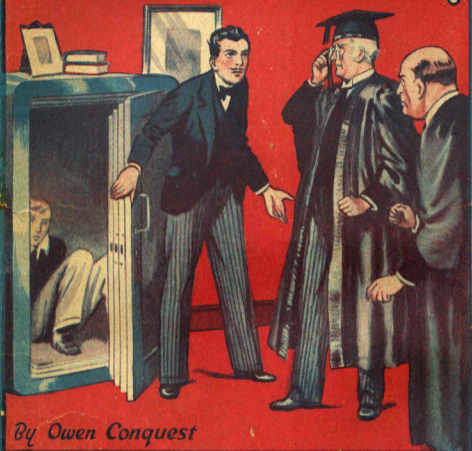


UNDER FALSE COLOURS!



By Owen Conquest

SCHOOLBOYS' OWN

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THE RAILWAY THAT GOES NOWHERE!

WHEN you board a train you can be pretty sure that it will take you where you want to go and get you there at the time you expect. But all railways are not like ours.

There is one railway in the world on which you can't go anywhere. There is only one station on it, no regular trains are run, and no tickets are issued. Indeed, the passengers are paid to travel on it.

Moreover, you are quite likely to find the platform ankle deep in snow in mid-summer, or basking under a tropical sun on the coldest day of winter. The carriages may be Egyptian, French, or Chinese, and the guard may speak any one of a dozen languages.

The Studio Railway.

You've probably guessed by this time that Hollywood is at the back of it. Yes, the railway runs for a quarter of a mile in the grounds of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studio, at Burbank, California.

It's not a film-setting, though. The loco is a thoroughly sound metal one, and a crew of ex-railwaymen are retained to look after it. It is used whenever railway backgrounds are needed for a film, and at such times the station and carriages, and the uniforms of porters and ticket collectors, are transformed to resemble those of the country which the film is about.

There are many railways so twisty that they practically tie themselves in knots. There is even one in New Zealand on which, after travelling for twenty minutes, you are actually farther away from your destination than when you started. But perhaps the giddiest of the lot is the toy-like

narrow-gauge line that runs up the foothills of the Himalayas to Darjeeling. In several places it describes a complete circle, crossing over itself by means of a bridge as it spirals to gain height.

Most amusing thing about the line is that the engines all carry a heavy baulk of timber as well as coal. Whenever they come off the rails—and they frequently do—this baulk is used to lever them on again, most of the passengers being mobilised to lend a hand.

A Straight Run.

At the other extreme there is a line in Australia which is dead straight for over three hundred miles. It runs across the central Australian desert between Port Augusta and Kalgoorlie, the country being so flat that passengers waiting at the halts can see the loco's headlight an hour before the train arrives.

Until recently there used to be a line across the Andes on which travelling was a quite desperate venture. It ran from Mendoza, in Argentine, to Valparaiso, in Chile, climbing so high that at times the trains were above the clouds.

So many trains narrowly escaped being swept away by avalanches that they have now closed the highest section.

It's really surprising how many things can stop a train. Several times expresses have run into swarms of locusts, and the rails have got so slippery with the crushed bodies of the insects that the wheels refused to grip. And on one occasion at least a rogue elephant took a dislike to a train in the East Indies and proceeded to charge the loco.

There was a terrific crash, and when the startled passengers clambered out to see what it was all about, they found a very sorry elephant nursing a bad headache and the loco hissing in an aggrieved manner on its side.

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To JIMMY SILVER & Co., of Rookwood, VICTOR GASTON is the new French master and a real good sort: But he is a man with a secret!

CHAPTER 1.

Tread!

“LOVELL, you ass——”
“Lovell, you duffer——”
“Lovell, you chump——”

Jimmy Silver, Raby and Newcome were evidently of one opinion!

As was the custom in the Fourth Form at Rookwood, they expressed their opinion with frankness.

Arthur Edward Lovell gave a grunt.

It was his fault, and for once Arthur Edward had not a word to say—a rare occurrence with Arthur Edward.

Jimmy Silver & Co. had been out on a long ramble that afternoon. The sunny spring weather had tempted

them far afield. They had had their tea at a little inn miles from the school. When they started for home they found themselves rather tired, with long miles in front of them. The miles seemed to grow longer and longer as, like the Weary Ploughman, they homeward plodded their way.

That was why Lovell had suggested taking the short cut across the extensive grounds at Devereux Lodge.

It would, as Lovell pointed out, save a good mile.

The Co. were quite willing—indeed, keen—to save a mile on their weary homeward way. To cut across Squire Devereux's estate, instead of going

round by the railway bridge and the village of Coombe, was a great temptation. A mile was a mile—indeed, just then it seemed more like a league—and the saving would land them at Rookwood in time for calling-over—a very important point.

But Jimmy Silver shook his head decidedly.

Devereux Lodge was out of bounds, strictly so on account of many complaints the Head had received from Mr. Devereux. That gentleman, for reasons best known to himself, did not like schoolboys roaming his woods, disturbing his game, and birds'-nesting in his ancient trees. In fact, he did not like schoolboys at all. No doubt that was a serious error in taste, but there it was!

So it was clearly understood at Rookwood that in the event of another complaint of trespass by the squire, the delinquent would receive a Head's flogging.

So Jimmy Silver, Raby and Newcome determined to resist temptation, and go round by the longer route. Being late for call-over meant lines. Being reported for trespass meant a severe licking. Lovell urged them to take the sporting chance. They declined; whereupon Arthur Edward Lovell announced his intention of taking the chance himself, on his own—and swung over the fence into the lodge grounds.

After that, of course, his comrades had no choice in the matter. They followed Lovell.

It was just like Lovell; it was a weakness of that youth that he always knew best.

With many misgivings, the Fistical Four of Rookwood scudded, by dusky woodland paths, anxious to get out of the forbidden territory. Even Lovell was anxious to get it over.

Then the disaster happened.

In sight of the palings that bordered the lodge grounds towards the railway, beyond which lay Coombe Lane and Rookwood School, the chums of the Fourth happened on the enemy.

Lovell had remarked that if they did butt into a keeper, a half-crown tip would act as a passport. But it was not a keeper who loomed up before Jimmy Silver & Co. now. A tall, rather angular gentleman, in shooting clothes, with a gun under his arm and an eyeglass jammed into a stern eye, loomed up on the path ahead of them—and they knew Squire Devereux at a glance.

They halted in utter dismay.

It was then that Jimmy Silver, Raby and Newcome told Lovell what they thought of him. It did little good, perhaps, landed as they were; but it was a relief to the feelings. That Lovell was an ass, a duffer and a chump was quite clear, and the Co. felt better when they had told him so.

"Of all the silly idiots," Raby continued. "I think Lovell takes the cake. Of all the born dummies—"

"Of all the frabjous, burbling jabberwocks!" said Newcome eloquently.

"We're landed!" said Jimmy Silver ruefully. "I really think, Lovell, that the proper place for you is a home for idiots. Why did your people send you to Rookwood instead of to a home for the mentally deficient? It's always puzzled me."

Another grunt from Lovell. He could not deny the soft impeachment. He had landed himself and his chums into a serious scrape, and the Head and his birch loomed terrifyingly ahead. The stern eye behind the eyeglass was fixed on the four juniors, and the tall, angular gentleman was striding towards them.

"Nice," said Raby; "very nice! The old gent will drive us over to Rookwood and hand us to the Head—caught in the giddy act! Oh, very nice!"

"More likely to lock us up in a shed and send a message to the school," said Newcome.

"Lovell, you fathead—"

"Lovell, you chump—"

The eloquence was recommencing. But it was, as Jimmy Silver realised, no time for eloquence, though it relieved the feelings. It was a time for action—prompt action.

"Shin up this tree!" said Jimmy Silver.

"What's the good?" growled Raby. "The old ass will stand under the tree and watch us till a keeper comes."

"Run for it!" suggested Lovell, speaking at last.

"And run into a keeper!" scoffed Raby. "And that old bouncer can cover the ground twice as quick as we can, with his dashed long legs!"

"Shut up and follow your leader!" rapped out Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy set the example.

He "shinned" rapidly up the big beech and clambered on a stout branch that overhung the footpath.

His comrades followed.

They were accustomed to following Jimmy's lead, and even Lovell, just at present, was not disposed to assert his own wonderful gift of leadership.

The juniors clambered up rapidly and only in time. Mr. Devereux arrived under the beech just too late—he barely missed Lovell's ankle as he grabbed after him.

The tall gentleman stood under the tree, his eyeglass gleaming upward, and shouted:

"Come ~~down~~ at once!"

CHAPTER 2.

Desperate Measures!

JIMMY SILVER & Co. sat tight on the big branch over the grassy path. For the moment, at least, they were out of danger. Jimmy nourished a faint hope that the squire might walk on, to call a keeper to deal with the trespassers—or that if he stopped to watch the juniors he might get tired and leave them to it. But it was a very faint hope. The look on

Mr. Devereux's grim face did not inspire confidence.

"Will you come down at once?" he shouted.

"Thanks—no!" said Jimmy politely.

"You are trespassing here, and you know it."

"Tell us something we don't know!" suggested Lovell.

"Shurrup, you ass!" murmured Raby. "What's the good of cheeking the old boy?"

Mr. Devereux's face became quite crimson.

"You impertinent young rascal!" he exclaimed. "Give me your names at once."

No answer.

"You belong to Rookwood School?" demanded the old gentleman.

Still no answer! Jimmy Silver & Co. had no intention of passing on useful information to the enemy.

"I know you do!" snapped the squire. "I believe I have seen you before—unruly young rascals! You belong to Rookwood! Begad, I'll lock you up in a barn, and send to your headmaster to fetch you back! I'll have no trespassers on my land! Do you hear me?"

"We're not deaf!" said Lovell.

"Will you come down?"

"On conditions," said Jimmy Silver.

"I'll make no conditions with you! Come down at once!"

"If you'll let us pass——"

"You insolent young rascal——"

"We're doing no harm," explained Jimmy. "Only taking a short cut, Mr. Devereux."

"Not unless you make it pax," said Lovell. And, serious as the situation was, the juniors could not help grinning at that.

Mr. Devereux did not look like making it "pax," even if he understood that schoolboy expression.

"Come down!" he roared.

"Will you let us pass?"

"No!"

"Then we'll stay here," said Jimmy Silver.

"I order you to come down!"

"Come up after us," suggested Lovell.

Mr. Devereux did not act on that suggestion. His days of tree-climbing were long over.

He took a silver whistle from his pocket and put it to his lips. A shrill blast rang through the woodland.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Newcome. "That's a signal for a giddy keeper. The game's up!"

Jimmy Silver set his lips.

"Not quite," he said. "After all, he doesn't know us by sight. He's not even certain we belong to Rookwood. If we can get clear——"

"We can't!"

Jimmy made no rejoinder, but he fixed his eyes on the man standing below the branch and calculated.

To wait till a keeper came was to ask for capture. If anything was to be done, it had to be done at once. It was said of old that desperate diseases require desperate remedies. And Jimmy was making up his mind to a very desperate remedy.

"After me!" he whispered at last.

Squire Devereux was looking up the path, in expectation of a keeper's appearance in answer to his whistle. His eyes were off the treed juniors for the moment.

Jimmy swung himself below the branch with his hands, hanging on just over the squire's head.

His comrades caught their breath as they watched him. Swinging to the branch over Mr. Devereux's hat, Jimmy suddenly let go.

Crash!

Mr. Devereux hardly knew what had happened. Probably it seemed to him like an earthquake. His ancient trees swam around his dizzy gaze as he crashed over under the impact of the falling junior from above.

"G—g—grrrrrrggg!" was all he said inarticulately.

Jimmy Silver rolled in the grass, a little dazed, but leaped to his feet instantly.

"Come on!" he shouted.

"Come on!" gasped Lovell.

The three juniors dropped to the ground at lightning speed, while the dazed and breathless squire still sprawled and gasped.

They ran on up the path like the wind.

Squire Devereux sat up.

"Groogh! Oh! What—oh—ah—begad—ooooomp!"

He sat and spluttered.

Jimmy Silver & Co. vanished from his sight up the grassy path. They reached the palings, and bundled over one after another at frantic speed.

They dropped in the lane beyond, picked themselves up, plunged through a hedge, and tore away across a meadow.

Jimmy Silver stopped in the middle of the meadow to look back.

Over the park railings a red and furious face was staring after the fugitives. The breathless squire had got that far in pursuit; but the palings stopped him.

"Safe as houses now!" said Lovell.

"Yes, rather! Oh dear!"

"Keep it up!" said Jimmy.

And the Fistical Four ran on, harder and harder. They left the meadow behind, and came out into a little lane with the level-crossing of the Latham railway ahead of them. The gates were closed, and the scream of an engine in the distance warned them that a train was coming.

"All serene!" gasped Newcome. "It won't keep us a couple of minutes—and we're well ahead, even if that old donkey is after us!"

"Right as rain!" said Lovell.

And the four juniors dropped into a walk as they approached the gates at the level-crossing.

CHAPTER 3.

From the Jaws of Death!

"JIMMY!"
 "What——"
 "Jimmy!"

Lovell & Co. uttered those startled exclamations as Jimmy Silver made a sudden bound ahead and rushed on towards the level-crossing at top speed.

They stared after him blankly.

Round a curve in the distance the train was now visible, rushing on towards the level-crossing. Under their amazed eyes Jimmy Silver cleared the gate at a bound and landed on the metals.

"Jimmy, you ass!" yelled Lovell. "There's no hurry! I tell you there's no hurry!"

The roar of the oncoming train was in their ears now. They came panting on to the gate, and then they saw what Jimmy Silver had seen.

Right on the line was a handsome Airedale dog. Evidently the animal had broken loose without leave, for a chain dangled from its collar.

Why the dog lingered on the metals with the train rushing down at him puzzled the juniors for a second or two. Then they observed that the chain was caught.

"Oh, good heavens!" breathed Lovell, white as a sheet.

The end of the chain was caught where the metals rested on a sleeper, and the dog, straining at it, could not get free. Right in the path of the train the hapless animal was chained, to be cut into fragments as the wheels rolled over him in a few moments more.

Jimmy Silver had cleared the gate at a leap, and landed within a couple of feet of the fastened animal.

Now he was stooping, with a white, set face, grabbing at the caught chain.

A shrill scream from the engine. It rang in Jimmy's ears, and he heard the roar of the train like thunder close at hand.

The dog was jumping, straining,

pulling in furious excitement, making the junior's task more difficult. But Jimmy Silver, though his heart was beating like a hammer, kept his head cool. He worked at the tangled chain with quick, active fingers, and jerked it loose at last.

Whistle—like a wild shriek—and a hoarse cry from the engine-driver, who had suddenly seen him. Jimmy Silver caught up the dog and hurled himself away on the farther side of the metals. The next second the train was roaring by, shutting him off from the view of his chums staring over the gate.

In those few seconds, while the train was passing, Lovell and Raby and Newcome tasted of a horror they had never experienced before, or dreamed of experiencing. For those terrible seconds they did not know whether their chum had been smashed down by the train with the animal he had sought to save.

It was only a few seconds, but it was a lifetime of horror to the three juniors, as they stood breathless, with chalky faces.

Then the guard's van was past, and they could look across the line again.

"Jimmy!" almost groaned Lovell.

"Jimmy—oh, Jimmy, old man!" panted Newcome. Raby could not speak—he clung to the gate, feeling sick.

Jimmy Silver, safe and sound, stood there, holding to the collar of the Airedale.

His face was white; but he waved his hand to his comrades.

"All serene, you fellows; come on!"

Without waiting for the gates to open the chums of the Fourth crossed. Jimmy Silver led the rescued dog out safely, and removed the dangling chain from the collar.

"Safer without that!" he remarked.

"Oh, Jimmy!"

"Come on, old tops!"

"Jimmy, you ass!" gasped Raby. "I—I—I thought you were killed!"

"Jolly near thing," said Jimmy composedly. "Oh, my hat! For a second

I thought that thundering train was right on me!" He shivered a little. "Never mind; it's over, and no harm done. We'd better get on. I'd like to round this dog up for his owner, but we've got no time. Come on!"

"I dare say he knows his way home," said Lovell. "Let's get going; that old ass may be on the giddy trail!"

Leaving the Airedale to his own devices, the Fistical Four ran on. They reached Coombe Lane, and headed for the school, of which the grey old tower was now in sight.

Lovell looked at his watch.

"All O.K.," he said. "We shall just do it; we're in time for call-over, you chaps! Lucky we took the short cut, after all, what?"

"Yes; especially if Jimmy had been killed on the level-crossing!" snorted Newcome.

"That couldn't be foreseen. Besides, he wasn't killed," said Lovell. "We've saved a mile home, and Dicky Dalton won't be giving us lines."

"Wait till Mr. Devereux comes up to Rookwood to grouse to the Head!" said Raby.

"Oh, you're a blessed croaker!" growled Lovell. "We've saved the lines, anyhow. And old Devereux doesn't know our names; and doesn't know for certain that we belong to Rookwood at all. I can't see that he can do any harm. If he grouses, the Head won't go round asking every fellow in the school whether he's been on the old duffer's land, I suppose. We're all right."

"Something in that," admitted Raby. "The same, we were silly asses to come across the Lodge grounds; I mean you were a silly ass!"

"Hear, hear!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Bosh!" retorted Lovell. "Why, if we hadn't come that way Jimmy couldn't have done his heroic stunt on the level-crossing, and that poor old Airedale would have been chopped to pieces. I'm jolly glad we did!"

"Well, that's so," admitted Jimmy Silver. "I'm jolly glad we got the poor old bow-wow out of his fix. So long as we don't get a flogging for trespass, it's all right."

"Oh, it's all right!" said Lovell confidently. "You fellows can't do better than follow my lead. You see, I've got the brains."

"Oh, my hat!"

Arthur Edward Lovell was evidently quite himself again!

But as the risky adventure had ended so well—so far, at least—his chums did not waste time telling him what they thought of him and his brains. They trotted on to Rookwood, and arrived before old Mack came out to close the gates.

They joined the crowd of fellows going in for roll-call, and cheerily answered "adsum" when Mr. Dalton, the master of the Fourth, called their names.

"Had a jolly afternoon?" asked Mornington of the Fourth, as the juniors came out after roll-call.

"Oh, topping!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Jolly nearly missed roll-call, though," said Lovell. "If they hadn't followed my lead, we shouldn't be in yet. They wanted to go round by the railway-bridge and Coombe, instead of —"

"Fathead!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Instead of——" continued Lovell.

"Come up to the study, ass!"

"Look here, Jimmy——"

"Oh, come on!"

The Co. fairly dragged Lovell away, leaving Valentine Mornington looking rather surprised. In the end study in the Fourth Form passage Arthur Edward glared at his chums.

"Look here——" he snorted.

"We're going to keep it dark," said Jimmy. "If old Devereux begins grouching to the Head we don't want it to be the talk of the school that we were the fellows who trespassed on his land. See?"

"No harm in telling Morny——"

"You were telling all Rookwood," growled Raby. "Five or six fellows, at least, heard you."

"Oh, rot!" said Lovell.

"Not a syllable about it to anybody," said Jimmy Silver. "I don't want a Head's flogging, for one."

"Oh, rot!" repeated Lovell. "I tell you, Devereux won't come here after us. He doesn't know us, and——"

"We're not taking the risk, ass! Not a word about it to anybody."

"Oh, all right!" grunted Lovell. "Anyhow, you fellows will admit now, I suppose, that I knew best!"

Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome did not admit it. Instead of that, they collared their obstinate chum, and bumped him on the well-worn carpet in the end study. Arthur Edward Lovell, in their opinion, had been asking for it for a long time. Now—much to his surprise and wrath—he got it!

CHAPTER 4.

A False Alarm!

ON the following day Jimmy Silver was not wholly easy in his mind.

He could not help thinking that possibly the adventure in the woods of Devereux Lodge would have a sequel.

Arthur Edward Lovell had dismissed the matter loftily; he considered that it was at an end, and, as usual, he was sure he was right. Jimmy hoped that he was, but he had lingering doubts on the subject. Raby and Newcome took the view that probably it was all right; and, anyhow, it was no use worrying.

All the Fistical Four agreed that there should be silence—least said, soonest mended. Only Lovell felt that there was no harm in mentioning the matter to a chap like Morny, who could be relied upon, and a good fellow like Putty of the Fourth, who could keep a secret, and a sport like Conroy, who was never likely to go back on a con-

fidant. Several other reliable fellows had it mentioned to them by Lovell.

And as Tubby Muffin was sometimes hovering near at hand, Tubby was soon in possession of the story—which was equivalent to shouting it from the housetops.

So before morning classes were over that day all the Classical Fourth who cared to know knew that the Fistical Four had trespassed in Devereux Woods the day before. Indeed, before dinner most of the Modern Fourth knew it.

After dinner that day Jimmy Silver found that it was a regular topic in the Fourth; and Peele opined that Squire Devereux would be at the school before the day was out, "after" the delinquents. Peele seemed to look forward to that with some pleasure.

"You've been chin-wagging, Lovell, you ass!" growled Jimmy Silver, after dinner.

"Bosh!" said Lovell.

"Every fellow in the Form knows we were in Devereux Woods, anyhow," said Newcome.

"I've not mentioned it to a single fellow who can't be trusted," said Lovell warmly. "Perhaps one of you has been chattering carelessly."

"Why, you silly owl——"

"The fellows seem to know about it, anyhow," declared Lovell. "Looks to me as if you've been chattering."

The Co. bore that as patiently as they could. It was a maxim of the Rookwood Co. that they should be tolerant of one another's little weaknesses. But undoubtedly Arthur Edward Lovell's chums sometimes found him a little trying.

Cyril Peele, the black sheep of the Classical Fourth, was lounging about the old stone gateway as the Fistical Four sauntered in the quad. Several times Peele glanced at them and grinned, and then glanced down the road. Lovell gave him a stare of great disfavour.

"What's that silly monkey grinning at?" he said.

Peele suddenly left the gate, and came across to the Fistical Four at a run.

"Better hook it!" he said.

"Hook it? Why?"

Peele jerked his thumb towards the gates.

"If the old scout doesn't know your names, he will know your faces," he said. "I'd get out of sight if I were you."

Lovell jumped.

"Is he coming?"

"Cut for it!" muttered Raby.

"Thanks for the tip, Peele!" said Jimmy Silver; and he started for the School House at a run.

"Put it on!" breathed Newcome. "If we keep out of the beast's sight, it may be all right yet."

Glances were turned on the Fistical Four on all sides, as they sprinted for their House. They looked neither to the right nor to the left, but ran hard for shelter. As ill-luck would have it, Bulkeley of the Sixth was coming out as they reached the door, bolting in like scared rabbits into a burrow.

Bump!

"Oh!" roared Bulkeley.

It was Lovell who crashed into the captain of the school; the other three dodged round him just in time. Bulkeley staggered back, almost winded by the shock; but he contrived to grab Arthur Edward by the collar.

"Leggo!" panted Lovell. "Sorry—hurry—leggo—"

"You clumsy young rascal!" gasped Bulkeley.

Jimmy and Raby and Newcome were in—but they turned back, as Lovell was captured. It was sink or swim together for the Fistical Four of the Fourth.

"I—I say, Bulkeley!" panted Jimmy.

"What are you racing about for?" demanded Bulkeley angrily, still gripping Lovell by the collar.

"We—we—we——" stammered Jimmy.

"We—we—we——" gasped Lovell.

"Leggo, Bulkeley—there's a good chap!"

"Put it on, you fellows!" shouted Peele, from the quad. "He's after you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A roar of laughter followed Peele's warning. Bulkeley looked puzzled.

"What's this game, Silver?" he exclaimed. "Who's after you?"

"I—I—hem——"

"Leggo!" roared Lovell, in momentary expectation of seeing the tall figure of Squire Devereux in the doorway.

Instead of letting go, Bulkeley dragged Lovell back to the door, and looked out. Lovell was in full view from the quad then, and there was a burst of laughter from a crowd of juniors there.

"What does this mean?" called out Bulkeley.

"Game's up, Jimmy!" groaned Lovell.

"Nothin's the matter, Bulkeley!" said Peele airily. "Those fellows seemed to think that somebody was after them."

"What?"

"There's nobody that I can see," continued Peele. "Perhaps they thought a Modern chap was after them. Did you, Silver?"

Jimmy Silver glared at Peele, as if he could eat him. There was no sign of Squire Devereux in the offing. The Fistical Four realised that it was a false alarm, and that Peele had been pulling their leg.

"You rotter!" howled Lovell. "You said—ow! Wow!"

He broke off with a roar as Bulkeley shook him.

"You young ass!" said Bulkeley. "You must learn not to butt into the Sixth like a mad goat! You will take a hundred lines, Lovell!"

And with that, and another shake, he released Arthur Edward, and walked away across the quad.

The Fistical Four came out again, looking very red and sheepish. Two or three dozen fellows were chortling at them, which was not pleasant for the heroes of the Fourth. Arthur Edward Lovell brandished a large set of knuckles under Peele's nose.

"You rotter! You said old Devereux was coming——"

"Did I?" ejaculated Peele.

"Didn't you?" roared Lovell.

"Certainly not!" said Peele, with an air of surprise. "I said I'd get out of sight if I were you."

"Well then, what did you mean?" demanded Lovell.

"Exactly what I said. I'd certainly get out of sight if I were you—I mean, if I had a set of features like yours."

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

Lovell's face was a study.

"You—you——" he gasped.

There would have been a serious case of assault and battery in another moment, but the Co. dragged Lovell away. Peele and his friends howled with laughter; and the Fistical Four, for once, were glad to get out of the limelight.

CHAPTER 5.

A Slender Chance!

JIMMY SILVER & CO. were quite uneasy during afternoon classes.

Fortunately, classes passed off without any interruption. But the Fistical Four were not in their usual spirits when Mr. Dalton dismissed his class.

"Blessed if this isn't getting on my nerves!" growled Raby. "If the beast's coming, why doesn't he come?"

"He'd have come by now if he was coming," said Newcome hopefully.

"More likely to leave it till after class," said Jimmy Silver. "But if he doesn't come to-day at all, I think it will be all right. After all, he can't be certain we're Rookwood chaps."

"Oh, it's all right!" said Lovell.

His comrades' dubiousness seemed to restore Arthur Edward's confidence—he had a little way of taking the opposite side in almost any argument. "Depend on it, it's all right. Believe me, we shan't see anything of the Devereux-bird."

Tubby Muffin came racing across from the gates, his fat face red with excitement. He waved a fat and excited hand at the Fistical Four.

"Look out, you fellows!" he gasped. "He's coming!"

"What?"

"Old Devereux!" gasped Tubby. "I've spotted him on the road—just spotted him! Hook it!"

"You cheeky ass!" roared Lovell, in great wrath. "Bump him!"

Not doubting in the slightest that Tubby was seeking to repeat Peele's little jest Arthur Edward seized the fat Classical with wrathful hands.

Bump!

"Yaroooh!" roared Tubby Muffin, as he sat down. "Ow, ow! Wow! Why, you ungrateful rotter—— Yarooooop!"

"If you think you can pull our leg, you fat dummy, try again!" snorted Lovell.

"Yow-ow-ow—wow!"

"Give him another!" exclaimed the exasperated Lovell. "Lend me a hand, the fat boulder's heavy! We shall have the whole Form pulling our leg if we don't put our foot down! Lend a hand!"

"I—I say!" spluttered the hapless Tubby.

"Hold on, Lovell!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"Lend a hand, I tell you!"

"Look!" hissed Raby.

He caught Lovell by the shoulder and spun him round towards the distant gates. There, in the red sunset, a tall and angular figure appeared in sight, and an eyeglass gleamed back in the sunlight. It was Squire Devereux!

"Oh, crumbs!" stuttered Lovell.

"Hook it!"

"Oh, dear!"

The Fistical Four bolted into the House, leaving Tubby Muffin still sitting on the cold, unsympathetic ground and spluttering. It was not a false alarm this time; and even Lovell realised that he had been hasty in dealing with Reginald Muffin. But there was no time to worry about Muffin now, so he was left to splutter in breathless indignation, what time the Fistical Four hunted cover.

They forgathered breathlessly in the end study. From one of the windows of that study there was a view of part of Big Quad. Jimmy Silver & Co. clustered at the window, and looked down upon the tall figure of the squire striding up the path. He disappeared into the porch of the Head's house.

"The game's up!" muttered Raby. "He's with the Head now—and the Head will be in a royal wax. He hates people complaining about Rookwood chaps."

"Blow him!" growled Lovell. "After all, he can't give our names. They can't spot us unless the Head parades the whole school for the man to pick us out. He won't do that."

Jimmy Silver shook his head silently. If the squire felt assured that the culprits were Rookwooders, and told the Head so, it was quite probable that the whole Lower School would be paraded for inspection.

The chums of the Fourth waited anxiously. There was a footstep in the passage at last, and they started, and their hearts beat quite painfully; but it was only putty of the Fourth. Putty's usually smiling face was serious and unsympathetic now.

"I'm afraid you fellows are for it," he said.

"The brute doesn't know our names," growled Lovell.

"There's an order for the whole Lower School to assemble in Hall. The prefects are going round shepherding the fellows in now," said Putty.

"Oh, rotten!"

Jimmy Silver sighed.

"Well, I suppose we're for it," he said. "After all, we chanced it, and we can stand it. Come on, you chaps!"

"That silly ass, Lovell——" said Raby morosely.

"That born chump, Lovell——" grunted Newcome.

"Hold on!" said Putty. "I've got an idea! You're sure that his nibs doesn't know your names?"

"Quite sure; but that won't help now. He's going to inspect the lot, and he knows our faces," said Jimmy.

"Couldn't you alter your faces a bit?"

"Wha-a-t?"

"That's the idea," said Putty. "After all, the man only saw you casually—'tain't as if he saw you every day. Keep to the back of the Form, and make your phizzes a bit different—squint——"

"Squint?" gasped Lovell.

"Yes—squint—or pull long faces, or stick something in your cheeks as if you had the toothache—then he mayn't know you——"

Jimmy Silver brightened.

"It's a chance!" he said.

And somewhat "bucked" by that chance, faint as it was, the Fistical Four went downstairs and joined the stream of juniors heading for Big Hall—keeping in the thickest of the stream.

CHAPTER 6.

No Luck!

BIG HALL was pretty full. The whole Lower School of Rookwood, Classical and Modern, was gathered, and there was a buzz of wondering voices. All the fellows knew that something very unusual was on the tapis; most of the Fourth guessed that it had something to do with Jimmy Silver & Co.'s escapade of the previous day. But the Third and the second were quite mystified; and the Shell wondered blankly. Indeed, Smythe of the Shell and some of his

friends were deeply uneasy—wondering whether some of their little speculations on “gee-gees” had possibly come to light. In fact, quite a number of fellows in various Forms felt disquieted, for one reason or another, and all the fellows whose consciences were clear were puzzled and full of surmises.

The Fistical Four took their places with the Classical Fourth—keeping as well back as they could, as Putty had sagely advised them. The other fellows, “caught on,” and formed up, as much as possible, to screen them. Only Tubby Muffin gave them a wrathful blink. Tubby was still indignant.

“You’ll jolly well be flogged!” mumbled Tubby. “I hope you’ll be sacked, Lovell—I jolly well hope you’ll be bunked out of Rookwood—see!”

Lovell did not heed.

He was rubbing an indelible pencil under his right eye, with a rather startling effect. He looked as if he had a black eye in an advanced stage of development, and certainly it altered his appearance a good deal.

Raby, with a little pocket-mirror, was practising a hideous squint. Newcome pulled down the corners of his mouth, and asked Putty in an anxious whisper, whether it made him look unlike himself. Putty assured him that it made him look unlike anything human at all.

Jimmy Silver stuffed several bullseyes into his cheek, giving it a remarkably swollen aspect. It looked like the effect of a very severe attack of toothache, and undoubtedly it altered Jimmy’s appearance considerably.

Around the four the Fourth Formers were grinning, and whispering encouragement.

Meanwhile, there was a buzz of whispered talk up and down the crowded Hall, the Head not having entered yet.

The prefects walked up and down, with their canes under their arms, calling for silence.

Bulkeley of the Sixth came along by the Fourth, and glanced at Jimmy Silver & Co. with a glance of surprise. He stopped and fixed his eyes upon them.

“Silver!” he rapped out.

“Oh! Yeb!” mumbled Jimmy.

The swollen state of his mouth made articulation difficult.

“What is the matter with your face?”

“Mum-my fabe?” stammered Jimmy.

“Have you the toothache, Silver?”

“N-n-no!”

“Then you have something in your mouth?”

“Yee-es!”

“Take it out at once!”

“Oh dear!”

The bullseyes were deposited in Jimmy’s handkerchief, and his face resumed its normal shape. Bulkeley gave him a grim look.

“I understand that a gentleman is here to identify somebody, Silver,” said the Rookwood captain.

“Is—is—is he, Bulkeley?”

“Yes; and you had better not play any tricks,” said the prefect severely. And he walked on.

Jimmy Silver breathed hard.

“Lucky he didn’t notice my eye!” murmured Lovell. “Poor old Jimmy! Try my pencil.”

“Try my squint,” said Raby.

There was a chuckle among the Fourth. Bulkeley of the Sixth having retired to the distance, Jimmy ventured to re-introduce the bullseyes into his mouth. There was a stir and a murmur in the Hall, as Dr. Chisholm appeared at the upper door, with a tall, angular gentleman by his side.

“Here comes the jolly old beak!” murmured Mornington.

The Fistical Four exchanged glances, half of hope and half of resignation. The crucial moment had arrived; and unless their pitiful efforts at disguise served their turn, detention was certain. And in that case, it seemed equally certain that four hapless

victims would be "hoisted" in the presence of the whole Lower School, for a severe application of the headmaster's birch.

"He's not got the birch with him, you chaps," whispered Mornington, by way of comfort.

"Not unless he's got it hidden in his gown," said Gunner. "Keep your pecker up!"

The Fistical Four eyed the Head anxiously, and still more anxiously the tall, bony gentleman, whose eyeglass gleamed along the crowded Hall, as if already seeking out a victim.

Mr. Dalton and Mr. Greely exchanged observation with the Head and Squire Devereux, in tones that did not reach the Fourth. To Jimmy's dismay, Bulkeley of the Sixth came back, and posted himself near the ranks of the Classical Fourth. Jimmy kept his head behind Gunner's burly shoulders, hoping to escape the prefect's eye. As yet, however, Bulkeley's eye was not turned upon him.

And now the Head's deep voice became audible to all the anxious Rookwooders.

"The boys, if they belong to Rookwood at all, are undoubtedly here, Mr. Devereux. The whole of the Lower Forms have been assembled. If they are present, no doubt you will be able to identify them."

"No doubt, sir!" said the stern tones of the squire.

"Then pray proceed."

Squire Devereux's tall figure came down the crowded line, and his eyeglass gleamed to right and left.

There was deep silence in Big Hall.

The tall figure of the squire loomed over the Classical Fourth—the gleaming eyeglass seemed to penetrate them like a gimlet. He stopped.

It was now or never! Raby squinted horribly, Newcome let down the corners of his mouth to the fullest extent, Lovell kept his pencil-blackened eye to the squire, and Jimmy Silver pre-

sented his swollen cheek. With bated breath the Fourth Formers waited, while the penetrating eyeglass gleamed at them.

The squire started a little. Possibly he was struck by Raby's squint, which really was horrible to contemplate.

Bulkeley moved forward.

"Silver!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Take those bullseyes out of your mouth at once."

"Oh!"

The game was up. Jimmy Silver once more deposited the bullseyes in his handkerchief, and his swollen cheek once more became normal. Squire Devereux's eyeglass was fixed on him.

"That is the boy!"

He did not look again at Lovell, Raby, or Newcome. He beckoned to Jimmy Silver.

"Boy, come here!"

Jimmy Silver suppressed his feelings, and stepped out from the ranks of the Fourth. Lovell & Co. exchanged a glance. Lovell dabbed at the blackening of his eye with his handkerchief—incidentally, making it look blacker—Raby ceased to squint, and Newcome to contort his mouth. It was sink or swim together; and Jimmy having been bagged, his comrades were ready to follow him to the slaughter.

Mr. Devereux stared at them.

"So you are the four young scamps

"

"Yes, sir!" sighed Jimmy.

"You were trying to escape observation?"

"Hem!"

To the surprise of the juniors, the squire smiled. It was rather a crusty smile—his features did not seem accustomed to such things. Still, it was a smile.

"Follow me!" he said.

"Oh dear!"

And in the lowest possible spirits, the Fistical Four followed the tall gentleman up the Hall to the dais where the Head stood.

CHAPTER 7.

A Startling Surprise!

"THIS is the boy!" Squire Devereux indicated Jimmy Silver. Of the Co. he seemed to take no heed.

Dr. Chisholm fixed his eyes on Jimmy.

"It was you, then, Silver?" he said.

"Yes, sir," murmured Jimmy.

"It was all of us, sir," said Raby.

"Eh?"

"My fault entirely, sir!" said Arthur Edward Lovell, coming out at his best at that moment. "I—I hope, sir, you'll let these fellows off. It was my idea from the beginning, and I fairly forced them to follow on. They were against it all the time."

"I fail to understand you, Lovell."

"Shurrup, Lovell!" whispered Jimmy anxiously. A flogging all round was bad enough; but it was possible that if all the guilt was concentrated upon one offender, that offender might be expelled.

But Lovell was true to his colours.

"I assure you, sir, and Mr. Devereux, that it was all my doing," he said earnestly. "We should have been late for call-over, and I insisted upon taking the short cut across Devereux Woods. These chaps wouldn't have come, only I jumped over the fence, and they wouldn't leave me in the lurch. It was all me, sir."

"Bless my soul!" said the Head. "There seems to be some strange misunderstanding here."

"Not at all, sir," said Lovell. "I tell you—"

"Have these boys trespassed in your woods, Mr. Devereux?" asked the Head, with a touch of stateliness.

The squire grinned. To the amazement of the hapless culprits, he unmistakably grinned.

"Begad, yes!" he said. "The young rascals—they're the four—one of them

dropped on my head out of a tree, begad—this one, if I am not mistaken! What is your name, boy?"

"Jimmy Silver, sir."

"Give me your fist!"

"Eh?"

"Your fist, my lad!"

Jimmy Silver wondered whether he was dreaming. The squire, with his grim old crusty face very kind in expression, was extending a big brown hand, to shake hands with Jimmy Silver—why, the junior simply could not imagine. He could not suppose that the squire liked a fellow to drop on his head from a tree. That was unimaginable. Yet here was the squire extending a big brown hand—which Jimmy Silver took and shook mechanically. Mr. Devereux gave him a grip that made him jump.

"I am proud, Dr. Chisholm, to shake hands with this lad!" said the old gentleman. "I should like all Rookwood to hear me say that I am proud to shake hands with him. Rookwood, sir, should be proud of this boy—proud of him, sir! This school has a name, sir, but it has never turned out better stuff than this boy—never, sir, in its history."

"I'm dreaming this!" mumbled Jimmy Silver.

The Head blinked kindly at Jimmy over his glasses.

Lovell and Raby and Newcome were dumb. This strange turn of affairs completely dazed them. It appeared to them that Squire Devereux was wandering in his mind. It was a fortunate circumstance, but it was very amazing. Every fellow in the hall was craning his neck to look on, in great astonishment.

Squire Devereux glanced round.

"Rookwood boys!" he said, in his deep voice. "Let me tell you what your schoolfellow did!"

"I—I'm awfully sorry, sir!" gasped Jimmy.

"What?"

"I—I'm sorry I dropped on you from the tree—"

"If you had dropped on my head a dozen times, my boy, I should not say a word about it," said Mr. Devereux. "Never mind that! Rookwood boys, listen to me. Yesterday my dog broke his chain and wandered away—my Airedale. His chain was caught in the metals at the level-crossing. He would have been cut to pieces by the train that was coming. This boy ran on the line and rescued him just in time."

"Oh!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

He understood at last.

There was a buzz of surprise and interest in the crowded Hall.

"From a distance," went on Squire Devereux, "I saw all that happened. I think my heart stopped beating. Until the train had quite passed I did not know whether this brave lad had been killed or not. He might have been killed—it was a terribly narrow escape—he risked his life to save a dog from a terrible death." The squire turned to Jimmy Silver. "My dear lad, you seem to have had an impression that I came here to lay some complaint. I am sorry for that. My woods are free to you and your friends whenever you choose, so long as you are at Rookwood." He turned again to the breathless ranks of Rookwood fellows. "Boys, if you value your schoolfellow as he deserves to be valued, you will give three cheers for Jimmy Silver!"

There was a roar in Big Hall. The old oaken rafters rang and rang again. The prefects joined in it—Mr. Dalton, master of the Fourth, added his deep voice. Jimmy Silver stood crimson and dumb. Lovell thumped him ecstatically on the back.

"Hurrah! Hip-pip-hurrah! Good old Jimmy!"

Jimmy Silver was still feeling rather dazed, when he found himself in the end study with a crowd of congratulating friends. Instead of capturing a flogging, he was the hero of the hour

—which was a distinctly agreeable change in the programme. And when Arthur Edward Lovell observed, once more, how right he had been all along, Jimmy Silver grinned and did not say him nay.

CHAPTER 8.

Tubby's Latest!

BANG! All the fellows in the junior Common-room at Rookwood looked round and fixed their eyes on Tubby Muffin.

Reginald Muffin of the Fourth—had entered the Common-room and slammed down a box on the table with an emphatic bang. No doubt that bang was intended to draw general attention upon Reginald. At all events, it did so.

Some of the fellows looked at the box. It was an oblong wooden box, with a locked lid and a narrow slit in the top of the lid. It looked like a money-box. Not a very useful article to Tubby Muffin, who never had any money.

"Well, what's the game, Tubby?" inquired Arthur Edward Lovell.

"That's the collecting-box," announced Tubby. "I'm taking a collection in the Fourth."

"What on earth for?" demanded Jimmy Silver.

"For poor old Mossoo."

"What!" exclaimed a dozen voices. Tubby Muffin mounted a chair to address the surprised crowd of Fourth Form and Shell fellows.

"Gentlemen—" he began.

"Chuck it!" suggested Raby.

"Gentlemen of Rookwood—"

"Dry up, Tubby!"

"Gentlemen," roared Tubby, amid laughter, "you are all aware our respected French master, Monsieur Monceau, has been down with the 'flu."

"No need for you to tell us what we're aware of," remarked Newcome. "Besides, he's out of sanny now."

"Monsieur Monceau is going away from Rookwood for a few weeks, to get a change after his illness," went on Tubby. "I hear that another beast—I mean, another French master—is taking his place for the rest of the term. Now, you fellows know that poor old Mossco is pretty hard up."

"No bizney of yours!" growled Lovell. "It's the business of all of us, in the circumstances," said Tubby Muffin firmly. "Mossco is a good chap. He never makes us work like the other masters do. Compare him with Mr. Dalton, for example. He isn't half such a beast."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"He's going away for a holiday. We know he's hard up, or he wouldn't wear the clothes he does. French masters always are hard up, I believe," said Tubby. "Anyhow, old Monceau is awfully poor. Well, I'm going to make a collection for him."

"You silly owl!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"I think it's up to us. The thing will be done delicately, of course," said Tubby Muffin. "The money taken in this box will be changed into a bank-note. It will be slipped into his hand at parting, as a token of the respect of the Lower School. Sealed up in an envelope, you know. If it comes to ten pounds, we'll make it a tenner. I rely on you fellows for a fiver at least. See?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"It's not a laughing matter," said Tubby Muffin warmly. "We all owe a lot to Mossco. He never asks for imposts. When he takes us in detention he lets us do practically what we like. Can you say that of any other master at Rookwood—Dalton, or Mr. Greely, or Wiggins, or anybody? You can cackle as much as you like, but I think it's our duty to stand by Mossco at this—this—this auspicious moment—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"At this—this crisis in his career," said Tubby, growing eloquent. "Some of you fellows have a lot of money.

Smythe, for instance, and Conroy—lots of you. Every fellow is expected to contribute according to his means."

"And who'll see that the jolly old token reaches Mossco?" inquired Mornington.

"That's all right! The matter will be entirely in my hands."

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

"It will be safe in my hands, I suppose?" howled Tubby.

"Safe to stick there!" grinned Putty Grace.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tubby Muffin glared indignantly at the Rookwood juniors. Jimmy Silver & Co. chuckled. Many and various were the methods by which Reginald Muffin was wont to seek to raise the wind when he was hard up—as he generally was. But taking a collection for a Rookwood master was really something new.

That Monsieur Monceau, however impecunious he might be, would refuse to touch such a token of regard was fairly certain. And that the cash would never reach him if it passed through Tubby's fat hands was absolutely certain.

The destination of that collection would be the school shop, and it would not be long in arriving at its destination. Possibly Tubby's intentions were good. But it was certain that the inner Tubby would be too strong for his good intentions once he found himself with cash in his hands.

"I say, this isn't a laughing matter, you silly chumps!" exclaimed Muffin. "It's jolly serious!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We're bound to stand by a good sort like old Mossco at this suspicious—I mean, auspicious—moment. It will buck him immensely to know how much we think of him." Tubby Muffin descended from the chair. "Now, stop cackling, you fellows, and roll up and contribute. Shove in as much as you can. Currency notes will be best."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But half-crowns and shillings will be

welcome, and coppers will not be despised," said Tubby. "Walk up! Cackle as much as you like, but shove in your spare cash. It's up to you!"

There was a ripple of laughter in the Common-room.

Apparently Tubby Muffin expected to see the Rookwood juniors drop their spare cash into the slit of the collecting-box. His expectations were not likely to be realised.

"I'm waiting for you fellows!" he said, with dignity.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've got lots of oof, Symthe. It's up to you to begin!"

Adolphus Symthe of the Shell chuckled. It was true that he had plenty of money. But it was not likely that any of Smythe's ample supply of cash would find its way into Tubby Muffin's fat hands.

"Up to me, is it?" asked Adolphus.

"Yes. Go it!"

"Well, I don't mind starting the ball rollin'," said Smythe of the Shell, with a wink to the juniors near him.

He walked up to the table, and his hand hovered over the box.

Clink!

He stood between Tubby and the box as he made his contribution; so, naturally, Tubby could not see that it was a trousers button that Smythe of the Shell dropped in through the slit. Tubby heard the clink as it fell in, and smiled with satisfaction.

"Now, then, you fellows, Smythe's set you an example," he said encouragingly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Adolphus Smythe's example was followed. Nobody had any cash to spare for Tubby's collection, but plenty of fellows had odd buttons or other valueless odds and ends, and they were quite willing to put them in the collection. Indeed, the collection caught on in a way that Tubby Muffin had never dreamed of anticipating. Fellows left the Common-room, apparently to fetch loose cash, and they came back and slipped things into the box, clinking.

Tubby Muffin sat in the armchair and smiled a fat smile of happy satisfaction.

Every minute or two something was added to the collection, and Tubby began to dream golden dreams.

Mornington lifted the box at last, and weighed it in his hands. The contents rattled and clinked.

"Full up, Tubby!" announced Morny.

"Oh, good!" gasped Tubby.

"I fancy-it won't hold any more," said Jimmy Silver. "You'd better take it to Mr. Dalton, Tubby, and ask him to change what's in it for banknotes."

Tubby detached himself from the armchair.

"Right-ho!" he said cheerfully.

He took the box from the table. It was very heavy, and Tubby's eyes fairly gleamed over it. If only coppers were in the box, the sum inside must be a goodly one. And surely a good proportion of the contents must have been in silver. Tubby hoped so, at least.

"Thanks for rolling up like this, you fellows!" he exclaimed. "You're sportsmen, you are, really. Of course, I knew you'd play up! Thanks all round!"

Tubby Muffin walked out of the Common-room with the box under his arm. A roar of laughter followed him. Two or three fellows looked out after him, to see whether he headed for Mr. Dalton's study. He didn't. He headed for the stairs. Tubby Muffin was heading for his own study, and the contents of that box, if in the form of cash, were much more likely to be changed for jam-tarts at the tuckshop than for banknotes to be presented as a parting token of esteem to Monsieur Monceau.

CHAPTER 9.

Hidden Treasure!

REGINALD MUFFIN placed the money-box on his study table, and contemplated it with fat and smiling satisfaction.

The box was so heavy that it had

been quite an exertion for Tubby to carry it up to the Fourth Form passage.

He groped in his pocket for the key with a dazzling prospect of sudden wealth dancing before his eyes. Such a weight, even in coppers, could not work out at less than some pounds. And if there was a good proportion of shillings and florins and half-crowns, the sum contained in the money-box was dazzling to contemplate. It was a large money-box, and it was full almost to the lid.

"Ripping!" murmured Tubby. "Topping! Splendid! Fancy the fellows playing up like that! Of course, they know they can trust me. That's what comes of being a really straightforward chap."

And then Tubby felt a slight twinge in his fat conscience. The collection had been taken for Monsieur Monceau, and already Tubby was regarding it as his own.

He hesitated.

"After all, a chap's entitled to expenses," he murmured. "Expenses are always paid out of charitable collections, and very often there isn't anything left after the expenses are paid. That's quite common, I believe. Suppose we say fifty per cent. for expenses. That's half for Mossoo and half for me."

What "expenses" Tubby had been put to it would rather have puzzled him to say, but he liked the word. The word expenses, like charity, covers a multitude of sins.

"That's a good idea," murmured Tubby. "But considering all the trouble I've had, perhaps I ought to put the expenses at seventy-five per cent. After all, Mossoo will get his quarter for nothing, and I had to think of the wheeze, and make the fellows shell out. It was my eloquence that did it, added to my being well-known as a straight and honourable fellow that could be trusted with money. Really, I think if Mossoo gets ten per cent. he will be doing jolly well. Even five per cent.—"

Tubby Muffin had a conscience. It worked, though perhaps it did not work full time.

He felt that he could not bag the whole sum. Even the famous Tubby realised that that would be too "thick."

After a little cogitation, he decided upon five per cent. for Monsieur Monceau.

Ninety-five per cent. for "expenses" was a large percentage, even for a charitable collection. But Reginald Muffin felt that that would be about right.

"After all, if Mossoo gets five per cent. for nothing he's doing well out of my stunt," said Tubby aloud. "I think he's jolly lucky myself. I hope he'll be properly grateful, but you never can tell I've come across a lot of ingratitude in my time."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tubby Muffin, with the key of the money-box in his hand, started, and stared round. Half a dozen grinning faces were looking in at the doorway of Study No. 2.

Tubby waved a fat hand at them.

"Don't you fellows butt in!" he exclaimed. "I'm busy. I'm just going to count it up."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Nothing to cackle at," said Tubby. "This is a business matter. I'm very careful in money matters. I'm going to account for the money to the last farthing."

"Well, let's see you open it," grinned Lovell.

"Let's!" chorused the juniors.

Tubby did not unlock the box.

He was keen to feast his eyes upon his ill-gotten gains, but not in public. The other fellows were equally keen to watch Tubby's face when he saw his collection. They felt that Tubby's expression would be entertaining.

"Oh, get out, you chaps!" urged Tubby. "I have to attend to business matters like this in private."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You mean you don't want us to

know that you're going to pinch Mossoo's collection!" grinned Raby.

"Nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Tubby indignantly. "Mossoo will receive every penny he's entitled to after I've deducted my percentage for expenses."

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

"Oh, don't cackle. Get out!"

Instead of getting out the hilarious juniors got in. They surrounded the table and the money-box.

"Let's see it opened," persisted Lovell.

"Yes, rather!"

"Open it, Tubby!"

"We want to count it up, you know!" chortled Putty. "I know you'll be surprised, Tubby, when you see what's in that box."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tubby Muffin slipped the key back into his pocket. He was quite resolved not to open the box in the presence of a crowd of the Fourth. Tubby was not bright, but he was bright enough to know what the Classical Fourth would think of ninety-five per cent. for "expenses."

"Look here, you chaps——"

"Open the box!" roared Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Shan't! I tell you——"

"Let's open it for him!" suggested Oswald.

"Good egg!" exclaimed Lovell. "I'll get the poker."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tubby Muffin made a sudden clutch at the box, grabbed it up from the table, and fairly bolted from the study with it. Clink, clink, clink! rang the contents of the box as Tubby raced out into the Fourth Form passage.

"After him!" roared Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a rush in pursuit of Tubby Muffin.

The fat Classical rushed for the stairs, with the hilarious juniors on his track. On the landing Lovell caught him by the collar and jerked him back.

"Now, you fat fraud——"

"Yooop!"

Crash!

The money-box escaped from Tubby's hands and went crashing down the staircase.

With bang on bang it rolled from step to step, the contents rattling and ringing and clinking with a terrific din.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Tubby. "Oh, dear!"

"Bless my soul!" It was a deep, fruity voice from the lower landing, the voice of Mr. Horace Greely, the plump and portly master of the Fifth Form at Rookwood. "Bless my soul!—What—what—what is this?"

Tubby Muffin jerked himself free from Lovell and fairly raced down the stairs. On the next landing Mr. Greely was standing, with a surprised countenance, holding in his hands the money-box, which had rolled to his feet, and which he had picked up in great astonishment.

"What—what—what——" the surprised Form-master was repeating.

Tubby panted up.

"That's mine, sir!"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Lovell, on the landing above. "It's old Greely! Better leave him to it!"

And the Fourth-Formers faded away along the passage, leaving Tubby Muffin to settle the matter with the master of the Fifth.

CHAPTER 10.

Called to Account!

MR. GREELY, holding the heavy money-box in his plump hands, stared at Tubby Muffin.

Tubby eyed him breathlessly. He could barely resist snatching at the box; but it was impracticable, of course, to snatch at a box held in the angust fingers of a Form-master. But anxiety thrilled Reginald Muffin from one fat end to the other.

Certainly, as the money-box was his property, Mr. Greely ought to have handed it over without a word. But as Tubby knew from dismal experience,

with Form-masters, you never could tell. They were a very uncertain race at the very best, and generally beasts.

"It's mine, sir!" gasped Tubby. "My—my money-box, sir! I—I was showing it to some fellows, sir, and it slipped out of my hands."

"Your money-box?" repeated Mr. Greely.

"Yes, sir. You—you can see it's a money-box," said Tubby anxiously.

Mr. Greely was staring at the box, as if really he supposed it might be a musical-box or a Christmas box or any old kind of box, whereas it was quite plainly a money-box.

"This is very extraordinary, Muffin," said Mr. Greely in his booming, fruity voice.

"Is—is—is it, sir?"

"This box weighs some pounds, I should say," exclaimed Mr. Greely. "At all events, it seems full of money."

"Yes, sir. I've been taking—" Tubby broke off suddenly. It dawned upon his fat mind that if he mentioned the collection he had been taking for Monsieur Monceau the matter would be out of his hands.

Once the collection came to official knowledge it was most probable that the whole thing would be quashed; but at any rate, it was absolutely certain that the collector would not be allowed to deduct ninety-five per cent. for "expenses." He would not be allowed to deduct five per cent.; in fact, he would not be allowed to keep a single coin in the whole collection. Tubby was not too obtuse to understand that, and the words died on his tongue.

"You have been taking what?" exclaimed Mr. Greely.

"I—I've been taking—taking—taking—" stammered Tubby, at a loss for a plausible statement.

"I trust, Muffin, that you have not been taking money that does not belong to you?" boomed Mr. Greely.

Reginald Muffin jumped. Even Reginald was not quite capable of proceeding to that length in his schemes for raising the wind.

"Oh, sir! No, sir! Certainly not!" he gasped.

"Then what do you mean that you have been taking?"

"I—I—I mean I've been taking care of my money this term, sir," gasped Muffin. "I—I've been saving up, sir. That's how it is, sir. And—and I've got my money-box full at last, sir!"

Tubby held out his fat hands nervously for the money-box. Mr. Greely seemed to hold on to it more tightly than before. His look was fixed on Muffin with deep suspicion.

"The money in this box belongs to you, Muffin?"

"Yes, sir!" gasped Tubby.

"All of it?" boomed Mr. Greely.

"Oh, yes, sir. Every shilling!"

"There must be a large sum, Muffin?"

"Oh, yes, sir! All my tips this term!"

"All your tips for several terms, Muffin, would not amount to such a sum as this box apparently contains," said Mr. Greely sternly. "I am not satisfied with this, Muffin."

"I—I say, gimme my box!" stuttered Tubby. "You—you ain't my Form-master, sir!"

Mr. Greely frowned portentously.

"I am not your Form-master, Muffin. If I were your Form-master I should insist upon your opening this box in my presence, and in making a strict investigation into the matter. As it is, I shall do nothing of the kind."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" gasped Tubby in great relief.

"I shall, however, take this box to your Form-master Mr. Dalton—"

"Ow!"

"And you will accompany me, Muffin."

"Oh, dear!"

"Follow me at once, Muffin!" boomed Mr. Greely. And he stalked away down the lower stairs, the money-box under his majestic arm.

Tubby Muffin blinked after him in utter dismay. He rolled dismally in the wake of the majestic Mr. Greely.

In the lower passage he came on

Jimmy Silver and Mornington. They looked at the money-box under Mr. Greely's arm, and looked at Reginald Muffin.

"I—I say, Jimmy!" gasped Tubby "Speak to him."

"Eh?" ejaculated the captain of the Fourth.

"Tell him it's mine—he'll take your word!" breathed Tubby in an anxious whisper. "He's taking my money-box to Dalton!"

"Well, you wanted it taken to Dalton, didn't you?" asked Jimmy innocently.

"Nunno—I mean yes! But——"

Mr. Greely glanced round.

"Follow me, Muffin!"

"Ow! Yes, sir!" groaned Tubby.

The hapless fat junior followed on, leaving Jimmy Silver and Mornington chuckling. Mr. Greely knocked loudly at Mr. Dalton's study door. Mr. Greely did everything heavily, loudly, and impressively. He was, in fact, a very heavy and impressive gentleman.

"Come in!"

The Fifth Form master walked into the study with the hapless Tubby at his heels. A little gentleman with a pointed black beard was in the study with Mr. Dalton. It was Monsieur Monceau, the French master, who was about to leave Rookwood for a time, and whose place was to be taken temporarily by another gentleman from la belle France. Mr. Dalton and Mosso both looked in surprise at the new arrivals. The Fifth Form master slammed the box, rattling and jingling, on the table.

"This is a matter for your investigation, I think, Mr. Dalton," he said. "Muffin dropped this box in my presence. He declares that it is his money-box, and he has saved up the contents this term. You can feel the weight of the box. I recommend looking into this matter, Mr. Dalton."

"Thank you, Mr. Greely," said the master of the Fourth, rather dryly. Mr. Greely, as a matter of fact, was

rather given to advising and recommending the other members of the Rookwood staff, and they were not always very grateful for his advice and recommendations.

The portly Form-master of the Fifth withdrew from the study, leaving Reginald Muffin standing before his Form-master.

"Please do not go, Monsieur Monceau," said Mr. Dalton, as the French gentleman moved. "This matter will not detain me many minutes."

"I—I say, sir! It's—it's mine!" stammered Muffin.

Mr. Dalton lifted the heavy money-box and set it down again.

"You had better speak frankly, Muffin," he said quietly. "If this box contains money, it cannot possibly all belong to you."

Tubby trembled.

"You—you see, sir——" he stammered.

"Is there money in this box?" exclaimed Mr. Dalton.

"Yes, sir."

"Then there must be a large sum."

"Yes, sir! I—I've been saving up

"Do not talk nonsense, Muffin. You could not possibly save up enough money to fill this large box. Where did you obtain so much money?"

"I—I—I——"

"Is it possible, Muffin, that you have been dishonest?"

"Ow! No!" gasped Tubby.

"Then where did this money come from? Answer me at once!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton sternly.

Tubby Muffin realised that there was nothing for it but the truth. Even parting with the money was better than being suspected of theft.

"It—it—it's a collection, sir!" he groaned.

"A collection!"

"Yes, sir. I—I've taken a collection

——"

"You had no right to do anything of the kind, Muffin, as you very well

know. Do you mean to say that your Form-fellows have contributed so much money as this to your collection?"

"Yes, sir! You see, they trust me."

"And for what was the collection taken?"

"For—for Mossoo, sir!" gasped Tubby.

Monsieur Monceau sat bolt upright in his chair. Mr. Dalton knitted his brows.

"Muffin! Are you out of your senses?"

"You—you see, sir, we think a lot of Mossoo!" gasped Tubby. "We—we wanted him to accept it as a token of our—our esteem, sir!"

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed Monsieur Monceau. "Mister Dalton, you shall understand! I could not accept! I have nevair dream of such a zing! Ze boys—perhaps zey mean well, but it is insult to me!"

"I quite understand that, Monsieur Monceau," said Mr. Dalton. "Muffin is the most stupid boy in my Form; but I cannot understand the other boys being foolish enough to enter any such absurd scheme. Yet the money seems to be here."

"It's for Mossoo, sir!" gasped Tubby. "I—I was only thinking of keeping ninety-five per cent—I—I mean five per cent, sir, for—for expenses."

"You were thinking of what?" thundered Mr. Dalton.

"Nothing, sir!" howled Tubby terrified. "I—I wasn't thinking of anything, sir—n-n-nothing at all."

"Zat boy, he is foolish," said Monsieur Monceau. "Vat you call in English, one fathead!"

"I am afraid he is also unscrupulous," said Mr. Dalton, frowning.

"Muffin, unlock this box at once."

"Yes, sir, I'll take it to my study

—"

"You will unlock it here."

"Oh, dear!"

"The money it contains," continued Mr. Dalton, "will be placed in the school poor-box. Unlock it at once."

Tubby Muffin fairly groaned as he fished out the key and inserted it into the lock. The lid of the money-box was raised.

Mr. Dalton glanced into it, and an extraordinary expression came over his face. Monsieur Monceau glanced into it and grinned. Tubby Muffin blinked at it as if he could scarcely believe his eyes, as indeed he scarcely could.

It was a remarkable collection.

Trousers' buttons, perhaps, predominated. But there were other buttons, many and various. There were several old rusty keys; and there were innumerable broken pen-nibs. There were links from an old dog-chain; there were pebbles; there were broken blades of penknives; there were all sorts and conditions of useless fragments and odds and ends. But there was no money!

"Upon my word!" ejaculated Mr. Dalton.

"Rotters!" howled Tubby Muffin, forgetting the presence in which he stood, in his amazement and wrath.

"Muffin!"

"Pulling my leg all the time!" howled Tubby. "I—I rather wondered at the way they rolled up and shoved it in! Beasts!"

"Boy!"

"That's why they wanted to see me open it! The awful cads!"

"Muffin, you utterly ridiculous boy, take this rubbish away from my study at once!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton. "You will take five hundred lines, Muffin. Go at once!"

"Oh, dear!"

Reginald Muffin picked up the money-box, the contents of which were now his undisputed property, and limped dismally out of the study with his burden. Mr. Dalton did not laugh till the study door had closed on him. The hapless Tubby did not feel like laughing at all. He limped down the corridor with the money-box; and at the corner he found a crowd of the Classical Fourth waiting for him.

"Ha, ha, ha! Here he is!" roared Lovell. "How many banknotes did

Dicky Dalton give you for that lot, Tubby?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Did Mossoo thank you nicely for that token of esteem?" inquired Mornington.

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

"Come along when you want another collection," chortled Putty of the Fourth. "I'll save up my old buttons for you, Tubby."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tubby Muffin meandered on his way dismally, leaving the Classical Fourth roaring with laughter.

CHAPTER 11.

Just Like Lovell!

"IT'S Muffin! I'll make him jump!" Thus Arthur Edward Lovell.

It was a couple of days later, and a half-holiday at Rookwood. Jimmy Silver & Co. were coming home from a ramble in Rookham Woods, and their path lay across the bridge above Coombe. On the low stone parapet of the bridge a fat figure sat, slowly and methodically working a way through a bag of cherries.

Tubby Muffin was too deeply interested in the cherries to look up at the sound of footsteps, or even to hear them. He was enjoying his podgy self, and the rest of the universe was a blank to him till he had finished the cherries.

Arthur Edward Lovell tiptoed along the parapet of the bridge, with the playful intention of making his presence suddenly known, and making Tubby jump.

Jimmy Silver called out to him.

"Hold on, ass! He might fall!"

Lovell did not heed, except to wave his hand back to his chums as a sign to be silent.

Tubby's back was to the Fistical Four, as he sat with his fat little legs astride the parapet. Deeply engrossed in the cherries, he was quite unconscious of Lovell's tiptoe approach.

Jimmy Silver frowned. Lovell was not much given to reflection, and such a practical joke was not without an element of danger. Jimmy decided that he had better call out to Muffin, though that step was certain to bring upon him the vials of Arthur Edward Lovell's wrath. But before he could call, Lovell made a run forward and gave the fat Classical a slap on the back.

"Hallo!" he bawled, just behind Tubby's head.

Startled almost out of his fat wits, Tubby Muffin whirled round, forgetting where he was; and at the same moment he over-balanced. Lovell made a clutch at him, and caught his collar. The collar came away in his hand as the fat junior shot downward towards the river.

"Good heavens!" panted Raby.

Jimmy Silver tore forward.

"Lovell! Oh, you ass!"

Arthur Edward Lovell stood transfixed, with Muffin's collar in his hand. He was utterly overwhelmed by the sudden happening. There was a gurgling howl and a splash below.

"He—he—he's in!" stuttered Lovell.

Jimmy rushed to the other side of the bridge. Tubby Muffin had been swept under the old brick arch by the current, and as Jimmy reached the opposite parapet and looked down the fat Classical was swept out from under the bridge. His fat hands clawed at the air, and he went under, rushed away by the fast current before Jimmy Silver could even think of diving in for him. He came up again a score of yards or more from the bridge.

"Come on!" panted Jimmy.

He rushed across the bridge to get down to the towpath. Muffin was a feeble swimmer even in a swimming-bath; in the river he was utterly helpless. It seemed almost a certainty that he would be drowned before the juniors could get anywhere near him. But Raby gave a sudden shout.

"Look!"

A man on the towpath had stopped,

and was looking out at the river, his eyes fixed on the feebly-struggling junior. He was a man of rather foreign-looking aspect, with keen black eyes and a black moustache, and very handsome features. He stood for a second, his eyes fixed on Muffin, and then, staying only to throw off his hat, he plunged into the river and swam out with swift, vigorous strokes.

The Fistical Four stopped, and watched him from the bridge. Muffin was far beyond their help if they had run their hardest. All depended on the foreign-looking stranger.

"He's got him!" panted Lovell.

"Good man!"

"Some swimmer!" said Newcome.

The stranger was evidently a powerful swimmer. The current of the river was swift and strong, but he struck across with powerful strokes, and was in the way of Tubby Muffin as the half-conscious junior came sweeping down. He grasped at Tubby and caught him, and the fat Classical's face was above the water again, white and set.

Then, burdened with Tubby Muffin, the stranger swam for the bank, yielding a little to the current, and slanting his way towards the willows on the towpath.

"Come on!"

Jimmy Silver & Co, tore down to the bank. They were ready to plunge into the water and help the rescuer, but he did not need help. By the time they reached the towpath the stranger had dragged himself and Tubby Muffin ashore to safety.

He was drenched to the skin, and the water ran down him as he stood. Tubby Muffin sat in the grass and puffed and blew.

"Muffin—he's all right!" panted Lovell, almost sobbing with relief.

"No thanks to you, you ass!" growled Raby.

"I—I never thought——"

"No, you never do!"

"Ow! I'm wet!" gasped Tubby

Muffin. "Ow! I'm nearly drowned. Ow! My collar's gone! Wow!"

"Thank goodness you're not drowned!" said Jimmy Silver. He raised his straw hat very respectfully to the drenched stranger. "You've saved this chap's life, sir. He belongs to our school, and we'll take charge of him. Get up, Muffin! You'll catch cold."

"Ow! I'm wet!"

"It was awfully plucky of you to go in for him, sir," said Lovell. "The river's dangerous about here."

The stranger smiled.

"Rien!" he said. "I mean, it is nothing. I could not see the boy drown. Mais, ma foi, I am wet! Can you boys tell me if it is far to Rookwood from here?"

"Rookwood!" exclaimed Jimmy. "We belong to Rookwood, sir. You're going to Rookwood?"

"Ah, you are Rookwood boys!" said the stranger, with a pleasant smile that made his handsome, dark face seem handsomer. "Mais oui, I am going to Rookwood. I shall be your French master."

"Oh, you are Monsieur Gaston!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver, remembering that he had heard the name of Mossoo's substitute, who was booked to arrive at the school that afternoon.

"That is my name."

Lovell picked up the Frenchman's hat and handed it to him. Monsieur Gaston ran his hands rather ruefully through his thick, dark hair, which was dripping with water.

"Thank you, my boy! I think I will run," he said. "My baggage will not yet be at Rookwood. But I must get some dry clothes. Ma foi! I am very wet. You will see that that pauvre garçon does not catch cold?"

"We'll look after him, sir. Straight on to Rookwood."

"Bon!"

The French gentleman, with a graceful salute, hurried up the towpath. He broke into a run, and was very soon

out of sight. Jimmy Silver grasped Tubby and jerked him to his feet.

"Come on, fatty!" he said. "You've got to trot or you'll be catching cold."

"Where are my cherries?"

"What!"

"I hadn't finished my cherries!" persisted Tubby Muffin.

"You silly owl!" roared Jimmy. "Your blessed cherries went in with you, and they don't matter."

"Don't they?" ejaculated Tubby indignantly. "They jolly well do! That silly ass might have got my cherries out while he was about it! He grabbed me by the hair, the silly duffer—and jolly well hurt me. Just like a silly foreigner!"

The Fistical Four stared at Tubby. This, apparently, was the Muffin brand of gratitude.

"Well, you fat frog!" exclaimed Lovell. "Get a move on before I kick you!"

"You jolly well made me fall in, Lovell, and you'll have to pay for the cherries—"

"You silly ass! Get a move on!"

"There was nearly a shilling's worth left. Ow! Leggo my ear, you beast! Wow!"

The question of the cherries was left unsettled. It was necessary for the drenched Tubby to get into active motion, and the Fistical Four got him into active motion. They grasped him and ran him up the towpath, and, in spite of Tubby's loud and indignant expostulations, they did not allow him to halt, or even to slack down, till they reached the Rookwood boathouse, and then they walked him up to the school, still expostulating.

CHAPTER 12.

A Startling Denunciation!

MR. DALTON raised his eyebrows. A foreign-looking, rather handsome and athletic young man arrived at the doorway of the Rookwood School House, with a face

flushed pink with exertion. He was a stranger at Rookwood, and evidently he had been in deep water. He was wet all over, and the summer dust of the Hampshire lanes had clung to the wet, covering him as with a garment. A dozen fellows in the quadrangle looked curiously at the young foreigner, and old Mack, the porter, was staring after him blankly from the gates. Mr. Dalton, who was looking out of the big doorway, was surprised, but polite,

The young French gentleman raised his hat—the only dry article about him—in courteous salute to the Fourth Form master.

"Bonjour, monsieur!" he began.

"Good-afternoon, sir!" said Mr. Dalton politely. "May I ask if you are Monsieur Gaston, the new French master?"

"Mais, oui," M. Gaston smiled. "I arrive in a peculiar way, and I give you surprise, n'est-ce pas? But it is not my fault that I am so wet. I walk from the station, and take the path by the river, and a boy fall in from the bridge. Voila tout!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton. "You jumped into the river to get out a boy?"

"Exactly. I explain this because I am so very wet." The French gentleman smiled again. "Excusez-moi. Perhaps you can tell me whether my baggage has arrived from the railway. I must change my clothes. You are a master here, n'est-ce pas?"

"I am the master of the Fourth Form," said Mr. Dalton. "My name is Richard Dalton. I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Monsieur Gaston." He shook hands with the young Frenchman. "Your baggage cannot have arrived yet; but certainly you must change your clothes. Will you come to my room? I can lend you a few things, with pleasure."

"Oh, you are too kind, too hospitable!" exclaimed M. Gaston.

Mr. Dalton smiled, and led the stranger into the House.

Mr. Greely, the master of the Fifth,

glanced at them as they went up the staircase, and started a little. He came to the foot of the staircase and looked up after them, but he had a view only of their backs. He turned away, and found Bulkeley of the Sixth at hand.

"Bulkeley," said Mr. Greely, "can you tell me who that young gentleman is who has gone up with Mr. Dalton?"

"The new French master, I think, sir," answered the captain of Rookwood.

"Ah! I remember that Monsieur Gaston was expected this afternoon," said the Fifth Form master thoughtfully.

"That is he, I think, sir."

"Dear me!" Mr. Greely looked perplexed. "I had only a glimpse of the young man, but it seemed to me that his face was familiar. I am almost sure that I have seen him before."

"Indeed, sir!" said Bulkeley politely, but without much interest.

"Certainly he resembles someone whom I saw in Paris in a certain vacation some time ago," said Mr. Greely.

"Indeed!"

"But, of course, it is impossible," said Mr. Greely, speaking to himself rather than to Bulkeley.

He walked on to Masters' Common-room without waiting for Bulkeley to make any rejoinder, leaving the captain of Rookwood considerably surprised.

Meanwhile, Mr. Dalton had taken the French gentleman to his room and hospitably supplied his wants. He left Monsieur Gaston to change, and came downstairs again. From the big doorway he had a view of five juniors coming up the path to the House—the Fistical Four, with Tubby Muffin in their midst. Tubby was red and perspiring and spluttering, expostulating loudly as he was hurried on. Jimmy Silver & Co. were determined that he should not catch cold by hanging about in wet clothes, and they were keeping him in active motion—extremely active

motion—and Tubby was more than fed-up with it. He would have preferred a bad cold and a week in sunny to all this exertion. But Reginald Muffin was not given his choice in the matter.

"Buck up, Muffin!" exclaimed Lovell, as he propelled the fat Classical up the steps of the House.

"Ow! Rotter! Lemme alone!"

"You'll catch cold, you fat duffer!"

"All your fault, you dummy. Let a chap alone!" gasped Tubby. "I'm nearly dropping now. Ow! Wow!"

"What does this mean, Silver?" exclaimed Mr. Dalton.

"Muffin fell in the river, sir," said Jimmy Silver. "He toppled off the bridge. We've brought him home."

"It was all Lovell's fault—" began Tubby, with breathless indignation.

"Shurrup!" murmured Raby.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton. "Is Muffin the boy whom Monsieur Gaston pulled out of the river?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Take him to the dormitory at once. I will ask the House dame to come up to him immediately."

"Very well, sir."

The Fistical Four propelled the breathless Tubby up to the Fourth Form dormitory, where they gladly handed him over to the care of Mrs. Maloney. Then they came down, and were called into Mr. Dalton's study to give an account of what had happened.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were emphatic in their admiration of the French gentleman's promptitude and courage in the rescue of Tubby Muffin. Evidently Victor Gaston was something of a hero in their eyes. Mr. Dalton listened to the recital with interest, the juniors judiciously forgetting to mention Lovell's obtuse practical joke which had caused the accident.

"It was no end plucky of him, sir," said Lovell. "The river's jolly dangerous below the bridge, as you know, sir. But he went right in as soon as he saw Muffin. He had him out by the time we got down to the bank. It was ripping, sir!"

Mr. Dalton smiled.

"It is very fortunate that Monsieur Gaston walked from the station by the towpath," he said. "Very fortunate indeed for Muffin!"

He dismissed the juniors, and as soon as the Fistical Four came out they found a crowd of the Classical Fourth curious to know what had happened. The chums of the Fourth gave a graphic description of Tubby Muffin's rescue to a crowd of fellows in the corridor. The general opinion of the Fourth was that Monsieur Gaston was a jolly good fellow, as well as some swimmer.

"We'll jolly well give him a cheer when he comes downstairs," said Mornington.

"Good egg!" said Conroy. "It will show him what Rookwood thinks of pluck!"

"Yes, rather!" agreed Jimmy Silver. "Where is he now?"

"Changing his clobber in Dicky Dalton's room," said Putty of the Fourth. "Let's wait for him."

"Hallo, here's Tubby!"

Tubby Muffin came downstairs in dry clothes, with an extremely cross expression on his fat face. He blinked morosely at the juniors.

"You owe me a bob, Lovell," he said at once. "It was all your fault. My cherries——"

"For goodness' sake shut up about those dashed cherries!" exclaimed Lovell impatiently. "Aren't you thankful that you haven't been drowned?"

Tubby Muffin sniffed.

"Oh, I wasn't in any danger," he said.

"What?"

"I'm a splendid swimmer, you know. Any of you fellows would have been in danger. I admit that. Not me!"

"You silly owl!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver. "You would have been drowned if the new Froggy hadn't gone in for you!"

"Rot!" said Tubby.

"And you ought to thank him for

saving your life," said Raby warmly. Tubby Muffin looked thoughtful. A cunning gleam came into his little round eyes.

"You fellows think he saved my life?" he asked.

"Of course he did!"

"Well, then, in that case, of course, a fellow ought to be grateful," said Tubby. "I'll tell you what. Suppose we present him with a token of our esteem——"

"Eh?"

"I'm ready to take a collection," said Tubby. "Not in a money-box——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't want any more of your rotten japes," said Tubby. "But if the chap saved my life, and all that, we ought to give him a—a—a testimonial. I'll take round the hat. If I had a testimonial I should prefer it in the form of cash. So, of course, he would. You fellows can trust me with the money——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lovell.

"I think it's a jolly good idea," exclaimed Tubby warmly. "Now, what are you fellows handing out?"

"Mine's a boot," said Jimmy Silver. And he suited the action to the word, and there was a roar from Tubby Muffin.

"Mine's a thump," said Newcome.

"Yaroooh!"

"Bump him!" exclaimed Mornington.

"I—I say! Whoop! Stoppit! I say! Yaroooh! I—I was only j-j-joking! I'm not going to take a collection! Yow-ow! I wouldn't, you know! Leggo! Mmmmmmmmm!"

"Mon Dieu!" murmured a surprised voice on the stairs. Monsieur Victor Gaston, the "new Froggy," was coming down, and he stared at the hilarious scene going on at the foot of the staircase.

"Oh, here he is!" exclaimed Lovell.

The juniors dropped Tubby Muffin at once. Tubby landed on the floor and roared, unheeded. Jimmy Silver gave

the signal for the cheer, and the juniors cheered the French gentleman uproariously, much to his surprise.

Mr. Dalton came along from his study.

"Hurrah! Bravo, sir! Vive la France!" The Fourth Formers were yelling with great enthusiasm.

"But what is all this? What does it mean?" exclaimed Monsieur Gaston.

"It was a Fourth Form boy whom you pulled out of the river, monsieur," said Mr. Dalton with a smile. "This is apparently an ovation from his Form-fellows. Come, my boys, that will do. Shall I take you to Dr. Chisholm, monsieur?"

"Thank you!"

The juniors still cheered as Monsieur Gaston walked away with Mr. Dalton to the Head's study.

"He's a jolly good fellow, and he knows what we think of him now," remarked Jimmy Silver.

Monsieur Gaston, dressed in a suit of Mr. Dalton's clothes, and looking none the worse for his ducking, walked away cheerfully to interview the Head of Rookwood. He was already on quite cordial terms with Mr. Dalton.

"Come to my study when you have seen the Head, and if you wish, I will introduce you to the other members of the staff in Common-room," said Mr. Dalton, as he left the French gentleman.

"You are very kind."

Mr. Dalton returned to his study. It was close on tea-time, and the Rookwood staff generally had their tea in Common-room, in a select company by themselves. It was a good opportunity for Monsieur Gaston to make the acquaintance of his future colleagues. Monsieur Monceau had not been considered of much account in the school, and indeed had generally been rather patronised by the other masters. But the "new Froggy" was obviously a man of different calibre, and looked like a man to hold his own quite easily in Common-room. Even the majestic

Mr. Greely was not likely to put him out of countenance.

Victor Gaston rejoined Mr. Dalton in a quarter of an hour. Then the two young men proceeded together to Masters' Common-room. They chatted cheerily on the way.

In Common-room were gathered the Rookwood masters; Mr. Greely, of the Fifth, Mr. Mooney, of the Shell, Mr. Bohun, of the Third, Mr. Wiggins, of the Second; Mr. Bull, the maths master, Mr. Flinders, the German master, and two or three others. Mr. Dalton presented the new arrival, and he was received politely. But Mr. Greely, laying down his newspaper, stood as if rooted to the floor, his eyes fixed on the face of the Frenchman, uttering no word.

The expression on Mr. Greely's face was strange. His eyes seemed almost to be staring from his head as he stared blankly at the French gentleman. Monsieur Gaston could not help observing his strange look—it was obvious to every man in the room. Mr. Dalton frowned slightly.

"Mr. Greely—you did not seem to hear me," he said rather sharply. "This is Monsieur Victor Gaston, who is taking Monsieur Monceau's place here for the rest of the term."

Still Mr. Greely did not speak. Still his startled eyes were glued upon the handsome, rather surprised face of the Frenchman.

"Mr. Greely——" murmured Mr. Mooney.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Mr. Greely at last.

He strode towards the Frenchman. There was a hush in Masters' Common-room.

"What are you doing here?" thundered Mr. Greely. "Felix Lacroix, what are you doing here?"

Victor Gaston looked at him calmly, coolly, not a muscle of his handsome face twitching.

"Vous vous trompez, monsieur," he said quietly. "You mistake. My name

is Victor Gaston—I am a French master—”

Mr. Greely's reply astounded Masters' Common-room.

“Your name is Felix Lacroix, and you are a French criminal!” he thundered. “I myself, in Paris last year, saw you sentenced to prison in a court of law for a robbery of a bank. You are here under a false name, and for some lawless purpose!”

“Mr. Greely—are you out of your senses?” exclaimed Mr. Dalton, in dismay and amazement.

“No, sir, I am not. I know that man as well as I know my own brother!” exclaimed Mr. Greely. “If he denies his name, I am going to the Head to denounce him!”

Victor Gaston shrugged his shoulders. “You will please yourself, monsieur,” he said. “I can only repeat that my name is Victor Gaston, that my testimonials are in the hands of Dr. Chisholm, and that you are mistaken—deceived, perhaps, by some resemblance.”

“Nothing of the kind!” Mr. Greely snorted with wrath. “I am going to the Head!”

With ponderous footsteps, the Fifth Form master stalked out of the room, purple with wrath and excitement. He left a dead silence behind him in Masters' Common-room.

CHAPTER 13.

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 door 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.

Peele noted his expression, and sneered.

“Of course, you're down on it, 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 is comin'. Get on with it.”

“What rot!” grunted Gower. “Where's the harm in locking a beak in his bed-room, I'd like to know?”

“No harm at all, as a rule,” said Jimmy. “A little fatheaded, perhaps, but no harm in it. But this chap Gaston is a really decent fellow. He pulled Muffin out of the river.”

“Muffin says he wasn't in any danger, and would have swum out all right,” sneered Peele.

“That's Muffin's rot. He was going under when Monsieur Gaston bagged him in the water,” said Jimmy. “But

besides that, Monsieur Gaston is a stranger here, and he comes from a foreign country, and there's such a thing as hospitality."

"Go it!" said Peele. "I suppose that's firstly?"

"What?"

"Get on to secondly," said Peele encouragingly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gower.

"And then to thirdly," continued Peele. "You'll have to chuck it before seventhly, I think. The new Froggy will be yelling to be let out of his room soon."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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 so 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 sit up, and 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? Yaroooooh!"

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.

CHAPTER 14.

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.

"Wow!"

"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 jape 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 josser 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 New-

come. "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.

CHAPTER 15.

Facing the Music!

MR. 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 Tallboys 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 prison-breaker, and 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 relations 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 saw 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 five 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 certain 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 sen-

tenced to 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 damage—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 recognised the man—I knew—"

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.

He rolled away to Common-room, and found most of the staff there, discussing the matter. A smile passed from face to face as the Fifth Form master came in.

He noted it, and writhed inwardly. Not a man believed that there was anything in his dramatic story.

"The Head has decided to allow the Frenchman to remain here pending investigation, Mr. Mooney," he said to the master of the Shell.

Mr. Mooney raised his eyebrows.

"The Head is to make an inquiry?" he asked.

"Assuredly."

"I wonder that he takes the trouble," said Mr. Mooney dryly.

"My accusation against the man is a serious matter, sir!" boomed Mr. Greely.

"I do not regard it as serious."

"Sir!"

"Come, Mr. Greely," said Mr. Wiggins. "The thing is absurd—to do absurd for discussion, in fact."

"Exactly my opinion," said Mr. Flinders.

Snort from Mr. Greely.

"I think the whole Common-room is agreed on that point," remarked Mr. Bohun.

"Then the whole Common-room, sir, should have a little more sense!" roared Mr. Greely.

"Sir!"

"Mr. Greely!"

"You forget yourself, sir!"

"I repeat," roared the Fifth Form master, "that the whole Common-room, sir, should have a little more sense!"

With that, the Fifth Form master rolled out, in a towering temper, and slammed the door, leaving the

Common-room shrugging their shoulders. And that evening the Common-room, though not, as a rule, particularly benevolent to newcomers, made it a point to be very civil to Monsieur Victor Gaston—possibly because they regarded him as a wronged man; but partly, it is to be feared, for the amiable purpose of irritating Mr. Horace Greely.

CHAPTER 16.

Lucky for Peels!

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—such as Monsieur Monceau, in ably 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 had 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 possibly have been paid to anybody.

But though nearly all the Fourth liked and admired M. Gaston, and wanted to let that "pompous ass," Mr. Greely, see that they liked and admired him, there were several members of the Form who took quite a different view.

M. Gaston, kind and patient as he proved to be, was a worker, and showed that he expected his class to work—which was sufficient to annoy fellows like Tubby Muffin, and Townsend and Topham, who preferred slacking. And Cyril Peele, who had not forgotten the failure of his trick, and the steely grip on his ear, had a feeling very like hatred for Victor Gaston.

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!

Jimmy Silver & Co., coming in from cricket practice after lessons that day, heard Peele expounding in the Classical Fourth passage. He had many listeners, and he was going strong. Arthur Edward Lovell unceremoniously took Peele by the back of the neck, and knocked his head on the wall.

There was a fiendish yell from Peele.

"Ow! Let go, you rotter! I'll smash you!"

"Smash away, old duck," said Arthur Edward cheerily. "Now, what were you calling the new Froggy?"

"I was calling him a burglar!" roared Peele.

Bang!

Peele's head smote the passage wall again.

"Yaroooh!"

"Are you going to call him any more names?" inquired Lovell, amid a roar of laughter from the Classical juniors.

"Ow! Yes, if I like."

Bang!

"Whoooooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sure you're going to?" inquired Lovell genially.

"Ow! No! Wow!"

"That's better!" Arthur Edward Lovell released Peele and stepped back. "Now, if you want a scrap, you cad, put up your paws. If you don't, you'd better leave off slandering a chap whose boots you're not decent enough to clean!"

"Hear, hear!" grinned Putty of the Fourth.

"Chuck it, Peele, old bean!" said Jimmy Silver seriously. "Nobody at Rookwood believes old Greely's rot. It's not decent to make a song about it like this."

"I believe it!" hooted Peele.

"Rats!"

"How did he get out of a locked room, then?" howled Peele.

"The door was locked right enough," said Gower. "I saw it! He must have had another key, of course."

"He hadn't. As if they'd leave extra keys lying about a room for a new master!" said Peele, rubbing his head and eyeing Lovell malevolently. "I know he hadn't! He found himself locked in, and just opened the lock without a key. Easy enough for him, from what Greely says."

"Rot!" said Mornington. "There was a key in the room, of course, or he couldn't have opened the door. I'll tell you what, you fellows. Mrs. Maloney has keys to all the rooms, of course. She must have left the second key in the room."

"Of course," said Lovell.

"Ask her!" hooted Peele.

"That's what I was thinkin' of. Let's go and ask Mrs. Maloney," said Mornington. "Then if she says there was a key in the room we'll give Peele a Form ragging for slandering the new Froggy."

"Hear, hear!"

"Good egg!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"That all right, Peele?" grinned Arthur Edward Lovell. "You're so jolly cocksure about it, you know."

Cyril Peele's expression changed, and the juniors grinned as they noted it. Peele's opinion might be sincere or insincere, but he did not want to risk a Form ragging. With that outcome in prospect, Peele did not feel quite so sure.

"Oh, rot!" he said uneasily. "I don't want to go bothering the House dame."

"Hedgin' already!" grinned Townsend.

"He's jolly well not going to hedge!" exclaimed Lovell. "He's coming to the House dame with us, and we'll ask her. Come on, Peele!"

"Look here——"

"You're coming, old bean!"

Lovell slipped an arm through Peele's. Jimmy Silver took possession of his other arm.

"It's a jolly good idea!" said the captain of the Fourth. "This will shut up Peele's mouth, if anything will. You're for it now, Peele. You've asked for it, and you can't grumble."

And Peele, willy-nilly, was walked away between Lovell and Jimmy Silver, in a very uneasy frame of mind. Mornington and Raby and Newcome and half a dozen other fellows followed on. They arrived at Mrs. Maloney's rooms in a rather hilarious mood, greatly entertained by Peele's looks. At the bottom of his heart, Peele believed that there must somehow have been another key in the French master's room, and the fact would be known to the House dame. At the door of the House dame's room Peele made a desperate effort to break away. But he was too well held.

"Come on, old dear!" grinned Lovell.

Mrs. Maloney raised her eyebrows at the unexpected visit of a crowd of the Classical Fourth. She was still more surprised when Jimmy Silver explained the object of the visit.

"Nonsense!" said the good dame. "You must not come larking here and asking nonsensical questions. Go away!"

"But we want to know, ma'am," said Lovell. "Peele makes out that the new Froggy is a conjurer, and can open doors without keys."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Maloney.

"There was a key left in Mossoo's room, wasn't there, Mrs. Maloney?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"Certainly not!"

"Eh!"

Peele brightened up. The Form ragging did not seem so near at hand now.

"But you have a key to all the doors, ma'am, as well as the key that's left in the doors," said Jimmy.

"Yes, of course. They're on the chain," said Mrs. Maloney.

"Wasn't the key to Mossco's room taken off yesterday?"

"No, it was not."

Peele was grinning now. He was glad that Mornington had suggested a visit of inquiry to the House dame's room. Some of the juniors exchanged rather curious glances.

"You're quite sure, ma'am?" persisted Jimmy. "You see, Peele says he locked Mossco's door on the outside, and he got out, all the same. He couldn't have if the second key hadn't been left in his room."

"Nonsense! Master Peele could not have locked the door on the outside. The second key is on the chain, and has been there ever since Monsieur Monceau lost his key last term," said Mrs. Maloney. "His key was found again in a few days. Now run away and don't worry a busy woman."

The juniors crowded out in silence, Peele was grinning cheerily, and Jimmy and Lovell had released his arms. Cyril Peele had escaped the threatened Form ragging, at all events. Mrs. Maloney's testimony had saved him.

"I say, it's jolly odd, isn't it?" said Mornington, as the Classical juniors came back to their own quarters. "How the merry dickens did Froggy get out of his room without a key?"

"What did I tell you?" grinned Peele.

"Oh, rot!" said Arthur Edward Lovell. "Of course, Peele never locked the door. He only thought he did."

"I locked it all right!" said Peele. "You didn't!" roared Lovell belligerently.

"I did!" yelled Peele.

"Then I'll jolly well——"

Peele vanished along the Fourth Form passage, with Arthur Edward Lovell in hot pursuit. Lovell's argumentative methods were not, perhaps, logical, but they had at least the effect of silencing Peele. After Peele had been run down in a box-room, and had

had his head in chancery for a few minutes, he was more than willing to drop the subject.

But the harm had been done. The incident was, to say the least of it, curious. It seemed to fit in so well with Mr. Greely's story. Many of the Fourth discussed it in their studies with shakes of the head and wondering surmises.

But in the end study at least there were no doubts. That celebrated study was "backing up" the new Froggy, and they would not allow themselves to doubt.

And as day followed day, and Victor Gaston obviously showed no sign of the cloven foot, 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 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.

CHAPTER 17.

A Startling Discovery!

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

Peele shook his head savagely.

"Can't! I've got a book of the Henriad 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 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 in the shady corner behind the chapel. Without Peele, he went down to watch the cricket.

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 junior's 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 the conclusion on very inadequate evidence.

He heard the shouts from the cricket-field through the open window of his study, as he drearily 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 cracksman, 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 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 glistened. 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?

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. There was a tramp of feet in the Fourth Form passage when Peele arrived there, and a buzz of cheery voices. The junior cricketers were coming in to tea.

"Hallo, seen a ghost, Peele?" called out Arthur Edward Lovell. Several of the fellows looked at Peele. His face was quite white.

"I've seen something," said Peele, with a bitter look. "Something that will make a bit of a row when it's known, Jimmy Silver."

"Eh! What's that?" asked Jimmy carelessly.

"Something that will get your precious Froggy kicked out of Rookwood, and perhaps sent back to chokey!"

The next moment Peele had to dodge Lovell's bat, and he quitted the Fourth Form passage at top speed.

CHAPTER 18.

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 to 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. And perhaps the wish was father to the

thought with Mr. Greely. He felt deeply the derision that had been poured upon his accusation, and he smiled complacently at the thought of how this undeniable proof would confound the whole Common-room.

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.

CHAPTER 19.

Mr. Greely Goes It!

"GREELY'S going it!"

"That ass, Greely!"

"That footling ass, Greely!"

That was not a very respectful way of alluding to Mr. Horace Greely, the master of the Fifth Form at Rookwood.

But there was no doubt that, at the present time Mr. Horace Greely was regarded, from end to end of Rook-

wood, as an ass. Fellows in his own Form, like Ransom and Talboys, agreed that Horace Greely was a footling ass; and Jimmy Silver & Co. of the Fourth held even stronger opinions. Pompous Mr. Greely had always been lofty in his manners, somewhat dictatorial in his speech. But never, till now, had Rookwood suspected that he was so many kinds of an ass.

A crowd of fellows were converging towards Masters' Common-room—the corridor outside that apartment was swarming. Jimmy Silver & Co. of the Fourth were there, and a good many of the Shell and the Fifth. Even some Sixth-Formers had come along, though generally the Sixth preserved an air of being far above the feelings that stirred common mortals.

It was tea-time—rather past tea-time—and the Rookwood masters generally had tea together in their Common-room. So most of the staff were there—Mr. Bohun and Mr. Wiggins and Mr. Flinders and Mr. Mooney and Mr. Dalton and Monsieur Victor Gaston.

Quite a cheery buzz of conversation had been going on, when Mr. Greely entered.

Possibly the conversation had been all the more cheery because Mr. Greely was not there. For there was no doubt that the Fifth Form master generally dominated the talk in Common-room, not to the satisfaction of his colleagues.

Mr. Greely's entrance was the signal for silence.

His expression showed that trouble was coming.

Mr. Richard Dalton, master of the Fourth, looked slightly impatient. Mr. Mooney frowned, and Mr. Wiggins looked painfully resigned.

Victor Gaston raised his dark eyebrows a little, but otherwise took no notice of Mr. Greely.

It was upon the Young Frenchman that Mr. Greely's stern, accusing eyes were fixed.

Victor Gaston did not seem to observe

it. Not a muscle twitched in his handsome face.

"Gentlemen!" boomed Mr. Greely.

The whole Common-room looked at him then.

"Gentlemen!" Mr. Greely surveyed the Common-room with an eye like Mars, to threaten and command, as it were. "Kindly give me your attention for a few minutes."

"Really, sir!" said Mr. Bohun testily.

"Mr. Greely!" murmured pacific Mr. Mooney.

"I am bound to ask you for your attention," said Mr. Greely, in his most pompous manner. "A short time ago, when Monsieur Gaston came to this school to replace Monsieur Monceau, I made an accusation against him."

"You did, sir," said Mr. Dalton sharply, "and the Head very properly regarded that accusation as ridiculous."

"That accusation," said Mr. Greely firmly, "I repeat. I accuse this young man, Victor Gaston, of being a bank-robber, whom I saw tried and sentenced in Paris last year under the name of Felix Lacroix."

Victor Gaston shrugged his shoulders.

His manner was mildly contemptuous. A slightly scornful smile hovered over his well-cut lips.

There was a buzz from the passage outside. The news that Mr. Greely was "going it" had spread fast and far. A sea of faces stared in at the open door.

A "row" in Common-room was unusual—and entertaining. Disagreements in Common-room were frequent enough at Rookwood, as at all other schools; but "rows" were really unheard-of. The news of a shindy among the masters would have drawn Rookwood fellows from the farthest corners of the school to the interesting spot.

Mr. Greely did not heed; in fact, he was not displeased that all Rookwood should hear him. All Rookwood had heard his accusation against Victor Gaston, and laughed it to scorn. All Rookwood should hear the undeniable proof that he had now to bring forward! From Mr. Greely's point of

view, he had been persecuted for doing his duty—and he was very keen to cover his persecutors with confusion.

Mr. Dalton rose to his feet, a gleam in his eyes.

Between Richard Dalton and the young French master a cordial friendship had grown up in the few weeks they had known one another. And "Dicky" Dalton was the man to stand by his friend at any time.

"Silence!" he exclaimed.

"What?" roared Mr. Greely, petrified.

In the passage, Jimmy Silver & Co. of the Fourth grinned at one another. "Dicky" Dalton was the man to deal with that pompous ass Greely, in their opinion.

"I repeat, silence," said Mr. Dalton. "You have made this accusation before, Mr. Greely. It is regarded as ridiculous by all Rookwood, from the Head downward. On your own showing, the man Lacroix was sent to prison last year for five years—obviously, he is in prison still. Even if he has escaped, as you fancy, it proves nothing against Victor Gaston, whose testimonials have been examined by the Head, and have satisfied the Head! You have no right, sir, to repeat this foolish accusation!"

Mr. Greely turned purple.

"I am not speaking idly, Mr. Dalton!" he roared, "Silence, young man! I have proof to offer! I raise the subject again because I have proof to offer—proof that has just come into my hands!"

"Impossible!"

Victor Gaston looked curiously at the Fifth Form master. There was a gleam in his eyes.

"Mais continuez, monsieur," he said. "This proof—of what does it consist?"

"That is what I was about to state, when Mr. Dalton interrupted me," said Mr. Greely crushingly. "A boy—a junior of your Form, Mr. Dalton—went to Monsieur Gaston's room this afternoon—"

The French master started.

"This afternoon," repeated Mr. Greely. "The boy—Peele of the Fourth

Form—admits that he went to the room intending to play a trick on the French master. Monsieur Gaston suddenly entered, and to escape observation Peele hid himself in the wardrobe."

"Well?" said Mr. Dalton contemptuously. Victor Gaston did not speak; his eyes were fixed strangely on the Fifth Form master.

"From his place of concealment," resumed Mr. Greely, "Peele of the Fourth Form saw Monsieur Gaston open a locked trunk, and take from it a set of steel tools. There were a number of tools, all of them of polished steel, so far as Peele could see. From the beginning, gentlemen, I never had any doubt that Victor Gaston, alias Felix Lacroix, had come here to carry on his nefarious business of a cracksman. I suspected that he had come provided with the tools of his iniquitous trade. Now an eye-witness can prove it."

Mr. Greely paused—not for a reply, but for breath. There was deep silence in the Common-room.

In the passage the buzz of voices had died away. Mr. Greely's positive statement had a startling effect on the crowd of fellows who heard it. Most of them liked the "new Froggy"—all of them regarded Mr. Horace Greely as a footling ass. But in spite of themselves they were impressed by what sounded like a plain statement of fact.

"Is Peele prepared to repeat this story to the headmaster?" asked Mr. Bohun, breaking the painful silence.

"He is quite prepared to do so."

"If it should prove false, he will be expelled from Rookwood, I should hope."

"He knows the risk he takes, sir!" boomed Mr. Greely. "I place implicit faith in his statement. Openly, I accuse Monsieur Gaston! Let him say that this is false, and let him open his trunk in the presence of the headmaster! Let him do so without paying a previous visit to his room. If the burglarious implements are not found

in his trunk, I will withdraw my words, and apologise to Monsieur Gaston!"

Mr. Greely paused again.

All eyes were fixed on the French master. It was a dramatic moment.

CHAPTER 20.

Calling in the Head!

JIMMY SILVER, in the doorway, looked anxiously across at Victor Gaston.

In spite of himself, Jimmy was worried.

He had not lost the strange changes of expression in the French master's face, as Mr. Greely unfolded his new accusation. Master of himself as he was, the colour had fluctuated in Victor Gaston's cheeks. And Jimmy could not help remembering the strange incident often dwelt upon by Peele—how Victor Gaston had inexplicably got out of a room after Peele had locked the door on him on the outside.

The incident had never been explained. Only Peele explained it on the assumption that "Felix Lacroix" would know how to pick locks.

The silence in the Common-room was long, and it grew painful. Monsieur Gaston did not speak—but his face was calm. Richard Dalton glanced at him, with nothing like doubt in his look.

"You deny this absurd story, of course, Gaston," said the Fourth Form master, as the Frenchman did not speak.

Victor Gaston smiled faintly.

"I should not be likely to admit it," he said.

"Quite so. It is absolutely your own choice whether you accede to the demand that Mr. Greely makes. Refuse it, and no one here will feel the slightest doubt of you."

There was a faint murmur.

Richard Dalton was speaking from his own loyal heart, which never entertained a doubt of the man he had made his friend. But such complete faith

was not general in the Common-room. Mr. Mooney, the master of the Shell, weighed in rather tartly:

"You are not advising Monsieur Gaston for his good, Mr. Dalton. My opinion is that he should throw open his trunk to immediate investigation, and thus prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the boy Peele has lied!"

"Undoubtedly!" said Mr. Wiggins.

"Mon ami, these gentlemen are right," said Victor Gaston. "Naturally, I should refuse this insulting investigation—but always afterwards there might be some doubt."

"Not on my part," said Richard Dalton.

"But there are others, and I do not desire that anyone should doubt me. Let the Head be called, and let us go to my room, and Dr. Chisholm himself shall open the trunk."

Mr. Greely caught his breath.

There was a buzz in the passage. This acceptance of the Fifth Form master's challenge was more than sufficient to restore confidence, shaken for a moment.

"Bravo, Froggy!" roared Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Good old Mossos!" shouted Mornington.

"You—you mean this!" exclaimed Mr. Greely, obviously very much taken aback.

"Mais certainement, monsieur!" answered Victor Gaston, with a slight expression of scorn.

"I make it a stipulation that Monsieur Gaston does not enter his room until he is accompanied by the head-master!" exclaimed Mr. Greely.

"C'est entendu—I agree!"

"I think that will settle the matter, Mr. Greely," said Richard Dalton. "Remain here, if you wish, and keep Monsieur Gaston under your own observation; I will call the Head."

"Very good, sir!" said Mr. Greely pompously.

He sat down at the table.

Mr. Dalton left the Common-room, making his way through the buzzing

crowd in the corridor, with a frowning face.

Round the Common-room door the crowd grew thicker and thicker. The excitement was intense.

"Greely looks a bit sick!" murmured Raby. "He didn't expect Froggy to take him on like that."

"Peele has been pulling his leg!" remarked Newcome.

Arthur Edward Lovell snorted.

"He ought to have more sense than to believe Peele. Of course, it's all whoppers from beginning to end; but Greely would jump at anything to prove his silly fairy-tale about Froggy."

Jimmy Silver looked thoughtful.

"It's queer," he said. "If there's nothing in it, Peele will get a Head's flogging, at least; he may be bunked from Rookwood. He must know that—he's no fool!"

"You don't believe there's anything in it, Jimmy?" exclaimed Putty of the Fourth.

Jimmy Silver shook his head decidedly.

"No, I can't! But it's queer that a cunning, sharp fellow like Peele should put his foot in it like this! That beats me!"

"It beats me, too," said Valentine Mornington. "He must have fancied he saw what he says, somehow. But it's queer."

"Hallo, here he is!"

"Peele, you cad——"

"Peele, you rotter——"

Cyril Peele stared round him with a scowl of dogged defiance. The whole crowd of juniors were down on him now; but Cyril Peele was expecting his vindication to come. He knew what he had seen in the French master's room; others might doubt as long as they liked, but Peele of the Fourth had the evidence of his own eyes.

"Wait and see!" he sneered.

"You've told that fooling ass Greely——" began Rawson.

"I've told Mr. Greely what I saw," said Peele coolly. "The man's a cracksman, and he's got a cracksman's outfit

locked up in the trunk in his room. My belief is that he came here to rob the Head's safe——"

"You cheeky rotter!" roared Lovell.

"Bump him!"

"Hands off!" yelled Peele, as the excited juniors closed round him. "I tell you, I—— Yooop! Ah! Help! Yarooooop!"

Bump, bump, bump!

"Look out! Cave! The beak!" shouted Oswald along the passage.

Dr. Chisholm, the Head of Rockwood, had turned the corner with Mr. Dalton. At the sight of the Head the juniors dropped Peele, and fairly bolted. They vanished in a tumultuous mob at the other end of the passage, leaving Cyril Peele sprawling on the floor and roaring.

"What is all this?" exclaimed the Head, in a deep voice.

Peele sat up.

"Ow! Groogh! Mooooooh!" he mumbled.

"Go!"

Peele scrambled up, and went. Dr. Chisholm rustled into Masters' Common-room with Mr. Dalton at his side. His severe brow was knitted. All the masters rose respectfully as he entered.

"Sir——" began Mr. Greely.

Dr. Chisholm checked him with a wave of his hand.

"Mr. Dalton has acquainted me with your amazing statement, Mr. Greely. I attach no importance to it whatever."

"Sir! I—I——" stuttered Mr. Greely.

Another commanding gesture from the Head.

"I told you before, Mr. Greely, that I had the very best recommendations with Monsieur Victor Gaston. He is a known man in his profession. That he ever bore the name of Felix Lacroix I do not credit for one moment. I blame myself for having yielded so far as to make inquiries concerning this man Lacroix. I have now been informed, Mr. Greely, that the bank-robber, Felix Lacroix, escaped from prison a few

weeks after he had received his sentence."

"Did I not say so?" exclaimed Mr. Greely.

"You did. And I have this to tell you, Mr. Greely, that the circumstance that a bank-robber named Lacroix has escaped from prison does not in the slightest degree shake my faith in Victor Gaston."

"Sir!"

"There is no connection between the two, save a fancied resemblance seen by no one but yourself," said the Head. "Now, sir, I shall investigate this further accusation you have made. Your statement that Victor Gaston is Felix Lacroix is, I am certain, unfounded; but it is an accusation that he cannot actually disprove, as he has no means of producing a bank-robber who is now in hiding from the French police. But this latest accusation, sir, can be put to the test. I will examine the trunk you speak of in Monsieur Gaston's room. It shall be opened to the view of the whole staff of this school. And unless the criminal implements to which you have alluded, sir, are found there, I shall expect you to resign your position at Rookwood."

There was a hush.

Mr. Greely set his plump lips hard.

"I submit, sir," he said. "I do not fear the test. I have done my duty, and if I am to suffer for it I am prepared."

There was a touch of dignity in the portly Fifth Form master as he spoke.

Dr. Chisholm bowed coldly.

"We will, then, proceed to Monsieur Gaston's room at once—with Monsieur Gaston's permission," he added courteously, turning to the French master.

"Certainly, sir," said Victor Gaston.

"You will call Peele of the Fourth, Mr. Dalton. He had better be present, as this accusation rests on his statement."

"Very well, sir!"

And Dr. Chisholm turned, and rustled in great dignity from the Common-room.

CHAPTER 21.

Put to the Proof!

WHAT a giddy procession!" remarked Valentine Mornington of the Classical Fourth. "Like a giddy circus!"

Some of the fellows grinned.

Morny's description was a little irreverent, considering the great importance of the personages composing the procession. Certainly it bore no resemblance whatever to a circus procession.

First went the Head, lofty, grave, commanding, dignified. After him went Mr. Dalton and Victor Gaston, side by side. After them the rest of the Rookwood staff, in twos. Peele cruised in the offing, as it were, like a light frigate keeping company with a line of battleships.

It was a most imposing procession. But fellows in the Rookwood Fourth were capable of seeing humour in everything, especially Mornington.

"Where are they going?" asked Tommy Dodd of the Modern Fourth, arriving on the scene as the procession started up Big Staircase.

"Into the Ark, I should think," answered Mornington. "The animals went in two by two, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Some of the masters glanced round, and the chortle was instantly suppressed. Really it was not a time for laughter.

Stately and dignified, the Head arrived at the door of Victor Gaston's room. The French master opened it, and stood gracefully aside for his numerous visitors to enter. Fortunately, the apartments in the Rookwood School House were spacious. Otherwise the French master might have had some difficulty in accommodating so many visitors all at once.

After the staff had marched in, the corridor outside was swarmed with fellows of all Forms. Nobody wanted to miss this show. Serious, indeed solemn, as the proceedings were, irreverent fags actually looked upon them

as a show—indeed, some of them described the proceedings as a "shindy."

All eyes in the room were on Victor Gaston now.

Mr. Greely gazed at him in wonder and perplexity. His belief was complete that the man was a criminal playing a part at the school. He was absolutely convinced of the truth of Peele's statements. Peele was fairly well known to be untruthful, but his earnestness in making his report to Mr. Greely had not been possible to doubt. And if he was speaking falsely he was facing the "sack." Pardon for such a statement, if unfounded, was impossible.

Peele simply could not have risked it, much as he detested Victor Gaston. So Mr. Greely was sure of his ground. Yet the coolness and self-possession of the French master amazed and disquieted him. How could the man be so cool, so self-possessed, with conviction at hand?

"Where is the trunk?"

It was the Head's deep voice.

"Here, sir!"

Victor Gaston pointed to the large metal-bound trunk.

"One moment!" interposed Mr. Greely. "Let us make sure that this is the trunk in question. Peele!"

"That is the trunk, sir!" faltered Peele.

Peele was uneasy now. He knew what he had seen; he could believe his eyes. Yet the Frenchman's coolness confounded him, as it confounded Mr. Greely.

"Monsieur Gaston, will you be kind enough to unlock that trunk?" said the Head.

"Certainly, sir."

Victor Gaston produced a bunch of keys. From the keys he selected one, and inserted it in the patent lock of the trunk.

The lid was raised.

Round the big trunk stood the Rookwood staff, and they all looked into it. They saw a tray packed with shirts and similar articles. The Head made

a slight gesture. Shirts and collars and neckties were useful, and, indeed, indispensable articles. But they seemed to introduce an element of the ridiculous into these grave proceedings.

Victor Gaston lifted out the tray.

The interior of the mysterious trunk was revealed.

From that interior Peele had seen the Frenchman lift the leather bag containing the set of steel implements. He had seen that, unless he had been dreaming while he crouched hidden in the wardrobe watching the man. Yet what did the icy coolness of the Frenchman mean? He could not have got rid of the tell-tale implements. Peele knew that he had not been to the room since the time he had been watched there.

Peele began to wonder dazedly whether he had, after all, been the victim of a delusion. Certainly it began to look like it.

The Head, with a touch of disdainful impatience in his face, glanced into the trunk. He saw a number of articles of clothing, neatly folded, a bundle of French newspapers, and two or three other articles, but the space was mostly empty.

"I am ashamed to trouble you, Monsieur Gaston," said the Head; "but, since we are here, perhaps you will empty the trunk."

"Sans doute, monsieur."

Quietly, sedately, Victor Gaston lifted the articles from the trunk and laid them aside.

Cyril Peel's brain swam. He could see the bottom of the trunk now—everyone present could see it. There was no sign of the leather case he had described to Mr. Greely—no sign of the set of steel implements.

Was he dreaming—had he been dreaming? His brain was in a whirl.

Mr. Greely stared into the trunk with a fixed stare. His belief had been complete, unshaken. But he had to trust the evidence of his eyes. The mysterious trunk was empty, and nothing of a criminal nature, nothing

of a suspicious nature, had been revealed. The trunk was as harmless as any other master's trunk at Rookwood School.

Dr. Chisholm's grave face grew graver and grimmer. His eyes fixed themselves on Horace Greely, with an almost terrifying expression. There was a long silence, broken at last by the Head's deep voice.

"Well, Mr. Greely?"

The Fifth Form master did not speak. He could not. He was simply dumb-founded.

Mr. Dalton spoke quietly.

"I am afraid that you have allowed an unscrupulous boy to deceive you with an absurd story, Mr. Greely," he said. At that moment, the Fourth Form master quite pitied the unhappy Mr. Greely.

All Horace Greely's pompous importance had left him now. He stood limp, dismayed, crushed.

"It is clear," said the Head, "that Mr. Greely has been deceived. That is no excuse, however, for his conduct in renewing his absurd accusation against a gentleman whom we all respect." He bowed to Monsieur Gaston. "Mr. Greely, you see for yourself, I presume, that your statements are absolutely unfounded."

Mr. Greely choked.

"I—I—it—it would appear so," he articulated.

"You withdraw your accusation?"

"I—I——"

"A plain answer, sir!" snapped the Head.

"I—I am bound to do so!" gasped Mr. Greely. "I—I have been deceived. I—I have certainly been misled."

"You owe Monsieur Gaston an apology."

Mr. Greely almost squirmed.

"I—I apologise!" he stuttered.

"Do not distress yourself, monsieur," said Victor Gaston. "You have done me an injustice. But I am assured that your motives were good—it is only at you have made a mistake. Let it be forgotten."



At Dr. Chisholm's order, Monsieur Gaston lifted out the tray, and the interior of the mysterious trunk was revealed. Cyril Peele's brain swam. He could see the bottom of the trunk, but there was no sign of any criminal implements!

"Monsieur Gaston is generous," said the Head. "But such incidents as these cannot be allowed to recur at Rookwood. Mr. Greely, you know the consequences of your action."

The Fifth Form master raised his head.

"I know, sir! I resign my position in this school. I am ready to leave Rookwood. I have done my duty—at least, what I conceive to be my duty. If I must suffer for it, I do not complain."

And Mr. Greely, with that, walked out of the room. The crowd in the passage respectfully made room for him to pass. That Mr. Greely was a "footling" ass, that he had made a ghastly mistake, all the school believed. But he was down now—down and out—and there was not a murmur as he went.

CHAPTER 22.

The Broken Link!

CYRIL PEELE stood with his knees knocking together.

The Head's glance turned on him, and that glance almost froze Peele's marrow.

His turn had come!

Unless he had been under some strange delusion, some mysterious aberration of the senses, he had seen what he had told Mr. Greely that he had seen. Yet the trunk stood empty before him, and he was convicted in all eyes as a reckless slanderer and deceiver. Deceiver he was, by nature—he had never scrupled to deceive when deceit served his turn. And it is the fate of liars never to be believed when they are telling the truth.

"Peele!"

The wretched junior made a faint sound.

"Peele! You have told Mr. Greely a falsehood, a wicked slander of a master in this school!"

"I—I— No, sir!" groaned Peele. "I saw—I mean, I—I thought I saw what—"

"Silence! You have not a good reputation in your Form, Peele; you are known to be habitually untruthful. But this example of your falsity passes all bounds. Such a boy cannot be suffered to remain at Rookwood. Peele, you are expelled from this school."

Peele's miserable glance turned on Mr. Dalton. The Fourth Form master was distressed and troubled.

"I cannot speak a word for you, Peele," he said. "You have acted recklessly, wickedly. You must take the just consequences."

Victor Gaston glanced at the boy, and there was a strange expression on his face.

"May I speak, sir?" he asked.

"Certainly, Monsieur Gaston," said the Head graciously.

"This boy, sir—it is on my account that you are sending him away from the school. That is very distressing to me, sir. He has injured me, but I forgive him very freely. Might I beg of you, sir, to attempt to take a more lenient view?"

Dr. Chisholm frowned.

His word was law in Rookwood, and it irked him to have the slightest of his decisions questioned in the slightest degree.

"Really, Monsieur Gaston," he said stiffly.

Peele stared at the Frenchman blankly. Was this the criminal he had denounced—this man who was trying to save him from the fate he had brought upon himself?

"It is perhaps impertinence for me to speak, sir," said Victor Gaston diffidently. "But it is I who am the injured party in this matter, is it not so? I feel sure that this unhappy boy did not fully realise what he was doing. If he should be given another chance, I am assured he will make the best of it."

There was a long pause.

"Very well," said the Head at last. "It is due to you, Monsieur Gaston, to be vindicated by the severest possible punishment of your reckless accuser."

At your personal request, however, I will rescind that punishment. Peele shall be flogged. Peele, go to my study and remain there till I come."

Peele limped from the room.

Jimmy Silver & Co. allowed him to pass in silence. He had escaped expulsion from Rookwood, but he was booked for a flogging; and a flogging was enough for him, without any demonstration from the juniors. Slowly, wretchedly, Cyril Peele limped down the stairs.

In Monsieur Gaston's room there was something like an ovation for the French master.

The Head spoke gracious words and shook hands with him before he went. The other masters followed his example. Richard Dalton remained after the others had gone.

"I am rather glad that this has occurred, Gaston," said the Fourth Form master. "It has been a painful incident, but it has finally cleared you from any possible suspicion. Even Mr. Greely must now recognise his mistake."

"You think so?" said Victor Gaston.

"I hope so, at least. And no one else has ever distrusted you, excepting that wretched boy Peele. It was kind—it was noble of you to speak a word for that wretched boy!"

Gaston smiled slightly.

"Why should he suffer?" he said.

"He has injured you—slandered you most wickedly!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton warmly. "He deserved to be expelled."

"I should be sorry if he suffered on my account, all the same," said Victor Gaston. "As for the flogging, that does not matter; it will instruct him not to play the spy. Right or wrong, it is base to play the spy."

He smiled again.

"And you, Dalton, you never lost faith in me?"

"I never had a moment's doubt," said Richard Dalton.

"You have not known me long, but you have become my very good friend, mon vieux," said Gaston. He looked

earnestly at the young Form master. "Richard, mon ami, you shall never have reason to repent of your faith in me. If in the past I have been guilty of errors, in the future at least I shall never be unworthy of your friendship."

"I do not think your errors can have been very great, old fellow," said Richard Dalton, smiling. "And we shall always be friends, I hope."

When Richard Dalton had followed the rest, Victor Gaston closed the door and quietly turned the key in the lock.

Then he came back to the empty trunk, and stood looking into it, standing for several minutes motionless, with a dark and gloomy expression on his handsome face. Strange thoughts were working in his mind.

He stirred at last and bent over the trunk.

His hand groped over the bottom of the trunk and touched a hidden spring. A secret lid rose, revealing that the trunk had a false bottom, with a narrow cavity beneath. From that cavity the Frenchman drew a leather case. He closed the lid again.

His brow darker than ever, he stood with the leather case in his hand, opening it, and staring gloomily at the array of bright steel implements it contained.

He closed the case at last, and thrust it into an inner pocket under his coat.

Then he quitted the room.

The gloomy expression was gone from his face, his look was careless and debonaire as usual, as he strolled down the big staircase and out into the quadrangle.

Richard Dalton was at his study window; but the Frenchman did not appear to observe him. He walked down to the gates. Apparently he did not want company in his walk.

Darkness had fallen when the French master returned to Rookwood. And no one in the school was likely to guess that in deep dusk by the river he had plunged that tell-tale case of implements into deep water—to sink

into thick mud at the bottom, and to remain for ever hidden. Whatever his motive, the link had been broken between Victor Gaston, French master, and Felix Lacroix, hunted by the French police.

CHAPTER 23.

A Dog with a Bad Name!

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL grinned as Peele of the Fourth came limping into the passage by the studies. Peele had come back from the Head's study—and he looked as if he had not enjoyed his interview with Dr. Chisholm. His face was pale, his lips twitching, his eyes burning. Bitterness and malice were "writ large" in his features.

As a rule, fellows who had the ill-luck to hit up against a Head's flogging were sure of sympathy. But there was little or no sympathy for Peele in the looks of the fellows in the Fourth Form passage. Peele had asked for it—begged and prayed for it, as Morny put it—and now he had got it. Even had his allegations been true, still Peele did not deserve much sympathy. It was not for any bad qualities, but for his good qualities, that he disliked the French master. Certainly Peele would not have found fault with the worst of characters who had allowed him to slack and loaf through the French class with impunity.

There had been a great deal of slacking in the French "sets" in Monsieur Monceau's time. That was changed under Victor Gaston. He expected his pupils to work, and most of the fellows played up—as schoolboys generally will when they have a master who takes his work earnestly. But incorrigible slackers like Peele felt a sense of personal injury at being expected to work. He had always slacked at French—he had often "ragged" the French master in class—and he was enraged to come across a French master who put a stop to slacking and who put down ragging with a steady hand.

Peele's motives were well-known—and his untruthfulness was equally well-known. All the Fourth thought about his story was that it was a strangely "thin" story for a cunning fellow like Peele to put up. As Putty of the Fourth observed, a fellow of Peele's experience in lying ought to have been able to spin a better yarn than that.

Peele glanced round him at the Classical juniors as he went to his study. His look was lowering and savage. Rawson was near his study door, and Peele shoved him roughly aside, out of the way.

Rawson turned on him angrily. Tom Rawson was a burly fellow, quite equal to handling two or three Peeles. Possibly because he could have handled Cyril Peele so easily Rawson took that rude shove with patience. He stepped back, touched by Peele's white face.

Peele went into his study and slammed the door. His studymate, Gower, was there.

"Had it bad?" asked Gower, with a curious look at him.

Peele nodded without speaking.

"You were an awful ass, you know," said Gower. "It was too thick, old chap! I'm as much up against Mossoo as you are, but—really—" Gower shook his head. "Altogether too thick!"

Peele's eyes gleamed at him.

"Does that mean you don't believe me?" he asked.

"Believe you?" Gower stared. "You don't mean to say that your yarn about the new Froggy was true?"

"Every word of it!" hissed Peele.

"Oh, can it!" said Gower. "The door's shut—nobody can hear you but me—so what's the good of keepin' that up?"

Peele leaned heavily on the table. He did not feel inclined to sit down just then. The Head had not spared the rod.

"It was true!" he said thickly. "Every word! I'd swear it anywhere! How he got out of it I don't know!

But it was true! Why, I should have been sacked if the brute hadn't put in a word for me. Do you think I'd have risked the sack?"

"Well you did!" said Gower. "And it was jolly decent of him to put in a word for you after what you'd said about him."

Peele's thin lips writhed in a sneer. "Was it? Perhaps he's got a bit of a conscience. He knew that I'd told the truth. And I dare say he didn't want me sacked, and my people kicking up a shindy about it. My father would have made a pretty fuss, I can tell you—hearin' from me that I'd been booted out of Rookwood for calling a thief a thief. I can tell you, there'd have been such a fuss that Lacroix couldn't have stayed on here calling himself Gaston."

Gower shook his head.

"You can always argue, Peele," he said. "But there's nothing in it. Old Greely made a silly mistake—and you hooked on to it because you hate the new Froggy. That's all there is about it. What's the good of sayin' you saw him take burglars' tools from his trunk, when the Head and all the masters looked, and there was nothin' there?"

"I know—I know——" breathed Peele.

"Accordin' to your own yarn, he put them back in the trunk and locked it, and never went to the room again till he went with the Head and the whole jolly procession. Yet the things weren't there! Dash it all, Peele, you ought to make up a better story than that."

Peele pressed his hands to his burning forehead. The mystery of it puzzled him, baffled him, bewildered him. Yet he knew what he had seen.

"Cut it out!" was Gower's advice. "Don't say anythin' more about it, old bean. It was a missfire, and the sooner you drop it the better!"

Peele scowled by way of answer, and Gower left the study. Gower did not believe a word of the story—which was natural enough, considering how it had been disproved, and considering his knowledge of Peele. Peele was left to

his reflections, which were black enough. He knew that had the story been told by Jimmy Silver, or Lovell, or Tommy Dodd, there would have been plenty of believers—strange as the story was. It was his own character he had to thank for the general disbelief. But then such a story could not have been told by a decent fellow, for a decent fellow would not have played the spy, and so could not have discovered what Peele had discovered.

Yet Peele knew that he had told the truth, and he puzzled and puzzled over the strange, utterly unlooked for outcome of the affair. What had become of the set of steel instruments which, with his own eyes, he had seen the Frenchman replace in the trunk before locking it? But, aching from the flogging, Peele was in no state to think out that problem, and he dismissed it from his tired mind at last.

After prep that evening Peele came down to the junior room, and found most of the Fourth there. Curious glances were cast at him. Peele had almost recovered from his flogging by that time, though he was still a little pale. Jimmy Silver & Co. were talking cricket by the big window. The match with Greyfriars was coming along, and that was a matter of keen interest to the Fistical Four. They did not heed Peele till he came up to them.

"You fellows think I was tellin' lies about the new Froggy?" said Peele in a low voice.

Snort from Arthur Edward Lovell.

"We know you were, you mean!" he growled.

"I give you my word that it was the truth!" said Peele.

"And what's your word worth?" asked Raby, with a curl of the lip. "You gave your word that you knew nothing about Tubby Muffin's guinea when it was missing, didn't you? Your word's worth as much as your bond, and that's worth nothing."

Peele's lip quivered. It was the best he could expect. He had lied too often

for his most solemn asseverations to be received without doubt.

"Cut it out, old bean," said Newcome. "Make up something better next time; or better still, don't let there be a next time."

"It was true!" muttered Peele.

Jimmy Silver rose to his feet.

"That will do, Peele," he said.

"You've slandered Froggy, and you're only here now because he begged you off from the Head. If you're not decent enough to hold your tongue after that, you'll be made to hold it. Even if what you said was true, you only show yourself up as a spy. And we all know it wasn't true—not a word of it!"

"I tell you——"

"Cheese it! Another word about Mossoo, and you'll get a Form ragging."

"Hear, hear!" said Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Will you let me speak a word?" hissed Peele. "I've thought it out now. I know how Gaston pulled the wool over their eyes. I know the tools were in the trunk—they're there now."

"Invisible tools!" grinned Lovell.

"Has Froggy brought the jolly old cloak of darkness to Rookwood with him?"

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"I tell you I've thought it out!"

Peele was almost feverishly earnest. "I know the tools were there. There must be some secret place in the trunk. It's a big, heavy trunk, and there's room for it. A false bottom to it, perhaps. I've heard of such things. That's the only explanation."

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Lovell.

"I can think of an easier explanation than that. There never was anything of the kind, and you made it all up from start to finish, because you've got a down on Froggy. Isn't that nearer the mark?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I know I'm a dog with a bad name," said Peele bitterly. "But this is the truth."

"You are—a jolly bad dog with a

jolly bad name," said Arthur Edward Lovell emphatically, "and if you keep harping on this subject you'll get a jolly bad licking."

"I tell you——"

"That will do!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver impatiently. "Stop it, Peele. Another word about Froggy, and we'll lay you over the table and give you six."

Peele gave the Fistical Four a bitter look. But he did not speak another word. He turned, and walked sullenly out of the room. Jimmy Silver made a grimace.

"That chap gives me a bad taste in the mouth," he said. "Why can't he stop his rot? Now, about the Greyfriars match, you fellows?"

And Jimmy Silver & Co. forgot Peele.

CHAPTER 24.

The Man Who Repented!

"POOR old Pompey!" murmured Hansom of the Fifth.

Talboys and Lumsden grinned.

Pompey, otherwise Mr. Horace Greely, the master of the Fifth Form, stood in the doorway, looking out into the dusky quadrangle, where the summer stars glimmered on the trees and walks, and a faint, red glow still lingered in the west. Mr. Greely's portly, majestic form occupied the doorway, his plump, purple face was dark with thought. That summer's evening Mr. Greely was not a happy man.

The three Fifth-Formers, strolling by, noticed him, and grinned. They did not feel or understand the tragedy of Horace Greely. They knew that he was to go. In a few weeks' time Rookwood would know Horace Greely no more. He was, in fact, simply staying till a new master was appointed to the Fifth. His resignation had been offered and accepted, in the French master's room that afternoon, after the strange scene there. And all the Fifth thought about it was, that the pompous ass had got it

"in the neck," and they wondered what sort of a merchant would come along later to take his place.

No one, probably, would have suspected that there was sentiment concealed under the portly, purple exterior of Mr. Greely. But there was. Leaving Rookwood was a terrible blow to him. For long years he had been a master there, and with his powerful voice and portly personality had dominated the Common-room. Indeed, he could scarcely imagine Rookwood without Horace Greely, and he did not entertain the least doubt that his departure would be a severe loss to the school. Long years had he passed in the classic shades of Rookwood—many more years had he expected to pass there. His dismissal came as a shattering blow. And, he was to go, leaving his rival firmly rooted there, a man he believed—a man he knew—to be a breaker of the laws—a man leading a double life!

Lost in painful thought, Mr. Greely stared out into the starry quadrangle with a lump in his throat. His colleagues would not be sorry that he was going—he knew that. Probably it would be a relief to some of them. In the incessant bickering of Masters' Common-room Mr. Greely had made himself more or less unpleasant to every member of the school staff at one time or another. Especially he had prided himself upon his gift for putting younger masters in their place. Now, somehow, Mr. Greely would have liked to think that somebody would miss him when he went.

An athletic, rather graceful figure came up the gravel path in the starlight. Mr. Greely knitted his brows at the sight of Victor Gaston. The French master was returning from his long ramble.

Victor Gaston came up the steps. Mr. Greely was in the middle of the big doorway, and he did not stir. He fixed his eyes upon the Frenchman.

"Bonsoir, monsieur!" said Victor Gaston politely.

To Mr. Greely's mind it seemed that the young man was mocking him. In the cool, smiling face he thought that he read an ironical triumph. It was too much. A surge of wrath came up in Mr. Greely's breast. For the moment he saw red. He forgot where he was. He forgot that he was a senior Form-master, he forgot the dignity of his position, he forgot everything but his bitter detestation of this man, who had beaten him all along the line, and who was to be left in triumphant possession of the field of battle. He was to go, and this man—this villain whom he had striven in vain to unmask—was to remain. And he was cool, smiling, ironical, at least, it seemed so to Mr. Greely's enraged eyes. The Fifth Form master raised his arm and struck with all his force at the handsome face before him.

"Mon Dieu!"

The Frenchman was taken quite by surprise. His arm flew up, and he partly warded the blow, but it took effect, and sent him crashing down the steps.

There was a shout.

"Greely's going it!" yelled Tubby Muffin along the passage. "He's knocked down Froggy!"

"My hat!"

"Phew!"

There was a rush to the spot. Seniors and juniors, prefects and fags, crowded up, amazed, in consternation.

At the bottom of the steps Victor Gaston sprawled, dazed and breathless. On the steps stood Horace Greely, panting, flaming with wrath.

And from the starlight of the quad came the Head, returning to the House from the school library.

Dr. Chisholm stopped dead. He could scarcely believe his eyes.

Victor Gaston struggled to his feet. There was a smear of red on his mouth, and his eyes were blazing.

"A fight!" yelled Tubby Muffin. "Greely and Froggy! Ow! Ow! Leggo my ear!"

"Silence!" said Mr. Dalton, compressing Tubby's ear for a moment, and then hurrying to the doorway.

Mr. Greely stood panting. The Frenchman had his foot on the steps to mount, his hands clenched.

"Gaston!" exclaimed Richard Dalton. "Stop!" It was the Head's thunderous voice.

Mr. Greely spun round towards the Head. At the sight of him all his wrath evaporated. He realised what he had done. The purple face of the Fifth Form master grew white.

"Sir——" he stammered.

"Control yourself, Monsieur Gaston," said the Head icily. "I have seen what occurred. This is no place for a display of fisticuffs. I command you to keep the peace."

Victor Gaston breathed hard.

"I am at your orders, sir," he said quietly. And indeed, after the first moment or two of intense anger, there was something like compassion in the glance he gave Mr. Greely.

Richard Dalton slipped his arm through his friend's.

"Come!" he whispered.

He led Gaston away. The Head's thunderous frown was fixed upon the unhappy Fifth Form master.

"Mr. Greely, you have strangely forgotten yourself. It was my intention to allow you to remain here till a new master was appointed to the Fifth. After this outrageous display that is, of course, impossible. I request you, Mr. Greely, to leave Rookwood by an early train in the morning."

"Sir, I——"

Heedless of the Fifth Form master's stammering voice, Dr. Chisholm swept into the House. Mr. Greely glanced round him. The white in his face changed to crimson. With faltering steps he made his way to his study and closed the door.

Not till he had disappeared did Mr. Dalton allow his friend to enter the House. In passages and studies excited discussion was going on, and

all Rookwood agreed that Mr. Greely's amazing action was the limit—the very outside edge, as Mornington put it.

Victor Gaston left Mr. Dalton in the hall and went up to his room. He was taking the Fourth Form master's sage advice to keep out of Mr. Greely's way for the rest of that evening.

He entered his room and switched on the electric light. He had been long out of gates—it was some hours since he had been in his room. But as he glanced round him he gave a start. The room had not been unvisited in his absence.

The great trunk, which had been the subject of investigation that day, lay on its side. The strong wooden bottom of the trunk had been hacked open with many a gash.

Victor Gaston stood and stared at it.

"Ciel!" he murmured.

Long he stood looking at the broken trunk. Who had done this? His enemy, Horace Greely? That was impossible! Peele? Yes, he knew that it was Peele! Knowing what he had seen, knowing, after reflection, that the criminal tools must be hidden in some secret receptacle in the trunk, Cyril Peele had done this. The bottom of the trunk, smashed in, revealed through several openings the space under the false bottom inside. It revealed the space, and nothing more. The searcher had been disappointed, after all.

Victor Gaston breathed deep and hard.

Repentance had come to the man who had sinned, and it had come just in time to save him.

The crackman's tools, dropped an hour ago into the river, buried in mud under flowing water, were gone—for ever. The man who had sunk to crime, and who had repented and resolved upon a brighter future, had broken that link with his past, and that resolve had saved him. For had the tools been still in the hidden place in the trunk

this would have revealed them, and the discovery of them would have justified Peele in what he had done, and proved beyond doubt the guilt of the man he had accused. As it was, Peele had discovered nothing!

"Mon Dieu!" muttered Victor Gaston. "Is it an omen? Is there pardon for the past, and honour and self-respect for the future? May Felix Lacroix vanish for ever from the knowledge of men and Victor Gaston take his place, an honourable man among men of honour? Is this a warning to me that the straight path is the path of safety?"

It seemed so—he believed so. But at the back of his mind, like a troubling shadow, lingered the thought that Nemesis lies always in wait for the evil-doer, and that somehow, sometime, the price of the past had to be paid.

CHAPTER 25.

Lovell Chips In!

"JE chante de ce heros qui regnaît sur la France——"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Which?"

"Et par droit de naissance et par droit de naissance——"

"Chuck it, Lovell!"

Arthur Edward Lovell of the Classical Fourth "chucked" it, not because he was bidden to do so, but because he couldn't remember what came next.

Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome stared at him, surprised. The Fistical Four were sauntering in Big Quad, at Rookwood, in the morning break, and they were talking and thinking of cricket affairs—of anything or everything but French poetry. Arthur Edward Lovell had been silent for some minutes, which was a little unusual. He had broken his silence suddenly with that poetic outburst.

"What are you spouting the

'Henriade' for in quad, you ass?" demanded Raby. "Don't we get enough of it in French class?"

"Too much!" said Newcome.

"Don't worry," said Lovell.

"French comes next in a quarter of an hour, and I want to mug up that muck a bit. I've been trying to learn the rot by heart, but the piffle doesn't seem to stick somehow."

Lovell's opinion of Voltaire's celebrated poem evidently was not a flattering one.

"You see, we're backing up the new Froggy, ain't we?" said Lovell, in explanation. "Well, there's lots of ways of backing up a master. I've punched Peele's head for slanging him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But you know Peele. It doesn't do him much good to punch his head. Only seems to make him vicious, somehow. I've got another idea. I'm going to mug up French, and show Mossoo Gaston that we really value his jolly old instructions," said Lovell impressively.

"But we don't," said Newcome.

Lovell coughed.

"Well, perhaps we don't, as a matter of absolute solid fact," he admitted. "But we ought to. There's no doubt that we ought to. After all, our people pay for it all, don't they? I'm going to be keen on French and surprise Froggy with it in class. That's why I'm learning the first book of the 'Henriade' by heart."

"My hat, that's a large order!" said Jimmy Silver. "How far have you got?"

"Two lines, so far."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, everything must have a beginning," said Lovell. "I've got the first two lines all right. Listen!"

"Keep them for class, old man," urged Raby.

But Arthur Edward Lovell did not heed. He proceeded to spout:

"Je chante de ce heros qui regnaît sur la France——"

"Give us a rest!"

"Et par droit de naissance et par droit de naissance——"

"Assez! Taisez-vous!" said Jimmy Silver. "There's some more French for you, Lovell. It means 'Enough! Shut up!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Naissance," said Lovell, still unheeding. "That means birth or something, doesn't it, Jimmy?"

"Yes, ass."

"And 'droit' means right, or something of the sort?"

"Something of the sort," grinned Jimmy.

"Then there seems a lot of ditto repeats about that second line," said Lovell, wrinkling his brow in a mental effort. Mental efforts did not come easily to Arthur Edward Lovell. "It seems to mean 'Both by right of birth and by right of birth.' That doesn't seem to make sense."

"Well, poetry never does make sense," said Newcome. "Especially French poetry."

"That's so," agreed Raby, with a nod.

Jimmy Silver chuckled.

"You've got it wrong, fathead!"

"No, I haven't," said Lovell, with confidence. "I've got it right. I know that."

"Ass! The line is, 'Et par droit de conquete et par droit de naissance,'" said Jimmy Silver.

"Conquete! That's conquest, isn't it?"

"Yes, ass."

"You think that's right, Jimmy?"

"I know it is, ass."

"I hardly think so," said Lovell sagely. "You see, I've got a good memory, especially for poetry. You're a bit weak in French, Jimmy, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I don't mind," said Jimmy, laughing. "You can talk any rot you like, old chap. It's a free country."

"I'll get the book, and jolly well prove that you're wrong!" said Lovell warmly.

And Arthur Edward Lovell stalked away towards the House, leaving his chums grinning.

Certainly it was quite noble of Lovell to determine to ratify the "new Froggy" by mugging up his language. But it was very doubtful whether Monsieur Victor Gaston would derive much gratification from Lovell's mastery of French. Lovell was a good man in many ways. He was worth much on the cricket field, and he was second to none in ragging the Moderns. But in class he was not brilliant, and in French it was absolutely certain that he never would shine.

Lovell entered the House, and made his way to No. 2 class-room, where Victor Gaston was to take the French class at eleven. His copy of "Henriade" was there. As it was not yet ten minutes to eleven the room should have been vacant. But as Lovell came up to the door he heard a sound of a movement within.

Lovell looked in. Cyril Peele of the Classical Fourth was in the room.

He was bending over the chair behind the master's desk. Upon that chair Victor Gaston would be sitting presently. Peele was squeezing out the contents of a tube of seccotine on the chair, evidently a playful preparation for Victor Gaston's arrival.

Lovell grinned, and then he frowned.

Peele could play any tricks he liked on other masters, but the chums of the Fourth had taken the "new Froggy" under their special protection. As the end study were "backing him up," it was not for Peele to play japes on him. Peele had been warned, his head had been punched, he had been kicked several times, and still he was going on. Arthur Edward Lovell trod softly into the room.

Peele's back was to him, and he was unconscious of Lovell's soft approach. He squeezed out the last drop of seccotine on the seat of the chair, and chuckled softly. The next moment he yelled with sudden alarm as a powerful grip was laid on the back of his neck.

"Oh! Ow! Who! What——"

Peele squirmed round in Lovell's grip. He was glad to see that it was not Victor Gaston or Mr. Dalton. He wriggled and glared at Lovell.

"Leggo, you beast!"

"That's for Froggy, what?" grinned Lovell.

"Mind your own business!"

"This is my bizney, old top! Haven't we told you, lots of times, that you're to let the new Froggy alone?"

"Leggo!"

"Old Greely can go for him as much as he likes, and we can't stop him, as he's a master," said Lovell. "But we can stop you, Peele, and we're jolly well going to! You're going to wipe that stuff up!"

"I'm not!" yelled Peele.

"You are—with your face!"

"Oh—ow—grooogh—yooooogghh!" spluttered Peele, as Lovell's iron grip, on the back of his neck, forced his face down on the chair.

The next few minutes were horrid to Peele.

Seccotine sticking Victor Gaston's trousers to the chair was one thing; seccotine rubbed up by Peele's features was quite another.

Peele wriggled and squirmed and kicked and spluttered and howled. But his features rubbed up the sticky mess thoroughly, and by the time Lovell had finished, Peele's face was in a shocking state.

"Mmmm! Grrrrgghh! Mmmmm!"

Peele's remarks were inarticulate.

"There!" gasped Lovell. "There you are!" He released the cad of the Fourth, and Peele staggered away, crimson and sticky and furious. "Oh, my hat! You look a picture! Ha, ha, ha!"

Lovell roared.

Peele clenched his hands convulsively, and made a spring at Lovell. Up went Arthur Edward's hands at once, and he grinned over them at Peele.

"Come on, old bean!"

On second thoughts, Peele did not come on. He gritted his teeth and rushed from the class-room. There was not more than time for Cyril Peele to clean himself before the French lesson.

Lovell grinned cheerfully. Instead of seeking his "Henriade" he took a duster and finished cleaning the seat of the chair, and it was spotless by the time the juniors came in to class, and Monsieur Victor Gaston entered; and the "new Froggy" never knew how narrow an escape his trousers had had.

CHAPTER 26.

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, seems 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 cracksman and bank robber. 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. 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 cracksman."

"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 possessed 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 trod 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 the 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 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.

CHAPTER 27.

Peele Looks for Trouble—and Finds It!

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

"Good-morning, sir!"

"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 now; all the more so because his features still felt the effect of rubbing the seccotine off the master's chair. Lovell had not handled him gently. Peele was in the mood for trouble, and trouble was not long in coming in the French class that morning.

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 breathed hard.

He had been unable to restrain his insolence, but he was not quite prepared for the consequences. Perhaps he had expected that Victor Gaston's conscience, or fear of causing discussion on the subject, would make him pass over the insult in silence. But whether the man was Victor Gaston, French master, or Felix Lacroix, cracksman and safe-robber, he was not the man to accept insolence from a fellow like Peele.

"You hear me, Peele."

"Serve you jolly well right, you cheeky cad!" murmured Arthur Edward Lovell.

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 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.

There was no danger. He stepped back to the safe with a malevolent gleam in his eyes.

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 return 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 scattering 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 thing 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.

CHAPTER 28,

In the Shadow of Death!

"DR. 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 Rookwood 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 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.

The dull beating on the iron door had given place to loud, sharp knocking, which could only mean that the fellow imprisoned in the safe had found something hard to use as a hammer.

The knocks were loud, sharp, ringing, and Jimmy Silver, looking with a pale face into the study, remembered that Peele of the Fourth had a pocket-knife with a metal handle.

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 circumstance. 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 helpless 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 cracksman, 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, of the doomed junior knocking on the iron door that shut him in to death!

Knock, knock, knock!

CHAPTER 29.

Self-Condemned!

JIMMY 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 Peele's life.

The knocking on the inside of the iron door was growing fainter and 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, cracksman 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."

"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 a double life; that Felix Lacroix has disappeared, leaving in his place only Victor Gaston. But 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 should it 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 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 cracksman'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 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!" Victor Gaston simply.

"Thank Heaven!" breathed the Head.

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.

"It is true."

"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.

CHAPTER 30.

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 deep in the river only yesterday. With them I buried, as I hoped, all 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 honour-

able 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."

"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.

Rockwood 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.

CHAPTER 31.

Asking For It!

"HERE, Silver!"

It was Hansom of the Fifth who called.

Edward Hansom, captain of the Rookwood Fifth, had a powerful voice, and Jimmy Silver certainly must have heard him call.

But he gave no sign.

Hansom was standing by the staircase, talking with Lumsden and Talboys of the Fifth, when Jimmy Silver of the Fourth came along. He suspended his conversation with Lumsden and Talboys to call to Jimmy Silver, and by the tone of his voice it was evident that Hansom was in an imperative mood.

"Silver! Do you hear?"

Jimmy Silver did not seem to hear.

He was walking towards the big doorway in the quad, outside which his chums, Lovell and Raby and Newcome, were waiting for him. And Jimmy Silver, like Felix, kept on walking.

Hansom reddened.

Lumsden and Talboys smiled slightly. It was evident that the Fourth

Former heard, and equally evident that he did not intend to heed.

"Silver!" bawled Hansom.

Still, like the dying gladiator of old, Jimmy heard, but he heeded not.

Hansom left his comrades and strode across to intercept Jimmy's way to the door. Jimmy Silver had to stop then, with the big Fifth Former directly in his path.

So he stopped.

"You cheeky little tick——" began Hansom.

"You cheeky big tick!" said Jimmy Silver cheerfully.

"Go to my study at once and fetch my Livy," said Hansom. "I want it for third lesson. See?"

Jimmy Silver smiled. Hansom, captain of the Fifth, was a great man in his Form—greater still in his own estimation. Being a great man, Hansom saw no reason why he should not fag juniors like a prefect of the Sixth. The juniors saw many reasons. They did not like fagging—and they did not like Hansom much. So it was a point upon which Jimmy Silver and Edward Hansom were not likely to agree.

"Do you hear?" snapped Hansom.

"Dear man, I could hear you across the quad," said Jimmy Silver affably. "The bull of Bashan isn't in it with you, old bean!"

"Are you going?"

"Oh, no, I'm not going!"

Lumsden and Talboys grinned. They were quite as keen as Hansom on keeping up the dignity and importance of the Fifth. But on more than one occasion they had found Jimmy Silver a hard nut to crack, and they had given him up. Their view was that Hansom would have been wiser to let Jimmy alone, and issue his lofty commands to more amenable fags of the Fourth, such as Tubby Muffin, or Peele, or Dickinson minor.

"Oh, you're not going, are you?" said Hansom.

"Not at all."

"Cut off at once before I lick you!"

"Same to you, dear man," said Jimmy. "Cut off at once before I lick you."

That was more than enough for Hansom of the Fifth. He simply could not allow himself to be defied in this way by a junior of the Fourth Form.

He made a jump at Jimmy Silver and grasped at him.

Jimmy Silver made a jump backward at the same moment, and Hansom's grasping hand swept the empty air.

Before he could grasp again Jimmy had dodged round him, and was speeding to the doorway.

"Oh!" gasped Hansom. "Stop! I'll—"

He sped after Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy cleared the doorway and came down the School House steps with a bound. Lovell and Raby and Newcome stared at him, wondering what was the cause of that sudden exit.

They understood the next moment, as the big Fifth Former came charging out.

"Back up, you fellows!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"What-ho!" grinned Lovell.

Hansom of the Fifth, rushing down the steps, rushed fairly into the arms of the Fistical Four.

Jimmy Silver, great fighting-man as he was in the Lower School, would not have been much use alone against a Fifth Form fellow. But with four sturdy juniors on the scene matters were quite different. Hansom could have handled one, or even two, of the chums of the end study. But in the grasp of four he was nowhere.

Almost before he knew what was happening Hansom of the Fifth was whirling in the grasp of four pairs of hands.

"Ow! Leggo!" he roared.

"Sit him down!" exclaimed Raby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cheeky fags! You— Ow— oh—ah!" spluttered the Fifth Former. "Bump!"

Hansom sat down on the lowest step. He sat there with a concussion that made him roar.

There was a chortle from the fellows in the quad who witnessed the sudden downfall of Hansom. Carthew of the Sixth, who was coming up to the House, grinned. Carthew was generally "down" on the Fistical Four; but he was not on good terms with Hansom, and he seemed entertained by the present proceedings of Jimmy Silver & Co.

"Hallo! Taking a rest, Hansom?" he asked.

"Ow!" gasped Hansom.

"You shouldn't sit on the steps, old man. Somebody might come out and fall over you!" grinned Carthew.

"Wow!"

Carthew went into the House, grinning. Hansom staggered to his feet, crimson with wrath. The mockery of a fellow like Carthew, whom he despised, gave the finishing touch to his wrath, and he saw red. He fairly bounded at the Fistical Four.

"Collar him!" yelled Newcome.

"Sit him down!"

Bump!

Hansom, in his wrath, did not count odds. But the odds were there, counted or uncounted.

Hansom sat on the step again, more heavily than before. Jimmy Silver & Co. grinned at him rather breathlessly.

"Have another?" gasped Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lumsden and Talboys came out at the doorway. They hurried down to Hansom.

"Hook it!" murmured Jimmy Silver.

And the heroes of the Fourth faded away in the distance, leaving Hansom to be picked up by his chums.

CHAPTER 32.

Follow Your Leader!

"FOLLOW your leader!" said Jimmy Silver. "Right-ho!"

It was a great temptation.

The big staircase was clear, the lower hall was untenanted. The great oaken banister, broad and polished, was more than tempting—it was irresistible.

Sliding down the big banister was strictly forbidden. The prohibition was reasonable enough, for certainly the proceeding was risky. Once a fellow had been hurt by whizzing down the banister at breathless speed and rolling off into the hall instead of landing on his feet as he should have done.

So the powers had forbidden it, and rightly so. But the Fistical Four felt, perhaps, that such a prohibition should not apply to them personally. For they were not at all likely to lose their nerve and bag an accident—their confidence in themselves was without limit.

To sit on the big broad banister, to sail down it like an arrow from a bow, and from the lower end to jump lightly and land on one's feet, was a risky but attractive form of exercise. Any prefect who saw a junior performing such a feat was bound to cane him or report him to his Form-master. A broken limb might very well have been the result of an accident.

But there were no prefects to be seen at this particular moment, and the smooth, polished banister was tempting. The Fistical Four were coming downstairs, and the banister was the quickest and most enjoyable method of descent.

So they adopted it—forgetting for the moment the stern prohibitions of the powers.

Jimmy Silver threw a leg over the banister and started. Nervous fellows sometimes slid down enfolding the

banister with their arms and chests. Not so the Fistical Four, who certainly deserved to be caned for their recklessness. Jimmy Silver sat erect and astride, and sailed down gloriously, and after him came Lovell, then Raby, and then Newcome. Four juniors, sitting on the banister in file, whizzed down with a terrific rush.

And then, from the window recess in the lower hall, stepped Carthew of the Sixth.

Jimmy was half-way down when he saw him.

He did not need the grin on the Sixth Form bully's face to tell him that Carthew had deliberately waited before showing himself till the Fistical Four were committed to that mode of descent. It was just like Carthew! He had spotted them at the landing above, easily guessed how they would descend if they supposed that no eyes were upon them, and so had kept out of sight till they started. Now he had something to report!

But it was too late to stop. The four juniors whizzed on. Carthew threw up his hand.

"Get off that banister at once!" he shouted.

Carthew must have known, or at least ought to have known, that the whizzing juniors in full career could not possibly have got off the banister, except by falling off. Indeed, any interruption of that perilous descent was liable to cause danger to the transgressors. A startled fellow might have lost his head and pitched off, with a broken leg or arm as the result.

Carthew should have been careful not to interfere till the reckless juniors were in safety. Instead of which he shouted up at them, coming close to the banisters.

"Get off at once! Do you hear?"

The quartette whizzed on.

There was little time to think, the descent was so swift. But the leader of the whizzing file saw that Carthew

was standing directly in the way of the jump-off. Carthew had not noticed that, or perhaps he did not care.

"Get aside!" howled Jimmy as he whizzed.

Carthew did not heed, and did not move.

Jimmy Silver had an instant's choice, of tumbling headlong over the massy newel-post at the foot of the banister, or of jumping clear in the usual way before touching it and landing on Carthew.

Crashing on a Sixth Form prefect was a serious matter. But it was not quite so serious as tumbling headlong into the hall on the hard oaken floor. And it was impossible to stop.

Jimmy Silver's mind was instantly made up.

Down he came—it was only a matter of seconds. Within a few feet of the newel-post he lifted one leg clear and leaped for the floor at the side of the big staircase.

Crash!

As Carthew was in the way a collision was inevitable.

It was a terrific collision.

Jimmy came down on Carthew like a thunderbolt, sending him sprawling.

Carthew sprawled, yelling and gasping, on the floor, and Jimmy sprawled over him. Jimmy's fall was broken, and to judge by the sounds that came from Mark Carthew, he was broken, too.

Before Jimmy could rise, the next in line came whizzing off the banister, and Arthur Edward Lovell sprawled over Jimmy. Then Raby came landing, and sprawled over Lovell, and then came Arthur Newcome, sprawling over all of them.

Carthew, in a breathless and battered state, fairly disappeared under the juniors.

His muffled voice was heard spluttering beneath the stack of them.

"Groogh! Mmmmmmm!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Jimmy.

"Ow!" stuttered Lovell. "The silly ass! Oh, dear! Might have broken our necks! Wow!"

The Fistical Four scrambled up, breathless and shaken. But for Carthew they would have jumped clear one after another, and landed in safety. Now they were hurt, and it was evident that Carthew of the Sixth was still more hurt.

He sat up and roared.

"What is all this?"

Mr. Dalton, the master of the Fourth, came hurrying from his study.

"Ow! Oh! I—I think my arm's broken, sir!" spluttered Carthew. "Those young villains—ow—sliding down the banishers—wow—jumping on me—moooooh—"

The Fistical Four stood silent. They knew what to expect now. They had transgressed the law, and the way of the transgressor was hard.

Mr. Dalton gave Carthew a hand up. His face was grim and stern. He felt the prefect's arm.

"It is not broken, Carthew," he said coldly. "There is a bruise—that is all."

"They jumped on me," roared Carthew. "Jumped on me from the banisters! It was intentional—ow!"

"We couldn't help it, sir," said Jimmy Silver. "Carthew stood right in the way. He ought to have known better."

Mr. Dalton knitted his brows.

"You were sliding down the banisters," he said.

"Ye-e-es."

"You are well aware that such a performance is strictly forbidden."

The Fistical Four were silent. They could not deny it.

"I shall cane you severely for this," said Mr. Dalton. "Follow me to my study."

Carthew gasped.

"That isn't all, sir! They jumped on me, knocked me over. It was done on purpose—"

"I am not sure, Carthew. The boys have hurt themselves by falling over you, as you can see."

"I know jolly well that they did, all the same," howled Carthew. "I told them to stop and get off the banister as soon as they'd started. They came on without taking any notice."

"That was inevitable if they had started," said Mr. Dalton dryly. "On another such occasion, Carthew, you should be careful to give a reckless boy plenty of room to land in safety. He should be punished, but not by the risk of a broken limb."

Mr. Dalton, signing to the Fistical Four to follow him, walked to his study. Carthew was left gritting his teeth. In Carthew's opinion nothing short of a Head's flogging was adequate to meet the circumstances. It was clear that Mr. Dalton disagreed with him.

Carthew limped away, furious. But Jimmy Silver & Co. were not happy as they followed their Form-master into his study.

Mr. Dalton selected a cane.

"You are very well aware, Silver," he said, "that the rule you have broken is made in the interests of the boys themselves. As head boy of the Fourth, you are expected to set a better example."

Jimmy coloured deeply.

It was quite true, and "Uncle James" of Rookwood realised that he had failed for once to play up in the way that might have been expected of him.

"I'm sorry, sir!" he said sincerely. "I didn't stop to think. I know I ought to have."

"Quite so," said Mr. Dalton. "You must try to remember the rules, and remember to regard them. Hold out your hand."

Possibly Mr. Dalton thought that a severe caning would help to fix the rules and a due regard for them in the

memories of the Fistical Four. Possibly he was right. At all events, he did not spare the rod, and when the chums of the Fourth left his study they were almost crawling and their hands were tucked in anguish under their arms.

In the corridor they looked at one another with ghastly faces.

"Ow!" said Lovell in a tone of deep feeling.

"Wow!" mumbled Raby.

"Mooooooooo!" murmured Newcome.

Jimmy Silver squeezed his hands and groaned.

"No more banisters for me! Ow, Ow! Wow! Blow the old banisters! Yow-ow-wow!"

The hapless four limped away. At the end of the corridor they passed Hansom of the Fifth, and that youth glanced at them and grinned.

"Somebody licked you fags?" he asked genially.

And the suffering quartette limped on, lacking even the energy at that moment of anguish to collar Hansom of the Fifth and roll him in the corridor.

CHAPTER 33.

Carthew's Chance!

JIMMY SILVER cast a wary glance over his shoulder and quickened his pace. It was the following day, and the effect of Mr. Dalton's caning had, of course, quite worn off. Jimmy Silver, looking as cheerful as if he had never been caned in his life, was sauntering by the footpath towards Coombe when he sighted Carthew of the Sixth.

Carthew was crossing the field from the opposite direction, and Jimmy could not have kept on without meeting him face to face.

Jimmy had no desire whatever to meet the bully of the Sixth at close quarters on his own, so he changed his direction and walked across the grass away from the footpath, stroll-

ing along with a careless air as if he hadn't noticed the enemy in the offing at all.

But a wary glance back showed that Carthew had left the footpath also, and was crossing the field on his track. And Carthew was following on with rapid strides, with a grim expression on his far from prepossessing face.

Jimmy Silver broke into a trot.

Jimmy was bound for the village of Coombe, and he saved a quarter of a mile by taking the footpath across the fields. He wished now that he had gone the longer way by the road.

Within the walls of Rookwood Carthew's authority as a prefect gave him many opportunities to make himself unpleasant to the juniors he disliked.

He never failed to avail himself of them. But his authority as a prefect, though stretched almost to breaking-point, had a limit in the school.

And it needed only one look at the bully's face to see that he intended to take advantage of this chance meeting in a solitary spot to deal with his old enemy of the Fourth in a way he could scarcely have ventured upon at Rookwood.

In those spacious fields there was no master, no fellow-prefect, to hear the yells of a thrashed junior, and no mobs of fags to rush to his aid.

Jimmy understood perfectly. His troubles with the bully of the Sixth had been many, and he knew Carthew and his ways well enough. He glanced back again as he trotted and saw that the senior had broken into a run. So Jimmy put it on.

Ahead of him, on the edge of the field, was a stretch of woodland, and Jimmy headed for the thickets there at top speed. Once among the trees, he felt confident of dodging Carthew.

"Stop!" shouted Carthew.

Jimmy was not likely to stop.

Behind him came the heavy footsteps of the Sixth Former, panting, in

pursuit. The light walking cane that Carthew had been carrying under his arm was gripped in his hand now.

Jimmy Silver reached the wood and plunged in among the trees and thickets, with his pursuer close behind. A second later his foot caught in an unseen wire, probably placed there for the benefit of trespassers, and he went stumbling headlong.

The sudden fall almost dazed him. He rolled over and scrambled up dizzily.

The next moment Carthew's grasp was on his shoulder.

"Stop, you young rotter!" growled the prefect.

Jimmy panted for breath. He had no choice about stopping, as he was in the grip of the angry Sixth Former.

Carthew eyed him evilly.

"You jumped on me yesterday, Silver!" he remarked. "No end of a joke—what?"

"I wish I'd jumped harder!" gasped Jimmy.

"You're going to pay for it now."

Carthew fixed his grip on the back of Jimmy's collar. By sheer force he bent the junior over a stump. Then the cane in his right hand came into play.

Lash!

Jimmy Silver struggled and roared. He knew that he was booked for a savage thrashing, and it was no time to stand on ceremony. He kicked out with vigour, and his boot crashed on Carthew's shin.

There was a roar of pain from the bully of the Sixth.

"Ow!"

"Let go, you rotter!" panted Jimmy.

Carthew, gritting his teeth, his eyes gleaming, compressed his grasp on the junior and forced him down on the stump again. Taking care to keep clear of the lashing heels, Carthew laid on the cane with vim.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

There were footsteps in the wood, and three fellows came in sight. They were Hansom, Talboys and Lumsden of the Fifth. The three Fifth Formers stared at the scene.

"Stop that, Carthew!" exclaimed Hansom.

Carthew gave him a glare.

"Keep off, and mind your own business!" he snapped.

Hansom of the Fifth did not keep off. With an angry frown, he strode up and caught Carthew's arm as another lash was descending.

"Let the kid alone!" he said sharply.

"You cheeky rotter——"

"Rats to you!" said Hansom contemptuously. "Who is it you're bullying now? Oh, it's that cheeky cad Silver! Well, I dare say he's asked for it, but he's had enough. Let him alone."

Carthew almost ground his teeth with rage. He was a prefect of the Sixth Form, and nobody in the Fifth, of course, had any right to interfere with him.

But Hansom, who was a big and powerful fellow, never was willing to acknowledge any superiority on the part of the top Form. Prefects like Bulkeley and Neville knew how to handle the rather obstreperous Fifth Former and keep him in his place.

But it was different with Carthew, whose courage was seldom at the sticking-point, and who had often put up with a good deal of "swank" from Hansom rather than venture upon a "row" with him.

Hansom was quite in his element now. He quite enjoyed bearding a Sixth Form prefect, and Carthew was the only prefect of the Sixth whom he could venture to beard.

So, heedless of Carthew's fury, he held back the bully's arm, and the cane did not touch Jimmy Silver again.

Carthew struggled to free his arm, still keeping Jimmy's collar gripped in his left.

"Let go, you fool!" he panted.

"Let that fag alone!" retorted Hansom.

"You're such a beastly bully, Carthew!" remarked Talboys, with a shake of the head.

"Bullying cad!" remarked Lumsden.

Hansom grinned at his chums. He was enjoying the situation. This would show Carthew, at least, what he thought of the Sixth!

"Take your paw off my arm at once," gasped Carthew. "I shall report this to the Head. You're interfering with a prefect——"

"Report and be blowed!" said Hansom cheerfully. "You're bullying that kid, and you're going to stop it." —

"Enough's as good as a feast!" said Talboys.

"Let go!" roared Carthew.

"Rats!"

"I tell you——"

"You let go that kid," said Hansom. "Now, then, sharp, or I'll jolly well make you."

That was too much for Carthew. He was not a fighting-man when he could help it; but to be openly hectorated by a Fifth Form fellow was more than he could stand.

He released Jimmy Silver's collar to free his hand. And that hand, clenched hard, was dashed full into Hansom's face.

"Take that, you cad!" he panted.

Hansom took it—he couldn't help that. The blow was unexpected, and it landed fairly on Hansom's nose. The captain of the Fifth went staggering back, and sat down in the grass with a heavy bump.

CHAPTER 34.

Licked to the Wide!

JIMMY SILVER jumped away, panting.

Carthew had no eyes for him for the moment.

His eyes were on Hansom of the

Fifth who was sprawling in the grass and spluttering wildly.

Hansom sat up.

"Ow!" That was his first remark.

"Wow! Ow!"

"Now mind your own dashed bizney!" said Carthew savagely, but a trifle apprehensively. He had floored Hansom quite successfully, but he was rather doubtful about what Hansom might do when he got up again.

"By gad! I—I—" gasped Hansom, feeling his nose as if to make sure that it still adorned his visage.

Carthew backed away a pace or two. At that point he would have been quite satisfied to let the affair end—even if he had to let Jimmy Silver off.

But Edward Hansom was not satisfied to let it end there. Hansom had been knocked down, and he was not to be knocked down with impunity. He scrambled to his feet, dashing a stream of crimson from his nose.

"You cheeky cad!" he roared. "Come on!"

"I'm not fightin' you!" growled Carthew. "You know jolly well that a Sixth Form prefect mustn't scrap."

"Then he mustn't punch fellows' noses," said Hansom, prancing up to the Sixth Former. "Put up your hands!"

Carthew backed farther away rather quickly. But he found Lumsden and Talboys in the way, grinning.

They pushed him back towards Hansom. Hansom pranced round the Sixth Former, brandishing his fists.

"Come on, you funk!" he roared. "You've punched my nose! See if you can do it again."

"Keep off!" yelled Carthew. "I'll report this to the Head."

"Report that, too!" said Hansom, tapping Carthew on the chin with a heavy set of knuckles. "And that!" His left tapped Carthew's nose.

"Go it!" chuckled Talboys.

Carthew breathed fury. There was no getting out of it, and he realised

it. He either had to fight Hansom of the Fifth, or to take a thrashing without fighting—and the former seemed the better alternative.

So he put up his hands and came on.

Carthew, as a Sixth Former and an older fellow, should have had the advantage, but he did not seem to have it. Hansom was a hard hitter, and his temper was thoroughly roused now. He knew, too, that there might be trouble to follow a fight with a Sixth Form prefect, and if there was to be a "jaw" from the Head, Hansom felt like indemnifying himself in advance at Carthew's expense.

So he "went for" Mark Carthew hammer-and-tongs.

Jimmy Silver looked on with keen interest.

He quite regretted having bumped Hansom on the School House steps a few days previously. No doubt Hansom was a lofty and rather overbearing fellow—but certainly his intervention now had been very useful to Jimmy. And it was quite a treat to see the bully of the Sixth handled by a fellow who could thrash him.

"Go it, Hansom!" sang out Jimmy, as Carthew staggered back from a whirlwind assault.

Hansom looked round at him. "What's that? Cheese it, you cheeky fag!" he said.

Jimmy chuckled. Hansom had intervened on his behalf; nevertheless he did not want the fact to be overlooked that between the Fourth and the Fifth there was a great gulf.

But Jimmy did not mind. He was willing to take any amount of swank from Hansom just then. For Hansom certainly was giving Carthew of the Sixth a beautiful licking.

Had Carthew been in conflict with one of the Sixth he would have cried off as soon as he could; but for very shame's sake he could not accept defeat from a Fifth Former if he could help it.

So he put up an unexpectedly good fight.

But he hated taking punishment, and without taking some punishment he had no chance of dealing with Hansom. In his efforts to avoid getting hurt he captured more damages than he would have received in the boldest attack. Hansom followed up all his retreats, and kept him busy from start to finish.

Carthew was soon gasping. He had been smoking cigarettes after dinner, and those smokes took their revenge upon him now that he needed all his wind.

For five minutes he put up something like a show, and after that he was driven about helplessly.

He went down at last, crashing. Hansom stood and glared down at him, breathless, but triumphant.

"Take your time," he said sarcastically as Carthew did not rise.

The bully of the Sixth gave him an evil look.

"I'm done!" he panted.

"Oh, you're not done yet," said Talboys. "Put in another round, Carthew, for the giddy honour of the Sixth."

"Sure you're done, Carthew?" asked Hansom. "My opinion is that you're not half licked yet."

"I tell you I'm done, you rotter," snarled Carthew. And he made the matter clear by remaining where he was, in the grass.

Hansom shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"Well, if you own up licked, all right," he said. "You're not to touch that fag again, do you hear?"

Carthew gritted his teeth.

"Do you hear?" roared Hansom.

"Yes, hang you!"

"Mind you don't do it, then. Silver"—Hansom turned to Jimmy quite graciously. He rather fancied himself in the role of champion of the oppressed—"let me know if that bully

touches you again, and I'll give him another jolly good hiding."

"Good man," said Jimmy, with a smile. He was not likely to call on Edward Hansom for protection at any time, but he was too tactful to say so.

"Not that you're to be cheeky to a prefect, either," went on Hansom, remembering the great gulf fixed between him and a fag of the Fourth. "If you do, I'll lick you myself."

"Go hon!" said Jimmy cheerfully. Hansom frowned.

"No lip, or I'll lick you now," he said warningly.

"Ta-ta," said Jimmy Silver. "Much obliged to you, Hansom." And Jimmy walked away through the trees, feeling it wiser not to enter into a wordy war with his rescuer.

Carthew of the Sixth sat up in the grass, but he did not rise till the three Fifth Formers were gone. By that time Jimmy Silver was far beyond his reach.

The bully of the Sixth took his way to Rookwood in a bitter mood. He had been licked—by a Fifth Form fellow. No doubt he could cause trouble for Hansom by reporting him for attacking a prefect—but then the whole story would come out, and Carthew did not want his bullying to come to the Head's knowledge. Neither was he anxious to advertise the humiliating fact that he had been thrashed by a Fifth Former.

On reflection Carthew felt that the less he said about the matter the better for himself.

That, however, only made him feel the more bitter both towards Hansom and Jimmy Silver. Hansom he could not touch, and even Jimmy was difficult to deal with if an obstreperous Fifth Former was going to butt in on the pretext of stopping bullying. Carthew felt as if his teeth had been drawn; both the fellow who had thrashed him and the fellow he wanted to thrash seemed to be out of his power.

CHAPTER 35.

Tubby Takes a Hand!

TUBBY MUFFIN gave a convulsive start. His fat heart almost jumped into his capacious mouth.

It was quite an ordinary sound that startled Reginald Muffin—simply the sound of a footstep in the Fourth Form passage—merely that, and nothing more!

But Tubby was in peculiar circumstances.

It was a half-holiday that afternoon, and most of the Rookwood fellows were on the playing fields. Tubby had watched the Fistical Four sally forth together, and had naturally supposed that they would be occupied for some time. And in that time Tubby saw an opportunity for paying a surreptitious visit to the end study. That there was a cake in the study cupboard Tubby knew, and with Jimmy Silver & Co. at games practice there was no reason whatever, so far as the fat Classical could see, why he should not sample that cake. Doubtless, the Fistical Four, when they came in hungry to tea, would miss the cake, and would be wrathful. But wrath to come was a trifle light as air in comparison with the cake. Tubby resolved to risk it, and now he was in the end study, with the cupboard door open, and he had been gloating over that cake when that sudden footstep outside disconcerted him.

Tubby whirled round from the cupboard in dismay. The footsteps were coming right on to the end study—and he was caught.

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Tubby.

He had no time to think. He acted on instinct. The lower part of the cupboard was pretty well filled with lumber and odds and ends, and there was barely room for Tubby to squeeze in. He squeezed in, and drew the cupboard door nearly shut. It would not quite shut with Tubby there.

There he crouched and palpitated.

One of the beasts had evidently come back to the study for something, and Tubby hoped from the bottom of his fat heart that the beast would not linger.

The door opened.

Tubby scarcely breathed.

Someone stepped inside the study. There was no sound of any further movement for a moment or two, and Tubby wondered. This did not seem like the entrance of one of the owners of the study. Tubby wondered whether it was some surreptitious marauder after the cake. But the newcomer did not approach the cupboard.

Tubby heard him move towards the table, and then, from sheer curiosity and wonder, Tubby peered out. The cupboard door was about an inch open, and it gave him a partial view of the study. The next moment Tubby almost betrayed himself in his astonishment. For the fellow standing by the table was not a junior at all. It was Mark Carthew of the Sixth Form.

Tubby controlled his feelings, and scarcely breathed. He was devoured with curiosity now. A Sixth Form prefect could not be suspected of raiding a cake; but evidently Carthew had some business in the study—business plainly of a surreptitious nature. Tubby wanted to know what it was, and Tubby was aware that if the bully of the Sixth found himself watched he would make matters painful for the watcher. So Reginald Muffin crouched in the bottom of the cupboard like a fat mouse.

Carthew was glancing about the study. He opened the table drawer at last, as if in search of something.

"That will do!"

Tubby heard him murmur the words.

A paper rustled in Carthew's hand. From the glimpse that Tubby caught of it, it seemed to be an old letter, which the senior had taken from the table drawer.

Tubby Muffin's astonishment intensi-

fied. Carthew was a "bad hat" in many ways, but he could not be supposed to be a thief. And if he was a thief there was no reason why he should steal an old letter from the end study. What on earth all this might mean was a deep and perplexing mystery to Reginald Muffin.

Carthew stood by the table, looking at the letter in his hand. He seemed to be reading it, but he did not finish. Crumpling it into his hand, he dropped it into a pocket.

Then he left the study.

The door closed behind him, and Tubby heard his footsteps dying away down the passage.

Then the fat Classical emerged gasping from his close quarters in the cupboard.

"Is he potty?" Tubby murmured, in utter bewilderment.

That really seemed to be the only explanation. Carthew's action was utterly inexplicable.

In his amazement and curiosity Tubby Muffin forgot even the cake. After a moment or two of thought he stepped to the door, and stepped out into the passage.

Carthew was disappearing by the staircase at the other end.

There was nobody about; all the Classical Fourth were out of doors on that sunny half-holiday. Tubby Muffin would have been out of doors himself but for the lure of the cake. Carthew, evidently, had observed all that, and had taken advantage of it to pay that secret visit to the end study. But what on earth did he want with an old letter from Jimmy Silver's drawer?

Almost gasping with curiosity, Tubby Muffin rolled along the passage, and peered over the banisters.

From the lower landing Carthew, instead of going out on to the next flight of stairs, was turning into the Fifth Form passage.

Apparently he was on a visit to the Fifth, and that was odd, for all—or nearly all—the Fifth were out of doors.

Tubby scuttled down the staircase and peered round the corner into the Fifth Form passage. He was just in time to see Mark Carthew vanish into Hansom's study.

That study, Tubby knew, was vacant, for he had seen Hansom and Talboys go out of the School House together some time before.

By this time Tubby Muffin was fairly trembling with wonder and inquisitiveness. What was Carthew "up to" in Hansom's study? There were rumours in the school of the encounter that had taken place in the wood, and it was well known that Carthew was on the worst of terms with Hansom of the Fifth. Had Edward Hansom been there, certainly Carthew would not have visited the study.

"It's a jape!" murmured Tubby. "My hat! A prefect of the Sixth japing like a fag while a fellow's out! It's a rag on Hansom—can't be anything else."

That much became clear to Tubby's rather obtuse intellect. Carthew's visit to Hansom's study was the visit of an enemy, not of a friend. Tubby knew that.

"But—but why did he take that old letter from Jimmy's drawer?" murmured Tubby in bewilderment. "That wasn't a jape, that was—"

Then it flashed on his fat mind.

Trembling with excitement, Tubby Muffin stole along the Fifth Form passage. Carthew had closed Hansom's door after him, and the fat Classical was in no danger of being seen. He stooped outside and applied one eye to the keyhole, but the key was in the way, and he could see nothing of the interior of the room.

But he could hear!

There was a sound of rending and tearing. Carthew was "ragging" some of Hansom's property—probably his school books. Tubby Muffin was not a bright youth; but he quite understood now. Hansom of the Fifth, when he

came in, would find his school books torn up and scattered about his room. He would find that old letter from the end study left on his floor, as if dropped there by accident by the ragger. That would be a clue—more than sufficient for the hot-headed Hanson. Tubby Muffin saw the whole game. The bully of the Sixth was killing two birds with one stone. There would be such a terrific row between Jimmy Silver & Co. and Hanson of the Fifth, and howsoever it ended mattered little to Carthew; the more damage given on both sides the better the plotting prefect would be pleased.

"The awful beast!" murmured Tubby.

The tearing and rending went on. Tubby backed away from the door, and paused. His first thought was to scud down to the fields and warn Jimmy-Silver & Co. But Carthew was not likely to remain long in Hanson's study. He would be gone before witnesses could arrive on the scene and catch him. And Tubby, apart from his disgust at this act of treachery, wanted very much to catch Carthew. He had the remembrance of many kicks and cuffs in his fat mind. He crept to the door again.

The key was on the inside. How long would it take to jerk open the door, bag the key, jam it in the outside of the lock, and lock Carthew in?

Before the ragger knew what was happening, he might be locked in the study—if Tubby was quick enough! And he was quite off his guard; he would not realise what was happening till it had happened!

Tubby's fat hand touched the knob, and then his heart failed him. If Carthew caught him—

Visions of himself travelling down the passage with Carthew's boot behind him, worried Tubby. His heart failed him and he drew back from the door.

Then, to screw his courage to the sticking-point came the remembrance of the cake. If he did Jimmy Silver

& Co. a good turn like this, they could scarcely fail to stand him the cake! There was such a thing as gratitude!

Reginald Muffin set his teeth.

His fat heart beat fast; but he was determined. Softly, silently, he turned the handle of the door. But his fat hand trembled so much that the lock clicked.

There was a startled exclamation in the study. Carthew turned round towards the door—his own heart, probably, beating as fast as Tubby Muffin's at that moment.

Further concealment was futile. Tubby had time—just time—and with desperate haste he opened the door and groped round for the key with his fat fingers.

It was in his grasp in a second, and he dragged the door shut again, and thrust the key into the outside of the lock. He heard Carthew springing across the room to the door. He both heard and felt the senior's sudden furious grasp on the door-handle. The key clicked just in time.

Click!

A fraction of a second later Carthew was dragging frantically on the door-handle inside the study. But the door was locked, and half a dozen Carthews could not have dragged it open.

Tubby Muffin backed away with a breathless chuckle, the key in his hand. From within the study came a panting voice:

"Unlock this door—quick!"

Tubby grinned, and did not answer.

"Who is there?" breathed Carthew, through the keyhole. "Who is it? Whoever you are, unlock the door—quick!"

Reginald Muffin was very careful not to answer. Carthew had seen nothing of him, save a momentary glimpse of a hand, and Tubby realised that silence was golden.

"Open the door, there's a good chap!" whispered Carthew. "I'll stand you a quid to open the door!"

It was a generous offer; but Tubby

Muffin, though not a bright youth, was bright enough to know that, once the door was open, he was likely to collect more kicks than halfpence from Carthew of the Sixth.

Instead of answering, Muffin rolled away down the passage, and rolled out of the School House in search of the Fistical Four.

In Hansom's study, Carthew of the Sixth stood dumbfounded. He was overwhelmed with dismay.

On the floor lay Hansom's Livy, his Virgil, his Latin grammar, his Greek lexicon, his Latin dictionary, and several other books—torn and rent and useless.

Any senior looking into the study would have supposed that some malicious fag had done the damage—had not Carthew been there to be found.

Hansom had rather a heavy hand with fags, and he would have had no doubt that some young rascal of the Third or the Fourth had "got even" in this way.

And among the torn fragments on the floor lay a letter written to Jimmy Silver by his father—the letter Carthew had taken from Jimmy's drawer. Hansom would have found it—and doubted not at all to whom he owed the destruction of his books.

Carthew had planned cunningly—unscrupulously, and now—

He shivered.

He was locked in the study, in the midst of the destruction he had wrought. And there was no escape for him!

While he stood, overwhelmed with dismay and apprehension, Tubby Muffin was seeking Jimmy Silver & Co., and the Fistical Four listened with blank amazement to what he had to tell them. Their faces grew dark when they understood.

"My hat!" said Lovell. "This is jolly thick, even for Carthew! Tubby's made a mistake somehow."

"I haven't you ass!" exclaimed

Tubby indignantly. "I've jolly well saved you from a terrific licking! Hansom would have had you up before the Head."

"It sounds awfully thick," said Jimmy Silver. "Let's go and look in the end study and see if anything is missing."

It did not take long to ascertain that something was missing. Jimmy Silver had left his father's letter in the table drawer; it was gone.

Raby scuttled away to the Fifth Form passage, and came back with the news that he could hear somebody moving in Hansom's study—like "a giddy wild beast in a cage," according to Raby.

"Now do you believe it?" demanded Tubby Muffin warmly.

Jimmy Silver nodded.

"But what were you doing here, anyhow, when Carthew came in, Muffin?" demanded Lovell.

"I wasn't after the cake——"

"What?"

"Of course, I wouldn't touch a fellow's cake," said Tubby. "But after what I've done, I shan't refuse it if you fellows offer it to me."

Jimmy Silver laughed, and handed over the whole cake to Reginald Muffin. He felt that Tubby had earned it. And then the Fistical Four went to look for Hansom of the Fifth.

CHAPTER 36.

Brought to Book!

CARTHEW trembled.

There was a sound of many footsteps in the Fifth Form passage. He heard the voice of Edward Hansom, captain of the Fifth.

The wretched Carthew cast a wild glance round the study. He was almost tempted to try his luck from the window.

"The door's locked right enough," came Talbot's voice.

"You've got the key, Hansom?" asked Lumsden.

"Yes, young Silver gave me the key,"

answered Hansom, and there was a sound of the key scraping into the lock.

Carthew backed as far as he could from the door, his face white. He was utterly and hopelessly caught, and there was no help for him. It rested with Hansom and his friends whether he lost his prefectship—indeed, whether he stayed at Rookwood at all. They had only to report the outrage to the Head—and the thought of how Dr. Chisholm would regard such a malicious outrage by a prefect of the Sixth Form, made Carthew quake.

The door was thrown open.

Hansom of the Fifth stepped in, and Talboys and Lumsden followed him. After them came Brown major and Duff of the Fifth.

"Here he is!" said Hansom grimly.

"My hat! Look what he's done!" Brown major pointed to the torn books on the floor.

Carthew looked at them with haggard eyes. He had known that this must come—that he would be kept locked in the study till Hansom & Co. were there to deal with him. He had picked up Jimmy Silver's letter from the floor, and burned it with a match—that intended trickery, at least, he was able to keep secret, or, at least, unproved. But the havoc he had wrought on Hansom's books could not be mitigated or disguised.

"And that's a prefect!" said Lumsden. "A prefect of the Sixth! I wonder what the Head would say to this?"

Carthew gasped hoarsely:

"I—I'm sorry—I apologise, Hansom! I—I— There's no need to drag the Head into it!"

"You cringing worm!" said Hansom, in measured tones. "This is because I licked you the other day, in a fair fight—what?"

"I—I—" gasped Carthew huskily.

"And you wanted me to drop on young Silver for it?" Hansom's eyes gleamed with scorn at the wretched prefect.

prefect. "Where's young Silver's letter—the one you were seen to take from his study?"

"I—I haven't—"

"That's it, I fancy!" said Lumsden, pointing to a fragment of charred paper in the fender. "The cad's been trying to cover up his tracks."

"I—I'll pay for the books!" breathed Carthew. "Don't make a row about this, Hansom. The—the Head—"

"The Head would boot you out of Rookwood, and you know it!" said Hansom contemptuously. "I don't see why I should let you off, either."

"I—I beg of you!" groaned Carthew.

There was no depth of humiliation too deep for the bully of the Sixth at that moment.

"Oh, cheese it!" said Hansom, in disgust. "You'll pay for the books, of course—you'll jolly well buy a new set, see?"

"I—I'm willing—"

"And that isn't all. You've ragged here like a Second Form fag, and you're going to take a fag's punishment! There's a malacca cane in that corner, Talboys. Hand it over."

Talboys handed over the cane. Hansom swished it in the air and Carthew eyed him apprehensively.

"Bend over!" said Hansom tersely.

"Wha-a-at?"

"Bend over! I'm going to give you a dozen of the best!"

Carthew panted. It was the crowning humiliation, and for a moment even Carthew's spirit rose against the idea of being flogged like a fag—he, a Sixth Form prefect!

"I—I won't!" he gasped.

"Won't you?" Hansom smiled grimly.

"You'll take a dozen from me, or you'll go straight to the Head and answer for what you've done. Take your choice!"

For a moment Carthew stood savage and defiant, under the grim eyes of the Fifth-Formers. Then he weakened as he realised that he dare not resist; he dare not face the Head.

With a face white with rage and

shame, he bent silently over a chair, as often enough he had made hapless fags bend.

"I thought so!" said Hansom.
And then he began with the malacca.

Jimmy Silver & Co. did not witness Carthew's punishment. No doubt it was an entertainment in its way; but "Uncle James" and his friends would not seem to triumph over a fallen enemy.

Carthew, when Hansom had finished with him limped away to his own study, there to hide his shame and fury.

The next day, when the Fistical Four came on him in the quad, Carthew gave them a look that the fabled Gorgon might have envied. The chums of the Fourth smiled sweetly at him in return.

CHAPTER 37.

Too Hasty!

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL
sniffed.

It was a pronounced, an emphatic sniff.

Lovell had just come in from cricket. He entered the end study in the Fourth Form passage and banged down his bat in a corner. And then he coughed, and then he sniffed. There was a thick atmosphere of tobacco-smoke in the end study—the air was quite heavy with it. Hence Lovell's pronounced, emphatic, and disgusted sniff.

Newcome stood by the study window waving a newspaper to clear off the cigarette-smoke. Arthur Edward Lovell fixed an accusing glance on him.

"You silly ass!" said Lovell.

"Er—what?"

"Smoking in the study! My hat! You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself, Newcome!" exclaimed Lovell hotly.

"You born ass!" roared Newcome.

"You silly bounder!" retorted Lovell.

"You footling chump! I haven't been smoking!" howled Newcome. "I haven't been indoors two minutes, fat-

head, and I found the study just like this, duffer! And I've a jolly good mind to punch your silly head, dummy!"

"Oh!" said Lovell, rather taken aback.

It was one of Lovell's little ways to jump to hurried conclusions. He seldom stopped to think. Indeed, his loyal chums, Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome, sometimes averred that he lacked the necessary mental apparatus for thinking.

"Well, if it wasn't you, who was it?" demanded Lovell.

"Fathead!"

"Look here, Newcome——"

"Ass!"

Newcome seemed annoyed.

There was a step in the passage, and George Raby came in. Arthur Edward Lovell's accusing glance turned on him.

"Look here, Raby, this is too thick! If you're taking to smoking cigarettes, like that cad Peele, you might at least smoke them somewhere else."

Raby stared at him.

"Who's been smoking cigarettes?" he inquired.

"Haven't you?" demanded Lovell.

"Fathead!"

"Slanging isn't answering," said Lovell loftily. "I asked you a question."

"You asked me to punch your silly nose, I suppose you mean!" said Raby warmly.

"Well, if it wasn't you or Newcome, I suppose it was Jimmy," said Lovell. "It must have been somebody. The study fairly reeks with it. I'm surprised at Jimmy, and I'll jolly well give him a talking-to! Hallo! Here he is!"

Jimmy Silver came in.

"Tea ready, you chaps?" he inquired cheerily.

"Never mind tea!" said Lovell severely. "I'm surprised at you, Jimmy—and jolly well shocked, too! You're captain of the Fourth, and you ought to know better!"

"Eh?"

"All very well for dingy cads like

Peele and Gower," went on Lovell indignantly. "But I never expected a chum of mine to make a study reek with filthy baccy-smoke!"

Jimmy Silver looked round and sniffed.

"Somebody's been smoking here!" he remarked.

"And I want to know who it was," said Lovell. "Newcome says it wasn't him, and Raby says it wasn't him; and so I suppose it was you, and you jolly well want kicking!"

"So you suppose it was me?" said Jimmy, looking at him. "You shouldn't suppose anything, Lovell, old man. You really ought to remember that on the few occasions when you do any thinking you make a hash of it. Never think, old man. Your brain won't stand it."

"Look here——" roared Lovell.

"It's clearing off," said Newcome, still waving the newspaper at the open window. "I wonder who it was? Awful cheek for some cad to sneak in here to smoke while we were out!"

Lovell stared.

"Oh! You think that's it?" he asked.

"Fathead! Of course that's it!" snapped Newcome. "If you had the brains of a bunny rabbit, you'd know without being told."

"That's all very well——" began Lovell.

"Peele, I suppose," said Jimmy Silver. "Just one of his tricks! Rather rotten for us if a master or prefect dropped in and found the study reeking with smoke."

"I should jolly well say so!" exclaimed Lovell. "And if it wasn't one of you chaps——"

"Cheese it, ass!"

"Well, if you give me your word, of course——" said Arthur Edward Lovell magnanimously.

"Not at all!" said Jimmy Silver cheerily. "No need for that, Lovell. You're not judge and jury and prosecuting counsel in this case. You're only a cheeky ass! What you really

want is a bumping! That's what you're going to have——see?"

"Look here——"

"Collar him!"

"What-ho!" grinned Raby and Newcome.

"Hands off, you cheeky chumps!" roared Lovell. "I tell you—I say—I—— Yooopp! Ah—ow! Yarooooop!"

Bump!

Arthur Edward Lovell, in the grasp of three pairs of hands, landed on the study carpet with a loud concussion and a louder howl.

"Oh! Oh, my hat! Oooop! You rotters—owp!"

Bump!

"There!" said Jimmy Silver. "Now own up that you're a cheeky ass, old chap, and say you're sorry to have given us the trouble of bumping you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I—I'll wallop you all round! I'll I'll——" gased Lovell, spluttering with breathless wrath.

"Are you a cheeky ass?" inquired Jimmy.

"Ow! No! I——"

Bump!

"Whooop!"

"Are you a cheeky ass?" again inquired Jimmy Silver, while Raby and Newcome roared with laughter.

"Oh, my hat! Yes, if you like!" gasped Lovell. "Oh, dear! Leggo! I'll scrag you! I'll give you the kybosh! I'll—— Ow!"

Lovell scrambled to his feet as his chums released him. He seemed about to charge at the three like an enraged bull. But just then there was a step at the door, and Newcome ejaculated:

"Hallo! It's Dicky!"

CHAPTER 38.

Mr. Dalton Wants to Know!

"NONSENSE!" said Mr. Dalton. Mr. Richard Dalton, the master of the Fourth Form, fixed his eyes on Carthew as he spoke. He spoke in a very decided tone. Carthew of the Sixth flushed.

"I've reported to you, as the juniors concerned are in your Form, sir," said Carthew tartly. "If you prefer it, I'll take the matter before the Head."

"You will do nothing of the kind, Carthew," said Mr. Dalton quietly. "As you have reported this matter to me I shall look into it. But I have said that it is nonsense, and I repeat that it is nonsense. It has not escaped my observation, Carthew, that you seem to have a personal dislike for Silver and his friends. I am afraid that you allow this to influence you—which is extremely unbecoming in a Sixth Form prefect of Rookwood."

Carthew compressed his lips.

"I suppose I can believe my own eyes, sir!" he snapped. "I passed Silver's study a short time ago, and it was reeking with tobacco-smoke. I suppose you do not intend to allow Silver to smoke, any more than any other junior at Rookwood, because he is a favourite of yours?"

"That is an impertinent remark, Carthew. I have no favourites in my Form," said Mr. Dalton sternly. "I know Silver too well to believe him guilty of any such folly. However, I shall go to his study at once and see into the matter. You will kindly accompany me."

Mr. Dalton rose and left his study, and the bully of the Sixth followed him.

The Fourth Form master frowned as he mounted the staircase. It was not the first time by many that Carthew had brought him reports of Jimmy Silver & Co.; and Mr. Dalton was quite aware of the feud between Carthew and the end study. Nevertheless, a plain statement of fact was easily put to the test, and the Form-master felt that he could not pass the matter without notice.

Several fellows of the Classical Fourth were in the passage, and they looked after the Form-master as he passed along with Carthew, and wondered what was "up."

Peele and Gower looked out of their

study, the first in the passage, and exchanged a grin.

"Trouble for somebody?" murmured Peele.

"Looks like it!" grinned Gower.

Mr. Dalton stopped at the doorway of the end study, which was wide open. He heard Newcome ejaculate "It's Dicky!" but affected not to hear. He was aware that he was called "Dicky Dalton" by the Fourth. He frowned into the study. There was an unmistakable atmosphere of tobacco-smoke, and Carthew's statement was borne out by that evidence.

The Fistical Four looked rather sheepishly at their Form-master. Lovell was red and breathless and panting, and the other three looked warm from their exertions in bumping their chum for his own good. They wondered whether Mr. Dalton had heard the uproar, and come along to inquire into it.

"What does this mean, Silver?" asked Mr. Dalton quietly.

"Only a rag, sir," said Jimmy. "Nothing the matter. We didn't think you'd hear the row——"

"I have heard nothing. I am alluding to the atmosphere of smoke in this study," said Mr. Dalton sternly. "Someone has been smoking here."

"Yes, sir."

"I was sure that Carthew was mistaken when he reported the circumstance to me. I trusted this study."

Jimmy crimsoned.

"None of us has been smoking here," he said. "We've been in only a few minutes, and we found the study smoky like this. We don't know who's done it."

Carthew burst into an involuntary laugh. This seemed to him about the thinnest story he had ever heard.

Mr. Dalton gave him a cold glance.

"This is not a laughing matter, Carthew. From Silver's statement, it seems that some other boy has been smoking in his study, and if I were a suspicious master I might very well

believe that Silver was the guilty party."

"I suppose you don't believe him, sir," said Carthew scoffingly.

"I certainly do, Carthew."

"It's just the first yarn that came into his head," said the prefect. "A lie on the face of it."

Jimmy Silver opened his lips and closed them again. He could not tell Carthew what he thought of him in the presence of Richard Dalton.

"On the contrary, Carthew," said the Fourth Form master, "I know Silver well enough to be sure that he is speaking the truth. I accept his statement absolutely."

"Thank you, sir!" said Jimmy.

Carthew set his lips.

"Then it's not much use my making reports to you, sir," he said, unable to control his chagrin and annoyance. "The evidence is plain enough, and if Silver's word is to outweigh it, Silver can do as he likes."

"Not at-all. I intend to carry this investigation further," said Mr. Dalton. "Someone has been smoking here—a thing that is against the laws of the school. How long have you boys been in?"

"I was in first, sir," said Newcome.

"About ten minutes——"

"There was no one in the study when you came in?"

"No, sir."

"You saw no one leave?"

"No, sir. There were some fellows in the passage."

"The smoking must have been quite recent when you came in ten minutes ago, as the odour is still so perceptible," Mr. Dalton turned to the prefect. "Carthew, you found this study reeking with smoke, as you told me, when you passed the door. How did you happen to be in the Fourth Form passage at the time?"

"It's a prefect's duty to look around the junior quarters occasionally."

"I know that. Were you simply making a round, or had you any special reason for looking into this study?"

"Well, I had a reason," admitted Carthew, after a moment's hesitation. "As a matter of fact, I suspected something had been going on."

"Why?"

"I heard a remark made by a junior," said Carthew sullenly. "It led me to believe that smoking had been going on here."

"Very good. Who was the junior whose remark you heard?"

"Peele of the Fourth."

"He spoke in your hearing—intending you perhaps to hear?" said Mr. Dalton.

"I don't suppose so for a moment."

"You heard his remark, at all events," said Mr. Dalton dryly. "We will now speak to Peele."

The Fourth Form master walked back along the passage, followed by Carthew, who was now looking sullen and uneasy. Jimmy Silver & Co. exchanged a grin. They could guess by this time that Carthew's leg had been pulled by the cad of the Fourth—though certainly Cyril Peele had not expected the investigation to take the line it was now taking.

Mr. Dalton stopped at the first study, and Peele and Gower faced him in uneasy surprise.

"Peele and Gower," said the Form-master quietly. "On two or three occasions I have had to punish you for smoking. Have you been smoking this afternoon?"

"No, sir!" answered the two juniors together.

"This study doesn't smell of smoke, Mr. Dalton," said Carthew viciously.

"Quite so; and the end study does. Peele, at least, was aware of the fact that smoking had been going on there."

"Oh, no, sir!" said Peele, in alarm.

"You made a remark in Carthew's hearing to that effect, Peele."

"Oh! I—I mean——"

"Have you been smoking in the end study, Peele, and did you cause Carthew to visit that study, intending punishment to fall upon boys who had been out of doors at the time?"

"Oh, no, sir!" gasped Peele.

"Have you been smoking at all to-day?"

"No!" said Peele desperately.

"Show me your hands! If you have not been smoking, Peele, how comes it that your fingers are stained with cigarettes?"

"Oh!"

"Turn out your pockets, both of you," said the master of the Fourth sternly. "Turn them out to the lining. Ah, I thought so!"

The hapless black sheep of the Fourth had to obey. Among the other articles turned out of their pockets were a packet of cigarettes from Peele, and two or three loose cigarettes from Gower.

"I think that settles the matter," said Mr. Dalton calmly. "I am afraid you allowed yourself to be misled, Carthew, by this unscrupulous boy Peele. I suppose it is clear to you now who has been smoking in Silver's study."

Carthew did not answer. He realised only too clearly that he had made a fool of himself in the most hopeless way, and he did not utter a word.

He gave the two black sheep of the Fourth a savage look, and quitted the study. The Fourth Formers in the passage grinned as he stalked away furiously to the stairs.

"Peele," said Mr. Dalton, "you will fetch a cane from my study."

Cyril Peele fetched the cane. As soon as he returned with it there was a sound of swishing in Study No. 1, and dismal howls from Peele and Gower. When Mr. Dalton left he left two hapless juniors wriggling.

"Oh!" groaned Gower. "Oh, you ass, Peele! Oh! You said it was quite safe. Ow! Wow!"

"Ow! I thought it was all right," groaned Peele. "Ow! It would have been all right for Carthew—wow! That beast Dalton seems to see through everything. Yow-ow!"

Ten minutes later Carthew of the Sixth looked into the study. He had

his ashplant under his arm, and an extremely unpleasant look on his face.

"So it was you who smoked in the end study?" he said grimly.

"Ow! Mr. Dalton's licked us for that!" groaned Gower, looking apprehensively at the ashplant.

"He hasn't licked you for making a fool of me," said Carthew. "I'm goin' to do that!"

And he did.

Loud yells rang from the study as the bully of the Sixth made active play with the ashplant. There was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth when Carthew went at last.

After tea in the end study Jimmy Silver & Co. came along the passage and looked in. Lovell had a cricket-stump in his hand.

"We know all about it, you rotters!" announced Lovell, "and we're going—Great Scott! What's the matter with you?"

"Keep off, you beasts!" groaned Peele. "We've had it from Dalton and we've had it from Carthew! Ow! Ow! Ow!"

Gower did not speak; he only groaned and mumbled. Jimmy Silver & Co. looked at them, and even Arthur Edward Lovell relented and held back the cricket-stump.

"Well, you look as if you've had enough," he said.

"Ow! Ow! Wow! Wow!"

"Only don't play any more tricks in the end study," grinned Lovell.

"Ow! Ow! Wow!"

The Fistical Four walked away smiling, leaving the hapless black sheep to groan. Peele and Gower were not likely to play any more tricks in the end study—at least, for a good while. The results were really too painful.

CHAPTER 39.

Carthew's Catch!

CARTHEW of the Sixth scowled at Jimmy Silver & Co. when he came on those cheery juniors the next day in the quadrangle.

They passed him with smiling faces, not at all disconcerted by his black looks.

Carthew looked after them with knitted brows.

It had been proved clearly enough that the smoking in the end study had been done by Peele and Gower, but Carthew still had, or tried to believe that he had a lingering doubt. He had found some solace in licking the two black sheep. But it was the Fistical Four that he yearned to lick, with a deep yearning.

"After all, where's the proof?" Carthew said to himself. "Peele seems to have smoked there; but very likely those young cads smoked, too. They're no better than the others; in fact, they're worse—they cheek me more than Peele ever does. They're Dalton's favourites, that's what it is; he doesn't want them to be found out."

Carthew gritted his teeth.

"If a fellow could only show them up—it would make Dalton look a pretty fool, too," he murmured. "If I could only nail them, I'd make it a job for the Head—he's not so jolly sharp as Dalton, either. And I know jolly well they kick over the traces as much as any young sweep in the Fourth, only they're so jolly careful."

Carthew did not know anything of the kind, as a matter of fact; but the wish was father to the thought in his case.

He walked along the path by the beches, his eyes malevolently on the four juniors sauntering ahead of him.

"Poor old Carthew!" murmured Jimmy Silver. "The dear man was awfully disappointed yesterday! I verily believe that he would like us to take to smoking and playing banker in the study, so that he could catch us out."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, we want to please a Sixth Form prefect—it's our duty," said Jimmy Silver. "But we really can't go so far as that, even to make Carthew happy."

"Not quite!" chuckled Raby.

"But we'll do what we can," continued Jimmy Silver. "The good soul is keeping an eye on us now. Follow your leader!"

Jimmy Silver struck off from the path and headed for the bike-shed. His chums followed him.

At the door of the bike-shed Jimmy Silver & Co. glanced round them with a very cautious air before entering the building—looking in every direction save that of Carthew.

Then they dodged into the shed very quickly.

Carthew's eyes gleamed.

It was impossible that the juniors had gone into the building for their bikes, for it wanted only six or seven minutes to third lesson. And they had dodged in in an obviously surreptitious manner.

Carthew hurried forward. There was something "on," that was clear to Carthew, and he meant to know what it was.

A minute after the juniors had gone in the Sixth Former was at the door, looking in after them.

He uttered an exclamation of triumph.

Jimmy Silver had taken a little cardboard box from the saddle-bag of his bicycle. Plain to the view, in Jimmy's hand, was a cigarette-box. Carthew could read the print on it—"WILD ROSE CIGARETTES."

"Here they are, you fellows," Jimmy was saying.

"And here I am!" exclaimed Carthew.

Jimmy Silver gave a dramatic start, and put his hand, with the box in it, behind him.

"Carthew!" he stammered.

"So I've fairly caught you out at last, have I?" grinned Carthew. "Cigarettes in the bike-shed, what?"

"I—I haven't any cigarettes, Carthew—"

"My hat! And you're the fellow whose word Mr. Dalton takes as the frozen truth!" exclaimed Carthew in genuine disgust. "You young rascal!"

We'll see what Mr. Dalton says about this! I fancy he won't be able to screen you this time!"

"I—I say, Carthew——"

"You'll come with me," said Carthew, dropping a heavy hand on Jimmy's shoulder. "Keep that in your hand—you're going to take the box just as it is to your Form-master."

"I—I——"

"Shut up and come on!" growled Carthew. "You others follow."

He marched Jimmy Silver out of the bike-shed. Lovell and Raby and Newcome followed in silence.

It was nearly time for third lesson and the Classical Fourth were converging on their Form-room, where Mr. Dalton already awaited them. Jimmy Silver, with Carthew's heavy hand on his shoulder, was marched along in the midst of a crowd of juniors heading for the Form-room, and there was a buzz of voices on all sides.

"What the merry dickens is up, Silver?" asked Mornington.

"Carthew's caught me, and he's taking me to Mr. Dalton," answered Jimmy.

"He's got a box of cigarettes in his hand!" giggled Tubby Muffin.

"Oh, Jimmy, you're for it, old chap."

"A fair catch, and no mistake!" grinned Peele.

"Jimmy," exclaimed Oswald anxiously, "you surely haven't——"

"Looks like it!" chortled Gower. "Uncle James is caught out at last! Serve him jolly well right!"

"Make way there, you fags!" snapped Carthew.

Still with the prefect's iron grip on his shoulder, Jimmy Silver was marched into the Fourth Form room. Lovell & Co. followed, and the rest of the Classical Fourth swarmed after them, in a buzz of excitement. Mr. Dalton was at his desk, and he looked up with a frown.

"What is all this?" he exclaimed.

Carthew gave him a vaunting look.

"I report Silver for smoking, sir!" he answered.

"Really, Carthew, this is too much!" exclaimed the master of the Fourth impatiently. "After your absurd mistake yesterday——"

"There's no mistake this time, even if there was yesterday, which I'm not sure of," said Carthew viciously. "I saw these four juniors sneaking into the bike-shed, and I followed them, in time to see Silver take a box of cigarettes from his bicycle-bag."

"Nonsense!"

"You can call it nonsense, if you like, sir," said Carthew insolently. "But he's still got the box in his hand. I brought him straight here with it, as I knew he could pull the wool over your eyes if I gave him a chance. Put that box on Mr. Dalton's desk, Silver."

Jimmy Silver obediently placed the cigarette-box on the Form-master's desk. Mr. Dalton stared at it.

"I scarcely understand this," he said. "You saw Silver take this from his bicycle-bag, Carthew?"

"Yes, sir; and I hardly think he will have the nerve to deny it."

"Do you deny it, Silver?"

"No, sir."

"Then what am I to conclude?" exclaimed the master of the Fourth. "Is it possible that I have been deceived in you, Silver?"

"I hope not, sir," said Jimmy meekly.

"You may as well admit that you went into the bike-shed to smoke, you young rascal!" said Carthew.

"But I didn't," said Jimmy, still meekly. "I went into the bike-shed because I knew you were watching me, Carthew."

"Eh?"

"I was pulling your leg," said Jimmy demurely. "I didn't guess that you'd be ass enough to bring me to Mr. Dalton. I didn't want to waste Mr. Dalton's time."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lovell.

"Silence, Lovell!" said Mr. Dalton, frowning. "Silver, this is a box of cigarettes——"

"Not at all, sir," said Jimmy cheerfully. "It's a cigarette-box, I use it

to keep patches for mending punctures in. Perhaps you'd look into the box, sir."

There was breathless excitement in the Fourth Form room as Mr. Dalton quietly opened the cigarette-box. No cigarettes were disclosed to view. Carthew's face was a study in scarlet as he saw the contents of that cigarette-box. There was an irresistible yell of merriment from the Classical Fourth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Dalton smiled; he could not help it. He held up the open box for Carthew to view.

"You seem to have made another mistake, Carthew," he said dryly.

Carthew gasped.

"I—I—yes—no—yes——" he stammered. "I—I thought, of course——" he stammered helplessly. "It—it was a trick! He—he knew I was watching him, and—and——"

"Quite so. And you might have been much better occupied," said Mr. Dalton. "This is not your duty as a prefect, Carthew. And I warn you that if there is any more of this persecution—for that is what it amounts to—I shall consider it my duty to speak to the Head on the subject. You may go."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Carthew almost limped from the Fourth Form room. It was some minutes before the Classical Fourth could be reduced to a proper state of gravity for third lesson. During that lesson Jimmy Silver & Co. wore happy smiles. Carthew's trail of vengeance—from their point of view—was adding considerably to the gaiety of existence at Rookwood School.

CHAPTER 40.

Chingachgook of Rookwood:

"THIS is getting too thick!"

Jimmy Silver made that remark a few days later in the end study. Lovell and Raby and Newcome nodded assent.

Carthew of the Sixth had just looked into the study, scowled, and departed. Carthew had no business in the end study; but he seemed to be prowling the Fourth Form passage, like a lion seeking what he might devour.

Jimmy Silver knitted his brows. It really was too "thick." For days and days the bully of the Sixth had been fairly on the trail—like a giddy bloodhound, as Lovell described it. Evidently he hoped to catch the Fistical Four out, and thus retrieve his earlier blunders—and there was something very exasperating to the four in Carthew's belief that there was wrongdoing of some sort if only he could find it out. It really seemed quite an obsession on Carthew's part, and the four chums, who had been rather entertained at first, grew more and more irritated by the prefect's watching and spying.

"The cheeky ass!" said Lovell.

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"What the thump does he think he is going to find out? Does he think we keep a bottle of spirits in the study and get squiffy over prep?"

"Or that we break dorm bounds and go down to the Bird-in-Hand to play nap—as I believe Carthew himself does sometimes?" exclaimed Raby warmly.

"You see, Carthew's a good deal of a shady rotter himself," said Jimmy Silver sagely. "And it's a way of shady rotters to think other fellows as bad as themselves. A bad hat always thinks that another chap is a bad hat. That's where Carthew lacks judgment—any sensible fellow ought to see what really nice chaps we are."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But it's altogether too thick!" went on Jimmy. "Peele's pulled his leg once, trying to get us into a row; and we've pulled his leg once, and it hasn't done him any good. But it's got to stop. Fellows are making no end of jokes about it; Townsend was saying the other day that there's no smoke without fire, the silly ass! Fellows will be beginning to think that Carthew's really got some reason to suspect us of blagging. It won't do—and it's got to stop!"

"But how?" asked Newcome. "I suppose we can't collar him and bump him—a prefect of the Sixth?"

"We might!" said Lovell.

"Well, we don't want a Head's licking," said Jimmy. "Prefects mustn't be handled by common or garden fags. But he's got to be fed-up with his spying and prying, and the giddy question is, how. That's what we've got to think out."

To that problem the Fistical Four devoted a great deal of thought. After tea they left the end study, and as they came downstairs they passed Carthew of the Sixth on the lower landing. He affected to be looking out of the window; but the corner of his eye was on them.

Ten minutes later, when the juniors strolled through the arches from Big Quad into Little Quad, Carthew

emerged from the arches, strolling along with his hands in his pockets—not looking at the juniors, but obviously keeping a surreptitious eye on them.

The four chums walked round Little Quad and back into Big Quad, and Carthew loitered at a distance behind them. Had the chums of the Fourth had any intention of slipping into a secluded corner to smoke cigarettes or play nap, as Peele and Gower sometimes did, certainly Carthew would have caught them. But as they had no intention of the kind, the bully of the Sixth was simply wasting his time—as well as exasperating Jimmy Silver & Co.

"Like jolly old Chingachgook in the story!" growled Lovell angrily. "Fairly stalking us round Rookwood."

"It's got to stop!" said Jimmy Silver. "Let's give him a run for his money, anyhow, as he's on the trail."

The Fistical Four walked away towards the abbey ruins. The ruins were out of bounds, though juniors sometimes explored them at considerable risk to their limbs and damage to their clothes. Carthew looked quite hopeful as he shadowed the four now.

But on the verge of bounds, the Fistical Four disappointed Carthew by turning back, and they passed him, as they returned to the quadrangle, and smiled at him in passing. Carthew gave them a scowl in return for the smile.

"Time for the meeting," said Lovell, as six rang out from the clock tower. "Give him a rest now."

The juniors went back into the House. There was a meeting of the junior dramatic society fixed for six o'clock, in the box-room at the end of the Fourth Form passage, close to Jimmy Silver's study. Most of the "Rookwood Players" were already assembled there, when the Fistical Four arrived.

"Two minutes late, you fellows," said Putty of the Fourth severely.

"We've been playing with old Carthew," said Lovell. "He's playing Chingachgook, and we've led him a dance."

"The silly ass!" said Putty. "Well, we're all here now, so let's get going."

Putty turned the key in the lock of the door. The proceedings of the Classical Players were private, and they did not like being interrupted by fellows who came in to look on and chuckle at their dramatic proceedings. It had never occurred to the Classical juniors that there was any harm in locking the box-room door; but there was one prefect at Rookwood, at least, who was disposed to see harm in anything and everything. There were seven or eight of the Fourth in the box-room, and they were sorting out their "parts" and preparing for their rehearsal, when there came a sharp knock at the door.

Jimmy Silver unlocked the door and threw it open.

Carthew strode in with a very suspicious face. A locked door made him suspicious—it was behind a locked door that he, himself, was accustomed to smoke cigarettes, or to play banker with Frampton of the Modern Sixth.

"Now, what's going on here?" he snapped.

"A rehearsal!" said Jimmy Silver meekly.

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Please yourself, old bean!"

Carthew stared about the box-room. Certainly there was nothing of a suspicious nature to be seen—not a sign of a cigarette even. But there were a dozen empty boxes and trunks in the room, and a huge packing-case in one corner, which afforded ample space for concealment of prohibited goods. Mornington was standing by the big packing-case, and he closed the lid down hurriedly. Carthew's eyes gleamed, and he strode across the room.

"What's in there?" he demanded.

"Straw, I think," said Morny.

"Nothing else?"

"Really, I haven't looked," yawned Mornington.

Carthew lifted the lid of the packing-case. There was plenty of old straw packing inside, and nothing else to be seen. The case belonged to Valentine Mornington; it had been used to convey to Rookwood a large handsome desk which now adorned Morny's study. Carthew began to grope in the straw and old canvas inside the case, the juniors standing round watching him, some of them laughing, and some of them angry and annoyed.

"Found anythin', old bean?" asked Morny, as Carthew turned away at last.

"Why did you close down the lid as I came in?" snapped Carthew.

"Just to set you huntin' through the old thing," answered Mornington cheerily.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jimmy Silver & Co.

Carthew scowled savagely, and strode out of the box-room. In his own suspicious mind he was certain that he was on the track of a secret smoking or gambling party; but there was no evidence to be found. Jimmy Silver kicked the door shut after him.

"I'm fed up with this," he said. "Carthew's got to chuck up his Chingachgook stunt. We've got to make him!"

And the rehearsal of the Classical Players proceeded, uninterrupted further by Carthew, though when the juniors came out, they found the prefect hanging about the passage. There was nothing for Carthew to discover, had he only known it, but he was a sticker.

CHAPTER 41.

Carthew Asks For It!

"HALF-PAST five in the box-room!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Right-ho!" said Lovell.

It was two or three days later, and during those days Carthew had been

playing Chingachgook, as Lovell called it, indefatigably. His eye was almost incessantly upon the Fistical Four.

It was really getting on their nerves by this time, and they were more than ever determined to teach the prying prefect a lesson. Hence the remark Jimmy Silver made to his chums as they were passing Carthew in the Form-room passage after lessons.

The juniors passed without appearing to observe Carthew, but they knew he was there, and knew that he heard the remark. Carthew glanced after them with a gleam in his eyes.

These meetings in the box-room, with the door locked, seemed exceedingly suspicious to Carthew; but he felt that the young rascals were too deep for him. But forewarned is forearmed, and now Carthew knew about the meeting in advance, and so he was able to take his measures.

Towards five, Jimmy Silver & Co. were in the end study, and the door was sufficiently ajar to allow Jimmy to watch the passage and the box-room.

He was not at all surprised to see Carthew of the Sixth come quietly along the passage and slip into the box-room, closing the door after him. He had expected it.

"The jolly old bird's in the nest!" announced Jimmy, turning to his chums. "Carthew's gone into the box-room—all ready to watch the giddy meeting. I suppose he'll be hiding in a corner behind a trunk!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lovell.

"The spying cad!" said Raby indignantly. "Pretty goings-on for a Rook-wood prefect!"

"Well, he's going to have a lesson this time," said Jimmy. "He's there to watch us, so of course he'll be out of sight—skulking in a corner or something. He's in good time, it's only five o'clock. There won't be any jolly old meeting, but the box-room door is going to be locked on him. And when he wants to get out, he can yell—nobody in the Fourth will hear him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jimmy Silver allowed ten minutes to elapse, to give Carthew plenty of time to take cover. Then he strolled into the box-room.

He glanced round the room.

Had he not actually seen Carthew slip into the room, certainly he would not have suspected that the prefect was there. There was no sign of him to be seen. Jimmy wondered a little where he had hidden himself, and his eyes fell on the big packing-case in the corner. He grinned.

The packing-case was amply large enough for Carthew to get inside, and it was the securest hiding-place to be found in the room. Certainly, had a meeting taken place, the juniors would never have dreamed of suspecting that a prefect was hidden in the packing-case. The case was of rather solid construction, but two or three of the wooden slats had been removed in opening it, and the hidden watcher had plenty of air, and was able to watch the proceedings from inside.

Jimmy Silver's eyes gleamed.

This was really better than he had anticipated. His idea had been to lock the door on Carthew, and leave him to skulk in the box-room till he was tired, then to give himself away completely by having to call to be let out. But Jimmy Silver thought of an improvement on that little scheme now.

He moved about the box-room as if looking for something, humming a tune. He made quite sure that Carthew must be hidden in the packing-case by observing quietly that he was nowhere else.

Then he left the box-room and returned to his study.

There was a hurried whispered consultation in the end study, punctuated by many chuckles. Then Raby scudded along the passage, and called in Mornington and Putty Grace, and

there was a further consultation, with many more chuckles.

Meanwhile, Carthew of the Sixth was waiting and watching.

It was close on half-past five, and the hidden prefect sat quite at his ease in the big case, with his eye to an opening that gave him a view of the box-room. What he was going to discover by spying on the meeting he did not know, but he hoped fervently that he was going to discover something to the disadvantage of Jimmy Silver & Co.

At half-past five the door of the box-room opened again, and a little crowd of juniors came in. To the astonishment of Carthew, Sergeant Kettle came in with them, and old Mack, the porter.

Carthew could scarcely believe his eyes.

Obviously this could not be a smoking-party, or a party for nap or banker. The school sergeant and the porter could scarcely have been included in any such party, that was certain.

"Here you are, Mack," said Mornington. "This is the case."

Old Mack produced a hammer and nails.

"'Ardly necessary to nail it up, Master Mornington," said the sergeant.

"Better," said Morny. "There's a lot of rubbish in it, and the lid might come off while you're getting it downstairs."

"Won't take a minute," said old Mack.

Carthew scarcely breathed.

Old Mack was driving nails into the wooden slats of the packing-case lid, fastening it down all round.

The wretched Carthew sat in it dumbfounded. Not for a moment did it occur to him that the juniors knew that he was there. He could only suppose that Mornington, to whom the old case belonged, had decided to have it removed, at this unlucky moment—

this most unfortunate moment for the spy of the Sixth.

As the strokes of the hammer echoed through the box-room, and the nails were driven home, Carthew sat fairly dazed.

CHAPTER 42.

Something Like a Show-Up!

JIMMY SILVER & Co. stood round, watching with smiling faces. Chinchgook had been fairly caught at last. They wondered how long it would be before Carthew decided to "show up." They wondered, too, what his feelings were like, as the packing-case was nailed up and lifted from the floor. Certainly his feelings could not have been enviable.

"My word! This 'ere is 'eavy for a hempty case!" gasped old Mack.

"'Eavy it is," said the sergeant. "There ain't nothing in this 'ere case, is there, Master Mornington?"

"Only some rubbish," said Morny.

"Then it's fairly 'eavy rubbish, I do say," gasped old Mack. "Howsumd-ever, we'll manage it."

"We'll lend you a hand," said Lovell.

There was no sound from the "rubbish" in the case. With the sergeant holding one end, the porter the other, and Jimmy Silver & Co. lending their aid, the packing-case was carried out of the box-room.

"'Eavy rubbish, and no mistake," said old Mack. "It seems to be shifting about inside, too, Master Mornington."

"Nothing to damage?" asked Mr. Kettle.

"Not at all. It doesn't matter in the least if you damage the rubbish in that case."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lovell.

As a matter of fact, the "rubbish" in the case was getting a little damaged. Carthew was pitched to and fro, half suffocated by the loose straw as the case was borne away. His head

knocked several times on the sides, and when the bearers bumped the case down in the passage to rest for a few minutes, Carthew felt as if an earthquake were happening to him.

"Careful on the stairs," grinned Jimmy Silver.

The packing-case was carried down the stairs. By that time whispers had apprised most of the Fourth of what was inside the case, and a crowd followed the sergeant and the porter.

"This way!" called out Mornington, at the foot of the staircase.

Sergeant Kettle shook his head.

"Can't carry this 'ere out through the quadrangle, Master Mornington. The 'Ead wouldn't 'ave it. We'll get it out at the back."

"Oh, nonsense," said Mornington.

"It's a shorter way."

The packing-case moved onward with its escort. Fairly in the middle of the quad, with the eyes of half Rookwood upon it, it was set down.

With the claw-back of the hammer, Mornington proceeded to rip up the slat lid of the packing-case. Jimmy Silver & Co. helped to rip off the slats.

Carthew, half suffocated, bumped and bruised, panted and gasped in the loose straw inside. He knew that the case had been set down in the quad, and he could hear a score of voices round him, and roars of laughter. It dawned upon him at last that Jimmy Silver & Co. must have known all the time that he was concealed inside.

"Hallo," yelled Lovell, "there's somebody inside."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Somebody inside the packin'-case!" yelled Smythe of the Shell. "Oh, gad! Who is it?"

"What is this?" exclaimed Mr. Dalton, hurrying up. "How dare you open this packing-case here? Why—what—what—what—"

The master of the Fourth fairly stutted as the loose straw was dragged aside and Carthew of the Sixth was revealed.

Carthew staggered up.

"Carthew!" shouted Bulkeley.

"What—what—"

"M-m-master Carthew!" stammered the sergeant. "I never knowed he was inside. Is he mad?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Carthew, breathless, panting, crimson with rage and shame, stood in the open packing-case with straw clinging all over him. Fellows of all Forms, from the Sixth to the Second, crowded round, staring at him, and yelling with laughter. Mr. Dalton could scarcely believe his eyes.

"What does this mean, Carthew?" he gasped. "Are you out of your senses?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Jimmy Silver & Co.

"Carthew, answer me! What—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" rapped Mr. Dalton angrily.

But the juniors roared. They could not help it. They roared and roared again.

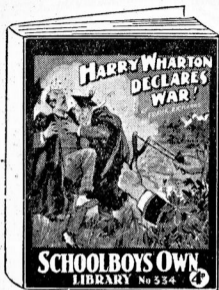
Carthew did not speak. He cast one furious glance round him, and then leaped from the packing-case and ran for the House. Yells of merriment followed him. Jimmy Silver wiped his streaming eyes.

"It's too good!" he gasped. "Oh, my hat! I think even Carthew will be fed-up after this. It's jolly old Chingachgook's last trail."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jimmy Silver was right. Afterwards, Carthew of the Sixth had a painful interview with Mr. Dalton, and a still more painful interview with the Head. And for days and days all Rookwood chuckled and chertled over the episode. And after that Carthew wisely decided to leave the end study severely alone, much to their relief and satisfaction. It was, in fact, Chingachgook's last trail!

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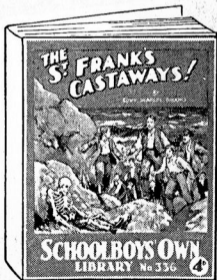


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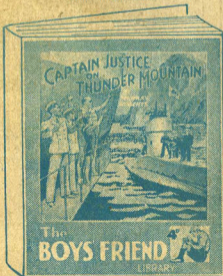
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