckle, into the bottom of the safe.

His chuckle died away suddenly. There was a step in the corridor—immediately afterwards a hand on the doorknob.

Peele's heart stood still. He knew that step; and he knew, too, that no one but the Head was likely to come to the room.

He was caught! For a second he was sick with fear. What had he done? Why had the Head come there—why, when he never left the Sixth till twelve, and it still wanted a quarter of an hour to noon?

The study door was opening. Peele, desperate, scared out of his wits plunged into the ample space of the big safe. He drew the iron door close after him, not quite shutting it. He was safe from observation there; and if only the Head would go—

He heard footsteps in the study. They approached the safe. They stopped. Peele's heart beat quickly, almost to suffocation. If the Head drew the iron door open he was revealed, and the consequences of what he had done were inevitable. Flogging—expulsion—the end of all things for him at Rookwood School. Peele barely breathed. He heard muttered words.

"Bless my soul! I certainly thought that I had left the key in the lock; but it is not here!"

Click! Dr. Chisholm did not pull the iron door open. He clicked it shut!

The spring lock closed. Peele was in utter darkness. For some moments he rejoiced. He was undiscovered, and the Head would go!

And then— With a rush of terror Peele realised that he was locked in the safe, unventilated—in an iron prison from which there was no escape! That rush of terrified realisation overcame him; he reeled, and leaned weakly on the iron wall. Locked in—locked in, without light, without air—to die if he were not released in time!

Flogging, expulsion, anything mattered little now, in comparison with that! He had hoped that the Head would go; now he prayed that he had not gone. With desperate fists Peele beat furiously on the iron door and shrieked for help.

**THE THIRD CHAPTER.**

**In the Shadow of Death!**

**"D**R. CHISHOLM—"

The Head frowned. He was at lunch; and when the Head was at lunch it was a service of some peril to disturb him.

Mr. Dalton stepped into the dining-room in the Head's house, his face somewhat pale, a very unusual agitation in his manner. He did not even notice the Head's frown.

"What is it, Mr. Dalton?" asked Dr. Chisholm icily.

"I am afraid it is very serious, sir. May I ask whether you left the door of your safe unlocked this morning?"

"I happened to do so for a short time. But I do not see—"

"I greatly fear, sir, that a foolish boy has, for some reason I cannot even guess, entered the safe and is shut up within it," said Mr. Dalton. "It is Peele of the Fourth—"

"A very troublesome boy," said the Head, frowning. "I had occasion to punish him yesterday, as you know. Is it possible that he has ventured to play

tricks in my study? I can scarcely believe it."

"He has not come in to dinner, sir, and cannot be found," said Mr. Dalton; "and I hear from Monsieur Gaston that he was sent to you in third lesson—"

"He did not come to me," said the Head.

"He has not been seen since he left the class-room," said Mr. Dalton. "But something living is undoubtedly shut up in the safe in your study, sir. Sounds can be heard—"

"Well, upon my word!" exclaimed the Head angrily, as he rose to his feet. "This is too much! Probably, however, it is some animal that crept into the safe while the door was left open this morning. The boy could have no reason for entering it."

"Only he seems to be missing, sir."

"I will come, Mr. Dalton." Dr. Chisholm followed the Fourth Form, master. In Head's corridor there was a crowd of Rookwood fellows, in a buzz of excited talk. Most of the masters were already in the Head's study—the door stood wide open. The alarm had spread all over the school.

The Head frowned portentously as he swept through the crowd and entered his study. He could hear now the sounds that told of a prisoner in the iron safe—a dull beating, hammering sound, that came faint and muffled through thick metal. Amid the sound of beating other almost indistinguishable sounds could be heard—sounds of a voice deadened by the thick iron, but whether a human voice or not it was hard to say.

Mr. Mooney, the master of the Shell, was tapping on the iron door, apparently as a message of hope to the individual shut up inside. He stepped back as the Head appeared.

Seldom had the Head looked so angry. This disturbance in the sacred precincts of his study roused his deepest ire.

"Really, gentlemen—" he almost barked.

"It seems that a junior is shut up in the safe, sir," said Bulkeley of the Sixth.

"Nonsense!"

"H'm!"

"Really, sir—" said Mr. Dalton.

"I do not suppose so for one moment!" exclaimed Dr. Chisholm.

"Why should a boy enter the safe?"

"But you can hear, sir," murmured Mr. Mooney.

"It unfortunately happens that I left the safe door unlocked for a short time this morning." The Head was deeply annoyed at having his act of carelessness brought to light in this public way.

"Doubtless some dog wandered in."

"The voice sounds to me human, sir," said Bulkeley. "And Peele of the Fourth certainly is missing!"

"Nonsense! He is a most troublesome boy, and is probably playing truant!" snapped the Head.

"At all events, sir, you have the key of the safe, and the matter may be speedily set at rest," said Mr. Dalton quietly.

"Undoubtedly! But I see no reason whatever for all this disturbance—I may say uproar!"

Silence followed the Head's remark. He took a bunch of keys from a pocket, and began to examine them, to pick out the key of the safe.

Having examined them, he frowned, and examined them again.

Masters and boys waited in silent tension. The strange sounds from

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behind the iron door of the safe continued. But no one doubted—save, perhaps, the Head—that, vague as the sounds were, they came from a human being.

Knock, knock, knock!  
The corridor swarmed, and most faces were pale. Almost all Rookwood seemed to have crowded to the spot.

For a fellow shut up in the iron safe was doomed to inevitable death by suffocation, unless he was released in time. And much time had elapsed before the sounds had been heard. A fellow passing the study, after the Head had gone to lunch, had first heard them, and called attention to the strange circumstances. Then the crowd had gathered, and the alarm had spread.

"You have the key, sir?" exclaimed Mr. Dalton.

"I—I should have it here."  
The Head's tone and manner were rather uncertain.

"Dr. Chisholm. If it is Peele in the safe, he must have been there some time—he may be already sinking into suffocation! For mercy's sake, sir, do not lose a moment!"

The Head laid down the bunch of keys.

His face was white now, as a dreadful realisation forced itself into his mind—the realisation of a fearful truth that banished all his anger.

"I remember now," he said, and his voice faltered. "The key is not here!"  
"You have only one?"

"Only one. I left it in the lock of the safe this morning. Mr. Greely interrupted me, and took my attention from it. Then you came in, Mr. Dalton, and I walked with you to the

Fifth Form-room. Afterwards, when taking the Sixth, I remembered leaving the safe unlocked, and hurried here to close it. To my surprise, the key was not in the lock; but I thought, at the moment, that I must have put it back on my key-ring and forgotten it. But—"

"But, sir—" breathed Richard Dalton.

"It is evident that the key was in the lock. That wretched boy came here, and must have taken it. Apparently it is in his possession—and he is locked in the safe!"

"Good heavens!"

"The lock closes with a spring," said the Head, in an agitated voice. "I found the door ajar, and closed it. Naturally, it never occurred to me for one moment that anyone might have entered the safe in my absence. How could I possibly dream of such a thing?"

Knock, knock, knock!  
"This—this is terrible, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton. "The boy—"

Dr. Chisholm shuddered.  
"One moment, sir." The deep, portly voice of Mr. Horace Greely boomed at the study doorway. "May not the key have fallen to the floor—may it not be at hand?"

"It is possible," said Mr. Dalton, though without much hope. "Let us search, at least."

In a moment a dozen masters and seniors were searching the floor for the key, while the Head stood leaning on the table, perspiration on his brow.

"Dr. Chisholm," went on the Fourth Form master, "is there no other means of opening the safe?"

"None!"

"Help must be brought immediately—a locksmith—"

"No locksmith could open that safe. The makers— But there is no time—the boy will be dead!"

There was a deep hush in the study. In the dead silence came the dull knocking from the interior of the iron safe—fainter now, as if the unhappy prisoner was already losing his strength.

The Head gave a groan. He had closed the iron door—he knew it now—on a human being—a young rascal, doubtless, who had taken the key from the safe, and so precluded all possibility of his own rescue; but in closing the iron door the Head had condemned that hapless boy to death! The knowledge of it shook him to the very soul!

Knock, knock, knock!  
A whisper of horror ran down the crowded corridor. There was no key. Peele had the key, and Peele was locked in the safe—to die!

The Rookwood fellows looked at one another with white faces.

Mr. Greely was breathing hard. A strange gleam was in his eyes. In an hour more the station cab would have been at the door to take him away from Rookwood for ever. But Mr. Greely, for the moment, was still there—and Mr. Greely's brain was working. His deep voice broke the horrified stillness in the Head's study:

"Dr. Chisholm!"

The Head did not look at him—did not seem to hear.

"Dr. Chisholm! The boy's life must be saved—by any means, the boy must be saved from death!"  
"Have you a suggestion to make?" The Head looked up. "Make it! Save the life of that wretched boy, Mr. Greely, and I am your debtor for life!"

"There is a man in this school, sir, who can save him."

"How—how?"  
"By opening the safe."  
"The safe cannot be opened by any man at Rookwood."

"By one man, sir, it can be opened—by an experienced cracksmen, sir, to whom the task of opening that safe, or any safe, is mere child's play, sir!" boomed Mr. Greely.

Richard Dalton turned passionately on the Fifth Form master.

"Mr. Greely! At this fearful moment do you dare to renew your foolish talk concerning Victor Gaston, my friend?"  
"I dare, sir—to save that unhappy boy's life!" said Mr. Greely. "I shall go at once, sir, to Victor Gaston—and unless he is a greater villain than I believe him to be, he will save the life of that unhappy boy!"

Horace Greely stalked away. He left a dead silence behind him in the room—a silence broken only by the sound, growing fainter and fainter, or the doomed junior knocking on the iron door that shut him in to death!

Knock, knock, knock!

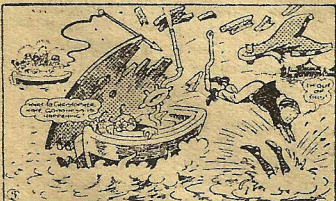
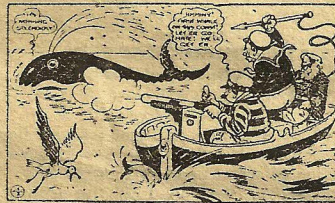
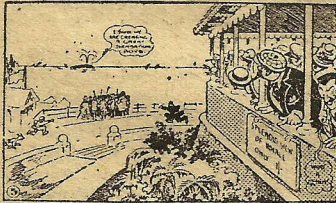
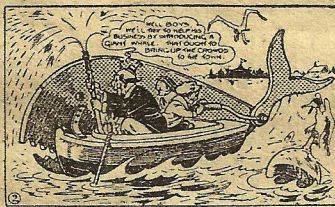
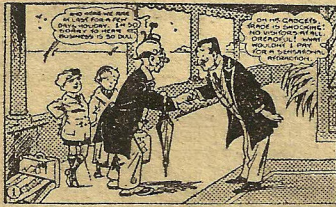
**THE FOURTH CHAPTER.**

**Self-Condemed!**

**J**IMMY SILVER & CO., in the front of the crowd swarming round the Head's doorway, looked at one another in silence. In spite of themselves, in spite of their firm and loyal belief in the master they admired, Mr. Greely's words had made an impression even on the Fistical Four. Indeed, they almost hoped that he was right—for unless he was right, it was absolutely certain that nothing could save Cyril Peel's life.

The knocking on the inside of the iron door was growing fainter and

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fainter—dying away as the strength of the choking boy ebbed.

Peele was not a good fellow—he was no credit to his school. It was some more of his impish trickery that had led him into this fearful strait. They knew that. But death was too terrible—all Peele's sins could be forgiven him, if only his life could be saved. There were few risks that Jimmy Silver would not have run to save him; but he was helpless. No one could aid the hapless junior—no one, unless it was a man to whom the "cracking" of safes was an accustomed job—unless, in a word, Horace Greely had been right all along the line, and Victor Gaston, French master, was one and the same man with Felix Lacroix, cracksmen and bank robber.

There was a whisper in the crowded passage as an athletic form appeared there—a handsome face, now strangely pale, with dark, handsome eyes that had now a haunted look. Victor Gaston strode down the corridor, the crowd making respectful way for him, looking neither to the right nor the left. He saw none of the sea of faces round him—he saw nothing there—he was looking far beyond Rookwood; looking into the imagined distance where the prison gates yawned for him—unless he allowed this boy to die!

Behind the French master came Horace Greely, with ponderous tread; but no one looked at the portly Mr. Greely. Every eye was upon the handsome Frenchman—every eye noted the ghastly pallor of his face, his eyes haunted with despair. And Jimmy Silver, as he looked at him, knew that he was looking not on Victor Gaston, French master, but on Felix Lacroix, bank robber, criminal, hunted by the French police, hidden from justice within the time-honoured walls of Rookwood. And he knew, too, that he was looking on a brave man, going with unflinching steps to his doom.

Knock, knock, knock!  
Fainter and fainter came the sound, the dying appeal for help from one now almost in the grip of strangulation. The Frenchman gave a convulsive start as he heard it.

He entered the study.  
Quietly, with his old graceful manner, Victor Gaston bowed to the Head and the pale-faced crowd of masters and seniors. He was calm—with the calmness of a man who knew that all was lost.

Richard Dalton touched him on the arm. They were friends, these two, and in Richard Dalton's heart there was no doubt.

"Victor! You cannot help here, old fellow!"

Victor Gaston's look in reply froze the words on Richard Dalton's tongue. It was a kind and affectionate look, and it was a confession. The Fourth Form master stood dumb.

In silence Victor Gaston crossed to the safe. He stood before it, searching it with his eyes. From within came the faint, despairing knocking.

He turned to the Head.  
"You have no key?"  
"None."

fate is too strong for us, my friend—the price of the past has to be paid! Heaven knows I had repented! Heaven knows I meant to live a straight life—that never, since I became your friend, has my hand been stained with crime—that never again it should have been so stained! You will believe that much of me—of Felix Lacroix!"

"Victor!" groaned Richard Dalton.  
"I cannot leave this boy to die, when



**TO SAVE AN ENEMY!** After working upon the lock of the safe some time, Victor Gaston at last succeeded in his task. He swung open the heavy iron door of the safe, and Peele was revealed—lying white and unconscious inside! (See Chapter 4.)

"The key must have been taken by the boy now locked up in the safe," Mr. Mooney explained. "Dr. Chisholm closed the door without knowing that anyone was inside."

Gaston nodded.  
"A locksmith!" muttered Bulkeley, of the Sixth.

The Frenchman smiled.  
"Inutile," he said. "Quite useless! You are absolutely certain, Dr. Chisholm, that there is no key?"

"Absolutely! Only the one inside the safe with that wretched boy."

"And there is not a moment to spare."

The Head groaned.  
In the doorway Mr. Greely stood, his eyes fixed on the French master. Victor Gaston did not look at him. If he gave the Fifth Form master his triumph at long last, that mattered little to him now. He stood before the iron safe, and all could see, in his working face, the terrible struggle that was taking place inwardly.

Knock, knock, knock!  
"Victor!" said Richard Dalton hoarsely. "It is impossible—I cannot believe—"

"Mon pauvre ami!" Victor Gaston's voice was very soft. "My poor friend, you have trusted me, and it is because you have trusted me that I have become worthy of your trust—that I have thrown behind me my double life; that Felix Lacroix has disappeared, leaving in his place only Victor Gaston. But

I can save him—and I can save him only by betraying myself. Helas! It is not easy for me, but even Felix Lacroix is not an abandoned villain. I must save the boy."

"You can save him?" breathed the Head.

"I can save him—and will! I can save him, because I am Felix Lacroix; and when I have saved him, I go hence to the prison that has waited for me too long."

The Frenchman said no more. The knocking had died away in the safe—all was silent.

Dr. Chisholm waved his hand in dismissal. The study was cleared. Only the Head remained, with Richard Dalton and Mr. Greely. Outside in the corridor the crowd was hushed.

Felix Lacroix was busy! Once or twice he spoke, to call quietly for some tool he needed. Richard Dalton hurried to obey. The cracksmen's outfit was buried deep at the bottom of the river. The tools he was accustomed to use were no longer at hand. But Felix Lacroix was a past-master in his strange art. As the French police knew only too well, there was no safe that could have baffled him for long. He worked with a set white face, with perfect coolness—calm and steady. He was working for an enemy's life, and his own condemnation, and he worked coolly, steadily, without a pause.



While he worked, the Head stepped to the telephone, to call up the school doctor. That was all. By the time the Frenchman was finished, the doctor's car was heard on the drive. Victor Gaston, alias Felix Lacroix, stepped back from his task. The heavy iron door was swung open.

He stooped into the interior of the safe, and lifted out Peele of the Fourth in his strong arms. The junior was white as chalk, and quite insensible.

"He lives!" said Victor Gaston simply.

Mr. Dalton took the senseless junior from Victor Gaston, and carried him from the study. Peele was handed over to the doctor's charge, still unconscious. But he was in no danger—he would live. A quarter of an hour more in the airless safe, probably, and only a dead body would have been taken out. But Peele had been saved—saved at a terrible cost to his rescuer.

Mr. Dalton, with a pale, set face, came back to the Head's study. Jimmy Silver caught him by the sleeve.

"Mr. Dalton! Is it true—is it true that—that—"

Jimmy's voice broke.

"I—I don't care," almost sobbed Lovell. "He's a splendid fellow—I don't care what he was! He's given himself away to save Peele—he's a splendid chap, and it's a rotten shame if they send him to prison—a rotten shame!"

Mr. Dalton entered the Head's study again, and the door closed. And the hushed crowd broke up, discussing the strange affair in whispers, and wondering what was to happen to Victor Gaston—now known to all Rookwood as Felix Lacroix, cracksman and convict.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Price of the Past!

"I AM ready!" Victor Gaston spoke in low, quiet tones, breaking the silence that had reigned in the Head's study. Mr. Dalton looked at him in miserable silence. Mr. Greely coughed. Dr. Chisholm fixed his eyes on the man he had trusted.

"You are Felix Lacroix?" "Even yet the Head seemed hardly able to believe it.

A weary smile crossed the Frenchman's pale, handsome face.

"I am Victor Gaston," he said. "In

the hands of the police of Paris I gave the name of Felix Lacroix! That is all. All you know of Victor Gaston is true; but you did not know that he had led a double life—you know it now."

"But why—why—"

The Head stammered. "Why? How can I say? I had a gift—a strange gift. I exercised it in sport at first. I was poor and ambitious. I found that in my hands no lock was secure." Victor Gaston shrugged his shoulders. "Add to that, if you like, that I was a scoundrel—"

"Never!" said Richard Dalton. "A scoundrel would not have betrayed himself to save a boy's life, as you have done," said the Head, strangely moved.

"Ah, monsieur, we all have our limit," said Victor Gaston. "But I fear that when first I came to Rookwood, I should not have been capable of this! If the boy's life is saved, it is Richard Dalton who has saved it. He made me his friend. He trusted me. I swore I would be worthy of his trust. The tools that that wretched boy saw in my trunk were buried in the river only yesterday. With them I buried, as I hoped, all



THERE'S THE REGISTRATION COUPON TO SIGN, CHUMS!

my past with its crimes. But it was not to be! I hoped that Felix Lacroix was gone for ever—that Victor Gaston, a man of honour, could look honourable men in the face while life should last! And it has ended thus!"

"In sacrificing yourself to save one who hated you," said Richard Dalton. "It was like you, Victor, and whatever your past may have been, you are still my friend, if you care to remain so."

Victor Gaston shook his head. "That is over," he said. "I shall not drag your name into shame with mine."

He glanced at the Head. "Monsieur, Felix Lacroix, cracksman, convict, prison-breaker, stands before you! You have only to telephone to the police. I shall not resist."

The Head did not speak. "Sir!" Mr. Greely's portly voice boomed. "Sir! It is not the Head's duty—in the circumstances—to denounce you. Sir, I denounced you to the Head because it was my duty; but now, sir, after what you have done, I should be proud to shake you by the hand."

Dr. Chisholm nodded slowly. "Whatever you were, Victor Gaston," he said, "I only know what you have done. You could have kept your secret—you betrayed yourself to save a life! That at least was noble, and atones for much! You are free, Monsieur Gaston—free to go as you choose. It is not my duty to detain you. Seek safety, while you can, before this is known outside the walls of Rookwood—and take my heartfelt wishes for your safety."

"And mine!" said Mr. Greely. Victor Gaston drew a deep breath. His eyes were on Richard Dalton. The master of the Fourth held out his hand.

"We part friends, Victor," he said. "I know what you will be in the future, whatever you may have been in the past. I trust you."

"I shall not fail," said Victor Gaston, in a low voice. He pressed Richard Dalton's hand, bowed to the Head, and was gone.

Rookwood knew Victor Gaston no more. Mr. Greely, of course, remained—the Fifth did not lose their Form master. Certainly they would not have missed him so much as the juniors missed Victor Gaston. Twenty-four hours after "Felix Lacroix" had left Rookwood, the police were seeking him; but he had vanished, and even Peele, when he emerged from the sanatorium after days of illness, hoped that the man who had saved him would escape with his freedom. And long after Monsieur Monceau had returned to his place at Rookwood, Jimmy Silver & Co. continued to talk of Victor Gaston, with a kind remembrance of him, forgetting the wrong he had done, in the remembrance of the noble atonement of the man who had been self-condemned.

THE END.

(Look out for another topping long story of Jimmy Silver & Co., of Rookwood, next week.)

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