

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

The POPULAR

Week Ending
June 30th,
1926.
New Series.
No. 452.

EVERY
TUESDAY.

2d



THE KID HITS OUT!

FREE
SIX SHILLING
"HOLIDAY" and "HOBBY"
ANNUALS
*See the Stupendous
offer to readers
inside!*

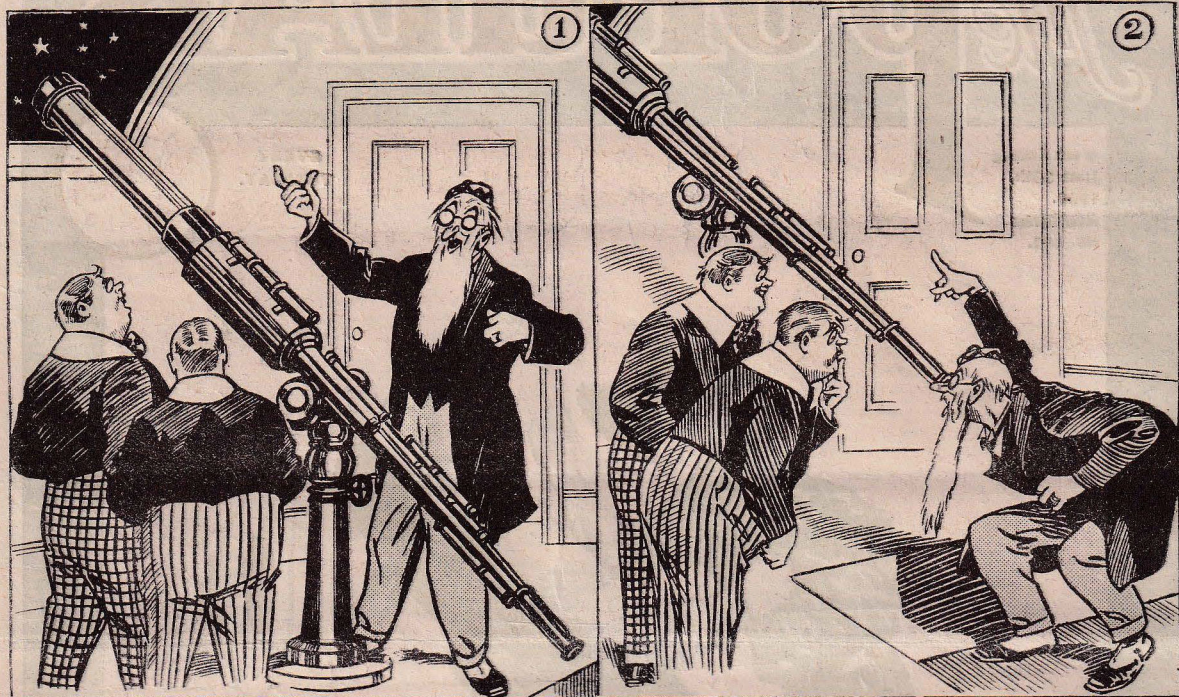


The BUNTER BROTHERS

— Merry Mirthmakers. —

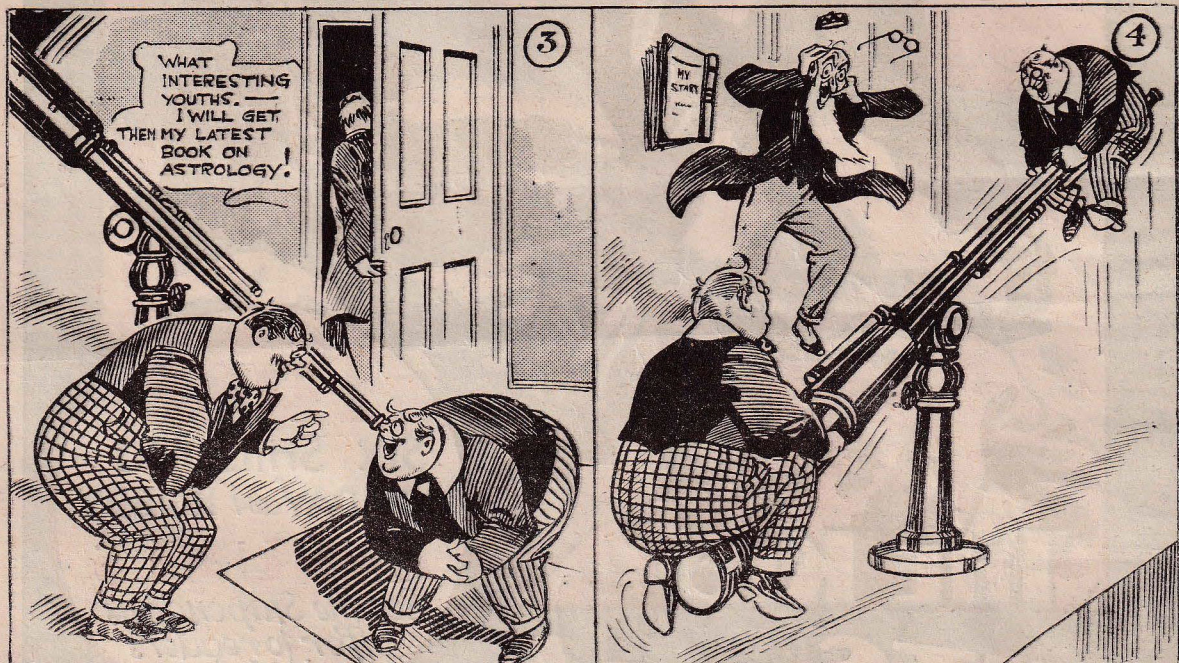


PROFESSOR STARRYCRUMPET ENTERTAINS THE BUNTERS!



"This," said Professor Starrycrumpet, displaying his wonderful new telescope to Billy and Sammy Bunter, "is the greatest invention of modern times. By looking through it we are able to see what the people on Mars have for breakfast."

The professor bent double and attached his gleaming orb to the end of the telescope. "Look, the orange-coloured planet—'tis Mars!" "Then where's pa's?" asked Billy facetiously, winking at Sammy.



WHAT INTERESTING YOUTHS. — I WILL GET THEM MY LATEST BOOK ON ASTROLOGY!

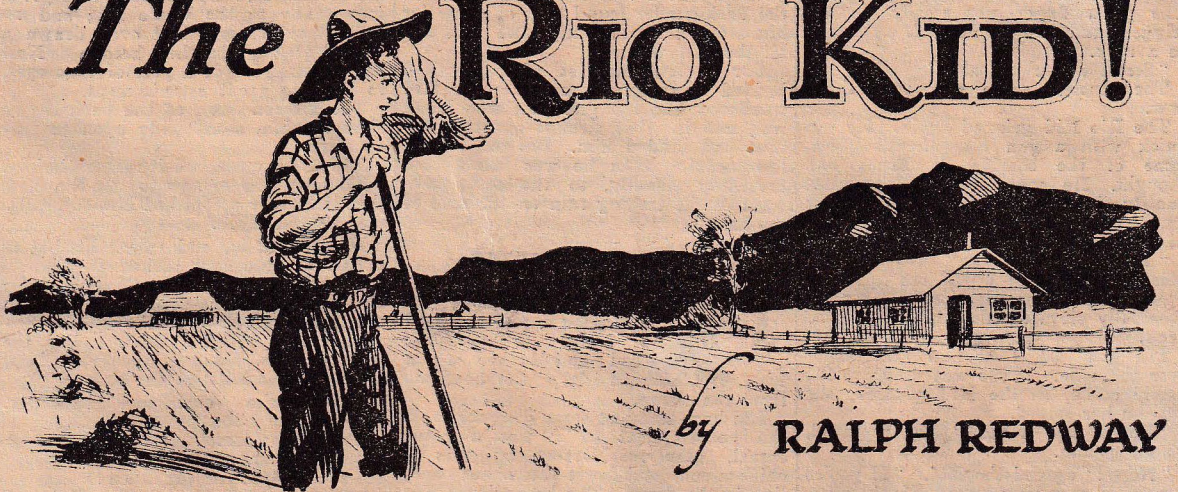
"I must get on with my work," said Professor Starrycrumpet, "and leave you to study the stars and planets at your leisure." He left the room, leaving the Bunter Brothers to enjoy the spectacle of the Milky Way. "Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Billy. "He thinks we're interested in his old astronomy."

But the Bunter Brothers were not! As soon as they were alone they proceeded to use that wonderful telescope as a see-saw. Just then back came the merry professor. When he saw those two fat boys riding his precious telescope, he had fifty-one fits. After that the Bunter Brothers saw stars with a vengeance—but not through a telescope!

A BOY OUTLAW IN LOVE!

The Rio Kid has been in many tight corners, and he's been behind prison bars in his long, adventurous career, but he has never yet been in love, until this week!

The RIO KID!



ANOTHER ROARING LONG COMPLETE TALE OF THE WEST, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

A Lodging for the Night!

WHEN the Rio Kid rode down the hill to Horse-Thief, he looked as much unlike the handsome, natty Kid, as it was possible for a fellow to look unlike himself. The Kid had roughed it in the hills of Nevada; but that was not the reason. He had roughed it often enough in the old days on the llanos of Texas, and had turned out handsome and neat and as clean as a new pin, in spite of the dust of the plains and the grime of the chaparral. But the Kid had hit a heap of trouble on the trail to Horse-Thief, and the signs of it were thick upon him.

The half-healed scar of a deep scratch from a yucca thorn marred his good looks. He was clothed in mud as in a garment. There had been heavy rains in the Sierra Nevada, and the Horse-Thief River had overflowed its banks, and for miles the Kid had ridden through a mud swamp. Rain was coming down hard, and the Kid was drenched. Wet and muddy, tired, and not in the best of tempers, the Kid looked anything but the dandy cow-puncher of the Double-Bar Ranch.

He had allowed that he would ride into the town of Horse-Thief in the afternoon; but the rain and the swamping of the trail had washed out that programme. Long after the sun had disappeared over the sierras, he was still wearily following the trail down from the hills. He no longer hoped to pick up

the lights of Horse-Thief in the distance. It was long past the hour when all good citizens went to their bunks.

The black-muzzled mustang, with all his hardy endurance, was sorely fatigued, and plugged on slowly and stolidly through the rain. The night was as black as the skin of a Louisiana coon. Only the glimmer of rain broke the darkness. The Kid almost gasped with relief at the sight of a glimmering light far off in the night.

He knew that he was not near Horse-Thief yet. The light was burning in some outlying cabin or ranch-house. Whatever the place was, it was a shelter for the night, at least—a shelter from the drenching rain. The Kid pushed on more cheerily, and the grey mustang bucked up a little, the black muzzle no longer drooping so despondently.

Through the mud and the rain the Kid arrived at last at a gate in a wire fence, and halted. Gates and fences were anathema to the Kid, bred on the boundless plains, where a puncher might ride for sixty miles without dismounting. But the Kid was far from the Rio Grande now. He hitched the mustang to the fence, opened the gate, and strode up the path towards the building that

was hidden in darkness, from which the single light gleamed at midnight.

He found himself in a timber porch, beside which was the window from which the light shone through a thin curtain. He groped for the door in the gloom, and rapped on it with the butt of his quirt.

Knock!

Save for the swish of the ceaseless rain the night was silent and still. The crash of the quirt rang almost like thunder on the solid pinewood door.

There was a sound of movement within the building.

Footsteps—light footsteps, which the Kid knew to be those of a woman—approached the door from within.

The Kid heard a bolt withdrawn, and the door was opened.

Light glimmered out, and in the lighted doorway a slim and graceful girl stood.

"You've come back, then!" said a voice, naturally soft, but now sharpened by anger.

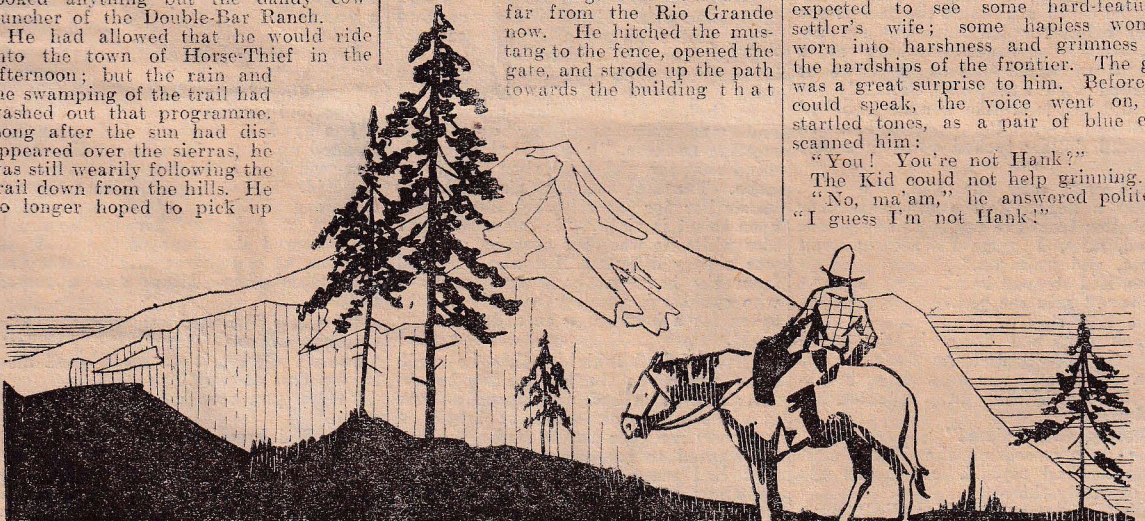
The Kid swept off his drenched Stetson.

The sight of the graceful figure in the doorway had startled him. He had expected to see some hard-featured settler's wife; some hapless woman worn into harshness and grimness by the hardships of the frontier. The girl was a great surprise to him. Before he could speak, the voice went on, in startled tones, as a pair of blue eyes scanned him:

"You! You're not Hank?"

The Kid could not help grinning.

"No, ma'am," he answered politely, "I guess I'm not Hank!"



(Copyright in the United States of America.)

He made a backward step the next moment.

The girl had picked up a rifle from a hook on the wall beside the door, and it seemed to leap to her shoulder. The muzzle bore full upon the Rio Kid. The girl's finger was steady on the trigger, and the barrel was as steady as a rock.

"Stand where you are!"

The musical voice was very sharp now.

The Rio Kid grinned again. He was quick with a gun himself—too quick, some of the sheriffs in Texas had thought. He could admire the same quality in others. The girl in the lonely cabin had lost no time in getting him covered with the rifle.

"Your game, ma'am," said the Kid pleasantly. "Shall I put 'em up?"

And, without waiting for a reply, he cheerfully elevated his hands above his head.

The girl looked at him searchingly over the rifle. If she was alone in the lonely cabin, as the Kid guessed, she was on her guard.

"You're not Hank?" she repeated, scanning him.

"Nope!" agreed the Kid. "If you're expecting a galoot named Hank, miss, I'm sure sorry that my name ain't Hank. But it ain't."

"Who are you?"

"I'm generally called the Kid when I'm to home," answered the Rio Kid good-humouredly. "No cause for alarm, ma'am. I wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone a woman. You're sure handy with the rifle, miss."

"What do you want here?"

"Not a bullet from that rifle, miss, if it ain't troubling you too much," said the Kid. "I never allowed I should be disturbing a lone woman, or I sure wouldn't have knocked at your door. I guess I was going to ask for shelter from the rain; but I wouldn't advise you to take a stranger in, in this lonesome place. But if you ain't any objection, ma'am, I'll bed down in a shed or a barn."

The girl scanned him keenly.

"You're a stranger here?"

"You've got it in once, miss. From Arizona last," answered the Kid.

"Hoboes are not wanted around Horse-Thief."

The Kid started.

He knew that he must look considerable of a picture, wet, and splashed from head to foot with mud. But it was a shock to be taken for a tramp. Still, he could not blame the girl of the lonely cabin for her mistake. An untidy, muddy stranger knocking at a door at midnight had to expect to be regarded with suspicion. Certainly the Kid did not look like a man who had a fat roll in his belt, and a hundred thousand dollars tucked away in a safe place.

"Ma'am," said the Kid, "I ain't exactly a hobo. Jest a galoot looking for shelter from the rain. But if you're scared, miss, I guess I'll hit the trail pronto, and wade on."

The Kid stepped back.

"Stay!" said the girl.

The Kid stayed.

"You can bed down in the barn, stranger. You'll find the door on the latch. You can come around for breakfast in the kitchen in the morning. Good-night"

"Good-night, ma'am!"

The door closed on the Kid almost before he had replied. He heard the bolt carefully shot.

"Well, carry me hum to die!" murmured the Kid.

THE POPULAR.—No. 492.

He walked back to his mustang, and unhitched him. In the darkness it was not easy to find the barn; but the Kid groped his way. Glad enough was the worn and weary Kid to hear the rain pattering on a roof above his head. In the darkness he found beds of straw for himself and his mustang, and that was all the Kid wanted.

For a few minutes after he had bedded down in warm straw the Kid wondered who the girl was, who Hank was, and in what strange quarters fortune had landed him. But only for a few minutes, then he was fast asleep, breathing steadily, to the accompaniment of the lashing rain on the roof of the barn.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Chance for the Kid!

THE rain went with the night; the Rio Kid stepped out of the barn into a world of sunshine.

He stood and looked about him, breathing in deep the keen air from the sierra.

The barn stood at some distance from the house; next to it was a horse corral, empty. Further on was a chicken-run, and fowls ran about cackling in the dawn. The house itself was a small building; a cabin built of timber, with not more than four or five rooms in it. But it was cleanly painted; there was a well-kept garden; all his surroundings, though poor enough, showed the attention of a careful hand. There were four fields under cultivation, though the Kid did not know enough about agriculture to know with what they were planted.

It was a small homestead, such as the Kid had seen hundreds of times up and down the West.

"Nesters!" muttered the Kid, with a grimace.

In Texas, where the "nesters" were creeping over the cattle country, fencing and wiring and planting, the Kid, like all true cow-punchers, hated them. But he was in Nevada now, and only a couple of miles out of a frontier town; and he expected to find fences, and gates, and barbed wire, and the whole bag of tricks. The Kid was only passing through, to reach the cow country further north, and he had been anxious to ride into the cow country. Now he was not sure that he was in a hurry. Somehow, he was not keen on hitting the trail and riding away from that lonely cabin—he hardly knew why!

There was no sign of the girl—no sign of anyone else. Hank—if the unknown Hank had returned after all—was not visible. The Kid washed himself at the horse-trough; he unfastened his slicker pack and performed his toilet in the barn, before his little hand-mirror—the Kid was very particular upon such matters as these. It still rankled in his mind that the girl had taken him for a hobo. The Kid was too fair-minded to blame her for the mistake; but he was keen to set it right. No one came near him while he was thus occupied; and it was a very different Kid who emerged from the barn—a handsome puncher who could not, possibly have been mistaken for a hobo, even on a dark, rainy night.

The girl had told him that he could come around to the kitchen for breakfast; and as he had not supped on the previous night, the idea of breakfast was very welcome to the Kid. Besides, he wanted to see again the blue eyes that had scanned him so searchingly. Somehow, those eyes haunted the Kid's thoughts. He hardly knew why. The Kid greatly admired all women, even to a rugged old Indian squaw, chewing

tobacco, the Kid would have been kind and gentle; all women were to him a superior order of beings, whom it was a man's business to respect, and to defend with his life if need were. But his respect and admiration were given impartially to the whole sex; and no individual woman had ever drawn a special glance from him before. Now he was thinking of a pair of blue eyes, to his own great astonishment.

The kitchen door, at the back of the timber cabin, stood wide open to the sunshine.

The Kid approached it rather timidly. Timidity was so new to the Rio Kid, that it further astonished him to realise that he was timid.

He glanced in, and raised his hat as a pair of blue eyes turned on him.

"Good-morning, ma'am!" faltered the Kid, still more astonished to hear his own voice falter.

The girl looked at him. For the moment she did not recognise him, thanks to the toilet in the barn.

"Oh!" she exclaimed suddenly. "You're the hobo!"

The Kid coloured.

"A puncher, ma'am!" he said.

"You're late for breakfast!"

"I'm powerful sorry, ma'am. But—" The Kid rather repented him of the time spent in the barn on his toilet, necessary as it had been.

"Come in!"

In the daylight, evidently the girl was not afraid. Her manner was quite matter of fact. The Kid stepped in, she gave him a stool at the table, and placed breakfast before him.

"I guess you've fed this morning already, ma'am!" ventured the Kid. He had hoped that the blue eyes would breakfast with him.

"Hours ago."

"Oh!"

"You're not eating your breakfast."

"Oh!"

The Kid ate.

The girl sat down on the opposite side of the table, scanning him. She seemed interested in the Kid, he could not help seeing that, and it gave him a strange little flutter that almost spoiled his appetite, good and substantial as the breakfast was. The improvement in his looks had obviously made a difference in the girl's opinion of him. But when she spoke, and revealed the cause of her interest, the Kid was abashed again.

"I can see you're not a hobo now," she said. "Excuse my mistake. You're a puncher?"

"Sure!"

"Not on a ranch at present?"

"Nope!"

"Looking for work?"

The Kid paused.

The hundred thousand dollars he had cleaned up in the Gila Mountains made cow-punching a matter of choice with the Kid. But it was not his cue to tell the story of his adventures in the gold country of Arizona. Trouble, as usual, had dogged the steps of the Kid, in Arizona as elsewhere; and the story of the Gambusino Mine was a closed chapter.

"I guess I'm heading for the cow country, ma'am!" he answered at last. "There's always room for a good man in the cow country."

"Have you ever worked on a home-stead?"

The Kid breathed hard.

Such a question, to a cow-puncher, was almost enough to make his gun leap from the holster, if asked by a man. But the Kid answered with great politeness.

"I ain't, ma'am—not yet."

"I've a reason for asking," said the girl. "My hired man has deserted me—he cleared off suddenly, yesterday, without a word. That was why I was sitting up so late, hoping that he would come back."

"The durned son of a gun!" exclaimed the Kid indignantly. "That any man, hired or otherwise, could have deserted those steady, clear blue eyes, seemed incomprehensible to the Rio Kid."

The girl smiled slightly.

"I guess I want to see that galoot," said the Kid hotly. "I guess his nearest relative wouldn't know his face when I was through with him. The dog-goned gink!"

"If you want a job as a hired man I can give you one," said the girl calmly.

The Kid's heart leapt so suddenly, that the boiled bacon almost choked him.

"You!" he ejaculated.

"Yes. Hank will not be coming back now—and if he did, I should fire him. I'm alone here until—until someone comes whom I'm expecting later. I can see now that you're not a hobo." She smiled, the most fascinating smile that the Rio Kid had ever seen. "Your face looks honest—"

"Thank you, ma'am!" said the Kid humbly; and wondering what Sheriff Watson, of Frio, would have said to that.

"I think I know a man who can be trusted," said the girl composedly. "If you care to take my hired man's place, I'll be glad. Labour is not easy to get in these parts, especially as the wages are not high—in this case."

"I sure don't care about wages much, ma'am," said the Kid eagerly. "Jest the barn to bed down in and food for a galoot and his horse—"

"I paid Hank three dollars a day!" "Suits me, ma'am!" said the Kid. Had the blue eyes said three cents, the Kid's answer would have been the same.

"Then I will try you for a week," said the girl, in a businesslike tone, "I guess you'll pan out better than Hank. He was a poor fish anyway. You can work?"

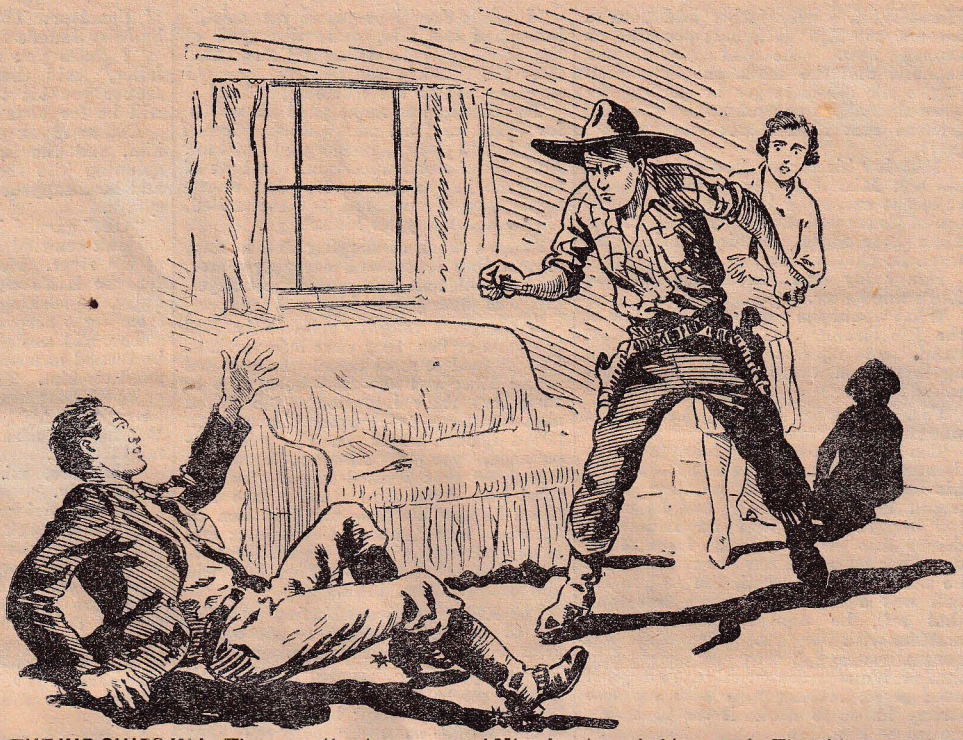
"Try me, ma'am!" said the Kid fervently.

"Come out as soon as you've finished your breakfast."

The girl went out by the doorway, light and graceful as a fawn. The Kid's eyes followed her till she disappeared, then returned to his unfinished breakfast.

The breakfast remained unfinished. The Kid was lost in meditation—wondering meditation.

Had any man on the Double-Bar Ranch ever suggested that the Kid would ever be working as a hired man for a nester, the Kid certainly would have pulled a gun on him, and made him eat his words.



THE KID CHIPS IN! There was the stranger—and Miss Janet was in his arms! The Kid grasped the man and dragged him back. He was a powerful man, but in the Kid's grip he sprawled backwards, and went crashing to the floor. "You dog!" hissed the Kid. (See Chapter 4.)

And here he was jumping with both feet at a chance of working as a hired man for a nester.

He was perplexed.

As a hired man he could stay within range of a pair of blue eyes; on any other terms he could not. That was why the Rio Kid had jumped at the unexpected chance. His hands, clean and white from the cowboy gloves, were to be hardened by rough toil— toil that was going to be a pleasure to him. He wondered and was perplexed. He was still wondering, staring at his unfinished breakfast, when a voice— sweet, but very firm and businesslike— broke in upon his meditations.

"Are you ready?"

The Kid jumped up so suddenly that the stool upon which he was seated went crashing.

"Yep, I guess so, ma'am."

"Come, then."

The Rio Kid came.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Hired Man!

THE Kid leaned back on his hoe and mopped his brow. Perspiration ran down the brow of the Kid, and it damped his thick hair. Having mopped his brow, he looked at his hands. The Kid's hands had always been soft and white; the cowboy gloves had protected them; and now— After a week as hired man at Horse-Thief they were blistered, rough, and raw. The Kid wondered whether their present state would affect his shooting, if he had need to pull a gun. Not that he was likely to need to pull a gun now. His life at the homestead was peaceful—so peaceful that the Kid marvelled that it was he, Kid Carfax, who was leading that life. He was almost forgetting how to pull a gun—but he was learning how to pull weeds.

Miss Janet—her name was Janet Grange—was not a hard taskmaster; she was kindness itself. But she expected a hired man to earn his hire, as was only just. The Kid earned it by the

sweat of his brow; and sometimes as he laboured he laughed—laughed at himself. As he wielded the hoe, he wondered what the old bunch on the Double-Bar would have said could they have seen him now, hoeing like a peon. And was thankful that they could not see him—thankful for every long mile that lay between him and Texas. Hoeing was a man's job, but it was a job the Kid had never handled. He had lived in the saddle, and he hated to find himself afoot. And hoeing was a game of the nesters who were creeping over the cow country, eating up the plains with cultivation. And the Rio Kid was working as a hired man for a nester, because that nester was a girl with blue eyes, and the blue eyes had worked havoc with the Kid's unwary heart.

He realised that now.

He realised that if the blue eyes smiled upon him he would say a long farewell to the sierra and the llano, to the camp in the chaparral, to the long, long trails by blazing sun or glinting star, to the free, roving life—to all that had hitherto been his joy. Such power was there in a pair of blue eyes. But he realised, too, that to Miss Janet he was simply a hired man—just a hired man, and nothing more. A cleanly hired man, an industrious hired man, a respectful and reliable hired man; but just a hired man who worked on the homestead, and dug and trenched and pulled weeds, and hoed—hoed—hoed! Still, it was a long trail to a girl's heart, and the Kid did not expect to ride that trail in a day, or a week, or a month. He served Janet faithfully, and found kindness, at least, in her eyes; and he saw her every day—hours every day—and that was all that the Kid could ask, so far.

But it was a great relief when Hank and his friends came.

Miss Janet farmed that little holding capably. With one hired man to aid her, she farmed it well, and sold poultry and eggs and vegetables to the men of

Horse-Thief. Her father had been a farmer, the Kid gathered; she was an orphan now. She was clever and capable, and she made the homestead pay, while others larger in the vicinity were dismally impecunious. The Kid guessed that Miss Janet was "some" girl!

That her hired man had a fat roll in his belt Miss Janet suspected no more than she suspected that he had ridden out of Texas with half the sheriffs of the Lone Star State gnashing their teeth when he eluded them.

Heavy lay that knowledge on the Kid's mind now.

What would she think of the outlaw of the Rio Grande—the Rio Kid, whose hand was against every man, and against whom every man's hand was raised?

For, of course, if he spoke out, he would have to tell her.

The Kid was not the man to lie or delude. The truth came as naturally to his lips as the air he breathed. He would have to tell her; and he could tell her, in truth, that he had been driven into outlawry by no fault of his own; but he would have to tell her that he was outlawed. Still, the roll in his belt was a comfort. Much less than that roll, he figured, would square matters with the law. The Kid was young, but he had seen law bought and sold in Western courts. Let it all go, if need were, leaving him with his two strong hands to work—if the blue eyes smiled on him.

But the blue eyes met his every day clearly, unsuspectingly, without the slightest suspicion of the Kid's thoughts and feelings. But the Kid was patient in riding a long trail.

But he was glad when Hank came. He was leaning on the hoe, mopping his perspiring brow, when Hank and his friends came up the trail from Horse-Thief town. Once before Hank had looked in. Hank had had a three days' "bender" in Horse-Thief, and then he had come back to his job, to find his job gone, a pair of blue eyes eyeing him sternly, and a finger pointing to the trail. Hank had gone back to Horse-Thief empurpling the atmosphere with "cuss" words. Now he had come back with a couple of friends, picked up from the boot-leg saloons of Horse-Thief, to argue the matter out with the new hired man. Hank had no idea of harming Miss Janet. Moreover, Hank knew that all Horse-Thief would have risen as one man to lynch him had he harmed a hair of her pretty head. Hank had come to lay out the new hired man; and, having had a glimpse of the Kid in the fields, he had sagely brought a couple of friends to help him do it.

The Kid's face lighted up. He dropped the hoe, and regretted for a moment that his gun-belt was hanging in the barn. In time of trouble the Kid was rather like a lost man without his guns. But there was no time to get the guns without running for them, and the Kid would not have run, under the eyes of the three galoots from Horse-Thief, to save his life, or a dozen lives. The Kid stood at attention, smiling—a rather wicked smile—as Hank and his friends came across the fields to him. From the house came Miss Janet, her eyes gleaming under the wide brim of her hat, and her rifle in her hand. Miss Janet knew that the three toughs had come to "soak" her new hired man, and she was prompt to intervene.

"Leave them to me, ma'am," said the Kid beseechingly. "I guess I want a change from the hoeing, miss."

"Three to one!" snapped Miss Janet.

THE POPULAR.—No. 492.

"I guess they'll be pie to me, miss," beseeched the Kid, quite dismayed at the idea of there being no "rookus," after all. "Don't you chip in, miss. I sure can handle the whole caboodle."

The Kid had to make good his words, for Hank and his companions, without stopping to parley, rushed right at him. Miss Janet stood uncertain, the butt of her rifle in the grass. But her uncertainty soon disappeared, and she smiled.

The Kid fairly let himself go. After a week of digging and hoeing, of mending fences and carrying water, feeding chickens and cutting cabbages, this was sheer joy to him.

If the three toughs expected the Kid to dodge or flee, they were in error. The Kid jumped to meet them. They closed round him; and had they been able to carry out their intentions, the hired man at Horse-Thief would have been left a broken wreck on the ground—punched, gouged, stamped, throttled. But a fist that seemed like a chunk of solid iron drove into Hank's face and lifted him off his feet, and laid him on his back, half-stunned at the start; and he lay staring up at the Sierra Nevada, while the other two piled on the Kid and dragged him down.

The Kid's eyes were blazing with the joy of combat. This was life again, after a week as a hired man.

Two powerful toughs, known all around Horse-Thief as "bad men," had the Kid in their grip; but the Kid did not crumple in their grip as they expected. It seemed to the two toughs of Horse-Thief that they had corralled a panther wild from the sierra. The Kid gave grasp for grasp, blow for blow. A man dropped at his feet, gasping and dazed; the other swung off the ground, with a yell of terror, in the Kid's powerful arms, and earth and sky reeled about him, till he was flung to the earth across his comrade.

Hank was sitting up in the soil newly hooded by the hired man, blinking. He did not seem to know what had come to him. His friends lay panting on the earth—panting, gasping, groaning. They picked themselves up at last, and ran for the trail. They did not even give the new hired man a look; they lighted out wildly, and the dust of the trail swallowed them up. They had had enough of the hired man.

Hank staggered up. He did not run—his hand was groping for the revolver at the back of his trousers.

The Kid laughed. Hank was not quick on the draw. Had the Kid been belted with his guns, and had he thought it worth while to pull, Hank might have been riddled with lead before he got his gun out. But the Kid had no gun, and Hank's revolver was in his grip.

Like a panther the Kid leaped forward.

Up went the revolver, but the Kid had the rising arm in his grasp, and the bullet, as it flew, flew skyward. A second more—Hank never knew how—the six-gun was wrenched from his hand and the muzzle of it was pressed to his chest, the Kid's finger on the trigger, the Kid's sunburnt, handsome face grinning over it.

"Let up, pard!" said the Kid pleasantly.

Hank spat out a curse. The Kid's look became quite ugly, and the trigger rose a fraction. His eyes gleamed over the gun like steel.

"Don't!" cried Miss Janet.

"I guess it's your say-so, miss," assented the Kid.

He tossed the revolver into the waters

of the Horse-Thief River, that flowed by Miss Janet's fence.

"I guess you want to hit the trail, feller," said the Kid. "I guess the sooner you hit the trail, the better it will be for your health. Pronto!"

And as Hank paused the Kid grasped him, and the former hired man went spinning into the water after his gun, and he disappeared there with a mighty splash.

"Oh!" gasped Miss Janet.

Hank crawled out on the opposite side of the river. He did not seem to care for the Kid's side of it. He limped away, squelching water, and vanished from sight across the alfalfa fields.

The Kid smiled. Then he blushed as he turned to meet the eyes of Miss Janet fixed on him. The Kid had thoroughly enjoyed that rookus; much more than he enjoyed his labours as a hired man. But he was afraid of what Miss Janet might think.

"You see, miss—" stammered the Kid lamely.

But the girl smiled.

"I guess Hank won't come back again in a hurry," she said. "I guess he has had a jugful more than he wanted. I'm glad you can take care of yourself."

"I sure always could do that, miss," smiled the Kid. And then, greatly daring, encouraged by the kind smile, he added: "And I guess if you'd let me take care of you, Miss Janet—"

The girl's merry laugh interrupted him.

"I guess I don't need it." She had not caught the Kid's hidden meaning. She nodded to him and went back into the cabin.

The Kid picked up the hoe.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Kid Hits the Trail!

THUD, thud, thud! Horse's hoofs rang on the trail.

Two more weeks had passed, and the hired man at Horse-Thief was still in Janet's service, still working in the fields and the barns, more than earning his keep.

Janet had told him more than once that she had never seen such a hired man; that she guessed she was lucky when he came along to Horse-Thief and stopped at her homestead. Perhaps it was because other matters occupied her mind that she did not divine the cause of the hired man's unremitting service and loyal devotion. And until he should see understanding in her eyes the Kid did not dare to speak. He who would never have shrunk from half a dozen levelled six-guns, was daunted by a pair of blue eyes.

Thud, thud, thud!

The Kid was mending a fence along the trail when the horseman rode out from Horse-Thief and came clattering up to the homestead. Since the affair with Hank and his friends the Kid worked with his gun-belt on, and as the horseman dashed up to the gate, he straightened up, and his hand dropped on a gun. A young man with a sunburnt face and a merry eye pulled rein at the gate and gave him a cheery nod.

"Hallo!" returned the Kid, his hand leaving the gun. A gun was not wanted.

"Miss Janet at home?"

"Sure."

"I guess you're a new man here," said the horseman, scanning the Kid.

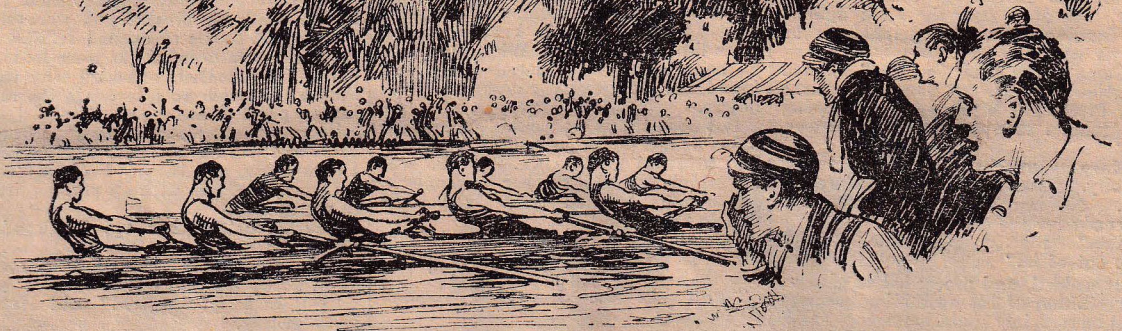
"New hired man," answered the Kid composedly, wondering a little who the rider was.

(Continued on page 12.)

THE "SERPENT" HUNTS TROUBLE!

Harmless japes, Nipper & Co. can stand. But japes of the vicious kind, which Reggie Pitt is capable of, they will not tolerate—and Pitt is made to understand that!

RUCTIONS ON THE RIVER!



A TOPPING LONG COMPLETE STORY, DEALING WITH THE EARLY ADVENTURES OF THE BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S, NARRATED BY NIPPER OF THE FOURTH!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Morning of the Race—An Amazing Result!

THE morning of the great boat-race at St. Frank's broke bright and clear. We of the Ancient House were in fine fettle; and I, as stroke, felt proud of my crew. We were all full of confidence, and we confidently looked forward to giving Bob Christine, of the College House, and his crew a good hiding.

The College House crew were by no means optimistic as to their chances.

Bob Christine regarded the sky critically.

"Going to be a fine afternoon," he observed. "A bit of wind, but that won't hurt. It doesn't matter much to us, anyhow. This is going to be one of our black days!"

Yorke and Talmadge nodded.

"Cheer up!" said Yorke. "We can't win every year, Christy. Besides, we may pull it off, even now. By the way you talk, anybody would think that we were a set of rank duffers—"

"So we are," said Christine. "I wouldn't say that to anybody else, but we're alone for the moment. Rank duffers—compared with the Fossils. It's sickening! How the dickens was I to know that the boulders would have such a stroke as Nipper? He's frightfully hot stuff, and I ain't ashamed to admit it—to you chaps. There's the Bo'sun, too. Why, he's as strong as a horse, and can pull like—"

"Oh, ease off!" snapped Talmadge. "What's the good of rubbing it in? Even if we're going to lose we needn't go about with faces a mile long. You're looking awfully serious, old man. Grin, and make the fellows think that we're going to win."

Christine & Co., in fact, were pessimistic. They were standing on the steps of the College House, and the knowledge that they were in for a failure that afternoon did not tend to make them cheerful.

Morning lessons were over, and the half-holiday promised to be fine, although somewhat chilly. An east wind was blowing.

Pitt, the latest comer to St. Frank's, lounged out of the College House, and

nodded to the three gloomy leaders of the Monks.

"Somebody going to be buried?" he asked politely.

"Buried?" repeated Yorke, staring.

"You look as if you're just going to a funeral," explained Pitt. "I thought, perhaps, that—"

"You silly ass!" snorted Christine.

"Awfully sorry," grinned Pitt. "But why are you looking so awfully lugubrious?"

"So which?" demanded Yorke tartly.

"That means mournful," said Pitt.

"But I thought St. Frank's was a seat of learning. It's quite an ordinary English word, I can assure you. The word lugu—"

"You'll look lugubrious before we've done, if you ain't careful!" snapped Christine. "Buzz off—go and eat coke! You've got a fat lot too much to say for a new kid!"

Pitt grinned again.

"I was just about to offer sympathy," he said calmly. "Of course, you're looking pretty sick because you think you're going to lose the race? My dear chaps, it's the biggest mistake you ever made. We shan't lose—"

"We'?" repeated Talmadge. "What the dickens have you got to do with it, you cheeky ass?"

"Well, I naturally stick up for my own House," said Pitt. "You wouldn't like me to go yelling about that the Ancient House will win, would you?"

"You can yell what you like," said Christine, who had taken a strong antipathy towards the new fellow. "Only don't yell here. We're getting rather tired of your voice, Pitt. It's a pity you don't—"

"At last!" said Reginald Pitt smoothly. "Do you know I've been expecting to hear that pun for days past. Don't glare at me! I've been quite harmless and I am as true as steel to the College House. Do you want to hear my opinion about the race?"

"No!" said Christine & Co. in one voice.

"That's a pity because you're going to hear it, all the same," observed the Serpent. "College House, my sons, is going to win by a whole length—perhaps more. If you haven't got faith in your-

selves, I have. You'll simply romp home!"

And Pitt thrust his hands into his pockets and strolled across the Triangle. Bob Christine and his chums looked after him thoughtfully. He spoke with such sublime confidence that it was almost possible to credit what he said.

"Blessed if I can understand that chap," said Christine slowly. "He knows jolly well that we shall lose, so what's the good of jawing like that? There's no reason for it. If some of Nipper's men were unexpectedly off colour, or if they were kept away from the race, I could understand it. But they're not off colour, and the whole eight will turn up smiling and ready to knock us into next week. Oh, I can see it coming! We're going to be whacked clean!"

There was a different spirit amongst the Fossils. We were absolutely confident of victory, and had excellent reason to be. My crew were at the top-notch of their form, and nothing stood between us and victory.

This was further demonstrated after dinner. I took my men for a final practice, for the race was not due to start until three-thirty. We still had an hour and a half.

We beat our own record over a measured course, and then took our frail craft to the starting-point, which was exactly opposite the boathouse, this being the nearest point to the school grounds. The course lay between here and the Bellon Bridge.

Christine and his men were also out; but, after watching them keenly, I came to the conclusion that they didn't stand an earthly. Our boat was a regular flyer, and we could handle her sweetly. Yakama, as cox'n, was just the fellow.

Billy Nation was steering the College House boat, and their eight consisted of Christine—who was stroke—Talmadge, Yorke, Freeman, Turner, Page, Oldfield, and Harron. The Ancient House eight was as follows: Myself—stroke—Watson, Trogellis-West, Burton, De Valerie, Owen major, Farman, and the Duke of Somerton. The duke was comparatively a new boy, but he was a bit of a wonder in the athletic line, and

fully deserved inclusion in the eight. It was a big honour for him, and he fully appreciated it.

"Well, we're all ready," I remarked comfortably, as I slipped a light overcoat on over my flimsy rowing togs. "Race starts in half an hour, my sons."

"Who's that silly idiot?" asked Watson suddenly.

"It's Pitt!" declared Valerie. "Well, of all the silly asses! Bathing on a special afternoon like this—and with such a cold wind blowing!"

Sure enough, Pitt, of the College House, was swimming easily up the river. He drew near the bank against the landing-stage, and grinned as he saw us watching him.

"Come out of that, you ass!" shouted Christine sharply. "You can't bathe now, Pitt! The banks will be swarming with fellows soon—seniors and masters, too."

"Keep your hair on," said Pitt genially. "Just having a dip before the race. No law against it, I suppose? All ready for the start now?"

"Yes," replied Christine. "But come out of it!"

Pitt nodded, and proceeded to give us an exhibition of his swimming prowess—and he certainly could swim, too. Finding that nobody took any notice of him, he swam off, and presently appeared attired as usual.

"I should think so, too!" said Talmadge. "Bathing ain't the thing this afternoon. Hallo! Here comes old Stocky." The excitement'll begin presently.

As Talmadge had said, Mr. Stockdale had put in an appearance. Other masters came along, too, including Nelson Lee himself. Mr. Crowell was with him. And, a few minutes later, the Head was observed in company with Mr. Paget and Mr. Langton, masters of the Fifth and Sixth respectively.

"Go it, the Blues!" yelled the Ancient House fags.

"Buck up, the Greens!" roared the College House fags in reply.

The College House colours were olive-green and yellow; whilst the Ancient House colours were blue and red. For short, they were always referred to as the "Greens" and "Blues."

Handforth grinned. "It looks to me as if the Greens have got the blues!" he said humorously.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Church and McClure loyally.

"Time to get to our place," I said briskly.

Fenton of the Sixth had consented to act as starter, and we didn't want to keep him waiting. The race was to commence precisely at three-thirty.

So, without any further ado, the rival boats were paddled out into midstream, and we prepared for the start amid general enthusiasm. I was quite gratified. I hadn't thought that a junior contest of this sort would excite so much interest.

Crack!

It was the starting-signal.

"Go it, you cripples!"

"The Blues—the Blues!"

"Greens—Greens!"

"Pull, you lubbers!"

There was a regular pandemonium of yells, but we took no notice of them. We started in splendid style, developing a quick stroke which carried us through the water at a terrific pace.

I had no time to see how the Greens were facing at the commencement, for my chief anxiety was to set the stroke of my own boat into an even, rapid rhythm. Everything depended upon stroke in a boat-race, of course.

THE POPULAR.—No. 492.

"Ancient House leads!" came a yell from the banks. "Keep it up—keep it up, the Blues!"

"Our esteemed boat is not performing the magnificent glide!" murmured Yakama, his face betraying keen signs of anxiety.

"Great Scott!" I muttered. "What's the matter?"

For some unearthly reason our boat was pulling heavily, as though unwilling to go at all. As Yakama had said, she was not performing the magnificent glide.

And yet the thing was staggering. We were in perfect form, every man of us. The boat, as I knew, was in splendid fettle itself. Why, only half an hour before we had tested her, and found her as sweetly running as ever before.

But now, try as we would, we couldn't move her at the same rapid pace as she had attained at practice. There was something sluggish in her movements, as though she had suddenly become double the weight.

"Souise me!" gasped the bo'sun. "There's something wrong, messmates! We shall never win at this rate!"

"Pull like the deuce!" I shouted desperately.

And, by a great effort, I increased my own stroke to thirty-six, and the crew fell in swiftly and easily.

Our muscles stood out in knots and perspiration streamed down our faces. But our boat was in an ugly mood; she wouldn't shift for toffee, or for anything else.

"The Greens are gaining!" roared the onlookers. "Go it, College House! You'll win yet! Greens—Greens!"

An answering howl came from the Fossils.

"What's the matter, you asses?" they roared. "Pull! Don't go to sleep!"

We were certainly not going to sleep, but the fact couldn't be denied that the College House boat was already half a length ahead. Crowds of cheering juniors were running down the towing-path, following us up. The excitement was tremendous. The Monks especially were nearly off their heads.

Reginald Pitt was amongst the foremost fellows on the towing-path, and with him were Fullwood & Co.

"What did I tell you?" grinned Pitt, who had booked some heavy bets with them. "Looks like a College House win, eh?"

"Hang you!" snapped Fullwood anxiously.

"I'm afraid I shall have to trouble you for a fiver—"

"Rot!" snorted Fullwood. "The Blues ain't whacked yet!"

But we were!

When at last the winning-post was reached the Greens shot past a clear two lengths ahead!

Amazing as it seemed, Christine & Co. won!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Extraordinary—Nothing Wrong with the Boat—Handforth's Clue!

CONSTERNATION reigned supreme amongst the Fossils.

The Monks, on the other hand, yelled themselves hoarse with triumph and excitement. The most astounded fellow of anybody, I think, was Bob Christine.

"Well, I'm blessed if I can understand it!" he panted. "What the dickens was the matter with you chaps?"

I took a deep breath.

"What you can't understand, Christine, isn't half what we can't

understand!" I replied grimly. "It was a fair win for you, and I wish you joy. But I'll bet anything you like that my crew wasn't to blame."

Christine stared.

"Then who was—or what was?" he asked.

"I don't know!" I replied.

"Don't know?"

"I'm rather bowled over," I explained. "It's absolutely a mystery. I'm going to have our boat out of the water in two minutes. I believe there's something wrong with her."

We were ashore now, just below the bridge, and the rival crews were surrounded by scores of excited fellows on the bank. Fullwood & Co. were looking particularly heated, although why they should take such an interest in the race rather puzzled me.

"Fine chaps, ain't you?" sneered Fullwood furiously. "You let your House down, you beastly slackers!"

I turned on him with an angry glitter in my eyes.

"You'd better shut up, Fullwood!" I snapped.

"Oh, had I!" roared Fullwood. "I'm going to state my mind—"

"Out of it, you rotter!" said Handforth grimly.

He seized Fullwood, swung him round, and sent him staggering. Just at that moment Pitt stepped forward and got into the way. This was most unfortunate—for Pitt.

Fullwood crashed into him, and Pitt blundered forward. His foot caught against a tuft of grass, and he pitched headlong over the bank into the deep water against the bank.

Splash!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Serve him right!" snapped Handforth unfeelingly. "He shouldn't get in people's way!"

Pitt went right under, and remained under for quite a time. Then he came up, puffing and blowing. Everybody was grinning. It even gave me pleasure to see Pitt receiving a ducking; I was just in the mood to be pleased at anybody's discomfort.

He was helped ashore by several fellows, who expected him to be in a snappy mood. A ducking with all one's clothes on is never exactly pleasant. But Reginald Pitt took the whole thing calmly.

"Who pushed me?" he inquired.

"Fullwood, wasn't it?"

"No, it wasn't!" snapped Fullwood tartly. "It was that fatheaded idiot, Handforth!"

"More of an accident than anything else, I suppose," said Pitt. "Least said about it the better. I'll run along and change."

And Pitt went off. Fullwood & Co. I noticed, were talking together some little distance off, with long faces. But I knew very well that they were not cut up about the failure of their side. They had some other game on.

Nelson Lee and some of the other masters had arrived at the bridge by this time. They were all somewhat surprised to learn the result of the race. There was no need to get the opinion of the referee, for the Monks had romped home by a couple of lengths. It was, as they gleefully declared, a regular walk-over.

"Hard luck, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "It only proves that you cannot be too sure in these matters."

"There's something wrong with the boat, sir," I said doggedly. "I know jolly well that the fault wasn't with my crew. We did splendidly at practice just before the race."

"He's right, sir," put in De Valerie. "We can't understand it at all. The boat seemed to drag, just as though we were towin' another boat."

"But that is obviously impossible," objected Nelson Lee. "As the boat has not been touched since you finished the race, you can make an examination and clear away any doubt without delay."

"That's what I'm going to do, sir," I replied grimly. "I've got more than an idea that there's a mass of reeds, or something, got entangled on the keel. It sounds rather impossible, but there's nothing else to account for the sluggishness."

Christine looked rather alarmed.

"Oh, that's rot!" he said. "It ain't fair to suggest things like that, Nipper! College House won fairly and—"

"My dear chap, I'm not disputing that," I said. "We're going to examine the boat for our own satisfaction. If we do find some beastly reeds or rubbish clinging to the keel it'll be our misfortune. But I can't see how it's possible, even now."

The matter was soon decided.

Amid a surging crowd of interested juniors the crew of the Ancient House boat went to the bank and lifted the frail craft out of the water. Then we turned her upside down on the grass.

At the very first glance I saw that nothing was wrong. Certainly no reeds had become entangled in the rudder, or on any other portion. The boat, in fact, was as clean as a whistle.

"There's nothing wrong with the boat now," I said. "And we're all rather fagged. What do you say to a run over the course again? By all rights, seeing that we are fairly exhausted, we ought to go like a funeral. It'll be a good test."

"I'm game," said everybody.

"Morrow is somewhere about, isn't he?" I went on. "He's got a stopwatch, and he knows exactly how long we took to cover the course in the race, because he timed us. We'll get him to time us again."

Morrow of the Sixth was quite agreeable, being a good-natured fellow. He frankly told us that we were young asses, and that we couldn't possibly improve on our previous time. As he pointed out, most of the energy had been taken out of us. We paddled up the river to the starting-point, and we all noticed that the boat was moving with her usual easiness. No comment was made, but the fact was rather startling. Why had the boat moved so heavily during the race? She hadn't been touched by a soul, and was in perfect condition. It was an amazing problem.

There were only a few spectators now. The fags and the seniors had cleared off, and only a handful of Ancient House Removites remained. The

Monks had vanished to a man, and I compressed my lips with vexation as I realised that they were celebrating at St. Frank's.

All the evidence went to prove that the boat had not been affected in any way. But, in spite of this, I was positively certain that something had affected it—and affected it seriously, too. And the absence of any explanation worried me greatly.

This conviction of mine was practically proved to the hilt. My crew had shared my view, and they were not

Study C with his usual assurance—having done the utmost to break the lock in entering.

Church and McClure followed him.

"Outside!" I said shortly.

"Rats!" said Handforth. "We've come to talk about the race. I've something to tell you. Last night we were on the river—"

"Begad! What for?" asked Sir Montie, in surprise.

"We were on the river," repeated Handforth, ignoring the interruption. "It was as dark as anything, and we



A DUCKING FOR A ROTTER! Fullwood crashed into Pitt, sending him staggering forward. His foot caught against a tuft of grass, and he pitched headlong over the bank of the river into the deep water. Splash! "Ha, ha, ha!" "Serve him right!" said Handforth. "Do the rotter good!" (See Chapter 2.)

particularly surprised at the result of the fresh trial, although everybody else was astounded.

We slipped over the course beautifully, in spite of our fagged condition. And Morrow, who had followed us along, announced in a somewhat startled voice that we had beaten the time of the College House boat by many seconds. In short, we had done better than Christine & Co., even after our tiring performance during the race itself.

"There's only one thing to think," said Morrow. "You must have been lazy, though, goodness knows, you seemed to be pulling hard enough. What the thunder was the matter with you?"

"There was nothing the matter with us, Morrow," I replied quietly. "It was the boat. Don't ask me what was wrong, because I can't tell you. There's no explanation."

And for the moment we had to be content with that.

After having changed, we adjourned to our various studies for tea. Sir Montie and Tommy had very little to say. Watson, however, remarked that he was compelled to express the view that the fault must have been ours, after all. It was ridiculous to suppose that the boat itself could have been responsible.

A heated little argument followed, and matters were by no means improved when Edward Oswald Handforth appeared on the scene. He walked into

were just coming back to the boat-house, when a light flashed out near the bank. And we saw Pitt doing something among the reeds, just against the bank."

"What was he doing?" I asked.

"How the dickens do I know?"

"Oh, I thought you were going to tell us," said Watson. "I suppose the silly ass was paddling."

Handforth glared.

"Paddling!" he echoed witheringly. "Of course, a chap would paddle in the darkness, and in amongst a lot of dry weeds, wouldn't he?"

"Well, what was he doing, then?" demanded Watson shortly.

"That's what I've been wondering," said Handforth. "It looks jolly queer to my mind. And have you noticed Pitt this afternoon?"

"No. What's wrong with him?" I asked.

"Nothing particularly wrong, but he looks as though he's come into a fortune or something," replied Handforth. "As pleased as a dog with two giddy tails."

"Nothing much in that," I remarked. "He's a College House chap, and he'd naturally be pleased. But that bit about the river is jolly interesting, and it requires some thinking over. Did Pitt know that you'd spotted him, by the way?"

"Hadn't any idea of it," put in McClure. "We only just caught a glimpse of him, you know. Probably he was doing nothing at all, but Hand-

forth seems to have a potty idea in his head that Pitt's been plotting—about this race, I mean."

"You only caught a glimpse of him, you say?" I remarked. "Are you sure it was Pitt?"

"Positive."

I puckered my brow, and thought carefully. Then, suddenly, I gave a jump. Two facts connected with the afternoon's events had sprung into a position of prominence in my mind. And they were of such significance, in the light of this clue of Handforth's, that a vague suspicion almost became a certainty.

I banged my fist upon the table with great force.

"By Jupiter!" I shouted tensely. "I've got it!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Investigations—The Mystery Explained—Christine's Rage!

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST focused his pince-nez upon me.

"Begad!" he exclaimed mildly.

"Have you really, Nipper? But may we inquire what you have got?"

"An idea!" I replied. "We have been jolly puzzled about the race, haven't we? Well, I'll bet a fiver to a tin-tack that those College House rotters have been up to some shady trickery!"

"Christine & Co.?" gasped Watson.

"No. I think they're above that sort of thing," I replied. "But there are other chaps in the College House—and Pitt's one of them. Handforth's piece of news set a train of thought into motion, and there's no telling where it'll end. Anyhow, Pitt's movements were suspicious this afternoon—tremendously suspicious."

Tregellis-West looked at me admiringly.

"Doesn't he do it well?" he asked, addressing the others. "It must be Mr. Nelson Lee's training, I suppose. But, after all, this talk about suspicions an' evidence is frightfully confusing. What does it mean, in plain English?"

"It means this," I replied grimly. "So far as I can understand, Pitt is the mainspring of the whole plot. Now, look here, I'll point out two very significant facts. If you'll cast your memory back, you'll call to mind that Pitt was bathing in the river just after we got back from our practice trip, before the race."

"What about it?" asked Watson. "Nothing criminal in bathing, is there? I don't see how—"

"Don't be in such a hurry!" I interjected. "Pitt was in the river for some little time. And when the race was over he accidentally fell in—just against the boat."

"Fullwood blundered against him," remarked Church.

"Did he?" I asked keenly. "I didn't take much notice of it at the time, but it now strikes me that Pitt shoved himself in the way. He meant it to look like an accident, and he did the trick jolly smartly, too."

"You—you ass!" roared Watson. "Are you suggesting that Pitt fell into the river on purpose—just for the fun of getting his clothes wet?"

"Precisely!" I agreed. "If you'll add to these two facts the remaining fact that Pitt has been prophesying a College House victory all day, you'll understand the true position."

"Nothin' simpler," remarked Sir Montie. "We've got brains like electric shocks—we can see everythin', begad!"

THE POPULAR.—No. 492.

But my everythin' happens to be shockin'ly small!"

"Yes; explain yourself," said Handforth tartly.

"Can't you reason it out for yourself?" I asked. "What does all this evidence point to? Why, that Pitt prepared some trick contrivance to fix on to the keel of the boat, so that it would run sluggishly. He was concealing it among the reeds when you chaps spotted him, in readiness for this afternoon."

"A—contrivance?" asked Watson, staring. "Oh, that's rot! Do you mean to say that we shouldn't have spotted it?"

"We couldn't," I replied. "Pitt was as cunning as a monkey. Why did he bathe this afternoon—of all afternoons? So that he could drag that thing under water and fasten it to the keel. We never suspected it, of course, and we didn't know it until we were actually rowing the race. Oh, the trickery of it!"

Handforth shook his head.

"I can quite believe that Pitt's a snaky beast. And I believe he's capable of any rotten game. But you're on the wrong track, Nipper. Didn't you haul the boat out of the water five minutes after the finish of the race? There was nothing on the keel then—and that knocks your theory into a cocked hat!"

I bent over the table.

"Does it?" I said grimly. "Why did Pitt fall into the water?"

"Great Scott!" gasped Watson.

"Why did he remain under for ten or fifteen seconds, instead of about two?"

I went on, thumping the table. "I'll tell you why. Because he heard me say, half a minute before, that I was going to yank the boat out of the water to examine it! That's why he ruined his clothes, because he knew the trick would be exposed unless he acted on the instant."

"But Fullwood bumped into him!" protested Church faintly.

"He didn't!" I retorted. "Pitt seized the chance, because it would have been too obvious if he had fallen in deliberately. Oh, he's a cunning boulder! And I'll bet you anything I've got that I've hit the right nail on the head."

There was silence in Study C for several seconds.

"Dear boys, Nipper's right!" said Sir Montie at last. "He's always right, begad! The way he reckons these things out is simply amazin'. Pitt's been up to some tricks."

"The boat went like a dream before the race, and it went like a dream just after!" I went on. "It only dragged during the race itself, and Pitt had been in the water on two separate occasions!"

"Immediately before and immediately after the race!" said Handforth breathlessly. "By George! What a rummy thing I didn't think of that myself! As a matter of fact, I did have inklings about—"

"Yes, we know all about them!" I cut in. "It was you who put us on to the right track, anyhow, Handy. Good for you, old son! You ain't quite such a lunatic, after all!"

"Here, I say—"

"No time for arguments now!" I said crisply. "Stop gobbling down that bread-and-butter; we're going to make investigations. And if my theory's right I'll simply slaughter Pitt!"

We left our tea at once and hurried out. The Triangle was deserted, for all the fellows were in their studies. Handforth & Co. were just as keen as I was. And in a very short time we arrived at the boathouse and carried our graceful

craft out and laid her keel upwards upon the grass.

"Look at that!" I exclaimed quickly.

"Which?" asked Handforth.

I pointed to something which had been of no significance to us before. It was a small, circular hole in the keel, heavily bound with copper. It was obviously provided for the purpose of slinging the boat up when not in use. Looking at it closely, I distinctly saw several bright scratches, recently made, which told their own story. Some other metal object had been scraping against the copper-work.

It was some few moments before my companions fully grasped the significance of those slight scratches.

"It may be good enough to satisfy us," said Handforth, shaking his head, "but you can't call it evidence."

"No, we're going to find the evidence now," I said crisply. "Yank out one of those small boats. We're going down to the bridge. Half a tick, though. We shall want some tools."

"Tools?" repeated Watson.

"To drag the river-bed," I explained.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Well, you are a goer, and no mistake!" said Handforth, with frank admiration. "Drag the river-bed! That's a ripping stunt! Do you think we'll find anything?"

"All depends how deep the water is," I replied. "There's some thick rope in the boathouse and a lot of hooks. We'll fasten some hooks on to ropes and drag the whole affair along the bottom. They ought to fish up something, anyhow."

It was a rough-and-ready contrivance; but we knew the exact spot where Pitt had "accidentally" fallen in, and he must have dropped his own contrivance there.

Within ten minutes we were just below the Bellton Bridge. Nobody was about, and we set to work quickly and systematically. It was pure luck, of course, but we got a "bite" within a minute.

Leaning over the bank, I gingerly raised the improvised drag and hauled its catch into the light of day. A chuckle came from my companions when we saw that the object was a rusty metal bowl, battered and useless.

"Try again," grinned Handforth.

I smiled.

"No need to," I said calmly. "We've got it, my sons!"

"Got what?"

"The thing which Pitt used to make our boat sluggish—"

"You—you ass!" roared Handforth.

"That fat-headed bowl?"

"Yes, this bowl!" I replied grimly.

"Can't you see? It's the very thing I was looking for—or something of the same style. Oh, the caddish rotter!"

My theory was proved to the hilt. The bowl had four ropes affixed to it, these ropes all joining up with a thicker one—something after the style of a parachute, if my meaning is clear. There was a stout iron hook at the end of the thick rope, which had simply been pushed into the copper-sheathed hole in the boat's keel.

The result was inevitable. As soon as the boat had gained a little speed the bowl swung astern, with its inner surface facing the resistance of water. It acted like a powerful brake, and accounted for the astoundingly sluggish behaviour of our craft.

"Neat, eh?" I remarked calmly.

"Neat!" repeated Sir Montie. "Begad! I—I am at a loss for words, old boy. It's a shockin' business. Pitt ought to be thrashed!"

"He's going to be, too!" I said grimly.

"We're going straight to Christine now. I can't believe that he had anything to

do with this rotten affair. In any case, that race must be rendered null and void. We shall have to re-row it on Saturday."

"And win!" said Tommy Watson, with great satisfaction.

"No need to let any of the masters know," I went on. "There'd be a frightful hubbub if this came out. Pitt would probably be sacked straight away; and it would serve him right, too! But we'll settle it amongst ourselves, I reckon."

"No, it wouldn't be the thing to sneak," agreed Handforth. "As for Pitt, I don't mind taking him on; I should just like to give him a thundering good licking—"

"Leave that to your uncle," I interrupted. "Come on, we'll hear what Christine has to say about this matter. It's a pity to spoil their celebrations in the College House, but there's no help for it."

We got into the boat and rowed back with all speed, and proceeded to Study Q.

We found that apartment crowded. In addition to its rightful occupants, Christine and Yorke and Talmadge, there were three visitors in the persons of Oldfield and Clapson and Nation. By the time we got in the study was fairly packed.

"Come for sympathy?" grinned Christine. "We've heaps to give away. Or perhaps you'd like us to teach you how to row a boat? We willingly give lessons—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He laughs best who laughs last!" said Handforth sagely. "You wait a bit, my cackling fatheads! We've brought evidence, and this is where you hide your heads in shame!"

"What's the ass talking about?" remarked Yorke wonderingly. "And what's that dirty-looking thing you've got, Nipper? Don't bring it near me, you ass—"

"We're not joking—honest injun," I interrupted quietly. "It's a serious matter, Christine. Don't fly into a rage, but do you know that your victory was worked?"

"Worked?" ejaculated Christine blankly.

"Yes," I said. "Our boat was deliberately tampered with, and the whole race was unfair—"

"You—you rotter!" shouted Christine angrily.

There was an immediate uproar, and I was quite satisfied that Christine & Co. knew nothing whatever about Pitt's rascality. By the time they had calmed down five minutes had passed. Handforth was then being firmly held into a chair by Church and McClure. Incidentally, Watson was sitting on his lap. This was most necessary, for Handforth positively insisted upon fighting every College House fellow on the spot. The question of odds never occurred to him.

"Lemme gerrup!" he roared, struggling wildly.

"It's all right, Handy," I said. "These chaps were naturally indignant and excited. When we've explained everything to 'em they'll calm down—and they might even apologise to you!"

Order was restored with some difficulty. But at last I was permitted to explain my suspicions about Reginald Pitt, and how I proved my case up to the hilt. Christine & Co. were bound to admit much against their will, that the race had been grossly unfair.

"Of course, we'll row it again on Saturday," said Christine, without hesitation. "It's the only thing to be done. We can easily get permission without giving Pitt away. But, by

jingo, he'll get it in the neck for this!"

"We'll kick him out of the House," said Yorke hotly.

"Well, that's your affair," I remarked. "I think I've convinced you that our boat was tampered with. The evidence is complete. It's hard lines on you, Christine, and I think you're jolly decent to take it so nicely. I'm awfully sorry this has happened."

Christine & Co. hadn't much to say, for it was a fellow of their own House who was involved. And when we left them, highly satisfied with the result of our inquiry, we had the impression that Reginald Pitt was booked for a warm time—quite apart from my own intentions.

The chopper, as it happened, was destined to fall at once!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Pitt is Pleased with Himself—Kicked Out A Cad's Reward!

BOB CHRISTINE breathed hard as soon as we had taken our departure. His chums looked serious and upset. This knowledge had completely bereft them of the joys of victory, and the blow was a hard one.

"Now we know why Pitt was so jolly certain of a College House win!" said Christine grimly. "Oh, my hat! What a come-down for us—and all because of a cad of a new kid! If we don't hang, draw, and quarter him, it'll be a standing wonder!"

"He ought to be sacked!" said Oldfield fiercely.

"Yes, but we can't sneak," objected Christine. "Nipper has been jolly decent over it, remember. He came straight to us before saying a thing. The masters needn't know anything—"

There was a tap at the door, and Pitt entered.

"Hallo!" he said cheerfully. "What's the trouble? You're all looking rather blue."

"Are we?" said Christine, making a sign to the others to keep quiet. "What do you want here, Pitt? Come to tell us how we managed to win the boat-race?"

Reginald Pitt nodded.

"Exactly," he agreed. "You may remember that I promised to make the Ancient House fry sing small within a week. Well, I've done it—I've kept my promise. Nipper and his pals are simply whacked."

"Oh That's news!" said Christine, with deadly calmness. "Anything else? Haven't you got any more to say?"

"Quite a lot!" replied the Serpent, taking a seat on a corner of the table. "It's like this. The Greens won the race because of me—I gave you the victory."

"Did you?" said Christine thickly.

"Go on!"

"I thought it out!" continued Pitt. "I managed to fix a patent contrivance of my own invention beneath the Ancient House boat—without the asses knowing anything about it. Oh, it was lovely! They didn't suspect anything. But this contrivance held the boat back, and enabled you to romp home first! See?"

Christine could only stare. Was it possible? Could it actually be? Was Pitt boasting about his contemptible trick? Did he imagine that these juniors would uphold him—that they would approve of his beastly caddishness?

It was astounding—but it was the truth!

"Personally," he went on, "I reckon that I dished the Fossils in a really masterly fashion. What do you think?"

Christine put his back against the door.

"You've had your say, you cad, and now I'll have mine," he exclaimed, with ominous quietness. "I think you're the biggest rascal we've ever had in this House—"

"Eh?" said Pitt, with a start.

"You're a worm—a miserable, plotting hound!" shouted Christine, his wrath blazing out. "As it happened, we knew all about your beastly scheme, but we didn't expect you to come here and boast about it! Boast about it! Ye gods and little fishes! It's a wonder you ain't squashed to pulp!"

"He will be, in a minute!" said Oldfield hotly.

Reginald Pitt looked alarmed.

"Don't be such asses!" he exclaimed. "What the deuce is the matter? Didn't you win the race? Haven't I proved to you that I'm capable of working out stunning wheezes? And what do you mean by saying that you know all about it?"

"Look at this!" roared Christine. He fished out the rusty bowl from beneath the table, and Pitt started again as he gazed upon it.

"How did you find that?" he asked sharply.

"We didn't find it—Nipper brought it to us!" snorted Christine. "He found out the whole rotten plot, and we're going to row the race again on Saturday—"

"Row it again?" asked Pitt, staring.

"What for?"

"Oh, I'm sick of him!" said Christine disgustfully. "Open the door, somebody! Look here, Pitt, we're going to deal with you lightly this time, because you don't seem to know what decency is. We're simply going to kick you all along the passage, across the lobby, and into the Triangle!"

Reginald Pitt progressed down the passage towards the lobby in a most erratic fashion. The juniors were excited, and Pitt was treated in no light manner. Whatever he received, however, he thoroughly deserved. Christine & Co. had the pleasure of hurling him forcibly out of Study Q. By the time he regained his feet he was bowled over again, and went down the passage violently.

By the time he got to the lobby he was pretty well bruised all over. And he was hurled forth from the College House into the darkness of the Triangle.

"And if you show your nose in here again," panted Christine, "you'll get kicked out with more force than ever! Understand? We don't want rotters like you in this House!"

"I shall come in when I like!" gasped Pitt defiantly.

"Try it on, and see!" retorted Christine "And if you sneak to any of the masters we'll give it to you hotter than ever! We've finished with you!"

And the incensed Removites turned back, and surged into the common room, where Christine proceeded to explain matters in detail to those juniors who were in ignorance of the facts.

Meanwhile, Reginald Pitt sat on the cold steps recovering his breath. He was hardy and wiry, and could take blows with ease. When he picked himself up and walked across the Triangle his eyes were glittering evilly. At the same time he couldn't understand why he had been treated in such a manner.

He really believed that he had been treated with gross ingratitude—after his great services to the College House Junior Eight! And there was a spirit

of bitterness and hatred in his heart as he mooched beneath the elms.

Three forms loomed up before him, and he made no attempt to avoid them. Those three forms belonged to Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and myself. We were, as a matter of fact, looking for Pitt. We had no idea then as to the fate he had met at the hands of Christine & Co.

"Somebody here, dear boys," remarked Montie. "I say, old fellow, have you seen anythin' of Pitt?"

"Yes, he's here," said Pitt calmly.

"The very chap I wanted to see!" I said, striding forward and facing Pitt squarely. "I want just five minutes with you, Pitt. What have you got to say for yourself? What do you mean by playing that foul trick upon our boat?"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Pitt roughly. "What's the good of making a fuss about it? I thought I was doing Christine a good turn. No harm in taking a rise out of you fellows, is there?"

"Doing Christine a good turn!" I repeated blankly. "Did you tell Christine that?"

"Yes, I did!"

"And what did he say?"

"What's it got to do with you what he said?" snarled Pitt. "Go away, confound you! You're an interfering brute, that's what you are! What's it got to do with you? Who told you to fish up that bowl?"

"THE RIO KID!"

(Continued from page 6.)

More than one man had ridden out from Horse-Thief to the homestead to deal for garden produce; and also, as the Kid knew well enough, to see a pair of blue eyes. He had not seen this rider before; and at the second glance he noted the signs of long travel. The horseman had come through Horse-Thief from a greater distance—a much greater distance. He had been long on the trail, the Kid could see; yet he had ridden rapidly and eagerly up to the gate. Obviously he had been there before—he knew the place and its owner.

He dismounted, hitched his horse at the gate, as the Rio Kid had hitched the black-muzzled mustang that rainy night three weeks ago, and tramped up the path to the cabin. The Kid resumed mending the fence, and the tap of his hammer echoed through the quiet afternoon.

A minute more and he dropped the hammer, leaping up. From the cabin came a cry—a cry from Miss Janet.

It was a startled cry; it might have meant anything, from surprise to alarm. To the Kid it meant that he was wanted in the cabin just as fast as he could get there. The stranger had entered the cabin; the door in the porch stood wide open. A panther leaping on his prey, a red-skinned brave springing at the throat of his enemy, was not so swift as the Rio Kid as he bounded to the cabin—his gun leaping to his hand, his eyes blazing death.

There was the stranger, and Miss Janet was in his arms—his arms were closed round her!

The Kid's left hand grasped the man and dragged him back. He was a powerful man, but in the Kid's grasp he sprawled backwards, helpless as a baby, and went crashing to the floor. The Kid's gun looked him in the face as he sprawled.

THE POPULAR.—No. 492.

I stared at him wonderingly.

"What's it got to do with me?" I repeated. "I'll show you! You're a scheming cad, and if you'd had your way this plot would never have come to light. Thank goodness, I found it out!"

"Oh, hang you!" growled Pitt, turning away. "It's a pity you can't mind your own business. But I can't expect anything else, I suppose, considering that you were originally picked up in the gutter by a low-down detective!"

I simply shook with fury. I had been quite prepared to let Pitt down lightly. But those words of his stung me into instant action. With a jerk of my hand I swung him round.

Smack!

My fist struck his mouth with terrific force, and he went down with a crash.

"If you get up again I'll give you another!" I said, breathing hard. "And if you ever say anything like that again, I'll thrash you until you can't see!"

Pitt scrambled to his feet, trembling violently.

"Try it on now!" he hissed. "You're a gutter-brat, and you were picked up by a rotten, blackmailing detective—"

Pitt didn't get any further. He lunged at me while he spoke, but I got in my blow first. He fought like a tiger, and for several minutes we were at it hard as we could go. Although a cad of the first water, Pitt was certainly not lacking in pluck. He stood up to me without flinching.

"You dog!" hissed the Kid.

"What the thunder—"

"Stop!" shrieked Miss Janet. She was between the Kid and the man who sprawled and gasped. "What do you mean? How dare you?"

Stupefied, the Kid gazed at her. The gun sagged in his hand. Her eyes blazed anger at him.

"Miss!" he stuttered. "Miss! I—I thought—"

"It's my new hired man, Frank," said Janet. The anger passed from her face as she realised the mistake the Kid had made, and her cheeks dimpled, and her laugh rippled. "Don't mind him; he had never seen you before. He must have thought—" She broke off, laughing till the tears came into her blue eyes.

And the stranger, grinning, picked himself up.

The Kid stared at them. His gun was in its holster now. He began to understand. This man who had kissed Miss Janet under his eyes—this man was not a "fresh" galoot from whom Miss Janet was to be defended. He was not a dog-goned guy to be soaked to a pulp. He was—What was he? She called him Frank! Who in thunder was Frank? The Kid knew, in a flash of perception, without being told. The Kid knew in one sharp, bitter moment that the biggest fool in Nevada was the hired man at Horse-Thief, who had horned in when Miss Janet's fiancé had been greeting her after a long absence.

"I—I—I guess I'm powerful sorry, ma'am!" faltered the Kid. His sun-burnt face was burning.

"Your hired man has sure got a hefty grip, Janet," said Frank, settling his ruffled collar and grinning. "It's all O.K., my man. I reckon you figured I was a fresh hombre, and Miss Janet wanted a protector. Ha, ha, ha! It's all O.K. Miss Janet don't need protecting from me. Miss Janet is sure going to marry me this fall. Isn't that a cinch, Janet?"

The girl was smiling; but the look on the Kid's face checked her merriment.

But I soon settled him. One heavy punch sent him staggering back, and he collapsed, muttering threats still. His nose was bleeding, his left eye was closing up, and his mouth was cut. But I hadn't an ounce of pity for him. The fellow was a rotter to his finger-tips.

Tommy and Montie said nothing, and as I brushed my clothes down, Pitt slowly rose to his feet and stood facing me.

"You'll be sorry for this!" he panted thickly. "You'll wish you'd never made an enemy of me before I've done!"

He turned on his heel and slunk off. "Dear boy, he fully deserved it," said Sir Montie quietly. "But you've made a frightfully vindictive enemy. Take my advice, and be on your guard! It'll be necessary!"

As events turned out, Montie's warning was fully justified! I hadn't done with Reginald Pitt by a long way!

Incidentally, the boat-race took place—fairly—on Saturday afternoon. The Ancient House won by a clear three lengths, and Bob Christine was decent enough to congratulate me afterwards. He took his defeat in the right spirit.

As for Pitt, well, I've got quite a lot to tell of him—but that's another yarn.

THE END.

(Reginald Pitt has certainly gained notoriety at St. Frank's—and all in a few weeks. You'll hear more of this amazing new boy in next week's rousing story of the chums of St. Frank's.)

ment. For the first time since she had hired the new man there was a gleam of understanding in the blue eyes, and Miss Janet's lovely face was grave now.

"Thank you," she said softly. "Thank you. If I needed a protector I should never find a braver one."

And that was some comfort to the hapless Kid as he backed out into the porch, and, once out, fairly ran for the barn.

In the barn, the Kid looked at the black-muzzled mustang. The soft, black muzzle snuggled under his arm, and the Kid rubbed his horse's nose tenderly, thoughtfully. For long minutes he stood caressing the horse, and his face was pale, his breathing hard. He spoke at last.

"Old hoss," said the Kid. "Old hoss, you and me run up against a snag when we hit Horse-Thief; we sure did. Old hoss, your boss is sure the darndest, pop-eyed, all-fired gink ever! Old hoss, it's three weeks since you and me should have figured on hitting the trail for the cow country; and I guess, old hoss, that you and me are going to hit that trail mighty sudden."

The slicker pack was on; the Kid led the mustang quietly out. He led him quietly into the trail. He led him softly along by the fence, where the hammer lay as the Kid had dropped it. He led him out of sound of the cabin, and then he mounted. With the reins in his hands, the mountain breeze blowing in his face, his boots in the stirrups, the Rio Kid was the Rio Kid again.

"Now, old hoss!" he said.

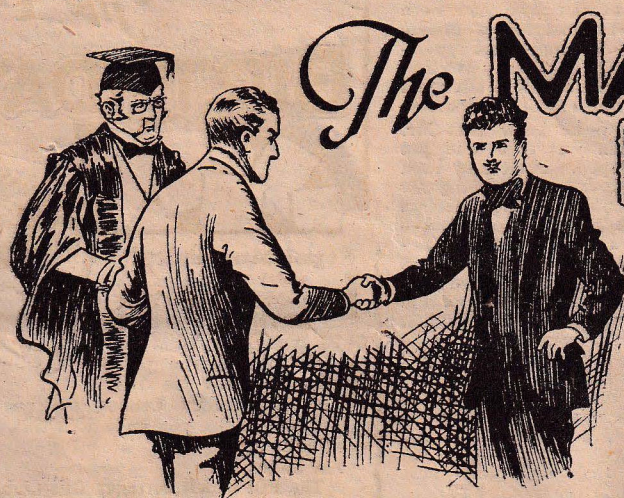
And a wildly riding horseman vanished in a cloud of dust. The Rio Kid was riding for the cow country again—riding hard—carrying with him a memory half sweet, half bitter. And a job was open for a new hired man at Horse-Thief.

THE END.

(You'll meet the Kid in another rousing Western yarn next week, chums!)

THE SECRET OF THE FRENCH MASTER!

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



The MAN WHO BETRAYED HIMSELF!

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

By Owen Conquest.

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

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

Dr. Chisholm, headmaster of Rookwood, frowned.

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

"Really——" he said restively.

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

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

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

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

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

"There is nothing further to discuss——"

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

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

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

"A matter of no moment, sir."

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

"Nonsense!"

Mr. Greely breathed hard and deep.

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

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

"I——"

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

Mr. Greely's purple face became more purple.

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

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

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

"Nonsense!"

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

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

"That is all."

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

"Nonsense!"

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

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

Dr. Chisholm made an angry gesture.

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

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

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

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

"Well, Mr. Dalton?"

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

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

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

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

"Very well, sir!"

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

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

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Peele Looks for Trouble—and finds it!

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

"Good-morning, sir!"
"Bonjour, monsieur!" added Lovell.
"Good-morning, my boys!" said Victor Gaston, with a pleasant smile.

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

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

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

Peele was in his blackest temper.

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

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

east suspicion on Victor Gaston—nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Peele!"

"Hallo!" said Peele.

Arthur Edward Lovell gave Peele a glare.

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

Peele grunted.

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

"Yes, sir!" said Peele.

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

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

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

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

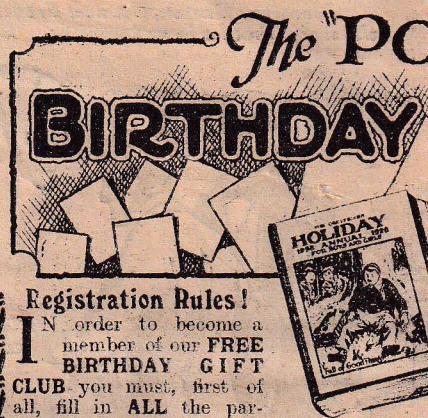
Peele came out sullenly before the class. He took the paper, and left the class-room with it in his hand.

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

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

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

"1928" ANNUALS AS BI



Registration Rules!

IN order to become a member of our **FREE BIRTHDAY GIFT CLUB** you must, first of all, fill in **ALL** the particulars required on the special **Registration Coupon** on page 18 of this issue. When you have done this, post coupon to:

The Editor,

The **POPULAR Birthday Gift Club**,
5, Tallis House, Carmelite Street
London, E.C.4 (Com)

Providing your registration coupon is filled up correctly, you will then be enrolled as member of our Birthday Club, and may consider yourself as such unless you are notified by the contrary.

Then you should watch carefully for the list of birthday dates, which will be published in this paper. Should the date of your birthday be the same as one of the published dates, you will be entitled to claim one of the splendid annuals illustrated above—that is either a "Holiday" or "Hobby" Annual. Further, you will be able to select your own annual.

Once readers are enrolled as members of the Birthday Gift Club they have no need to register, as their original registration holds good, providing they continue to purchase regularly the **POPULAR**, and also one other of the following papers—the "Magnet," "Gem," "Nelson Lee," or "Boys' Realm," as stated on their registration coupon.

Register To-day on the S

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

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

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

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

He grinned at the thought.

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

FREE GIFTS FOR READERS!

POPULAR

GIFT CLUB!



Take every care that the date of birth which you give on your registration coupon is absolutely correct in every particular, for this date, once it is accepted for registration can, in no circumstances, be altered afterwards.

Please remember that the only method of joining our Birthday Gift Club is by filling up one of the printed registration coupons published in this paper. No other form of registration can be recognised.

It should be understood that this scheme will continue until the present stock of annuals is exhausted. Therefore, register at once.

The Editor's decision upon all points arising out of this scheme must be accepted as final and irrevocable. This is an express condition of registration.

Only ONE registration coupon need be filled and sent to the address given above. This coupon can be received on or before the date stated in the registration coupon.

READERS OVERSEAS.

All Overseas readers are eligible to participate in our Free Birthday Gift Club, as special time limitations are allowed in the cases of readers living elsewhere than in the British Isles.

SEND IN YOUR REGISTRATION COUPON TO-DAY, AND THEN KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN FOR THE FIRST EXTRA-LONG LIST OF BIRTHDAY DATES, WHICH WILL BE PUBLISHED SOON.

Form provided on page 18.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

In the Shadow of Death!

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

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

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

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

"Really, gentlemen—" he almost barked.

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

"Nonsense!"

"H'm!"

"Really, sir—" said Mr. Dalton.

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

"Why should a boy enter the safe?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Head laid down the bunch of keys.

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

"I remember now," he said, and his voice faltered. "The key is not here!"

"You have only one?"

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

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

"But, sir—" breathed Richard Dalton.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dr. Chisholm," went on the Fourth Form master, "is there no other means of opening the safe?"
"None!"

"Help must be brought immediately—a locksmith—"

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

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

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

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

The Rookwood fellows looked at one another with white faces.

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

"Dr. Chisholm!"
The Head did not look at him—did not seem to hear.

"Dr. Chisholm! The boy's life must be saved—by any means, the boy must be saved from death!"

"Have you a suggestion to make?"
The Head looked up. "Make it! Save the life of that wretched boy, Mr. Greely, and I am your debtor for life!"

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

"How—how?"
"By opening the safe."

"The safe cannot be opened by any man at Rookwood."

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

Richard Dalton turned passionately on the Fifth Form master.

"Mr. Greely! At this fearful moment do you dare to renew your foolish talk concerning Victor Gaston, my friend?"

"I dare, sir—to save that unhappy boy's life!" said Mr. Greely. "I shall go at once, sir, to Victor Gaston—and unless he is a greater villain than I believe him to be, he will save the life of that unhappy boy!"

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

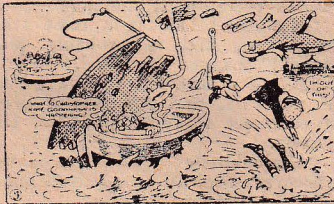
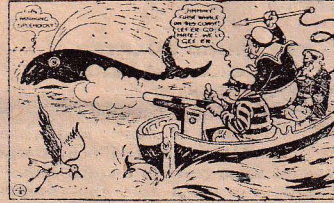
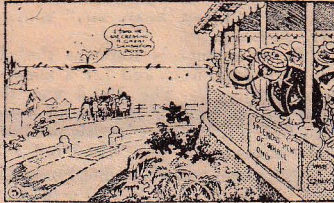
Knock, knock, knock!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Self 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

PROFESSOR EDISON GADGETS—SPORTING INVENTOR!



Want a real, good, hearty laugh? Then follow the side-splitting adventures of Professor Edison Gadgets. The six pictures above are a much reduced set that have already appeared. You will find another set just as funny in this week's copy of

THE BOYS' REALM.

Besides this hilarious cartoon, there are many other Topping Features in this Popular Wednesday paper.

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.

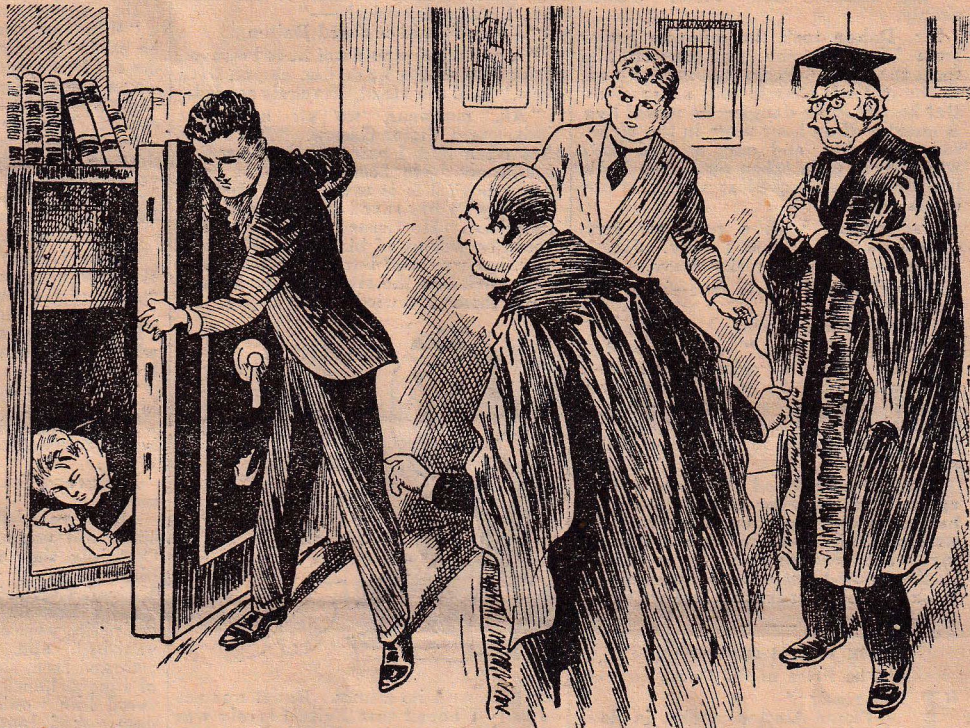
"You have no key?"

"None."

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

"Victor!" groaned Richard Dalton.

"I cannot leave this boy to die, when



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

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

Gaston nodded.

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

The Frenchman smiled.

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

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

"And there is not a moment to spare."

The Head groaned.

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

Knock, knock, knock!

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

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

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

"You can save him?" breathed the Head.

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

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

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

Felix Lacroix was busy! Once or twice he spoke, to call quietly for some tool he needed. Richard Dalton hurried to obey. The 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 was swung open.

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

"He lives!" said Victor Gaston simply.

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

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

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

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

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

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
The Price of the Past!

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

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

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

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

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

"But why—why—"
The Head stammered.

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

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

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



**THERE'S
THE
REGISTRATION
COUPON
TO SIGN,
CHUMS!**

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And mine!" said Mr. Greely. Victor Gaston drew a deep breath. His eyes were on Richard Dalton. The master of the Fourth held out his hand. "We part friends, Victor," he said. "I know what you will be in the future, whatever you may have been in the past. I trust you."

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

Rookwood knew Victor Gaston no more.

Mr. Greely, of course, remained—the Fifth did not lose their Form master. Certainly they would not have missed him so much as the juniors missed Victor Gaston. Twenty-four hours after "Felix Lacroix" had left Rookwood, the police were seeking him; but he had vanished, and even Peele, when he emerged from the sanatorium after days of illness, hoped that the man who had saved him would escape with his freedom. And long after Monsieur Monceau had returned to his place at Rookwood, Jimmy Silver & Co. continued to talk of Victor Gaston, with a kind remembrance of him, forgetting the wrong he had done, in the remembrance of the noble atonement of the man who had been self-condemned.

THE END.

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

REGISTRATION COUPON.

BIRTHDAY GIFTS.

(Please write very plainly.)

Name..... Date of Birth: Day..... Month..... Year.....

Full Address.....

I declare that I am a reader of "THE POPULAR" and and purchase BOTH THESE PAPERS regularly from my newsagent. I have carefully read the rules of your Birthday Club Scheme, and I agree to abide by them in every particular. Will you please enrol me as a member of your Free Birthday Gift Club.

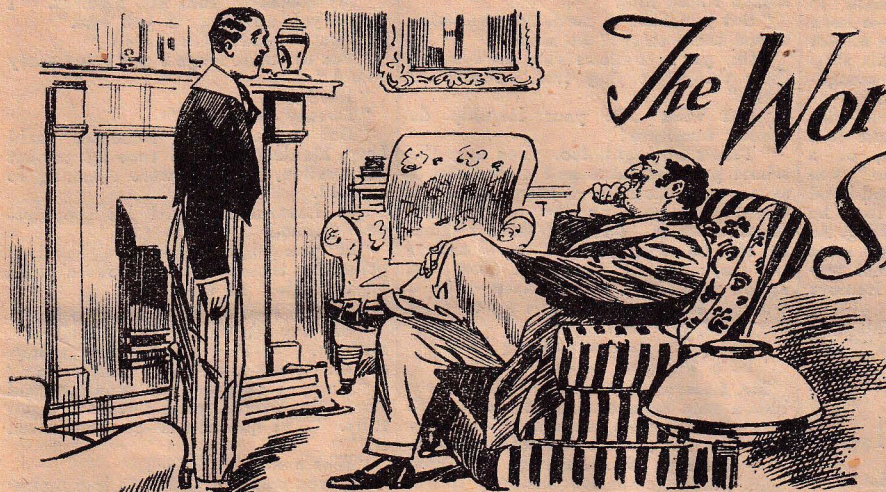
Newsagent's Name.....

Address.....

THIS COUPON IS ONLY AVAILABLE UNTIL JULY 7th, 1928.
POPULAR. **JUNE 30th, 1928.**

WANTED—FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS!

A promise, however rashly made, is nevertheless a promise, and must be kept. So thinks Lord Mauleverer, and he goes to great lengths to fulfil his word!



The Word of a Slacker!

By FRANK RICHARDS.

(Author of the famous stories of Harry Wharton & Co., of Greyfriars, appearing in the "Magnet" every Saturday.)

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Nothing Doing!

"Oh gad!" Lord Mauleverer of the Remove at Greyfriars made that ejaculation in despair. There was a look of utter amazement and consternation on his noble features which suggested that the letter he was reading contained anything but good news.

"Oh gad!" Mauly glanced at the letter again. It was from his uncle's solicitors, Messrs. Moosey, Vine & Moosey, and ran as follows:

"We are honoured by your lordship's communication, and in reply beg to state that we are not empowered by Sir Reginald Brooke to advance your lordship any sum in excess of your lordship's regular allowance, which will be forwarded on the usual date. We regret, therefore, that we are unable to accede to your lordship's request for the sum of £500 (five hundred pounds).

"We are, my lord,
"Your lordship's obedient servants,
"MOOSEY, VINE & MOOSEY."

"Oh dear!" Lord Mauleverer looked thoroughly unhappy as, seated on a bench under the old elms in the quadrangle, he perused that polite but firm epistle for the third time. In the generosity of his heart the schoolboy millionaire had promised to render assistance to the amount of five hundred pounds to a hero of the War who was still suffering from shell-shock. Dr. Pillbury, in whose care the patient was, had told Lord Mauleverer that Mr. Harrington was in desperate straits financially, and Mauly, to whom money meant nothing unless he could do good with it, had forthwith written to his guardian's solicitors for the amount in question. Had Sir Reginald Brooke been in "town" that five hundred pounds would have been advanced promptly, Mauly had not the slightest doubt, but unfortunately Sir Reginald had just started for a holiday in Switzerland and had not left his nephew his new address. Not for one moment had Lord Mauleverer expected a refusal from his uncle's solicitors, however, although Harry Wharton, who had helped the schoolboy earl to write the letter to Messrs. Moosey, Vine & Moosey, had tried to

convince him at the time that there would be "nothing doing."

"Bad news?" Lord Mauleverer looked up as Harry Wharton bore down upon him and, with an eloquent gesture, handed the captain of the Remove the letter.

"What do you make of it?" he asked, when Harry Wharton had read the letter.

"It's a jolly long-winded way of saying 'No, old nut!" said Wharton, smiling. "What the thump did you expect?"

"Five hundred pounds," said Mauly innocently.

"Nothing doing, old fellow!" Lord Mauleverer knitted his brows. "You think they mean that?" he asked.

"I do." "I'm surprised at these Moosey people—shocked at them, by gad!" said Mauly. "Fancy a fellow takin' all the frightful trouble of writin' a letter because he's hard up for money, and then not gettin' the money! It's a wicked waste of energy—not to mention the stamp. Dash it all, I'm beginnin' to see how Bunter feels when a fellow won't cash his postal-order for him! Do you think the Head would be very waxy if I went to a moneylender?"

"Oh, my hat! You'd get the boot, you ass! Besides, moneylenders want security—you're under age."

"Oh, rotten! What's going to be done, then?"

"I give that up, Mauly!" The bell rang, and the Removites had to return to the Yorm-room. Lord Mauleverer went in with a gloomy and puckered brow.

Poor Mauly had been so accustomed to having all the money he wanted that a shortage of cash came as a real shock to him. When his ample allowance ran short, a letter to his uncle always brought forth fruit, as it were, sometimes accompanied by a little lecture on extravagance. Mauly did not mind the lecture—he was a good-natured fellow, and believed in giving uncles their head. And the cash, after all, was the chief consideration. But now, for once, there was no cash!

No cash! It was a serious situation. Certainly there were plenty of people in existence who had had the same experience. Lord Mauleverer was quite well aware that there were lots of people who hadn't a

ten-pound note to spare. He thought it very hard lines on them. But it seemed harder, somehow, now that it had come home to himself. He had never thought much about money, or valued it very highly. Sticking to it tightly was a thing he had never dreamed of.

Moosey, Vine & Moosey had given him a shock. Even if they weren't empowered by his guardian to advance him some of his own money, they had plenty of money of their own that they could have advanced had they chosen. They hadn't chosen! Mauly was shocked and grieved by this example of close-fistedness.

He gave Mr. Quelch hardly any attention during third lesson. He was given fifty lines, but he did not heed. What did lines matter to him when he had promised Dr. Pillbury five hundred pounds to provide for his shell-shocked patient, and couldn't keep his promise?

That was a horrid thought. He had to keep his promise—he must keep it. Somehow or other that promise had to be kept, though the skies fell.

At dinner Lord Mauleverer hardly ate. He was too worried to care for food; and he did not even notice when the playful Skinner spilt salt upon his pudding.

After dinner he mooched in the quad by himself, a prey to deep and anxious thought.

There, ten minutes later, Harry Wharton found him, with an expression of amazement fastened on his noble features.

"Anything up?" asked Harry. "Lots!"

Where was the five hundred pounds to come from? It had to come from somewhere—but where? It was a problem that there was nothing in Euclid to equal, and Lord Mauleverer tried to grapple with it, and was reduced to the lowest state of spirits.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. Not a Trade!

"BLESS my soul!" Mr. Quelch, the master of the Remove, made that remark as he stood at the door of the School House. Looking out into the sunny quadrangle after lessons, Mr. Quelch became aware of a peculiar figure approaching him. It was that of a gentleman whose nose was his most prominent feature—a really impressive

feature. The gentleman had an oily complexion, and an oily smile.

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Quelch, a second time.

He recognised the old gentleman. It was Mr. Lazarus, of Courtfield—a keen business gentleman, who dealt in almost every article under the sun in his shop at Courtfield. He would sell a second-hand watch, or bike, or overcoat, or cricket bat, and purchase the same—not at the same figure. He would hire out a caravan, or a bicycle, or a dress-suit. But his chief "line" was the purchase and sale of second-hand clothes and furniture—in that "line" he lived, and moved, and had his being. As he came up to the School House steps Mr. Lazarus swept off his ancient top-hat in polite salute to the Remove master.

"Good-afternoon!" he said affably.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Lazarus!" said the astonished Form master.

"Nize vezers we are getting now, Mr. Quelch."

"Nice—what? Oh, weather! Yes, Certainly! May I ask, Mr. Lazarus, why you have called?"

"Yeth, certainly!" said Mr. Lazarus. "I call to see his lordship, who wishes to sell some sings!"

"Lord Mauleverer?" There was only one lord at Greyfriars.

"Yeth, that is so."

"Bless my soul!"

"No objection, I hope, sir?"

"N-n-no—since you are here," said Mr. Quelch, very much taken aback. "It

—it is certainly very irregular! But

—but since you are here—"

"Shank you, Mr. Quelch!"

Mr. Lazarus passed into the house, and was shown into Lord Mauleverer's study, and Mauly's studymate, Vivian, after a blank stare at Mr. Lazarus, vacated the premises, leaving his lordship alone with the visitor.

"Sit down, Mr. Lazarus, please!" said Lord Mauleverer.

Mauly's manners were very polished, and he had a well-bred boy's respect for age, though inwardly Mauly could not help regarding Mr. Lazarus as "rather a corker."

"Shank you, my lord!" said Mr. Lazarus.

He sat down and laid his ancient hat on the table, where it reflected the sunshine from the window.

"It's very good of you to come so promptly," said Mauly.

"Piziness," said Mr. Lazarus—"piziness, sir! I comes as soon as I can get away from the shop. Always happy to oblige a shentleman! You have some old clothes you wishes to sell, isn't it? Ladies and shentlemens' cast-off apparel bought at the best prices."

"Clobber, by gad!" said Lord Mauleverer. "I hadn't thought of that! That's a second string to the bow. Fact is, Mr. Lazarus, I'm sellin' out."

"Your lordship is leafing school?"

"Oh, no! Not at all! I'm hard up!" explained Lord Mauleverer. "Short of money, you know," he added in elucidation.

"Zose sings will happen!" said Mr. Lazarus sympathetically.

"All the stuff in this study belongs to me," said Lord Mauleverer, with a wave of the hand at his expensive furnishings.

"I believe it costs a lot of money—how much, I don't know. Will you buy the lot?"

"My cootness!" said Mr. Lazarus.

He glanced round the room. Lord Mauleverer's surroundings were sybaritic, and undoubtedly they had cost a great deal of money. Wealthy and affectionate uncles and aunts had con-

tributed costly articles, and Mauleverer had a way of buying anything that took his fancy, regardless of price. Mr. Lazarus' black eyes glittered as he looked round him.

"But you have a master's permission to sell these sings!" he asked.

"Oh, yes! Fellows can always sell their things, if they like. That's all right."

"But what will your lordship do without furniture?"

"That's all right, too. You see, the school provides table and chair, and a square of something—I forget what it's called—that goes on the floor. Linoleum, that's it. I've had them stacked in the box-room to get them out of the way; but I can yank them out again. Vivian won't mind—he's a trump. I want to sell this lot to raise the wind, you know."

"Vat price are you asking?"

"Five hundred pounds."

Mr. Lazarus gazed at Lord Mauleverer like a man in a dream. Expensive as Lord Mauleverer's goods were, certainly they had not cost five hundred pounds. And although Mr. Lazarus, of Courtfield, did an extensive business, it was improbable that he had such a sum in ready cash to handle at a moment's notice. For some minutes there was silence in the study—Lord Mauleverer waiting for the dealer's reply, and Mr. Lazarus wondering dazedly what kind of an ass he had to deal with. He was not accustomed to meeting persons like Mauly in the way of business.

"Five hundred pounds!" he breathed at last.

"Just that," assented Mauleverer. "You see, that's exactly the sum I'm in need of."

"Oh! Zat is why you ask him?"

"That's it."

"My cootness!" said Mr. Lazarus.

"If you hand me that sum it will save me no end of bother," said Lord Mauleverer, by way of an added inducement.

"But zese sings did not cost so much as that?" gasped Mr. Lazarus.

"No, I hardly think so," said Lord Mauleverer thoughtfully. "Let's see, I know that rug was ten guineas, because nunky gave me a special lecture about it when he came, and that fixed it on my mind. Aunt Gloriana gave me the bookcase. I believe it's worth a lot of money. Those crinkly things show that it's something or other—I forget what—very special. The sofa was sixteen guineas. I remember that, too, because the people kept on dunnin' me for it, though I told them I hadn't any money left. There's lots of other things, and they all cost somethin'. But it couldn't have run to five hundred pounds—couldn't possibly. I should think."

"But—but—" gasped Mr. Lazarus, still feeling like a man in a dream—"when you sell sings second-hand you do not get same price as new."

"By gad! Don't you?"

"Never!"

"That's a bit awkward, isn't it?" said Lord Mauleverer, puckering his noble brows in thought, and looking at the dazed Mr. Lazarus. "But perhaps you could stretch a point for once? You see, I've got to have five hundred pounds quick, and if you don't hand it to me for this furniture, what's a fellow to do?"

"My cootness!" said Mr. Lazarus once more. He seemed unable to say anything else in reply to Mauleverer's question.

"There's my clobber, too," said Mauly brightly. "Lots of clothes, you know. I can do with one suit of Etons,

and I can borrow one of Wharton's toppers when I want one—I know he's got two. I'll throw in all the rest, along with the sticks—what?"

"My cootness," said Mr. Lazarus. "I makes you an offer, if you like."

"That's good! Go ahead!"

"For all these sings I giff you twenty pound."

"Eh?"

"Twenty pound."

"But I want five hundred," said Lord Mauleverer in a tone of patient explanation, as if he were speaking to a child.

Mr. Lazarus shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"If you should get five hundred pound for these sings you make a profit on the sale," he said.

"Yaas. That's what I want to do."

"Oh, my cootness!" murmured Mr. Lazarus. "But I should lose money on the transaction, Lord Mauleverer."

"Yaas, I suppose you would," said Lord Mauleverer, eyeing him thoughtfully. "The question is—can you afford it?"

"Wha-a-at?"

"If you couldn't afford to lose money on it, of course, I couldn't expect you to. But if you could—"

"Oh, my cootness!"

Mr. Lazarus rose to his feet. He began to feel that there would be no business done here.

"I say, this is rather rotten," said Lord Mauleverer in dismay. "You're quite sure you couldn't spring five hundred pounds, with the clobber thrown in?"

"Quite sure, my lord!" grinned Mr. Lazarus. "But I gives a pound for a shoot of clothes in good condition."

"A—a—a pound! Oh, my hat! I jolly well wish I could buy a suit of clothes for a pound or ten pounds," said Lord Mauleverer. "There's some-thing' wrong somewhere. Nothin' doin', then?"

"I'm afraid not, my lord."

"You couldn't go to two-fifty, and let me have the other two-fifty afterwards, when your profits come in from somewhere?" asked Lord Mauleverer anxiously.

"Oh, my cootness! No."

Lord Mauleverer rubbed his wrinkled, troubled brow.

"It's horrid awkward," he said. "I'm sorry I've wasted your time, Mr. Lazarus. It was very kind of you to call. You must let me pay your taxi fare from Courtfield."

"But I take no taxi from Courtfield, my lord," said Mr. Lazarus, who was an honest old gentleman. "I walks!"

"But it's over two miles!" said Lord Mauleverer in amazement. "My hat! Dash it all, you can't walk back! Hang on here while I go down and telephone for a taxi."

"Oh, my cootness! I walks back as I came, my lord," said Mr. Lazarus. "I vill not put you to expense. I am very glad to have seen your lordship. Always at your lordship's service."

And Mr. Lazarus backed out of the study and departed. Lord Mauleverer was left in a dismal frame of mind. All his resources were failing him one after another, after all the deep thought he had given to the matter. Billy Bunter grinned into the study a few minutes later.

"You're wanted, Mauly."

"Go away, Bunter!"

"Yah! Mr. Quelch wants you in his study!"

"Oh dear!"

Then suddenly Lord Mauleverer's troubled face brightened.

"Quelchy! By gad! I'll get it from Quelchy!"

And with a greatly relieved mind at that happy thought, Lord Maulvever made his way quite cheerfully to his Form master's study.

But all he got from "Quelchy" was a licking, for the master of the Remove regarded Mauly's cool request for five hundred pounds as something in the nature of a "rag," and punished him accordingly.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Coker to the Rescue!

"HELP!" Coker of the Fifth gave quite a jump.

Horace James Coker was walking along the lane near Greyfriars meditatively, and did not notice particularly where he was going. He had food for thought—much food. For the cricket season was going strong at Greyfriars, and Wingate of the Sixth, for inexplicable reasons, barred Coker from the first eleven. This, in spite of the fact that Coker was the best cricketer inside Greyfriars—or outside—in Coker's opinion, at least.

Thinking over what had better be done in these irritating circumstances, Horace Coker strolled along, absently rapping with his walking-cane as he went at the high wall of a garden that bordered the lane.

Then suddenly over that high wall came the call that made Coker of the Fifth jump.

"Help!"

Coker of the Fifth had his faults. He played cricket in a way that might have made the angels weep. He never regarded as possible or reasonable the existence of more than one opinion on any subject—that one opinion being Horace Coker's. But Coker was a good fellow in the main, and the very last chap to let a cry for help pass unheeded.

He halted and looked at the high wall. The rapping of his stick on the bricks as he sauntered by had apparently reached ears within, and drawn that call for help from somebody who was shut up in the garden. Coker was ready to help him whoever he was. A tree grew close to the wall, the tree that had served Lord Maulvever's turn on another occasion, and Coker clambered up and looked over the wall.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed.

A man stood looking up from the garden, a rather handsome man, with brown eyes that glittered curiously. There was something in his bearing that indicated the former soldier.

"Did you call?" asked Coker, staring down at him from the wall.

"Yes. I heard you passing." The man approached nearer, and whispered up to Coker. "For goodness' sake get me out of this! I've been a prisoner here for I don't know how long."

"A prisoner!" ejaculated Coker. "Kidnapped?"

"I was brought here ill, and now they keep me a prisoner."

"But who—who does?"

"Germans."

"Germans!" almost yelled Coker.

The man nodded mysteriously.

"Yes. A gang of them. One of them passes himself off as a village doctor. Another is in the house yonder, disguised as a woman housekeeper. I am a prisoner. I have been a prisoner ever since I left the Army. Nobody knows."

"I—I suppose not!" gasped Coker.

to help an old soldier who was being persecuted. It did not occur to Coker, in the excitement of the moment, to doubt the man's story. The man was obviously honest and in deep earnest. That the poor fellow's brain was unhinged was a suspicion that did not enter Coker's mind—yet.

The escaping man got a grasp on the wall and dropped over into the lane. Coker dropped beside him, panting from his efforts.

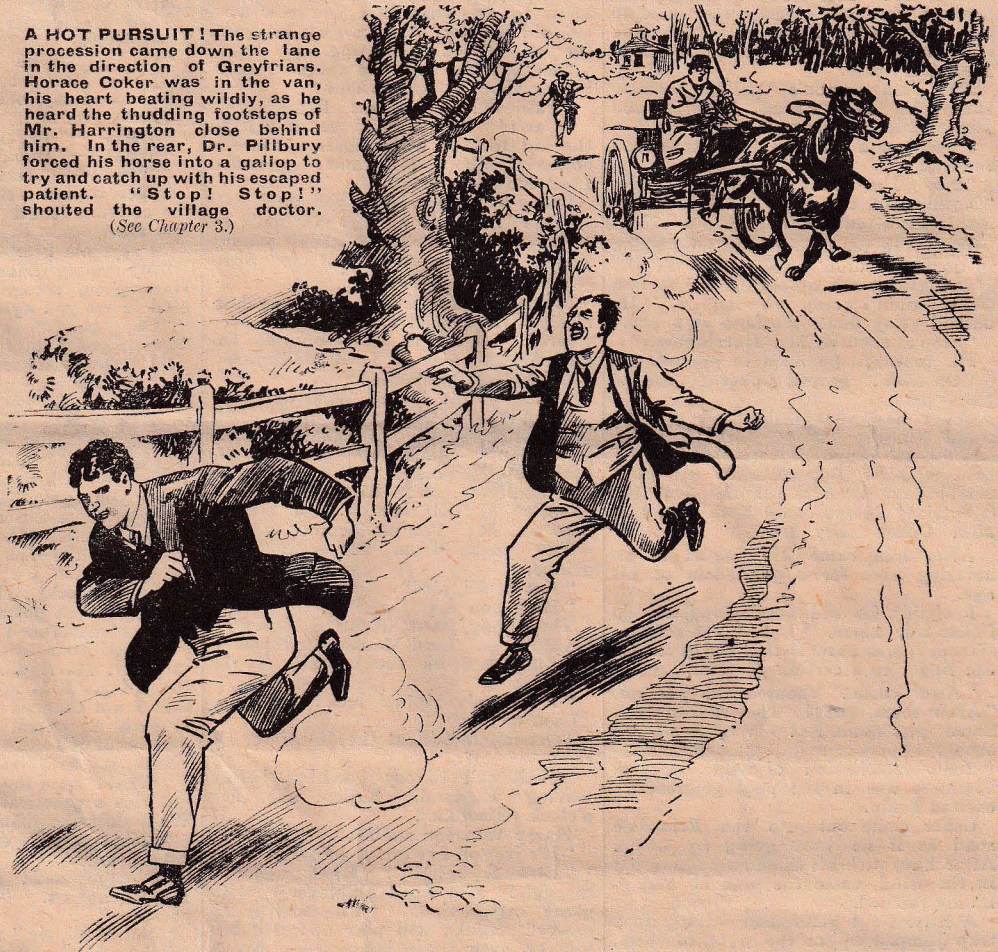
"Well out of that!" he gasped. "Now let's get off to Friardale. This way. The sooner you get to the police the better."

"Yes, yes, yes. This must be reported. But what a wonderful escape! I fell quite heavily into the road, you noticed that?"

"Not hurt, I hope."

A HOT PURSUIT! The strange procession came down the lane in the direction of Greyfriars. Horace Coker was in the van, his heart beating wildly, as he heard the thudding footsteps of Mr. Harrington close behind him. In the rear, Dr. Pillbury forced his horse into a gallop to try and catch up with his escaped patient. "Stop! Stop!" shouted the village doctor.

(See Chapter 3.)



"You really mean to say that you're shut up here by a gang of Germans?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" The man's manner was earnest, excited, his eyes blazing with excitement. "Help me out of this, and take me to the nearest police-station."

"I'll jolly well do that!" said Coker.

"Blest if I ever heard of such a thing! A rotten shame!"

"Quick! A bomb may be thrown if I am seen escaping!"

"Good heavens! Here, take my fist!"

Coker laid his broad chest on the wall, and reached down his hands to the man below. Mr. Henry Harrington grasped them, and with great activity pulled himself up. The strain on Coker was great. But he was a hefty fellow, and Coker would have stood more than that

"Not at all. But how extraordinary that I did not explode."

Coker jumped.

"Wha-a-at?"

"I should have mentioned, perhaps, that I am so charged with high explosive that a touch may make me go off," said Mr. Harrington.

Horace Coker staggered back against the high brick wall.

"It was kind of you to help me out," said Mr. Harrington. "Very kind, indeed! I have often called to persons passing, but they have never helped me. Of course, they may have feared to be blown up if I should explode at an awkward moment. It is a trying life."

"Oh, goodness gracious!" gasped Coker.

He realised the facts now. He moved along the lane to get a little farther away from the rescued man. The poor gentleman seemed very polite and good-tempered, in spite of his unhappy delusion. But with lunatics, Coker realised, you never could tell. He understood now that the "Germans" were merely figments of the poor fellow's fevered fancy, and Coker wondered uneasily what might happen should the man take him, Coker, for a German!

"Let us lose no time, my young friend," said Mr. Harrington. "Take me to the police at once! I require protection."

"Oh crumbs!" groaned Coker. "I—I say, I'll help you up the wall again. You'd better go back."

"Impossible! Take me to the police-station."

"No, no!" urged Coker. "Get back into the garden! Here, come round to the gate and I'll knock! You—you really mustn't wander about, you know. It—it ain't safe."

Mr. Harrington's polite manner vanished. He stared grimly and suspiciously at Coker.

"You are a German!" he exclaimed suddenly.

"No, I'm not!" gasped Coker. "Nothing of the sort! I'm a white man. Oh, Great Scott! Keep off!"

What the poor gentleman was going to do Coker didn't know. But as Mr. Harrington came quickly closer to him Coker didn't stop to inquire. He dashed away down the lane at a run.

"Stop!" shouted Mr. Harrington. His footsteps pounded in pursuit.

"Oh dear!" gasped Coker. And he put it on.

Coker had always declared that he could win the "mile" for the school against all comers. Nobody had ever believed him. But certainly his claim would have been substantiated if the Greyfriars fellows could have seen him now. Coker fairly flew.

After him came Harrington at an amazing pace for a gentleman of his age.

Probably he did not intend to do Coker any harm. But in the circumstances it was natural that Coker should not linger to ascertain the fact.

"After them!" shouted the pursuer. "After them, boys! They're running! Shoot, you dummies! Why don't you shoot?"

Some recollection of wild days in Flanders was in the poor gentleman's excited brain.

Coker came out into the Friardale road as if he were going by steam. After him, with his thick hair blown out in the wind, came the man he had so kindly rescued.

A little stout gentleman driving in a trap jumped up at the sight of them. It was Dr. Pillbury driving to Greyfriars, and his hair almost stood on end at the sight of his patient.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Coker did not even hear. He rushed on towards the school, frantic and breathless. Mr. Harrington may have heard, but he did not heed. He rushed on after Coker.

The alarmed doctor rattled his reins, and drove on in pursuit of the pair of them.

It was an amazing procession that arrived at the gates of the school, and Gosling, the old porter, almost fell down as he beheld it. He quite fell down as Coker came in, for Coker was in too great a hurry to see him in the way, and he butted into Gosling like a battering-ram.

Leaving Gosling for dead, as it were, Coker raced on towards the School House. Mr. Harrington, jumping over the sprawling and gasping Gosling, raced on after him. And from all sides there arose shouts of amazement and consternation.

Harry Wharton met the schoolboy earl in the passage, as he came out of Mr. Quelch's study.

"Licked?" he asked.

"Ow! Yaas!"

"What's the trouble? Been checking Quelch?"

"Nunno! I only asked him to lend me five hundred pounds."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, gad! It may seem funny to you, Wharton! It doesn't feel funny, though!" groaned Mauleverer, squeezing his aching palm.

"Poor old Mauly! Quelch ought to know by this time that you're a born ass, old fellow! But there's a telegram for you. The kid's waiting."

"Read it for me, old chap. I can't bother about telegrams now!"

"Fathead! Here it is! Read it!"

"Can't! You read it, or give it to the kid to take away again! I'm not botherin' about telegrams!" groaned Lord Mauleverer.

"May be somebody ill, you ass!"

"Oh! Poor old nunky! He must be a bit seedy, or his medical johny wouldn't be scuttling off to Switzerland! Give it to me!"

Mauleverer opened the telegram hurriedly. He looked at it, and his face cleared. Sunshine came out on the noble countenance of Lord Mauleverer.

"Hurrah!" he shouted.

"Good news?" asked Wharton.

"Top-hole! The very best! All plain sailin' now! Where's that telegram-kid? Mauleverer plunged his hands into his pockets. "I want to give him half-a-crown! Dash it all, I haven't any half-crowns! A ten-bob note will do! You don't mind, kid?"

The youth from the post office grinned.

"Not at all, sir!"

"Here you are, then!"

The happy youth departed richer by ten shillings. Lord Mauleverer turned a beaming face on the captain of the Remove.

"It's simply rippin' luck!" he said.

"Look at it!"

Wharton looked at the telegram. It ran:

"Shall call to say good-bye before leaving England. Expect me five o'clock.—BROOKE."

Harry Wharton smiled.

"It's just on five now," he said.

"Isn't it toppin'? That sees me through!" said Lord Mauleverer, with great satisfaction. "I'll pitch it to nunky! Nunky will play up! I'll ask him to sack those lawyers—No, I won't, though! I dare say they can't help bein' silly asses, bein' lawyers, you know! But isn't it toppin'? What's that thumpin' row in the quad? Has uncle come?"

Lord Mauleverer ran to the door. It was an arrival, though not that of Sir Reginald Brooke. Just as Mauleverer looked out of the doorway, Coker of the Fifth came pounding breathlessly up the steps. The fate of Gosling was the fate of Mauleverer. Right into his lordship, with a crash, came Coker of the Fifth, and the slim junior spun away from the shock and was strewn on the floor.

"Yow-ow! Oh, great gad! Oooop!" Coker reeled against the wall. He was breathless, spent.

"Shut the door!" he articulated.

But there was no time to shut the

great door of the School House. Coker's pursuer was fairly at his heels.

"Keep him out!" gasped Coker.

"He's mad! Potty! Keep him out!"

"Great Scott!"

Lord Mauleverer sat up, as Mr. Harrington, with his hair tossing and his eyes dancing, rushed into the house.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Mauly Explains!

MR. QUELCH came hurriedly out of his study. From another direction came the Head, and Mr. Prout, the master of the

Fifth. Wingate and Gwynne of the Sixth arrived. Outside the doorway half Greyfriars had gathered, in wild excitement. Coker's amazing flight across the quad, with the wild-looking gentleman at his heels, had drawn amazed attention from all quarters. There was a roar of voices.

Lord Mauleverer picked himself up breathlessly.

"Oh, gad!" he gasped. "It's the chap—How on earth did he come here? I—I say, old bean—"

"Keep him off!" groaned Coker.

"What—" began Mr. Quelch.

"What—" thundered the Head.

"Wha-at—" stuttered Mr. Prout.

Coker of the Fifth dodged away in the crowd. Lord Mauleverer caught Mr. Harrington by the sleeve.

"I say, old bean—"

"My young friend!" exclaimed Mr. Harrington, recognising him, "I am glad to see you again!"

"Oh, good!" gasped Mauleverer.

"Quiet, you know! Take it easy!"

"I was looking for a German," said Mr. Harrington. "One of the Huns who have been keeping me a prisoner in a bungalow. No, I will not shake hands, my young friend; an explosion here would do considerable damage, and I must not risk it. But I am very glad to see you again."

"What does this mean, Mauleverer?"

almost shouted Mr. Quelch.

"This is—the chap, sir! I mean the gentleman I spoke to you about! The shell-shocked chap, sir! Goodness knows how he got away!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"Keep your distance, gentlemen!"

said Mr. Harrington. "Do not press round me. It is my duty to warn you that I am charged with high explosive to such an extent that a catastrophe may occur if I am touched."

"Oh, my hat!" said Wingate.

"What?" said the Head dazedly. "Is—is this a practical joke, or—or what? What does the man mean?"

"He's potty!" came Coker's voice from behind.

"Bless my soul! A lunatic!" said the Head, aghast. "Then how—why—what—"

"Not at all, sir," said Mr. Harrington mildly. "Only an unhappy victim, sir, of a very peculiar misfortune. I am charged from head to foot with a very powerful explosive, and in the event of my being roughly handled the explosion would be likely to wreck this whole building."

"Bless my soul!"

"Poor fellow!" murmured Mr. Prout gently. "He—he must be secured, but—

but gently—gently."

"Here is Dr. Pillbury!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch, in great relief. "Dr. Pillbury, doubtless you will be able—"

The little doctor came panting in. His plump face streamed with perspiration, and several buttons were burst off his frock coat.

"Do not be alarmed!" he gasped.

"This gentleman is my patient—he is quite amenable to reason. He has never

given trouble before. I cannot imagine how he escaped from the garden. Every precaution was taken. Some utterly foolish person must have aided him."

The utterly foolish person—otherwise Coker of the Fifth—slipped quietly away from the back of the crowd. Coker felt a distinct disinclination to figure in the proceedings.

"Come, come, Harry!" said the doctor, slipping his arm through his patient's.

"If you will take your friend into the visitors'-room, Dr. Pillbury, I will order the car to take him away with you," suggested the Head.

The doctor looked greatly relieved. "Thank you very much, Dr. Locke! It would be a help. Come, Harry; this way."

Dr. Pillbury led his patient into the visitors'-room, and the door closed on them. The crowd broke up in a buzz of excitement.

Lord Mauleverer looked out into the quad, anxious to see his uncle. A portly gentleman appeared in the offing; but before Mauly could go out to greet Sir Reginald Brooke, Mr. Quelch called to him:

"Mauleverer!"
"Yaas, sir!"
"Come into my study."
"Oh! Yaas, sir!"

Lord Mauleverer followed the Remove master into his study. Mr. Quelch fixed a very curious look upon him.

"You seem to be acquainted with that—that very unfortunate gentleman, Mauleverer?" he said.

"Yaas, sir," said Mauly. "His name's Harrington. He's a patient of Dr. Pillbury's."

"The unhappy man is at the end of his resources," said the Remove master slowly.

Lord Mauleverer nodded. "Yaas, sir! And—and as I happened to hear about it, I—I thought I ought to butt in. So I told Dr. Pillbury I was goin' to."

"And to whom have you promised the large sum of five hundred pounds?"

"The doctor's goin' to handle it, sir. He's the chap's friend, and lookin' after him without bein' paid. I suppose he's not a rich man—country doctors generally ain't rich, I believe. So if he can weigh in, I can weigh in, sir—as I've got lots of oof—I mean tin—that is to say, cash. If my uncle had been at home, it would have been perfectly simple. But the lawyer johnnies wouldn't shell out when I asked them, for some reason."

Mr. Quelch smiled. "I am not surprised that the solicitors did not shell out, as you call it, Mauleverer."

"Aren't you, sir? I was."
"Hem! You believe, Mauleverer, that your uncle would approve of your expending so large a sum upon a stranger?"

"I'm sure of it, sir! Besides, it isn't a large sum."

"Hem! Some people, less fortunately placed than yourself, Mauleverer, would regard it as a very large sum indeed."

"Yaas, I suppose Bunter would, frinstance," agreed Lord Mauleverer reflectively. "Somethin' wrong somewhere. But I'm glad, sir, that you approve of my wheeze—I mean my idea."

"I have not said so, Mauleverer."
"As it turns out, sir, it's all right," said Lord Mauleverer brightly. "Just after you licked me—"

"What?"
"I—I mean, just after my interview with you, sir, there was a telegram from nunky—"

"From whom?"

"My uncle, sir! Says he's comin' to say good-bye before he bunks—I—I mean before he buzzes off. I saw him in the quad a minute ago, sir—so he's come. You'll see, sir, that he will play up like a little man when I put it to him," said Lord Mauleverer confidently.

"Ahem! You must not put your expectations too high, Mauleverer," said Mr. Quelch, with a very kindly look at the dandy of the Remove. "As your uncle has arrived, you may go now, my boy. If I had known all the circumstances I should not have caved you."

"Thaak you, sir!" murmured Mauleverer, quite pleased with his Form master's graciousness, nevertheless still feeling an ache in his palm.

Mr. Quelch's regret for the caning did not, unfortunately, make any difference to that.

"You may go, Mauleverer."
And Lord Mauleverer went to look for his uncle.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Trumps!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. were chatting with Sir Reginald Brooke in the hall when Lord Mauleverer came up. The old baronet's kindly eyes fell on his nephew, and he held out his hand. Mauly gave him his left.

"Fin damaged!" he explained. "My dear boy! An accident at cricket?" asked Sir Reginald, with concern.

"Nunno! Accident with a Form master."
"Oh!"

"It's jolly good of you to butt in, sir," said Mauleverer. "I'm always jolly glad to see you, and gladder than ever now. Don't go, you fellows. I want you to help me persuade nunky if he's obstinate. But I think it will be all right. I hope you're feelin' pretty well, uncle?"

"I am not at my best, Herbert," said the baronet. "That is why I am ordered to take a complete rest in Switzerland. But I could not go away for so long without saying good-bye to you; so, on second thoughts, I came down to-day. But my letter holds good, you know. I shall expect you to curb your extravagant habits, and keep within your allowance while I am away."

"I'm goin' to, sir. Easy enough if a fellow sets his mind to it," said Lord Mauleverer cheerfully. "After this five hundred pounds—"

"What?"
"After this five hundred pounds, I shan't worry you for any extra tin the rest of the term," said Lord Mauleverer.

Sir Reginald Brooke's eyeglass dropped from his eye.

"Five hundred pounds!" he repeated.

"Yaas."

"Herbert! You—you are not requesting me to hand you the sum of five hundred pounds?" said Sir Reginald Brooke faintly.

"Yaas."
Harry Wharton & Co. grinned. The expression on Sir

Reginald Brooke's face was, as Bob Cherry remarked later, worth five hundred quid in itself, at least.

"Perhaps I'd better explain," said Mauleverer.

"Perhaps you had!" assented his guardian, with extreme dryness of manner.

And Lord Mauleverer, for the second time that afternoon, explained how his escaping from Bunter had led to making the acquaintance of Harry Harrington, and how he had afterwards made the offer of five hundred pounds to Dr. Pillbury, the village doctor, for the relief of the unfortunate gentleman.

Sir Reginald Brooke polished his eyeglass while he listened. Harry Wharton & Co. wondered how he was going to take it. His face gave little sign.

"Got it, uncle?" asked Lord Mauleverer at last.

"I think I understand, Herbert."
"Oh, good! I don't suppose you've got five hundred pounds in your pocket, uncle? You see, Harrington and Dr. Pillbury are in the visitors'-room now."

"No."
"But it's all right; a cheque will do."
"I do not generally travel with a cheque-book in my pocket, Herbert."

"Oh, gad!"
"Herbert, you are a young donkey!"

"Eh?"
"It is utterly impossible for me to hand you five hundred pounds of your own money until you come of age."

"Good gad!"
"But," said the old gentleman, his face breaking into a smile, "I can hand out five hundred pounds of my own money, and that I shall proceed to do—to redeem your promise, Herbert; also, because I think it is my duty to do so. Now let me see the poor gentleman, and the doctor, as they are here."

And Sir Reginald was shown into the visitors'-room.

Dr. Pillbury never quite recovered from his surprise at receiving a cheque for £500 from Mauly's guardian for the benefit of his patient. And he had always a kindly eye for Mauly when he came to Greyfriars afterwards. Harry Wharton & Co. were glad that the affair had ended so happily, and they did not soon forget it, but Lord Mauleverer did. His lordship had the problem before him of keeping within his allowance for the rest of the term, and that problem taxed Mauly's faculties to the utmost, to the exclusion of all other matters, great or small.

THE END.

(You will all enjoy reading: "THE BOY WITH A SECRET!" next week's topping long complete tale of Harry Wharton & Co., of Greyfriars.)


MY CYCLE BARGAINS

ONLY 2/6 A WEEK

Brand New 1928 Coventry Models. Fully Guaranteed. Sent on 15 Days' approval. Packed free and Carriage paid. Only a small deposit. Money refunded if dissatisfied. Write to-day. Established 30 years.

ART LIST FREE

George King COVENTRY. LTD



IN DEEP DISGRACE!

Barred by his schoolfellows—cut by his own chum. That's the painful situation in which Ernest Levison finds himself. But how has this come about? Levison used to be so popular!

Barred by the School



By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

(Author of the tales of Tom Merry & Co., of St. Jim's, appearing in the "Gem" every Wednesday.)

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Cardew Explains!

"I'VE got some news for you, Levison!" drawled Ralph Reckness Cardew, of the Fourth Form of St. Jim's.

"Keep it!" snapped Levison of the Fourth.

Cardew had just entered Study No. 9, where Ernest Levison and his minor, Frank, were seated, staring silently out of the window that looked down on the darkening quad.

There was a moody scowl on both the Levisons' brows, and Cardew was quick to notice it.

Two days ago there was not a happier fellow or a more popular junior at St. Jim's than Levison of the Fourth. But in those two days many things had happened, and he was now the most unhappy, and, worse still, the most unpopular fellow in the school.

For Ernest Levison was in disgrace.

It had all come about in such a strange manner, and all the blame lay at the feet of Baggy Trimble, the fat mischief-maker of the Fourth. Baggy had started a story round the school that Levison had been sacked from Greyfriars, terms ago, for stealing. Really, Baggy had asked for trouble by circulating that horrible rumour, and everyone expected Levison to deny the accusation.

Levison had not denied it, and, to everyone's amazement, had refused to disprove the story. That, of course, was his undoing. Whatever his reasons were for letting the rumour stand nobody knew; but they could do nothing but believe it, since Levison would not clear his name.

A rift in the lute in Study No. 9 had resulted. Sidney Clive, of that study, had moved out, ashamed of his old chum, and Ralph Cardew was expected to do the same. Nobody wanted a thief for a chum. But, strangely enough, Cardew had kept on his friendship with Levison, although everyone else had cut him.

That was the state of affairs when Ralph Cardew sauntered lazily into Study No. 9 as the darkness settled over the school.

"Don't you want to hear my news?" asked Cardew lightly.

"No."

But Frank turned his eyes at once upon Cardew.

"About my sister, Doris?" he asked.

THE POPULAR.—No. 492.

"Oh!" said Levison of the Fourth. "Is that it, Cardew?"

"Yes. I had the honour and pleasure of escortin' two young ladies to Aunt Catherine's, at Lexham."

"You did?" shouted Frank.

"My unworthy self," assented Cardew.

Levison of the Fourth gave him a grim look.

"What trick have you been playing now?" he asked.

"Dear man, don't get your rag out!" said Cardew. "You were going to meet Doris and Cousin Ethel this afternoon, what? And bring Doris to St. Jim's? But I butted in with a car; led the dear girls to suppose that it was arranged for them to come across to St. Jim's by road, instead of rail, an' bagged them. The arrangement was a genuine one—I made it myself! But I didn't explain to them that it was entirely my own brilliant idea. They wouldn't have agreed to leave so many affectionate relatives and friends hangin' up at Rylcombe Station if I had."

"You cheeky sweep!" exclaimed Frank indignantly.

"Can it, dear boy—can it!" implored Cardew. "After we left Wayland Junction there was a chapter of giddy accidents. Nobody hurt—that's all right! First of all, the chauffeur took the wrong road—"

"On your instructions!" snapped Levison.

"Dear man, you ought to be a lawyer!" said Cardew admiringly. "Gussy never thought of guessin' that. Then there was a breakdown, eight miles from anywhere—"

"You squared the chauffeur!"

"Did I?" said Cardew reflectively.

"Well, it's barely possible that there's somethin' in it. He said somethin' about a magneto. I don't know what a magneto is, but I let it go at that. The delay was considerable; car got goin' again just in time to take the ladies on to Lexham, without comin' to St. Jim's at all. They sent no end of regrets. I did my best to cheer them, but I am afraid they were bored. Waitin' in the car wasn't half so excitin' as what they'd have seen at St. Jim's; f'rinstance, say, a fight between Doris' brother and Ethel's cousin, D'Arcy, or somethin' of the kind of an exhilaratin' nature."

"Oh!" said Frank.

Levison stared grimly at Cardew. He understood it all now.

That afternoon Doris Levison and Ethel Cleveland, cousin of D'Arcy of the Fourth, were coming down to the school on a short visit. With Levison in disgrace, it had seemed a most unfortunate situation, for who could explain to Miss Doris that her brother was barred by the school for a past sin? And yet how could she possibly miss the facts when she arrived, to find Levison on anything but speaking terms with D'Arcy and Tom Merry & Co.?

Realising the acuteness of the situation, Ralph Cardew had that afternoon butted in with the object of preventing Doris Levison and Cousin Ethel from coming to St. Jim's. He had been successful!

Levison could not help feeling relieved.

"It was like your cheek, Cardew!" said Frank at last.

"I know it, dear youth."

"You're sure Doris and Ethel didn't suspect it was a spoof breakdown, and catch on to something?"

Cardew smiled.

"Quite."

"Well, it's just as well," said Frank, with a deep breath. "It was like Cardew's cheek, Ernie, but—but I'm glad."

"Time you got into the Third Form-room if you don't want Mr. Selby after you, Frank," said Levison.

"Right-ho!"

Levison minor quitted the study, his face much more cheerful now. He understood Cardew's motives, and he was glad that that painful meeting had not taken place, after all. Cardew, the slacker of the Fourth, had put in a whole afternoon—not to mention the expense of a car—to save Doris Levison from learning that her brother was an outcast in the school. It was like Cardew; he was always doing what was most unexpected.

The dandy of the Fourth stretched himself in the armchair, and crossed one elegant leg over the other. Levison stood looking at him with a moody brow, and Cardew returned his gaze with a lazy, whimsical smile.

Levison understood as well as his minor did; and he was glad—deeply relieved—that Doris had not come. But he was not in a mood to feel grateful to anybody.

Cardew wondered with quite undisturbed tranquillity whether Ernest Levison was going to cut up rusty. Perhaps Levison was not certain for some minutes. But he turned away at

last, and sat down at the table to work. Cardew watched him idly as he worked.

The black look was still on Levison's face. It seldom left him now. Neither was he working with the keenness of old. For a long time now Levison of the Fourth had become one of Mr. Lathom's best pupils. But during the past day or so, Mr. Lathom had had very serious faults to find with Levison—careless and slovenly work, and impertinence in the Form-room. Since the date of the Greyfriars match, when Levison had played up so splendidly for St. Jim's, the unhappy boy had been on the down-grade, and every day seemed to make a fresh difference. More and more Ernest Levison was reverting to his old self—the "old Levison" who had been the blackest among the black sheep of the school many terms ago.

Cardew watched him, and wondered.

Every fellow in the Lower School, excepting Frank, was down on Levison of the Fourth. He was an utter outcast now.

Even Cardew, who would have remained his friend, had not believed him innocent of what was laid to his charge, and Levison had repelled his friendship with scorn.

To most of the fellows the evil that Levison was now showing came as no great surprise. The old Levison was breaking out again, that was all.

But Cardew, with all his careless ways, was a keen observer. While Levison's guilt seemed beyond a shadow of a doubt, Cardew's doubts were growing stronger and stronger.

Levison shut up his books suddenly.

"Not finished?" asked Cardew.

"Yes."

"That won't satisfy Lathom in the mornin'."

"Hang Lathom!" said Levison briefly.

"Aren't you goin' to help me with my prep?"

"No."

"You used to be quite keen on it. Now you let me slack about an' never urge me to do my giddy duty."

Levison looked at him.

"I've asked you before not to speak to me, Cardew," he said.

"I remember."

"Well, don't do it."

"Dear man, you know how talkative I am," urged Cardew. "Must hear the music of my own dulcet tones. I'm not doin' any prep. I shall have trouble with the Lathom bird to-morrow. We'll go through it together—what?"

Levison did not answer. He turned to the door.

"Hold on a minute, old bean," said Cardew lazily. "I've got somethin' to say."

"I don't want to hear it."

"Lend me your giddy ears, all the same. You've never told me why you had to leave Greyfriars, Levison."

"And I don't intend to."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't choose."

"Good man! Never satisfy idle curiosity," assented Cardew. "But I don't believe what Trimble got from Bunter when the Greyfriars fellows were over here."

Levison turned on him.

"You don't believe it?" he asked bitterly. "You don't believe that I was kicked out of Greyfriars for robbing the headmaster?"

"No," said Cardew.

"Why not?" sneered Levison. "Everybody else believes it. Bunter told Trimble, and they're both such truthful chaps, both of them."

"Nobody would have taken Bunter's word, or Trimble's, either," said Cardew. "You've only got yourself to thank, Levison. It's easy enough to get the truth out if you like, and you won't do it. If you let the case go by default, naturally you're considered guilty."

"I know that."

"You've got some reason?"

"Has that only just occurred to you?" asked Levison bitterly.

"And you won't say what it is?"

"No," said Levison, "I won't."

"Not even to your old pal?" asked Cardew lightly. But though his manner was light, his eyes were earnest.

"I've got no pals," said Levison coolly.

"And you could explain if you liked?"

"Yes. And I won't say a word," said Levison, between his teeth. "Not a syllable! I had a reason for not putting Trimble's yarn to the test—a good reason. But it wasn't a reason that I could shout all over the school. It was my own business, anyhow. I didn't choose to leave St. Jim's."

"Leave St. Jim's!" echoed Cardew, with a start.

"It might have come to that; it would have come to that. I thought my friends had faith enough in me to stand by me, even if I didn't disprove that fat rascal's yarn. They hadn't. I don't know that I blame them." Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"Before you came here I was a pretty hard case. I reckoned I had lived it down; but that turns out to be a mistake. Give a dog a bad name and hang him. It hasn't been so jolly easy to keep straight after what I was. I dare say it's not in me to keep it up, anyway. Perhaps they're all right. Perhaps I'm a rotter past praying for, as they all think. Well, I may as well have the game as the name. Anyhow, I'm not going to be turned out of St. Jim's to please anybody. I'm holding on."

"But—but I don't understand!"

"I know you don't."

"You're accused of having been sacked from your old school for theft. Disproving it couldn't harm you here."

"It could, and would."

"But how?"

Levison looked at him mockingly.

"And you're a keen chap—one of the keenest," he said, "and you don't see! Perhaps I'm pulling your leg—lying, you know. Any chap here will tell you what a liar Levison of the Fourth used to be. It's just breaking out again. Same old Levison, sick of humbugging. That's how it is. Can't you understand that?"

"No," said Cardew, "that's not it. But if you'd tell me—"

"Well, I won't!"

And with that Ernest Levison left the study. Cardew remained in the arm-chair, his brows wrinkled in thought, thinking deeply, forgetful of prep and forgetful of his preparation. It was not often that Ralph Reckness Cardew, who had a keenness far beyond his years, was puzzled; but he was puzzled now. But through all his doubts and perplexity one thing was clear now to his mind. Bunter's story, repeated by Trimble, was false, for whatever reason Levison had left his old school, it was not for a crime. Cardew was sure of that now sure that Levison could prove it if he chose.

But why did he not choose?

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Levison's Reply!

TOM MERRY knitted his brows, and a troubled look came over his sunny face. It was Saturday afternoon, and Tom was standing on the steps of the School House, looking out into the quad. At a little distance, Racke and Crooke of the Shell were talking to Ernest Levison.

The three seemed quite friendly.

The two outsiders of the Shell had openly rejoiced in Levison's disgrace when it had happened. They had made no secret of their satisfaction, and with great joy they had joined better fellows in turning Levison down.

Once—it was not so very long ago—Levison had been hand in glove with Racke and Crooke and Mellish and the other black sheep. They had bitterly resented his turning his back on them. For long—so long, indeed, as Levison was able to hold up his head in the House—he had kept his distance from the shady set. And so his downfall had brought satisfaction to his one-time associates—they had gone out of their way to "rub it in." Not that Levison had cared much; it was not the opinion of Racke & Co. that was likely to worry him.

Now there was a change. Levison, apparently, had made it up with his former friends. Even if he had been expelled from his old school for stealing, Racke & Co. were willing to know him for their own purposes, and after they had "rubbed in" his disgrace and the satisfaction it afforded them. Levison had more brains than the whole flock of black sheep put together; in his shady days he had been very useful to them. Now, apparently, he was gathered into the fold again. Tom Merry could see that the three juniors were planning some excursion for the afternoon, and he did not need telling that it was a questionable one.

It worried Tom.

He had never chummed with Levison, certainly, but he had liked him well enough, after his reform. If the fellow was a thief—and it seemed that he was—Tom certainly wanted nothing to do with him, but he could not help feeling that it was hard for the past to rise up like this against a fellow who, whatever he had been, had turned over a new leaf. Tom did not want to come into contact with him, but he was sorry to see him going deeper down. There was good in Levison, whatever he was and whatever he had done, Tom knew that. At St. Jim's he would never be able to hold up his head again, but that was no reason why he should throw in his lot with the black sheep of the school, and sink lower still.

Levison left the other two juniors and came towards the steps.

"I'll be back in a tick!" he called out as he left them, and he came up the steps and almost ran into Tom Merry.

He gave the captain of the Shell a look of quick dislike, and stepped aside to pass him. And Tom, moved by a kind impulse, called to him.

"Hold on, Levison, a minute!"

Levison stared round at him as he picked up his cap.

"Hallo! What the thump do you want? I'm going out."

"Only a word or two," said Tom mildly.

He drew Levison into the window recess in the hall.

"Look here, Levison, you've come down with a crash, and it can't be helped, I suppose. But my belief is that you've been doing your best, and play-

ing the game for a good time past. I know some fellows think that you've been humbugging all the time, but I'm certain that it isn't so."

"Thank you!"

"I know that you've chucked up your old rotten ways ever since young Frank has been here," said Tom. "All your friends were glad of it. Levison, it's no good talking about being friends now, for that's impossible, but I'm very sorry to see you taking up with Racke and Crooke again. I know what that means."

Levison smiled—his old evil smile.

"Pub-haunting, and all that," said Tom.

"Quite so!"

"Is it good enough, Levison?" said Tom earnestly.

"Isn't it good enough for me?" asked Levison, with sarcastic surprise. "I should have thought it was rather good of Racke to be willing to speak to a thief! Even Racke isn't quite so bad as that, you know. He has a moral superiority over me, and he waives it and offers to be friendly. Naturally I jump at the chance."

Tom Merry set his lips a little.

"If you're only going to mock, it's not much use my speaking," he said. "You've come a mucker, now it's come out why you had to leave Greyfriars and—"

"Has it come out?"

"What's the good of beating about the bush?" said Tom, a little irritably. "When a fellow's accused of being a thief, and doesn't defend himself, that settles the matter for any straightforward chap."

"I suppose so!" said Levison, with a no-l. "Well, as the matter's settled to your satisfaction, why not let it rest? After a fellow's stolen, he can't fall much farther."

"I—I suppose that's so, in a way," said Tom, hesitating. "But—but you're too good for Racke's kind of game, all the same, Levison. What's the good of playing the shady goat, and risking getting the sack? There can't be much pleasure in it for a fellow of your intelligence. Racke is a fool as well as a blackguard, but you're no fool."

"I see!" said Levison mockingly. "You'd like my company this afternoon!"

"Well, no!" said Tom.

"Dear man! You're sorry to see me with Racke going downhill a little farther than I've got already. You advise me to chuck up Racke's friendship, such as it is—"

"Yes," said Tom.

"Without offering me your own in exchange?"

Tom was silent.

He felt the force of what Levison said, but there was no help for it. If Levison had been expelled from Greyfriars for theft, Tom Merry did not want to have anything to do with him.

Levison burst into a laugh.

"Well, I'm going out with Racke this afternoon," he said. "I'm going down as deep as Racke, or deeper. I'm going to have the game as well as the name. I used to be considered a hard case—in the merry old days. I'm going to be a harder case still. And if the fault rests on anybody's shoulders, Tom Merry, it's on yours."

"Mine?" exclaimed Tom.

"Yours," said Levison. "It's too late now, I'm fed up. But you could have helped me. You see, the yarn that Bunter spun to Trimble was all lies—lies from beginning to end. Bunter lies

as naturally as he breathes, and Trimble's the same. I've no doubt he put trimmings on what Bunter told him. You chose to believe the lies!"

"I didn't choose," said Tom. "I never believed a word of it at first. You refused to put the matter to the test."

"For reasons of my own."

"What reasons?"

Levison's lips curled.

"If you'd asked me that at the time I might have told you—I don't know. Certainly I don't intend to tell you anything now. I'm not going to place myself at any fellow's mercy—after my late experiences."

Tom stared at him.

"How? What do you mean? At a fellow's mercy?"

"You don't understand?"

"No, I don't."

Levison laughed.

"You wouldn't!" he said. "Well, if you've finished I'll get off. My pals are waiting for me—my dear pals!" He laughed again, a laugh that was not good to hear. "Thanks no end for your kind advice. So kind of you to try to save me from going to the merry bow-wows—trying to save me with one hand, and giving me a shove off with the other, by gad! I'm going to give you something in return for your kindness."

"What do you mean?"

"That!" said Levison.

Smack!

Levison's open hand came with a crash across Tom Merry's face, and the Shell fellow staggered back and fell in the window-seat. Levison laughed, and ran lightly out of the house.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

At the Cross-Roads!

"BIT of a change for you, old top!" Racke grinned as he spoke.

Levison, Crooke, and Racke were strolling along the towing-path behind the Green Man. They stopped at the inn gate. Crooke opened the gate, like one familiar with the surroundings—as, indeed, he was. It was no new thing for Racke and Crooke to pay surreptitious visits to that disreputable quarter on a half-holiday, strictly under the rose. But it was a long time since Ernest Levison had shared in their dingy pursuits.

"Yes," said Levison, "it's a change."

He stopped at the gate and stood leaning upon it.

In the inn garden a fat and loudly-dressed man waved a cigar at the juniors with a welcoming gesture. It was Mr. Joseph Banks, who was quite glad to see three pigeons arrive to be plucked.

"Come on!" said Crooke, and he went up the garden path.

"Come on, Levison!" said Racke, staring at the moody Fourth-Former leaning on the gate.

Levison did not answer.

He had come out with the two black sheep of the School House, fully intending to join them in smoking and playing banker in the back parlour of the Green Man, in his old dingy way. His mind was made up—bitterly, savagely made up. He had done his best. He had atoned for the past as well as it could be atoned for, and it was all useless. The past was not to be lived down. It had risen against him once more, and this time there was no hope. He was condemned by the school. He was barred by all the fellows he liked and respected. Why should he not indemnify himself as he could, and take, at least, what was going?

That was how he had looked at it in his bitter despondency and anger. But now, as he stood on the verge of the last and lowest plunge, he knew that he could not do it.

His reform had gone deeper than he had been aware himself. The old life of dingy blackguardism had lost its appeal to him.

The reeking, smoky atmosphere of the Green Man parlour, the greedy face of Joe Banks, the greasy cards, the feverish excitement of gambling, the thought of it all filled him with disgust, almost with sickness. There was no solace in that. He knew it now. As he leaned on the gate he was conscious of nothing but black depression. It seemed as if there was no sun in the sky for him.

Racke stared at him. He was far from understanding the thoughts that passed through a mind like Levison's.

"Aren't you coming in?" he asked.

"No."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing!" said Levison sullenly.

Aubrey Racke sneered.

"Cold feet?" he asked. "What rot! It's safe enough."

"I'm not thinking of that."

"Then what the thump do you mean?" demanded Racke. "Aren't we here for a little game? I've told Banks you're comin', and he's expectin' you, glad to give you a welcome. Come in!"

"Go and get your little game," said Levison. "I'm not coming in. Leave me alone!"

"I'll leave you alone fast enough!" sneered Racke angrily. "Nobody's very anxious for your society, if you come to that. You ought to be jolly grateful for being taken up at all, if you ask me."

"Let it go at that," said Levison quietly. "I don't want to quarrel with you, Racke. Only let me alone."

"I'll let you alone fast enough!" snarled Racke. "Go and eat coke!"

Levison glared at him and clenched his fist. But the next moment he unclenched them and turned abruptly away and strode down the towing-path, with his hands driven deep into his pockets. Never had he felt so "down and out" as he felt that sunny afternoon.

He threw himself into the thick grass by the river at last to rest, tired by his tramping and by the emotions in his breast. He lay in the grass and stared away across the shining river.

A boat came into sight. He heard a cheery voice calling:

"Put it on, you fellows!"

It was Figgins' voice. Figgins was steering. Fatty, Wynn, Kerr, Redfern, and Owen were rowing. The New House juniors looked ruddy and cheery, enjoying their half-holiday. Levison watched the boat pass, with a gloomy brow. The juniors did not glance towards the figure stretched in the grass on the bank. He watched the boat cut of sight, his brow growing blacker and blacker.

But it was only trouble and misery in his face. The evil was not there. What had he done to deserve what had happened to him? Once, certainly, he had done enough to deserve heavy punishment, even punishment as heavy as he was receiving now. But that was long past. He had done his best to make up for that. He could say, with a clear conscience, that he had done his best. And now—

He remembered bitterly how he had looked forward to the day of the Greyfriars match, when he was to play in Tom Merry's eleven against the team from his old school. How little he had dreamed of what that day had in store

for him then! How contemptuous he had been towards Trimble's spying and prying! He had even refused Cardew's offer to keep the prying Baggy at a distance from the Greyfriars fellows. He had not cared; he had not known that he had anything to fear. Who could have foreseen this? It was so long since he had left Greyfriars. Harry Wharton & Co. had visited St. Jim's many times since. He had never dreamed that that old trouble at Greyfriars could rise up against him at St. Jim's. And Bunter, for no reason that he could think of, but the love of lying—Bunter had lied. And he could not prove that the lie was a lie because his tongue was tied, and the lie was believed. And the fellows did not even understand why his tongue was tied, why he could not, dared not, call on the head-master of Greyfriars to prove that Bunter and Trimble had lied.

It seemed so easy to Tom Merry & Co. for a fellow whose honour was in question to place the matter before the House-master and demand inquiry. Easy enough for a fellow like Tom Merry, or Blake, or Figgins, or D'Arcy. Not easy for Ernest Levison. His tongue was tied—and he wondered that the fellows did not guess why. Yet not even Cardew guessed.

He wondered, as he lay in the grass, whether it would not be better to risk all—clear himself, at least, of the accusation against him, and leave St. Jim's; for he did not doubt that it would come to that. He would go; but he would leave the fellows he respected respecting him. He wondered.

There was a step on the towing-path, and he started as he saw Ralph Reckness Cardew. Cardew saw him at the same moment.

"Found you, old bean!" he said. He did not say, and his face did not betray, how glad he was to find Levison there, and not with Racke & Co. "Been lookin' for you for over an hour."

He sat in the grass beside Levison.

"Improvin' the shinin' hour by puttin' in some thinkin'—what?" he asked lazily.

"Yes."

"Any results?" smiled Cardew.

"Yes. I'm going to stick it out," said Levison. "I won't be driven away from St. Jim's! I'm not doing Frank much good now, but he would miss me. And Doris—" He broke off. "I'm sticking it out. But it's going to be hard."

And he did not speak again, and lay in the grass, silent, thinking—thinking till the gathering dusk warned him that it was time to return to the school. And Cardew, equally silent, walked back with him to St. Jim's, perplexed, wondering, scarcely understanding his friend's mood, but realising that Levison's evil angel had left him at last—that the fellow who walked silently by his side was once more the Levison he had known.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. To Fight or not to Fight?

TOM MERRY & CO. were waiting for Levison to come in.

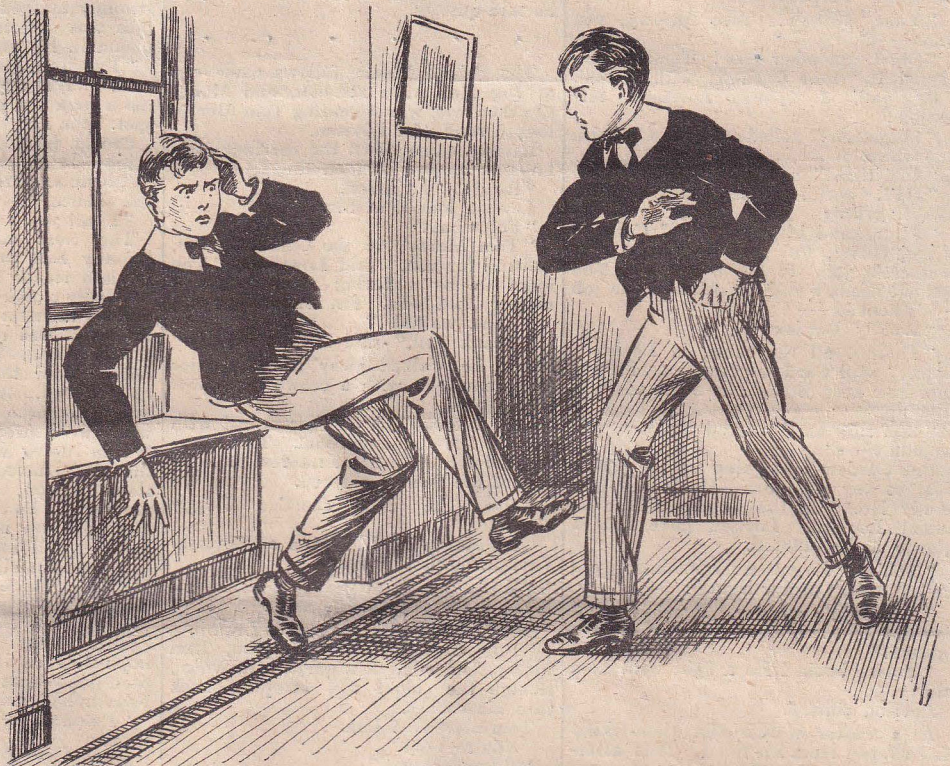
Quite an army of fellows, in fact, were waiting. It was known that Levison had smacked Tom Merry's face, and that there was to be a fight between Tom Merry and Levison of the Fourth—and that was a very interesting circumstance in itself. Tom

up the sponge for him when he's licked."

"There's Cardew," remarked Blake.

"Is Cardew stickin' to him?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Blake. "Nobody ever knows what Cardew may or may not do! It would be just like him to stick to Levison because everybody is down on him—just out of contrary pigheadedness!"



STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER! "Thanks no end for your good advice," sneered Levison. "So kind of you to try to save me from going to the bow-wows. Take this for your kindness!" Smack! Levison's open palm came with a crash across Tom Merry's face. (See Chapter 2.)

Merry was a great fighting-man; and Levison, though scarcely the match of the Shell fellow, was hard as nails, and known to have plenty of pluck and an iron nerve. That little "mill" was likely to be worth watching, and all the fellows who had heard the news booked themselves for front seats, so to speak. And, needless to say, all the sympathy and good wishes were on Tom Merry's side. Tom was popular, and Levison of the Fourth was at the very nadir of unpopularity. Manners and Lowther knew why the fight was taking place; the other fellows only knew that it was taking place, but they were satisfied that the fault was on Levison's side—as, indeed, it was. Tom was not a fellow to quarrel without adequate cause.

So much an outcast now was Ernest Levison that it was doubtful whether among all the crowd of St. Jim's fellows he would find a second, unless he called on the services of his minor in the Third Form. Baggy Trimble, who never could mind his own business, made it a point to ask Sidney Clive whether he was seconding Levison, and Clive did not even trouble to answer the inquisitive Baggy. But when Blake asked him the South African junior replied briefly in the negative.

Whereupon Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the ornament of the Fourth, assumed a very thoughtful expression.

"It's a bit wotten!" he said. "Levison ought to have somebody to throw

"Levison doesn't seem in a hurry to come in, though," remarked Dig. Blake chuckled.

"I dare say by this time he's sorry he got Tommy's back up. Tommy can punch. Not like this study; but he can punch! Levison's for it as soon as he gets in front of Tommy."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Nobody expected Levison to come out best in the impending combat; but everybody expected him to put up a determined fight, and that Tom Merry would have to go "all out." Tom was aware of that himself, and he was in a determined mood. Levison's smack on his face still seemed to burn when he thought of it. He felt that it would have been wiser perhaps to leave the black sheep to go on the road to ruin his own way; but his intervention had been well meant, at least. There was no excuse whatever for Levison's insolent rejoinder, so far as Tom could see.

When Levison came in at the gates with Cardew some time later, he was the eyefore of a very large number of eyes. Some of the juniors wondered whether he had stayed out so long intentionally to avoid the conflict.

Levison's face was very grave and his manner very quiet. He did not seem to observe the interest he excited. He came up the School House steps with Cardew and entered the House. He went up the

staircase by himself, Cardew remaining downstairs. He, if not Levison, had observed the general excitement.

"Anything on, you fellows?" he asked, addressing Blake & Co.

"Yaas, wathah!" smiled Arthur Augustus. "Are you secondin' Levison, Cardew?"

"Shut up!" growled Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Secondin' him?" repeated Cardew.

"I don't catch on. Is Levison goin' on the giddy warpath?"

"Yaas, wathah! Tom Mewwy, you know."

"Oh, I remember now! Tommy mentioned it," said Cardew, with a nod.

"By gad, I believe Levison's forgotten!"

"Forgotten!" yelled Study No. 6, with one voice.

"Just that!" said Cardew, carelessly.

"He'll get reminded, then!" said Blake, grimly.

"I'll remind him," assented Cardew.

"Yes, Gussy, I'm goin' to second him if there's goin' to be a scrap. You fellows needn't rush in claimin' the job—it's booked—"

"Weally, Cardew—"

"Thanks, all the same, in Levison's name," said Cardew gravely. "I'll tell him how keen Study No. 6 are to back him up."

"You silly ass!" roared Blake. "We wouldn't—"

"But Cardew was going up the stairs, deaf to any rejoinder. He looked into Study No. 9 in the Fourth, where he found Levison. Levison gave him a glance as he entered.

"You've forgotten somethin', old bean," said Cardew lightly.

"I shouldn't wonder. I've had a lot to think of," said Levison. "What's the matter?"

"You're booked for a fight with Tom Merry."

Levison started.

As a matter of fact, the whole thing had slipped from his mind. That afternoon he had been thinking of other things—after leaving Racké & Co. He had been through a stress of mind that left little room for trifles. He had stood at the cross-roads, as it were, and made his choice between the downward path and the hard, uphill road, where he would have to fight every inch of his way. It was the latter that he had chosen, and his mood, when he returned to St. Jim's, was very different from the mood in which he had left. In those quiet hours by the river bank he had fought with and quelled the evil spirit. He was himself again, like a fellow emerging from an evil dream.

Cardew's words came like a shock to him.

"A fight with Tom Merry?" he repeated. "Oh, yes, I remember! I—I suppose I've got to go through with it, all the same."

He paused, and wrinkled his brows in thought. Cardew watched him curiously. He could not understand Levison to-day, but he certainly found him what he would have called an "interestin' study."

Levison shook his head at last.

"I'm not going to fight Tom Merry!" he said quietly.

The School House fellows came out of Big Hall after roll-call, and Monty Lowther, who was seconding Tom Merry, looked round for Levison.

Levison came down the corridor, and Lowther tapped him on the arm.

"Ready?" he asked.

Levison looked at him.

"For what?"

"Tom Merry's in the Common-room, waiting for you," said Lowther. "You seem to be suffering from lapse of memory, old bean. I'm reminding you."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Thank you," said Levison coolly.

And he walked away to the major Common-room, with a crowd of fellows in his wake.

Tom Merry had another crowd with him in the Common-room. There was a general movement of interest as Levison of the Fourth entered.

"Here he is!" chortled Baggy Trimble.

Tom Merry fixed his eyes on Levison. Levison met them calmly.

"Well, are you ready, Levison?" asked the captain of the Shell.

Ernest Levison drew a deep breath.

"I'm not going to fight you, Tom Merry," he said, in a quiet, calm voice, though the colour was creeping back into his cheeks.

Tom stared at him.

"You're not?"

"I'd rather not."

"It's not a matter of choice now," said Tom Merry grimly. "You can't tell a fellow you're not going to fight him after punching his face, Levison."

"Wathah not!"

"I'm sorry!" said Levison.

"Wha-a-at?"

"I know you meant kindly enough when you spoke to me this afternoon," went on Levison, in a low voice, "I was in an evil temper, and I'm sorry for what I did. That's all. If you want to scrap I'm ready. But I was bound to say that."

Tom Merry gave him a very puzzled

look. There was a derisive murmur from some of the juniors.

"Cold feet!" remarked Crooke, very audibly.

"Funk!" giggled Trimble.

Levison's flush deepened, but his manner was still calm.

"Well," said Tom, after a pause, "if you're sorry, I—I suppose that ends it. Let it drop."

Levison of the Fourth looked round. There was no trace in his looks of the evil, the bitterness that had been so strongly marked there of late. But his face was determined, and there was a gleam in his eyes.

"I've apologised to Tom Merry," he said. "But any fellow here who calls me a funk can put it to the test on the spot. I'm ready!"

Crooke backed out of the crowd, and Baggy Trimble made himself as small as possible. Grandy of the Shell broke the silence.

"I call you a funk!" he said warily.

The next moment George Alford Grundy had to put up his hands, as Levison strode straight at him. Blake hurriedly closed the Common-room door, and for the next ten minutes the scene in the room was exciting. At the end of the ten minutes Grundy of the Shell confessed—from the carpet—that he had had enough. And Cardew led Levison away to bathe his nose and his eyes, which were sorely in need of attention.

Tom Merry went to his study in a thoughtful mood. He could not understand Levison, and he was doubtful and perplexed. So long as the St. Jim's out-cast kept up his attitude of mocking defiance and insolence Tom knew how to deal with him. But this was a new Levison. There was a quiet dignity in the ostracised junior that troubled Tom. The thought came into his mind, and haunted him, that perhaps, somehow, impossible as it seemed, injustice had been done—that somehow Levison of the Fourth had not had fair play.

"I wonder—" said Tom, after a long silence.

He did not finish.

And oddly enough, in Study No. 6 about the same time, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked up from the entrancing pages of Milton, which he was "mugging" for the morrow, and remarked thoughtfully:

"I wondah—"

And he shook his noble head and returned to Milton.

THE END.

(Although Levison has decided not to tread the downward path, he has not yet finished with trouble. He is in the thick of it in next week's long complete story, entitled: "SACKED FROM ST. JIM'S!" Don't miss it!)



2/6 DEPOSIT

ensures delivery of a world-famed 400A Mead "Marvel" Bicycle. Nothing more to pay till you have ridden the machine one month. "MARVEL" 400—£4 7s 6d CASH. We pack FREE, pay carriage and guarantee satisfaction or refund your money. Factory-soiled cycles CHEAP. Accessories at popular prices. Write TO DAY for illustrated Catalogue, Testimonial Budget and special offer of 15 Days Free Trial.

Mead CYCLE COMPANY (INC.)
Dept. B 611, BIRMINGHAM.

The Picture Paper with the MOST News
SUNDAY GRAPHIC

GROW TALLER

It's easy. Add 2, 3, or more inches to your height. Details free.

B. J. EDISON, 39, Bond Street, Blackpool.

£2,000 worth cheap Photo Material and Films. Samples Catalogue Free. 12 by 10" Enlargement, any photo, 8d.—**HACKETT'S, JULY ROAD, LIVERPOOL.**

STOP STAMMERING! Cure yourself as I did. Par-ticulars Free.—**FRANK E. HUGHES, 7, SOUTHAMPTON ROW, LONDON, W.C.1.**

All applications for Advertisement Space in this publication should be addressed to the Advertisement Manager, UNION JACK SERIES, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., London, E.C.4.