

SCHOOLBOY SERIES No. 1

The SECRET of the SCHOOL

by FRANK RICHARDS
(AUTHOR of BILLY BUNTER)



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“Struck down.”

The Secret of the School

“PLUM” TUMPTON, of the Fourth Form at Sparshott School, lifted his head from the pillow and listened intently.

All was silent: as was to be expected at a quarter to midnight. But Plum wanted to make sure before he got out.

He had to be careful. Plum was not a careful fellow by nature. But he fully realised the need for care in his present enterprise. A Sparshott fellow who got out of his dormitory, and out of the House, in the middle of the night, really could not be too careful!

Indeed, as he sat up, in the dead silence and darkness, Plum was strongly inclined to throw the whole thing over.

The mere thought of getting spotted and sent up to Dr. Oliphant in the morning, made cold shivers run down Plum's plump back.

But was he going to have that tick, Carboy, crowing over him, making out that he dared not be as good as his word? He was not!

Plum put a chubby leg out of bed.

It was as dark as the inside of a hat. The high windows of the dorm. were carefully blacked out. If there were stars in the sky, not a single glimmer penetrated into the Fourth Form dormitory.

It was not easy for a fellow to move about noiselessly in that intense blackness. Least of all was it easy for Plum Tump-ton, who even in broad daylight was liable to bump into anybody or anything that happened to be near at hand.

Plum's second chubby leg followed the first. He stepped out of bed.

There was not a sound, save the low breathing of many sleepers. Nobody had awakened, so far—not even the fellows in the next beds on either side of Plum—his pals Vernon and Rake.

Plum did not want to awaken them. He did not want any argument on the subject of his midnight expedition. They had argued with him in the study that evening—rather to the detriment of prep. Argument had no more effect on Plum than water on a duck. But voices in the dorm, at midnight's stilly hour, might reach other ears. Silence was Plum's cue.

So it was rather unfortunate that, in groping for the chair on which he had carefully laid his clothes in readiness, Plum missed the chair with his groping hands, and knocked on it with his nose.

Tap!

“Oh!” gasped Plum.

The tap of Plum's nose on the chair-back caused him to forget caution for a moment! Only for a moment—but it was enough.

There was a sound of stirring in the next bed.

A sleepy voice followed:

“Who's that?”

Vernon had awakened.

Plum stood quite still—one hand to his nose, which had a pain in it. He hoped that the silence would reassure Vernon, and that he would go to sleep again.

Instead of which, there came another voice, from the bed on the other side. Rake had awakened also.

“Is that that clown Tumpton?” asked Rake.

“Is that you, Plum?” asked Vernon.

Plum breathed hard and deep. Both of them were awake—and there was a sound of stirring, further along. The voices

were awakening other fellows—the whole dorm. would soon be wideawake, at this rate.

"Look here, shut up, you men!" breathed Plum. "Don't make a row! Do you want to wake up all Sparshott?"

"You fathead!" was Vernon's reply.

"You clown!" came from Rake.

"What's the row?" came a third voice, "Is it an air-raid?"

"No!" hissed Plum, "Shut up, Cook, will you?"

"Oh, that ass Tumpton!" said Cook. "Look here——"

"Will you shut up?"

Plum groped for his clothes. He found his trousers, and jammed his legs into them. He tucked in his pyjamas. He tucked and tucked, but his pyjamas seemed unusually ample, and would not cram in—till he made the sudden discovery that he had got hold of the sheet from his bed, and was trying to tuck it into his trousers, in the dark. Plum breathed harder and deeper. This was frightfully annoying, when he wanted to be quick, and get out before all the dormitory started a buzz of talk.

"Blow!" hissed Plum.

"Look here, you're not going, you ass!" said Vernon.

"Get back to bed, you chump!" said Rake.

"Will you be quiet?" asked Plum, "Where's my jacket—blow that jacket! I know I put it on the chair. "I've got to——Oh! Ah! Wow!" It was Plum's plump chin, this time, that established contact with the chair, as he groped in the dark. "Oh, crikey! My chin! Oh!"

"There was a sound of revelry by night!" came another voice—Carboy's this time.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Will you dry up?" hooted Plum. "The whole House will hear you! Old Rapstraw may be prowling about——"

"Is your journey really necessary?" asked Carboy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll jolly well bolster you, if you don't shut up, Carboy! Shut up, the lot of you!" howled Plum. "I'm going, see? Carboy makes out that I haven't the nerve to go out to the Keep at night! I'll jolly well show him whether I have or not, see? He's bet me his two-bladed knife that I won't do it! Well, that knife's as good as mine! I'm going."

Plum huddled on clothes. He groped under his bed for a pair of rubber shoes.

"Wow!"

"What is that clown up to?" asked Vernon.

"Ow! I've banged my head—ow!—on the beastly bed—ooh—I can't see in the dark like a cat—ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's nothing to snigger at in a fellow banging his head? Where's those beastly shoes—where's those rotten shoes—where's those blighted shoes—oh, here they are! Now will you fellows shut up, before half the House comes up to this dorm? I'm going now."

"You chump!" hooted Tom Rake. "You'll get flogged for breaking out at night!"

"Tain't breaking out at night, blow you! I'm not a rotter like Snape of the Fifth, to break out at night, I hope!" exclaimed the indignant Plum.

"What do you call it, then?" asked Vernon.

"I'm just going over to the Keep, just because I said I would, and because I'm jolly well going to make Carboy hand over that two-bladed pocket-knife, see, just to make him sorry he spoke! Breaking out at night! I've a jolly good mind to punch your head, Rake! I would, only I'm in a hurry. Now for the love of Mike be quiet—I'm just going to open the door."

"Look here, you ass——"

"Look here, you fathead——"

"You'll get nailed——"

"You'll run into Rapstraw——"

"You'll get flogged in the morning——"

"Or bunked——"

Half a dozen well-wishers addressed Plum. Heedless of good advice, Plum groped his way to the door. He was going, and that was that.

But the Fourth Form fellows fell silent, as they heard Plum turn the door-handle. They did not want to risk giving the alarm and landing Plum in trouble. If there was any trouble about, Plum was exactly the fellow to run right into it, without assistance from anyone.

The door opened. Plum stepped out into a corridor as dark as the dorm. He closed the door with caution—perhaps a little too much caution. Plum had his own way of being cautious.

Bang!

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Rake.

"Oh blow!" came Plum's exasperated whisper. "The dashed thing slipped. I say, old beans, do you think anybody heard that?" Plum was invisible, but it seemed that he had reopened the door to address that question to his form-fellows.

"Not if they're all as deaf as posts!" answered Carboy.

"Come back, you ass!" breathed Vernon. "Ten to one the Old Bean's woke up. Bother the ass—he's gone!"

Plum went—the door closing again with a snap.

"Well, some fellows ask for it!" remarked Carboy.

"You tick!" growled Tom Rake. "It's your fault Plum's playing the goat—and I'll jolly well see that you shell out that two-bladed pocket-knife in the morning, too."

"Eh! I don't mind!" yawned Carboy. "I haven't wanted it much, since both the blades got broken the other day."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a chuckle along the Fourth Form beds. Poor old Plum, it seemed, was running all these frightful risks, and the reward of valour was to be an article that had quite lost any value it ever had!

"Cave!" hissed Rake, suddenly.

The door opened.

"Is anyone awake in the dormitory?" asked a high-pitched, wheezy voice—the well-known voice of Rapstraw, master of the Fourth. Evidently, he was awake—and up!

Dead silence.

Plum's chums could only hope that Rapstraw would not switch on the light and observe Plum's empty bed. Fortunately, Mr. Rapstraw did not switch on the light. He listened for a moment or two: then, apparently satisfied by the silence, shut the door quietly.

"Poor old Plum!" murmured Rake.

"Poor old Plum!" sighed Vernon.

They could only hope for the best for their erring chum. The Sparshott Fourth settled down to sleep again, with two exceptions. Harry Vernon and Tom Rake intended to remain awake till Plum returned. They remained awake for ten minutes or more—and then drowsiness supervened. After which, the Sparshott Fourth slumbered peacefully—minus Plum.

* * *

"**B**LOW!" breathed Plum.

Plum breathed that word inaudibly. In fact, he hardly dared to breathe.

Plum had crept along the dark corridor as far as the landing. Every window, of course, was blacked out: all was pitch-

dark. But Plum knew his way well enough in the dark: there was no trouble about that.

But there was trouble of another kind. Tumpton of the Fourth was, in fact, born to trouble as the sparks fly upward! As he reached the wide landing, there was a sound of soft footsteps approaching him from impenetrable gloom.

Some fellows might have thought of burglars. But Plum was not bothered by nerves. He had no doubt that that unfortunate bang of the dormitory door had reached Rapstraw's ears, and that he was coming to see what was what, as it were.

It might have awakened him—his rooms were across that landing. Or he might have been already awake. All the fellows knew that Rapstraw was a bad sleeper, and sometimes stayed up to almost unearthly hours. But for the war, Rapstraw certainly would not have been master of the Fourth Form at Sparshott—he was past the active age of a master—that was why the juniors had bestowed on him the distinctive name of the "Old Bean."

Young masters were gone to the war. Old gentlemen who had long been in retirement, after laborious careers, had been rooted out to take their places—rather like owls blinking in unaccustomed light!

How old Rapstraw was, was a moot question—estimated variously from seventy to ninety—some fellows even put it at a hundred or so! He had been heard to refer to Coote, the master of the Shell, as "that young man"—and Coote was fifty-nine. Ancient as he was, he had obeyed the call when vacancies had to be filled in the places of young men called up for something more strenuous than school-mastering—and was at Sparshott for the duration.

The healthy sleep of youth was far behind Mr. Rapstraw. The fellows had learned that Rapstraw sometimes "prowled" about the House at night, doubtless in the grip of insomnia—which made it risky for a fellow to break out of dorm.

A sleepless master might pace the long landing at any hour he pleased—but no Sparshott fellow was allowed out of his dormitory: and any fellows with a fancy for breaking bounds, always knew that there was the risk of running into the Old Bean.

Plum had hoped that Rapstraw might be sleeping soundly for once. That footstep on the landing revealed that he was not.

Plum could not see him—he could not see his own hand before his eyes. But he had no doubt it was the "Old Bean."

He backed against the passage wall, flattened himself there, and remained perfectly still, scarcely breathing.

He could only hope that Rapstraw would pass unconscious of his presence. He was, at all events, absolutely invisible.

The footsteps came nearer.

They passed.

Rapstraw—if indeed it was Rapstraw, passed on up the corridor, unconscious of Plum. That meant that he had heard the bang, and was going to inquire. Plum suppressed his breathing—and was almost on the point of suffocation by the time the unseen man had passed.

The footsteps died away up the corridor.

Plum breathed again—but he did not stir. He dared not grope his way about, with a master in the offing. He had to wait till Rapstraw was off the scene.

It was Rapstraw—there was no further doubt about that when his squeaky, high-pitched voice reached Plum's ear from the dormitory doorway.

Plum's heart missed a beat, as he realised that Rapstraw was at the open doorway of the Fourth Form dorm. Supposed he switched on the light!

Too late Plum realised that he ought to have fixed up a dummy in his bed. It was Plum's way to think of things, when it was too late for anything else to be done.

In absolute anguish, Plum stared up the corridor in the dense darkness, dreading to see a gleam of light.

But there was no gleam: the darkness remained unbroken. Then came the soft sound of the dormitory door closing again. Rapstraw was satisfied: and Plum felt a heavy weight lifted from his heart. After all, the Old Bean was not likely to wake up a junior form at midnight, just because he had heard some sound or other. Anyhow, all was safe now. Plum had only to wait till he cleared off, and then pursue his way.

Soft footsteps came down the corridor again to the landing—so soft as to be only just audible. There was no doubt that Mr. Rapstraw was a considerate old bean. If insomnia made him turn out at night, at least he was as careful as possible not to disturb anyone else.

Again the unseen master passed Plum, blotted in silence against the wall. Again Plum breathed relief, as Rapstraw's faint footfalls died across the landing. The Old Bean was gone, at last.

There was silence again.

Plum did not hear a door open or shut. But he had no doubt that Rapstraw had gone back to his room: he would have heard him, had he still been on the landing.

A long minute of silence was enough for Plum. Glad to get going again, he tiptoed across the landing, towards the head of the stair.

He groped down with his hand on the banister, round the curve of the big staircase, and descended to the study landing below.

Plum crept cautiously across to the lower stairs.

Once more he groped down, sliding his hand down the banister for a guide. He arrived safely on the ground floor.

All was plain sailing now. The way out was easy—by the window of Potter's study—it was still called Potter's study, though Mr. Potter had left to join the Forces some time since. His place had not yet been filled—as Carboy put it, the Head had not yet found some superannuated old geezer to take Potter's place. So that study was vacant, and made things easy for Plum.

Two or three minutes of groping in thick darkness, and Plum was at the door of Potter's study. He was sure—or as good as sure—that he was at the right door. But a fellow had to be careful—as he did not want to barge into the wrong room in the dark. Some of the masters had rooms on the ground floor, and Plum did not want—very much he did not want—to walk into one of them and wake up an astonished beak!

He groped in his trousers pocket, produced a match-box, and struck a match. The glimmer was enough. It was the door of Potter's study.

The match went out.

Satisfied, Plum put his hand out to the door-handle. Then, suddenly, he jerked it back with a jump of horror and alarm. For at that moment, he heard a sound within the study—which more than startled him.

There was somebody in Potter's study.

It was amazing—for who could possibly be there at midnight! Rapstraw, even if he were still prowling, could hardly be supposed to have selected an empty study to prowl in. Who and what—

Plum backed away. Who it was, and what it meant, he could not begin to guess, but it was something or somebody—and Plum's cue was to remain unseen.

The study door opened from within.

Plum tried not to breathe.

Somebody—he could not imagine who—was staring out of that study in the dark, peering into the blackness, and listening. Had he—whoever he was—heard the scratch of Plum's match on the box? That was it, probably—though who he could be, and why he was there, had Plum guessing.

A few seconds—that seemed like hours—dragged by. Then, to Plum's relief, the door closed again, with hardly a sound. Whoever it was, the silence seemed to have satisfied him.

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Plum.

Who was in Potter's study—in the dark? There had not been a glimmer of light. Standing there almost bemused with astonishment, Plum tried to think it out. Then, suddenly, it flashed into his mind—some fellow, very likely that weed Snape of the Fifth—breaking bounds, choosing that means of egress, just as Plum had chosen it.

"Of course, that's it!" murmured Plum.

He moved closer to the door and listened. The faintest of sounds came from within—but Plum knew that it was a closing window. The fellow in the study was no longer there—he had dropped into the quad, on which the window opened. Undoubtedly, some black sheep breaking bounds—Snape of the Fifth or another. Plum did not doubt it.

Plum waited another minute, to make sure. Then he softly turned the door-handle, opened the door an inch or two and peered in.

A faint glimmer of starlight met his eyes.

The black-out curtains at the study window had been drawn a little aside, and left so by the unknown who had dropped out. Plum opened the door further—all was safe, and he stepped in. He shut the door behind him and stepped across to the window.

It was a casement window, and shut. But it was not fastened, as it should have been. It opened to Plum's touch. He peered out into the quadrangle.

All was still and silent. Whoever it was that had got out of that window before Plum, was gone. If it was Snape, he was well on his way to Rodwood by that time. Jolly late hours for even a weed like Snape to be breaking bounds, Plum thought. Anyhow he was gone—not that Plum cared much about Snape, who, if he ran into him, had more to fear than Plum from a row. However, Plum did not want to run into Snape or anybody else, and he waited for a few minutes. Then, in quite a cheerful mood, Plum opened the casement wider, and scrambled out on the broad sill.

He closed the casement, and dropped lightly to the ground.

It was all serene now—after all his alarms—it was hardly ten minutes' work to cut across to the old Keep, and return—he would be back long before Snape—if it was Snape. Feeling quite bucked, Plum turned his back on the sleeping House, and started.

* * *

DARK and gloomy looked the old Keep, as Plum approached it.

It was the oldest part of Sparshott: the last remnant of a Norman castle that had once stood upon the site. Men-at-arms, in ancient days, had clanked, where now the Sparshott fellows congregated. Only the old Keep survived, and even of that, there was not much.

Massive walls, many feet thick, covered with moss and brambles—broken remnants of loophole windows—not a vestige of roof. The old building was open to the stars. Great gaps in the thick old walls gave easy entrance.

In the day-time, Sparshott fellows often loitered about in the old ruin: but at night, it was dark, lonely, shadowy, eerie—Plum, at midnight, did not like the look of it at all.

Unpleasantly, as he blinked at it in the starlight, the recollection came into his mind that the ruined Keep was said to be haunted. A ghostly man-at-arms was said to linger on the scene of some "battle long ago." In the daytime that, of course, was all rot. It did not seem quite such rot in the dim starlight and solitude of midnight's witching hour.

Plum was conscious of a queer feeling in his inside—not funk, of course: he disdained to be funky. But it was a very unquiet, uneasy sort of feeling—not funk, but perhaps second cousin to funk.

But Plum pushed resolutely on.

He had said that he would visit the old Keep at midnight: and what he had said, he had said, and that was that.

Only he realised now that it was not quite so small a matter as it had seemed in the dayroom, when that tick, Carboy, had taken him up and dared him to do it. It was, in fact, dashed unpleasant.

After all, it was only a matter of minutes. He had to get into the Keep by way of a yawning gap in the old wall, and reach a bench that stood within: a bench on which Plum had often sat—in the daytime. Carboy—just before lock-up—had cut into the Keep, and left an object lying on that bench for Plum to pick up and bring back with him, as proof that he had done it.

Plum was quite incapable of saying that he had done it, if he hadn't done it: but Carboy was not of a trusting nature. Carboy preferred proof. So that article—a catapult that belonged to Carboy—was there, waiting for Plum.

Plum scrambled into the gap, as silently as he could.

The old Keep was a good distance from the school buildings, and no sound there was likely to be heard by the most wakeful ears in the House. Still, a fellow could not be too careful, when he was out of the House at midnight.

Charne, the porter, might be up, on fire-watch duty. Others might be up, for all Plum knew. Indeed, at the thought of Charne, and fire-watching, it came into Plum's mind that, for all he knew, there might be a lot of wakeful people about any minute—suppose, for instance, that there was an alert? Suppose the unwelcome note of the siren boomed out raucously in the stilly night?

It might happen—it had happened more than once.

"Blow!" growled Plum.

He hadn't thought of that before. Really, he might have—but he hadn't! Thinking was not Plum's long suit.

Suppose there was an alarm: everybody turning out—and one fellow out of doors, at a distance from the House—missed immediately! That meant a frightful row for Plum.

He hurried his steps. He clambered through the gap, less silently than before, and came breathless into the interior of the old Keep.

It was dark—a bare glimmer of starlight falling into the shadowy old place. But Plum knew every inch of the way. He started towards the old oaken bench without hesitation, though he could not see it—but suddenly, with a jump at his heart, he stopped.

There was a sound in the silent old ruin.

Plum's heart jumped and thumped. It had been surprising enough to find that somebody had been in Potter's old study. But it was really amazing to hear someone in the Keep. Who on earth—excepting Plum—could want to be in the old Keep at midnight?

Not Snape—not a breaker of bounds—that was impossible. But who—what—how—

Plum stood as if rooted, staring before him in the deep gloom, horrid thoughts of a ghostly man-at-arms chasing one another through his startled mind.

The sound was repeated—a footstep! It was unmistakable—and it was approaching him.

Someone was there—and that someone had heard him, and was coming towards him as if to meet him.

A tramp, perhaps—the old Keep could be entered on the side where its ancient wall bordered the Rodwood road. Some wandering tramp might have clambered in to pass the night there, in some sort of shelter.

Ghostly men-at-arms were unpleasant—but some hefty, hulking tramp was still more so, at such a place and hour. Plum stood undecided whether to cut and run, or what else to do.

But he had little time to think.

A dim shadow moved in the shadows, directly in front of him. He made out nothing but something dark that moved.

Then, suddenly, came a blinding flash of light, as an electric-torch was turned on, the light blazing directly in Plum's startled face.

It dazzled and blinded him—he could see nothing. But his face, in the glare, was, of course, plainly visible to the unknown who held the torch, unseen himself.

An angry voice snarled:

“Dummkopf!”

It was the last straw to Plum's astonishment. He knew that it was a German word he heard, though he did not know what it meant. In the name of all that was amazing, who could be speaking German in the old Keep of Sparshott?

The light was instantly shut off.

Plum made a movement—hardly knowing what he was doing. What happened next came like lightning.

There was a crashing blow in the dark. Something hard and heavy descended on Plum's head, and a thousand lights danced before his eyes. He dropped like a log on the mossy, old flag-stones.

After that, all was blank to Plum. Darkness and silence wrapped the old Keep, and in the darkness, Plum Tumpton lay stretched on the flags, senseless—stunned by that sudden and ruthless blow, with a trickle of red oozing down his plump cheek from under his hair.

* * *

HARRY VERNON awoke with a sudden start, and sat up in bed. He blinked in the light, which had been switched on in the Fourth Form dormitory. The door stood wide open, and in the doorway, Mr. Rapstraw—the Old Bean.

Vernon blinked at him.

A dozen other fellows, sitting up in bed, or raised on their elbows, stared at the Old Bean.

Mr Rapstraw's face was very stern. Never had the juniors seen that crusty, wrinkled old countenance look so grim.

“Oh, scissors!” Vernon heard Tom Rake's muttering voice, across Plum's empty bed, “It's all up for Plum! Poor old Plum!”

Mr. Rapstraw had not turned on the light when he had come before—how long ago, the juniors did not know: they had all been sleeping soundly. This time he had turned it on—and the game was, therefore, up for Plum. In the light, the empty bed could not escape his eye. In fact, the Fourth Formers could see that his eyes—little keen pin-points under his bushy grey brows—were fixed on that bed.

There was a brief moment of grim silence: then Mr. Rapstraw spoke.

“Vernon!”

“Yes, sir!” stammered Harry.

“Tumpton has left his dormitory. Has anyone else left it?”

“N-no, sir! We're all here.”

"I can see that! Has any other boy been out of the dormitory!"

"Not that I know of, sir! I'm sure not."

"We've all been fast asleep, sir!" said Carboy.

"I am glad of it!" said Mr. Rapstraw, grimly. "Any boy—even a very stupid boy like Tumpton—should have common-sense enough to observe the rules of the school in such times as these."

"Tumpton meant no harm, sir!" ventured Harry. "He's not gone out of school bounds—it was only a lark——"

"Does that mean that you know he was absent, Vernon?"

"We all knew, sir!" said Rake.

"I am not addressing you, Rake! Kindly be silent. You were aware that Tumpton left the dormitory at a late hour, Vernon?"

"Ye-es, sir."

"You are head boy of the Form, Vernon! You should have intervened: You are very much to blame for the accident that has befallen Tumpton."

Vernon gave a start.

"An accident, sir? Is Tumpton hurt?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Rapstraw, "and you are to blame, Vernon."

Vernon shut his lips hard. He did not see that he was to blame—he was head boy and captain of his Form: but he could not have stopped Plum. Argument had as much effect on Plum as water on a duck. Nothing would have stopped Plum but grabbing him and holding him by main force.

But Vernon was thinking less of Rapstraw's sharp and angry words, than of poor old Plum's accident. If Plum was hurt, he wished that he had collared him and sat on him, rather than let him go. But what could have happened? Plum was the fellow to gather up any trouble that might be available—to bang a door when he wanted to be cautious, or to run into a master in trying to avoid him—but even Plum ought to have been able to get to the Keep and back without accident.

"What has happened, sir?" asked Vernon, in a low voice.

Mr. Rapstraw glanced out of the doorway. The light was on in the corridor. The juniors realised that the Old Bean was not alone—there was someone else coming up the corridor, slowly. Was it Plum? What on earth had happened to Plum!

"Tumpton met with an accident in the Keep!" said Mr. Rapstraw. "He appears to have fallen over in the ruins and struck his head with some violence."

"Oh, the ass!" breathed Rake.

"No doubt he stumbled in the dark," continued Mr. Rapstraw. "Fortunately—very fortunately—I had joined Charne, who is on fire-watch duty, on his round, and I heard a sound from the Keep, which seemed like a cry. But for this, Tumpton might have remained there, perhaps till morning. As it was, we went to investigate, and found him."

"Is—he badly hurt, sir!" faltered Vernon.

"His head seems to have been cut, and he has a very bad bruise—but the injury does not seem very serious. He was only half-conscious when we found him. I have attended to his injury, and Charne is bringing him here. Dr. Oliphant will deal with him in the morning for this insensate escapade." Mr. Rapstraw's jaw set hard. "I have no doubt that he will be flogged."

Footsteps were heard in the corridor. All eyes were fixed on the doorway, in which two figures now appeared: old Charne, the school porter, with Plum leaning heavily on his arm.

Plum did not look his usual self by any means. His fat face was pale as chalk, his head covered with bandages. He blinked dismally at the staring Fourth Formers, as Charne led him in.

"You will go back to bed now, Tumpton!" rapped Mr. Rapstraw.

"Yes, sir!" mumbled Plum. "I——"

"You need not speak. The doctor will see you in the morning—in the meantime, you will remain quiet."

"Yes, sir! But——"

"I have told you to be silent, Tumpton."

Plum was silent.

"Vernon!"

"Yes, sir!"

"You can see the state this stupid boy is in. He must keep as quiet as possible, until the doctor has seen him. There is to be no talk in this dormitory after I have gone—if I hear a sound, I shall return."

"Very well, sir."

"The boy must sleep, if possible—in any case, he must remain quiet. I trust to you to see to this, Vernon."

"Certainly, sir."

"He must have struck his head with some force, probably on one of the old stones in the Keep," said Mr. Rapstraw. "He needs repose——"

"If you please, sir!——" began Plum.

"Will you be silent?"

"Yes, sir, but I never knocked my head—I——"

"Another word, Tumpton, and I shall give you detention for every half-holiday this term. I cannot cane you in your present state."

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Plum. And he was silent. Rapstraw, of course, had got it all wrong—he seemed to fancy that Plum had fallen over and knocked his head—but this, evidently, was not a judicious time for telling him what really had happened. Rapstraw was a man of his word—especially when it was an unpleasant word—and Plum did not want a whole term of detentions.

Vernon and Rake turned out to help their unfortunate chum into bed. Plum was settled at last—his pallid face as white as his pillow. Charne gave him a look of mingled irritation and compassion, and went out. Mr. Rapstraw glanced up and down the row of staring faces.

"Silence in this dormitory!" he said. "Keep that in mind, Vernon."

"Yes, sir."

The light was switched off, and the door closed after the master of the Fourth. But for Rapstraw's warning, there would have been a buzz of inquiring voices at once. Every fellow wanted to know what exactly had happened to Plum in his midnight adventure in the old Keep.

But no voice was heard. Nobody wanted Rapstraw to come back—especially with that look on his face: moreover, it was quite likely that the Old Bean was lingering near the door, to make sure that his instructions were obeyed—Rapstraw sometimes had rather stealthy ways.

"I say, old nuts——" came a whisper from Plum's bed.

"Shut up, you born idiot!" hissed Rake in a whisper. "Haven't you landed in enough for one night?"

"Yes—but——"

"Quiet!" hissed Vernon.

"All right! But all the same——"

"Ten to one the Old Bean's just outside the door!" breathed Vernon.

"Oh, crikey!" That was enough for Plum; his whisper was not heard again.

The wild tale of his midnight adventure had to be left till morning. Once more the Sparshott Fourth settled down to sleep—and Plum at length, in spite of the ache in his head, sank

into slumber. If the Old Bean was keeping his old ears on the alert, he heard nothing more from the Fourth Form dormitory.

* * *

“YOU ass!”
“You clown!”

Such were the chummy remarks addressed to Plum Tumpton, of the Sparshott Fourth, by his loyal chums, Rake and Vernon, when they turned out in the morning.

Plum sat up in bed, put his hand to his bandaged head, and gave a dolorous squeak. It seemed that there was still a pain there. Plum's head was hard: but he had had quite a nasty knock.

“Ow!” squeaked Plum.

“Jevver see such a born idiot?” asked Rake.

“Never!” said Vernon.

“Hardly ever!” grinned Carboy.

Rake gave Carboy a glare.

“It's all your fault, you weed. If you hadn't pulled Plum's leg, he would never have played the clown last night. I've a jolly good mind——”

“Tumpton can't help being a clown!” argued Carboy. “If he doesn't do one fatheaded thing, he does another. Don't you, Plum?”

“Wow!” said Plum.

“Got a pain?” asked Rake.

“Ow! Yes.”

“Serve you jolly well right!” said his chum, heartlessly, “Couldn't you stick in bed after lights out? Couldn't you walk into the old Keep without falling over and damaging it with your silly napper?”

“Plum all over!” remarked Cook, “I expected to hear him falling downstairs. If he didn't fall downstairs, he had to fall somewhere else.”

“Bound to!” agreed Vernon. “The chump!”

“The born idiot!” said Rake.

Plum grinned feebly. He knew that his pals were worried and anxious about him, as it was undoubted that he had to go up to the Head after third school—Rapstraw was certain to report him. Being worried and anxious, they took it out of Plum by slanging him.

“A fag in the Second Form could go all over the Keep in the dark, with his eyes shut!” growled Rake. “You had to fall over!”

“But I didn't!” howled Plum. “Rapstraw's got it all wrong! I never fell over at all, see?”

“You didn't! Did you walk up to the wall, and bang your head on it, just to get a bruise, and let Rapstraw hear you squeak in the middle of the night?”

“No!” yelled Plum. “I was knocked on the head.”

“What?”

“There was somebody in the Keep!” explained Plum, “He hit me on the head.”

The whole Fourth Form stared at Plum Tumpton. He had got it out at last—the true tale of his midnight misadventure. But it did not make the impression on his form-fellows that might have been expected—at least by Plum. There was amazement in every face—but more incredulity than amazement.

“He hit you on the head?” repeated Vernon. “Who did?”

“The man in the Keep.”

“What man?” yelled Rake.

“How should I know? I never saw him—only a sort of shadow! He rapped me on the head with something——”

“With what?”

“I don't know—something jolly hard!” said Plum, rubbing

his bandages again. "I don't remember anything afterwards till the Old Bean picked me up—I must have been senseless——"

"Right on the wicket!" said Carboy. "But tell us something we don't know. That's ancient history."

"You silly ass, I mean——"

"We all know you were senseless—and you haven't changed since!" persisted Carboy. "More senseless than ever, I should say, to spin us a yarn like that."

"I was stunned!" shrieked Plum.

"Well, you came a cropper, you know!" said Vernon, soothingly. "You seem to have given your nut a hard knock——"

"I didn't—he did——"

"Who's he?" asked Cook.

"He—him—the man in the Keep! I don't know who he was, but he must have been a German, I think——"

"A which?" shrieked Rake.

"A Hun!" said Plum.

"Have they arrived at last, then?" asked Carboy. "We've been hearing about invasion for a jolly long time now. Have they got here at last—and started on Plum? Think they'd give Churchill the go-by, and begin on Plum?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

He must have been a German!" howled Plum. "If he wasn't what did he want to speak in German for?"

"Oh, he spoke in German, did he?" asked Rake, staring blankly at his chum. "Did you have a talk with him, before he tapped you on the crumpet?"

"No, you fathead, of course I didn't! I think he was surprised to see me there, and spoke without thinking, see?" explained Plum. "He said only one word, but I know it was German——"

"Fancy Plum catching Huns in the middle of the night!" said Carboy. "Another Hess game, perhaps! Did he drop from a plane like Hess, Plum?"

"Look here——" yelled Plum.

"Well a fellow wants to know!" argued Carboy. "If there's Huns dropping in at this school, the Head ought to know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The Head's going to know!" declared Plum, "I shall tell him, of course, when I go up. Of course he must know."

"You howling ass!" said Rake.

"I've got to tell the Head, haven't I, with Huns lurking about the school?" demanded Plum. "May be a spy, for all I know."

"Look here, Plum, old man, have a little sense!" said Vernon, "You've been dreaming—that tap on your napper gave you nightmare——"

"Think he wasn't there?" howled Plum, indignantly.

"Well, yes, rather! We've got a camp a mile away, and Home Guards all over the shop—and I don't think they would let a lot of Germans wander round loose," grinned Vernon. "Forget it, old bean."

Plum glared at his comrades in almost speechless indignation. He had been tapped on the head—hard—by a German: at least by someone who spoke German. Plum knew it, if the other fellows did not. And not a fellow believed that it had really happened.

It did sound a little steep—Plum admitted that. Such an adventure did not happen every day. The fellows might have believed that some tramp had tapped him on the head. But a German—it really was steep. No doubt there were German spies in the country—but a German spy in the old Keep at Sparshott School sounded, to say the least, improbable.

Plum, certainly, could not begin to guess how the man came there, or what on earth he might be doing there. Spies turned

up in all sorts of places, no doubt: but a school was the last place in which anyone would have thought of looking for them. A few miles away was Rodwood Camp—and in another direction, Parsley Aerodrome—both of which might have interested Hun spies. But really and truly, Sparshott School was a place absolutely without interest of any kind for the Bad Man of Berlin and his minions.

Still, there it was—it had happened! Plum had been tapped on the head by a man he had surprised in the Keep, who had uttered a word in German. Steep as it sounded, it was true.

Most of the juniors were laughing. Vernon and Rake were rather concerned for poor old Plum—if a knock on the napper had made him dream such weird things as this, they thought that he really ought to see a doctor.

Plum crawled out of bed, still glaring indignation.

“Hold on, though!” said Carboy. “You say he talked German—and you know about as much German as you do Dutch or Chinese. How did you know it was German?”

“Think I don’t know?” snorted Plum. “Haven’t I heard them gurgling their lingo on the radio? I know it was a German word.”

“What was the word?” asked Tom Rake.

“Dummkopf!” said Plum. “I don’t know what it means, but I jolly well know it’s a German word.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” yelled Carboy.

“Well, what are you sniggering at now?” howled Plum. “Do you know what the word means, you weed?”

“Ha, ha! Yes, rather! It means blockhead! Looks as if he knew Plum, doesn’t it?” chuckled Carboy.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Blockhead!” repeated Plum, rather dashed. “Sure it means blockhead? I don’t see why he should call me a blockhead.”

“I don’t see why he shouldn’t!” grinned Carboy. “Just what he would call you, I should think, if it happened at all.”

“Well, whatever it means, that’s what he said!” snorted Plum. “He sort of barked it out, as if he were surprised to see me there, and spoke without thinking.”

“If he said anything at all, that’s what he would say!” said Carboy. “But this is queer, you men. How did Plum dream a German word, when he doesn’t know any German?”

“I never dreamed it!” yelled Plum, “and if you say again that I dreamed it, I’ll buzz a boot at you, see?”

“Well, you did dream it, you see, as it never happened, and—oh, my hat!” Carboy dodged just in time, as a boot flew. The boot missed him by a foot or more. But every bullet has its billet. The boot landed on the ear of Banks of the Fourth, much to his surprise and annoyance.

“Whooop!” roared Banks. “What——”

“Goal!” chortled Carboy.

“Who—what—Plum, you mad ass!” Banks made a vengeful rush at Tumpton. Rake and Vernon grasped him just in time, and dragged him back.

“Hold on!” gasped Vernon.

“I’m going to spifficate him——!”

“Hold on! You can’t spifficate a man on the sick list!” urged Rake. “Plum meant it for Carboy, too.”

“No need to mention that he meant it for somebody who didn’t get it!” remarked Carboy. “Try again with the other boot, Tumpton—I’ll stand just in front of Vernon! Go it.”

“Yah!” snorted Plum.

Banks was restrained from vengeance, contenting himself with telling Plum what he thought of him, which he did at great length. Plum did not heed him—neither did he pursue the subject of the mysterious man who had called him a “dummkopf” in the Keep. Plum was too indignant to carry on. Plum’s word

was as good as gold, and it was exasperating to find that the Fourth Form, on this occasion at least, consisted wholly of doubting Thomases.

Not another word did Plum utter till the Fourth was going down. Then Vernon touched him on the arm in the corridor.

"Look here, Plum, old man," he murmured.

Plum glared.

"Well?" he rapped.

"Cut out that funny story, when you see the Head!" urged Vernon. "It's too steep, old chap. It might make the Elephant go off at the deep end."

"Yah!" was Plum's rejoinder.

"But look here——"

"Rats!"

And Plum marched on, an angry, wrathful, and indignant Plum—with a pain in his head, and another in his temper.

* * *

“TUMPTON!”

Mr. Rapstraw rapped out the name in the Fourth Form room. Plum was there with the Form—a bandage still on his unfortunate napper, but feeling better.

He had expected to have to see the doctor that morning: but Mr. Rapstraw had not, after all, considered it necessary. Mrs. Gunn, the matron, had looked after Plum's injury: much to his relief: he did not want to have to see the doctor. The damage, as it turned out, was not very great: though certainly Plum had had a hard rap. There was a bruise, and a slight cut—and a head-ache. Plum hoped at least that the Old Bean would go easy with him in Form. A fellow couldn't be expected to construe, with his napper in such a state.

Rapstraw's look at him was not pleasant. Every fellow in the Form could see that the Old Bean was angry with him—which was not to be wondered at. Sparshott fellows were not expected to cause trouble in the middle of the night. Rapstraw rapped out his name like a bullet.

"Yes, sir!" mumbled Plum.

"You will come to my study, Tumpton, after third school."

"Yes, sir! I think I ought to tell you, sir——" began Plum.

The juniors exchanged glances. This sounded as if Plum was about to plunge into that strange tale of a man in the Keep—not the sort of funny story to relate to a crusty old bean like Rapstraw.

But Plum had not the chance of getting it off his chest. Rapstraw interrupted him sharply.

"That will do, Tumpton."

"But I think, sir——"

"I should be glad indeed, Tumpton, to believe that statement!" said Mr. Rapstraw, who could be what the juniors called a sarcastic beast, at times. "But I doubt whether you are capable of thinking at all, Tumpton."

"But I—I mean—I think——"

"Say no more."

Rapstraw barked out that command: and Plum was silent. When Rapstraw barked, there was no more to be said.

So Plum bottled up his strange tale for the present. Really, Plum had other matters to think of—if indeed he was capable of thinking, which Mr. Rapstraw seemed to doubt. An interview with the Head loomed over him—doubtless Rapstraw was going to take him to Dr. Oliphant after third school. And an interview with the "Elephant" was a rather terrifying prospect.

Plum, however, did not seem to be thinking of this. Plum's powerful intellect was well known to work always on original lines. Plum was generally called "the Clown" in his Form: and

there was no doubt that Plum really was almost every known kind of an ass.

(Plum was very glad when the Form was dismissed in break. Lessons, and a sharp-tempered Form-master, worried Plum, added to that ache in his napper. Vernon and Rake joined him, going out, and Plum gave his chums an unchummy glare. Like the prophet of old, Plum was angry, and considered that he did well to be angry. If a weed like Carboy had laughed at his strange tale, at least his own pals might have believed him—and they hadn't! However, Plum condescended to speak.

"We'll go into the Keep, if you like, and I'll show you just where it happened," he said.

"Where what happend?" asked Rake.

"Where that Hun knocked me on the head."

"My dear chap——"

"Oh, all right!" said Plum, bitterly. "You don't believe me! All right! I'll keep it for the Head."

"For goodness' sake——!" murmured Vernon.

"Think the Head won't believe me?" sneered Plum.

"Of course he won't! He will know it was a nightmare, same as we do," answered Rake. "You see, you dreamed it, old scout."

"If that rat Rapstraw had let me speak, when I was brought in, I should have told you last night!" said Plum.

"Hem!"

Plum breathed hard.

No doubt, had Plum told his strange tale immediately on his return to the dormitory, it would have made a different impression on the Fourth. They would not, at all events, have supposed that he had dreamed it.

The Old Bean had stopped that, with his fussy interference. Plum felt very sore with the Old Bean, in consequence. Why couldn't he have let a fellow speak?

"I'm going to tell the Head, of course," he said. "The Head's got to know. He will pass it on to the Home Guard."

"Will he?" murmured Rake. Tom Rake could not quite see the Head passing on such a yarn to the local Home Guard.

"The Head's no fool!" said Plum.

"No—and that's all the more reason why you shouldn't spin him such a yarn," urged Rake. "The old Elephant will be waxy anyhow, when he hears that a fellow's broken out of dorm at midnight."

"Who's broken out of dorm at midnight?" demanded Plum.

"Didn't you, you ass?"

"That's not what I call it! Breaking out at night is a rotten trick—the sort of thing Snape would do! Cutting down to the Keep was quite a different matter."

"Let's hope the Head will see the distinction!" grinned Rake.

"Mind what you say to the Beak, old chap!" urged Vernon. "If he thinks you're trying to pull his leg, you'll hear the thunder roll."

"Rot! I don't see why Rapstraw is leaving it till after third school," grumbled Plum. "I ought to see the Head at once, really. It's important."

His chums gazed at him. Evidently, instead of dreading that visit to the Head's study, like any other fellow, Plum was anxious for it to come off!

"Oh, gum!" said Rake. "I suppose Plum really believes that there was somebody in the Keep—fellow might fancy anything in the dark. But——"

"Do you believe there was a man in the Keep or not?" demanded Plum.

"Hem!"

"Yes or no, blow you."

"No, blow you!" grinned Rake.

"What about you, Vernon?"

"Same!" answered Vernon.

"Then you can jolly well go and eat coke, the pair of you!" said Plum. "If you can't take a fellow's word, don't speak to me again." And Plum swung away with a frowning brow.

"Look here, you clown——" exclaimed the two together.

"Yah!" Plum flung that monosyllable over his shoulder, and departed.

"You silly ass!" roared Rake.

"You born idiot!" yelled Vernon.

Plum did not even trouble to say "yah" again! He walked off, and left them staring after him exasperated.

In the quad, a group of Fourth Form fellows surrounded Carboy, and all of them were laughing. Plum gave them a sour glance in passing—he had no doubt that he was the cause of the merriment. Plum did, undoubtedly, cause a good deal of merriment, at all times, in the Sparshott Fourth, he did not know why. Now he seemed to be causing more than ever.

But as he passed, Carboy called to him, all eyes turning on him at the same moment.

"Here! This way, Tumpton."

"Go and eat coke!" retorted Plum.

"Don't you want that pocket-knife?"

Plum had forgotten all about the pocket-knife.

"You won it, you know!" said Carboy, blandly.

"Oh!" said Plum.

He approached the group, with a more amiable expression on his plump face. This, really, was very decent of Carboy. Plum did not like Carboy—few fellows did, if any—but he had to admit that this was decent.

"Well, look here," said Plum. "I did go to the Keep, as I said I would—but I never got that catapult you left on the bench, you know. That was part of the bargain."

"That's all right," said Carboy. "That was only to be proof that you really went. Well, we've got proof, as Rapstraw picked you up there, see?"

"Yes, that's so!" said Plum. "You ought to hand over the pocket-knife, certainly, as you know I really went. But you never do play the game if you can creep out of it, you know——"

"What?"

"Well, we all know that, don't we?" said Plum. "You're rather a slithy tove, you know, Carboy, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Oh!" gasped Carboy. "No! Not at all! Well, look here, you did the trick, as per arrangement, and you get the bun! See?"

"Righto!" agreed Plum. "Jolly decent of you to play up like this, Carboy. You ain't such a rotter as you seem, I dare say."

"Ha, ha, ha!" came in a chorus. The Fourth Form fellows seemed entertained by the expression on Carboy's face.

Carboy seemed undecided, for a moment or two, whether to plant his knuckles on Plum's little fat nose. However, he restrained that natural impulse, and shoved his hand into his pocket instead.

"Here it is," he said. "It's yours."

And he placed the pocket-knife in Plum's hand and immediately walked away. The other fellows all watched Plum, grinning.

Plum could not quite see where the grin came in. He had the pocket-knife, and it was—or had been—a jolly good knife! Pocket-knives were not so jolly easy to come by in these war

days, as of old. A fellow who bagged a really decent pocket-knife for nothing, might consider himself lucky.

"Well, that's all right, ain't it?" said Plum.

"Right as rain!" agreed Banks. "You're the lucky man, Tumpton."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dashed if I see anything to snigger at," grunted the puzzled Plum. "I've jolly well got the knife, and chance it."

Plum glared at the hilarious juniors—and then looked, for the first time, at the knife in his hand. It looked all right, at the first glance. But not at the second! Plum stared at it. Then the change that came over his plump countenance was really extraordinary, as he discerned the fact that both blades of the pocket-knife were broken off short—very short.

"Why—what——" ejaculated Plum.

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

"This knife ain't got any blades——" gasped Plum.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That rotter Carboy—was that why he gave me the knife——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why, I—I—I'll——" Words failed Plum, and he hurled the useless remnant of a knife over the Sparshott beeches, and rushed away in search of Carboy—leaving the Fourth Formers yelling. But Carboy had judiciously vanished from sight, and Plum did not see him again till third school, in the Form-room.

* * *

MR. RAPSTRAW sat in his study, after third school, with a frowning brow, when Eustace Percival Tumpton—otherwise Plum—entered.

Rapstraw was not looking pleasant.

But then, Rapstraw seldom did look very pleasant. Perhaps, like other "dug-outs" of the war, he felt the strain of resuming activities more suitable to a younger man. It was known that he suffered a good deal from insomnia, which was supposed to be the reason of "prowling" sometimes at night, and of showing sharp temper sometimes in the morning.

Rapstraw looked about sixty, but the general impression was that he was older than that. Carboy, who was always interested in the business of others, and always knew more than other fellows knew, declared that the Old Bean was on the shady side of seventy.

There was no doubt, at all events, that he was a fearfully old stager—one of the most prehistoric of the dug-outs turned up by the war.

He had many "old" ways. On the other hand, age had not robbed him of his vigour. On one occasion, when he had found a bent pin on the chair at his desk in the Form room, he had taken Carboy by the collar—and Carboy had been surprised by the force of his grip. Carboy had told the other fellows ruefully that the dashed old relic still packed a lot of muscle. Sometimes, too, when Rapstraw was angry, his voice lost the wheeze of age, and rapped out strong and sharp. And his little pin-points of eyes were undoubtedly good—they saw everything that went on in his Form room, at all events. Rapstraw might be a dodderer in some respects, but he had the eyes of a hawk.

Those sharp eyes fixed now on Plum, as the clown of the Fourth came in with rather a hangdog look on his plump face. Plum doubted very much whether Rapstraw would see the fine distinction between "breaking out of dorm," and "just cutting down to the Keep." It was clear enough to Plum, but poor Plum had long ago learned not to expect such intelligence as his own from schoolmasters.

"Now, Tumpton, I require you to explain yourself!" said

Mr. Rapstraw, harshly. "Why did you leave your dormitory last night?"

"To go down to the Keep, sir."

"I am aware of that, as I found you there, where you had fallen——"

"I never fell——"

"Do not interrupt me, Tupton. What I require to know, is your reason for paying a visit to a spot remote from the school buildings, at the hour of midnight."

"A fellow dared me to do it, and I wasn't going to funk, and—and so I did it, sir."

Mr. Rapstraw looked fixedly at Plum. It seemed to take him some little time to get this down. But he nodded at last.

"I am prepared to believe that, Tumpton," he said slowly. "Such a statement from any other boy would be open to very much doubt. But I have observed, of course, that you are the most utterly stupid boy at Sparshott——"

"I do not think," said Mr. Rapstraw, "that any other boy in this school could be capable of such folly—such almost incredible stupidity."

"Oh, I say——" ejaculated Plum.

This was rather thick, Plum thought. It was really odd how everybody who had to do with Plum took him for a fool! Rapstraw was, evidently, no exception.

"You did not go to such a place to meet anyone?" asked Mr. Rapstraw. "Some undesirable acquaintance from outside——"

Plum flushed crimson. Did this old ass think he was a weed like that rotter Snape, sneaking into obscure corners to meet a sporting man from the "Feathers"? Did he fancy that a man like Plum was the sort of shady ass to "back his fancy" with a disreputable bookmaker?

"Look here, sir——" blurted out Plum.

"Very well, I take your word on this matter," said Mr. Rapstraw. "I am prepared to attribute the whole occurrence to your utter stupidity. If anything of the kind should recur, Tumpton, you will receive a public flogging from your headmaster. In the circumstances, however, I shall deal with the matter myself, and in view of the injury you have sustained from your folly, I shall deal with you lightly. You will take detention for two half-holidays."

"Oh! Thank you, sir!" he stammered.

"With that, the matter will close!" said Mr. Rapstraw. "I only warn you very seriously never to be guilty of so stupid an escapade again."

"But I'd better tell you, sir——"

"What have you to tell me?"

"About what happened in the Keep last night, sir."

"I am aware of what happened, Tumpton, as I found you where you had fallen and struck your head on the stone——"

"I didn't fall, sir! I was knocked out."

Mr. Rapstraw stared at him.

"Knocked out! What do you mean, Tumpton? Do you mean that you were knocked out, as you express it, by your fall?"

"I was hit on the head, sir."

"Hit on the head!" repeated Mr. Rapstraw, blankly.

"Yes, sir—there was somebody in the Keep——"

"Somebody in the Keep!" repeated Mr. Rapstraw, in the same blank tone. Plum could see that he was going to get no more belief from his Form master than from his Form. But he was going to stick to his guns. Plum might be a clown, and he might be, as Rapstraw said, the stupidest boy at Sparshott. But he was stubborn—and he was going to say his say, belived or not.

"I couldn't see him in the dark, only a shadow," said Plum. "But he was there, and he tapped me on the crumpet——"

"What?"

"He really did, sir——"

"Do you mean that you suppose that some tramp had trespassed in the Keep, and that he——"

"If he was a tramp, he was a German tramp, sir."

"A German tramp!" repeated Mr. Rapstraw. "Are you out of your senses, Tumpton? How could there be a German tramp in this country, in a state of war with Germany?"

"I didn't say he was a tramp, sir—you said tramp!" answered Plum. "I know that he was a German."

"Are you mad, Tumpton?"

"Nunno, sir."

"Then what do you mean by telling me this ridiculous story?" exclaimed Mr. Rapstraw. "What do you mean by it?"

"It's true, sir!" said Plum doggedly. "There was a man there who knocked me on the head—I couldn't see him, of course, in the dark—but he was there all right——"

"You tell me that you could not see the man, and yet that he was a German?" exclaimed Mr. Rapstraw. "You must be wandering in your mind."

"He called me a blockhead, sir——" pleaded Plum. "I don't know why he should have called me a blockhead, but he did! Carboy says that "dummkopf" means blockhead, and it was "dummkopf" that he said, just as he was going to hit——"

"Do you feel unwell this morning, Tumpton?" asked Mr. Rapstraw.

"Only a pain in my head, sir, from that knock——"

"You do not feel unwell otherwise?"

"Eh! No, sir."

Plum was astonished by this sudden solicitude for his health!

"Very well, Tumpton, I am glad of it—but—possibly the injury may have caused more damage than I was aware," said Mr. Rapstraw.

Plum glared at him!

He understood Rapstraw's questions now. The blighter was making out that he was, as he would have expressed it, "off his onion." That was the effect of his strange tale on Mr. Rapstraw! The Fourth Form fellows thought that he had been dreaming. The Fourth Form master suspected that he had gone "batty." Plum crimsoned again, with indignation.

"You had better say no more about this, Tumpton!" said Mr. Rapstraw. "I am sorry for you, though you have only your own folly to blame for what has happened. You appear to believe this extraordinary story——"

"It's true, sir."

"Nonsense! Try to put it entirely out of your thoughts," said Mr. Rapstraw kindly. "Possibly that concussion, when you fell, disordered your mind a little, and you may have dreamed this——"

"That's what the fellows all say, sir! But——"

"If you have told this extraordinary story among your Form fellows, Tumpton, they are taking a charitable view in supposing that you dreamed it. They might very easily have supposed that you were out of your senses."

"It's true, sir——"

"I shall have to tell the Head, sir!" exclaimed Plum.

"I have told you, Tumpton, that I shall not take you to your head-master. The matter is closed."

"I've got to tell the Head, sir! The Elephant—I—I—I mean Dr. Oliphant, has got to know about a rotten Hun hanging about the school at night——"

Mr. Rapstraw rose to his feet. His hand strayed to the cane on his table.

"Listen to me, Tumpton!" he said, very distinctly. "I forbid you to go to your head-master with such an absurd story. I will not have the head-master's time wasted with your absurdities."

"But—look here, sir——"

"If I hear," said Mr. Rapstraw, in the same distinct tone, "that you have dared to disobey me, Tumpton—that you have ventured, in spite of my direct command, to approach your head-master on this subject, I shall punish you with the greatest severity. I can make full allowances for your folly and stupidity, Tumpton, but I will not permit defiance in my Form. If you disobey me in this matter, I shall demand your expulsion from the school, and I have no doubt—none whatever—that Dr. Oliphant will expel a boy who not only breaks school bounds at midnight, but adds disobedience and defiance to his offence."

Rapstraw, evidently, was in a "bait." He was going to make Plum toe the line, or he was going to get Plum "bunked." Plum blinked at him like an owl.

The Fourth Form master pointed to the door.

"Leave my study—and remember what I have said!" he rapped.

And Plum went—in quite a dazed state.

* * *

“VOUS avez entendu——!”

Squeak! ur-r-r-rrr!

Tom Rake turned the dial. The radio was buzzing in No. 3 Study, in the Fourth. Harry Vernon and Tom Rake were giving it attention. Plum Tumpton was not—except to glare at it, and occasionally at his chums.

Plum was in a troubled, worried, and wrathful frame of mind. He was angry—and Plum was seldom angry, and it did not agree with him. He was worried, and he did not like worry. He was, in fact, rather like a bear with a sore head that day.

Perhaps it was partly due to the fact that his head was a little sore in reality! There was still a lingering ache in it, which was most uncomfortable.

Still, that was not the worst.

The Head ought to know—Plum was sure that the Head ought to know. But Rapstraw had categorically forbidden him to see the Head about it. And after all if Rapstraw did not believe a word of it, why should the Head, if he heard it? Not a man in the Fourth believed a word of it, either.

Plum had been thinking about it all day. But he did not consult his chums further on the subject. Plum was not speaking to his chums now! If they couldn't take a fellow's word, they could go and eat coke. Plum was not going to speak to them again, until they were ready to believe every word of it—to lap it up like milk, in fact.

This was rather awkward, as the three shared the same study.

After tea, the three were there—Plum wasn't going to keep out of the study, just because there were a couple of fellows there with whom he wasn't on speaking terms.

Every now and then Vernon or Rake gave him a cheery word, just as if there was nothing the matter. Plum only glared by way of reply.

In this mood of trouble, worry, resentment, and wrath, all mixed up in his plump breast, the radio was an added infliction. Plum came near shying a Latin dictionary at it.

Tom Rake was keen on radios and anything else in the mechanical line. He liked tinkering with it, or any kind of mechanical contraption. It was a small radio, but it had all

three wave-lengths, and Tom could pick up all sorts of things on it. It worked on a flex run from the study light: the lamp, of course, having to be taken out to give place to the flex. When the news came on, very often a crowd would gather round the door of No. 3 to hear the latest.

Gr-r-r-r! came from the radio, as Tom twiddled the dial. There seemed to be some atmospheric about.

Plum opened his lips—and nearly said “For the love of Mike, shut that thing off!” But he closed his lips again, with the words unuttered. He remembered in time that he wasn’t speaking to these doubting Thomases.

“Here you are!” said Tom, at last.

“The news, Plum!” said Vernon, amiably.

Grunt, from Plum.

The announcer’s voice ran on. Rake and Vernon listened in, and Carboy, Banks, Cook, Lennox, Lamb, Hanson, Wilmot, Scaife, and other fellows came round to hear.

Plum ostentatiously did not listen in. He gave a deep and prolonged yawn to signify that he was bored.

But all of a sudden, Plum sat up and took notice.

After retailing the latest items of news from the ends of the earth, the announcer came to an occurrence nearer home—the arrest of a “German spy” somewhere in England.”

“Oh!” said Plum.

The spy had been seized “in the vicinity of an aerodrome in a southern county.” Plum’s eyes glistened.

“I wonder——” he began.

Vernon glanced round at him.

“What?” he asked.

Plum remembered—and was silent.

“Deaf?” asked Vernon.

Plum was not to be drawn. Besides, he was listening-in now. Plum was deeply interested in tales of German spies, after what had happened the previous night. If that unknown man in the Keep wasn’t a spy, what was he? Suppose this was the same man? Perhaps they had got him!

But little more was told.

The spy was in safe keeping: and the name of the police-officer who had tricked him—Inspector Hardwood of Scotland Yard—was mentioned. That was about all.

Then the announcer passed on to other things: such as rations, in which Plum was not interested.

Generally, Plum was quite interested in ration news. Plum had a healthy appetite—a very healthy one—and he lived in hope of hearing that jam especially had been de-rationed.

But for once rations failed to interest Plum.

He was thinking of spies.

Tom Rake shut off at last. Plum’s plump brow was corrugated with thought.

“I wonder——” he said, again.

“Go it!” said Rake.

Plum hesitated. But he had to speak.

“Well, look here,” he said—letting his chums out of Coventry, so to speak, for one occasion only! “Look here, suppose it’s the same chap!”

Vernon and Rake looked puzzled.

“What chap?” asked Rake.

“That chap they’ve caught—Inspector What’s-his-name, you know——”

“Inspector What’s-his-name!” repeated Vernon, gravely. “I don’t seem to remember hearing him mentioned——”

“Oh, don’t be an ass!” snapped Plum. “You know whom I mean—Inspector Thingumbob—what was it, Rake?”

Plum never did remember names or dates, which sometimes caused him spots of bother with Mr. Rapstraw.

"Hardwood!" said Rake, laughing.

"Yes, that was it—Hardwood. Well, he's run in a spy near an aerodrome in a southern county—we're in a southern county!" said Plum.

"Oh, my hat! There are nearly a dozen other southern counties, and some hundreds of other aerodromes!" said Vernon.

"Well, it may be the same man——"

"What man?"

"The man I saw—I mean, that I didn't see—I mean the man who knocked me on the nut in the Old Keep last night."

"Can't be the same man!" said Tom Rake, shaking his head.

"Why can't it?" demanded Plum, hotly.

"Well, the man that Hardwood has run in must be a real man," explained Rake, "and the man in the Keep wasn't! See?"

Plum gave him a devastating glare.

"You silly owl!" he roared.

"There's a lot of difference between a real live German spy, and a nightmare," said Rake, with another shake of the head.

"Can't be the same."

"Forget it, old man!" said Vernon. "You'll have the Old Bean on your trail if you keep it up. He's been shirty with you all day."

"Blow the Old Bean!" hissed Plum. "What did they want to dig the old ass up for—a ninety-year-old noodle—a doddering twerp a hundred years old—or more!"

"Make it a thousand!" suggested Rake.

"The old frump!" said Plum. "I jolly well ought to go to the Head about it—and he won't let me! I've a jolly good mind to go anyway."

"Don't be an ass, old chap," said Vernon, soothingly, "Rapstraw's our beak——"

"A doddering old derelict—about a hundred and twenty——" hooted Plum.

His chum's grinned. Rapstraw's age seemed to increase more and more, in Plum's estimation, as his wrath intensified. He seemed fairly on the way to reaching the venerable age of Methuselah.

"Time he was put back in the box," snorted Plum. "I know we can't have young masters now—but there's no need to dig up one a century and a half old! Who's Rapstraw, I'd like to know?"

"Our beak, old chap, even if he's two or three hundred years old, and a few over!" grinned Rake.

"Chuck it out of your mind, Plum," advised Vernon.

"How can I chuck it out of my mind, when that Hun that tapped me may be after the aerodrome——"

"Going to walk off with it?" asked Rake. "Fancy waking up one morning and finding the aerodrome missing?"

"Will you talk sense?" yelled Plum. "Look here, I'm going to the Head about it—and Rapstraw can go and be blowed."

"My dear ass——"

"I wish I knew how to get on to that chap What-do-you-call-him!" said Plum. "Think I might get on to him, if I borrowed a telephone and rang up Scotland Yard?"

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Vernon and Rake together, almost overcome by the idea of a Fourth Form junior at Sparshott ringing up Scotland Yard and asking for Inspector Hardwood.

"Well, think he'd come down and look into it?" asked Plum.

"Oh, scissors! Not quite! More likely to get his hair off at the idea of a schoolboy trying to pull his leg—if you got through to him!" gasped Vernon.

"If!" grinned Rake.

Plum rose from his chair. His face was grim. Other fellows, perhaps, might have been laughed out of sticking to such a story. Not so Plum! Plum might be all sorts of an ass, and

undoubtedly was—but Plum was a sticker. All that his chums had said had had only one effect on Plum—it had made him make up his mind. And when Plum Tumpton's mind was made up, it was made up!

"So you think I'd better chuck it?" he asked.

"Yes, rather."

"And not go to the Head?"

"Not in your lifetime."

"That's your advice, is it?" snorted Plum.

"That's it, old chap."

"All right! Now I'm going!" Plum crossed to the door.

"Eh! Where are you going?" exclaimed Vernon.

"I'm going to the Head."

"Look here——" shouted his chums together, in dismay.

Plum walked out of the study.

"Plum, you ass!" yelled Vernon.

"Plum, you clown!" yelled Rake.

But answer there came none. Plum Tumpton was heading down the passage for the stairs, on his way to Dr. Oliphant's study. What Plum had said, he had said: and what he had said, he was going to do. And that was that: and his alarmed chums gazed at one another, as if petrified, for a long moment.

Then, as if moved by the same spring, they rushed out of the study after Plum.

They were going to stop him—if they could: and save him from himself, as it were—if they could! It only remained to be seen whether they could! But Eustace Percival Tumpton had lost no time. Two anxious and breathless juniors raced down the stairs—they charged along passages—and they glimpsed Plum—just as the door of the Head's study closed behind him. The next second that door hid Plum Tumpton: and Harry Vernon and Tom Rake stared at that door, and then at one another, in dismay.

"That's torn it!" said Rake.

Plum was with the Head! In spite of his anxious chums, in spite of Mr. Rapstraw, Plum's strange tale was going to be told to the Headmaster of Sparshott. And Rake and Vernon could only wonder dismally what the outcome would be.

* * *

DR. OLIPHANT gazed at Tumpton of the Fourth.

Plum stood red, breathless: gasping a little. He was excited—he was a little alarmed. He wondered whether he was going to be whopped. But he had told his tale. He had blurted and spluttered it out, into the astonished ears of an astonished Headmaster: and now he stood, like a man awaiting his fate, before the Head—who gazed at him in silence.

Dr. Oliphant's kind, benign old face, framed in silver hair, was far from alarming to see. But the Head could whop—many fellows knew that the benign old gentleman could whop—hard! What was he thinking of Plum's strange tale? That the junior had dreamed it, like the fellows in the Fourth—that he had gone "batty," like Rapstraw? What was he thinking, as he sat there silent, with that thoughtful expression on his face—and what was he going to do? The silence seemed long, very long, to Plum. It was a deep, deep silence. It might almost have been cut with a knife.

The Head broke it at last. He did not, to Plum's relief, glance at his cane. He spoke quietly, his old but very keen and penetrating eyes fixed on Plum's red ruffled face.

"That is a very strange story, Tumpton."

"Yes, sir!" gasped Plum. "I know! The chaps think I dreamed it! Mr. Rapstraw thinks I'm batty——"

"He thinks—what?"

"I—I mean balmy, sir!" stammered Plum. "That is, bats

in the belfry—I—I—I mean gone crackers, sir! Haywire, I mean." Plum floundered, "I—I—I—mean he thinks that knock on the head made my fancy it, sir."

"You should choose your expressions a little more carefully, Tumpton, in speaking to your headmaster."

"Oh! Yes, sir! I mean——"

"If you did dream or fancy this, Tumpton——"

"Oh, sir!" Plum could have groaned. Was his last hope going to fail him? "I didn't, sir! It—it happened, sir! I—I was bound to tell you, sir. A German hanging about the school, sir—I know it ain't expected to last much longer, sir, now the Huns are knocked out East and West, but still, it's war time, and a German——"

Dr. Oliphant held up his slim white hand.

"You saw nothing of the man, Tumpton?"

"I—I couldn't, sir! He flashed his light right in my eyes, and dazzled me, and before you could say knife——"

"Before what?"

"I—I mean, at—at once, sir—he knocked me on the head—cosh! I've got the bump there now, sir. And—and a pain in it! Oh, sir, it did happen." Plum's earnestness was almost tearful.

"You say the man spoke—a single word in German?"

"Yes, sir! I knew the word was German, because it sounded like a pig snorting—I've heard them on the radio——"

"Upon my word!" said Dr. Oliphant, gazing at him.

"I didn't know what it meant, sir, till Carboy told me. But I knew it, was German—Carboy said it meant blockhead—dummkopf! Of course I can't understand why he should have said 'Blockhead.' But he did."

Did a faint smile cross the Head's grave face? Plum thought so, and wondered why!

"You had never heard the word before, Tumpton?"

"Never, sir! I don't know any German. I knew it was a German word from the sound, that was all: and Carboy said——"

"I shall consider what you have told me, Tumpton! In the meantime, you will say nothing on the subject."

"I've told the Old Bean, sir—I—I mean Mr. Rapstraw, and—and all the fellows in the Fourth——"

"Quite! But you will say no more—you will let the subject drop entirely," said Dr. Oliphant. "If you fancied all this, Tumpton, the less said the better. If you did not, there is a still greater necessity to say nothing. I am afraid, Tumpton, that you are not a very intelligent boy——"

"Me, sir!" ejaculated Plum, in surprise.

"But you have intelligence enough, Tumpton, to understand that the less said on this subject the better. In any case, I command you to say nothing further."

"Very well, sir!" said Plum. "Of course, you know best, sir."

"I am glad you can realise that, Tumpton. Let the matter be forgotten, as quickly as possible. Not a word more. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"If I hear," said Dr. Oliphant, "that you have talked further on this subject, Tumpton, I shall have to consider very seriously whether you can be allowed to remain at Sparshott."

"Oh, sir!" gasped Plum.

"Remember that!" said the Head. For a moment the kind old face was grim. "I expect implicit obedience, Tumpton."

"Yes, sir! Oh, certainly, sir."

"Very good! You may now leave my study, Tumpton."

Plum looked at him. He was not wholly satisfied. Did the Head take him seriously, or did he take the same view as Rap-

straw? Plum could not tell. He would have liked to ask what was going to be done about it. But one look at the Head's face decided Plum not to ask that question! Without another word the fathead of the Fourth left the Head's study.

Dr. Oliphant sat looking at the door that had closed on that hopeful member of the Fourth Form at Sparshott. There was a rather strange expression on his face. Long he sat—in silence. He was thinking—but not, perhaps, on the same lines as everyone else who had heard the story of that wild adventure at midnight in the old Keep.

He could not dismiss that strange tale as Mr. Rapstraw had done. For one circumstance, one stubborn fact, hammered in his mind. It was the German word that Plum had heard in the old Keep.

The boy knew no German. He might have picked up a few odd words, here or there, perhaps on the radio: but "dummkopf" was extremely unlikely to be one of them. The boy was, perhaps, a fool: but he was truthful: and his earnestness was not to be mistaken—he had said that he did not know the meaning of the word till a junior had translated it for him, and the Head believed him. How could the boy have fancied a word that was unknown to him?

Yet, if he actually had heard that word uttered in the old Keep at night, it meant—what did it mean? What could it mean?

It meant that, in spite of his Form-master's disbelief, he actually had run into some unknown person in the old ruined Keep: a person who, in a startled moment, off his guard, had involuntarily spoken in German! It meant that he had run into a German—amazing, almost impossible as it was, it meant precisely that!

A spy? What else? The war was almost over—that was common knowledge. Since the Anglo-American army had crossed the Rhine in the West, and the Russians had crossed the Oder in the East, the end might come any day. Any day the radio might announce that Germany had surrendered. Nevertheless, that did not alter the fact that it was still war—and that enemy spies were still active, and would be active up to the very end. And there was an air camp only a few miles from Sparshott School. Was it possible—

Long the Head sat in silent thought. When, at last, he stirred, it was not to pick up his pen, and resume marking papers for the Sixth Form. It was to pick up the receiver of his telephone, and dial a number.

Plum, in No. 3 Study, had had the wild idea of ringing up Scotland Yard. Had he done so, it was improbable, to say the least, that much heed would have been given to a junior school-boy with so wild a tale to tell. But the name of Dr. Oliphant, Headmaster of Sparshott School, carried more weight than that of Eustace Percival Tumpton of the Fourth Form.

An official voice was very respectful when Dr. Oliphant gave his name: very different, there was little doubt, from what it would have been like had Plum been the caller! Dr. Oliphant held on while it was ascertained whether Inspector Hardwood was available to answer his call.

A minute later, a quiet steady voice came through. Then for a good many minutes Dr. Oliphant was speaking: the quiet voice from the other end only interrupting once or twice with a question. Finally that quiet voice remarked:

"Thank you, Dr. Oliphant! You have mentioned to no one that you have called me up?"

"No one," said the Head.

"Please keep it entirely secret. There may be nothing in this matter, but there may be much. Expect Mr. Brown in the morning."

"Mr. Brown?"

"Exactly."

"I understand!" said Dr. Oliphant, after a pause. "I will expect Mr. Brown."

There was an extremely thoughtful shade on the Head's face as he put up the receiver. It remained there when he picked up his pen and resumed his labours on Sixth Form papers. Very, very thoughtful did he seem—but he was not thinking wholly of Latin prose.

Meanwhile, Plum had returned to No. 3 in the Fourth. His friends were waiting for him there, in anxious mood.

"Bunked?" asked Vernon.

"Yah!" was Plum's reply.

"Flogged?" asked Rake.

"Don't be an ass!" yapped Plum.

"You've told the Head?" demanded both together.

"Didn't I go to his study to tell him?"

"And he never even whopped you?"

"No!" snorted Plum.

"Well, that beats it!" said Rake. "But I can tell you this—Rapstraw jolly well will if he hears you've been to the Head."

"Blow Rapstraw!" said Plum. "Bother Rapstraw! Bless Rapstraw! I jolly well believe that the Head believed the whole thing——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, shut up!" roared Plum.

And the subject dropped in No. 3 Study.

* * *

"WHAT a life!" sighed Tom Rake.

He wriggled as he spoke. Harry Vernon gave him a sympathetic look. Other fellows were sympathetic. Sympathy, no doubt, was grateful and comforting. But it did not much help a fellow who had had "six" on the bags. Especially when that six had been laid on by Rapstraw.

For, surprising as it was in an Old Bean of Rapstraw's venerable years, he had a hard and heavy hand with a cane—a harder and heavier hand than the Head, who, as all Sparshott knew, could whop! Where he packed the muscle was a mystery. He packed it somewhere: and his Form had the benefit of it, when Rapstraw was shirty. And Rapstraw, who had never been good-tempered, seemed to grow worse and worse. Perhaps, at his age, he found the Sparshott Fourth a strain. Whatever the cause, he made the juniors long for the end of the war and the return of the younger masters. Plum Tumpton declared that the brute got worse, visibly, every day. Perhaps that was an exaggeration. But there was no doubt that Rapstraw was very cross-grained, and getting more so.

"The awful rotter!" said Tom, wriggling. "Six of the best—how the ancient image lays them on is a wonder! But—he does! Six of the very best—and what did I do?"

"Nothing—as usual?" grinned Carboy.

"Well, I slid down the banisters!" admitted Rake. "Any other beak would have given me lines. Rapstraw gave me six—wow!"

Harry Vernon frowned.

"The man's a brute!" he said. "I can't understand him. You'd think that the crossdest-tempered outsider would feel a bit pleased these days—the way the war's going. Rapstraw doesn't seem to care."

"Unpatriotic beast!" said Rake. "I remember he whopped me the day we got the news that Monty was over the Rhine. He didn't care a boiled bean."

"If they let us off every time there's a victory, these days, there wouldn't be many whoppings handed out!" grinned Carboy.

"But old Rapstraw does seem to get worse as the news gets better—it's weird, but he does."

"Blow him!" mumbled Rake, still wriggling. "I'd like to punch Rapstraw's head—ancient as it is——"

"Shurrup, old chap!" whispered Plum. "There's that man Brown——"

"Bother him!" grunted Tom.

A rather stocky man, with a pair of very keen eyes under iron-grey brows, was passing the group of juniors in the quad. They were standing near the fountain: and the stocky man paused, perhaps to watch the play of the waters—perhaps because he was interested in the remarks of the schoolboys. Some of them glanced at him, without much interest.

They had all seen Mr. Brown about the school a good many times. He had come one morning—the second morning after Plum's adventure in the old Keep. It was understood that he was an architect, and was at Sparshott to prepare the plans for structural alterations after the end of the war—now, as everybody knew, near its end. He was a quiet-looking man, quietly dressed, with a quiet voice and a polite manner. Fellows often saw him pottering about, no doubt thinking out those architectural plans. He had a room in the House, and fed with the Staff in Common-Room: and had, of course, nothing whatever to do with the boys. But as he had the run of the school, and seemed to like pottering about in all sort of places, they often came across him. He had been a week at Sparshott now, and they were quite used to the sight of the quiet Mr. Brown.

Tom Rake gave him a slightly inimical look. If Mr. Brown had heard him say that he would like to punch Rapstraw's head, it would be awkward—if he mentioned it to Rapstraw. It was no business of the architect's, certainly: still, he might. And Tom did not want another "six" from the Old Bean.

Mr. Brown glanced at Tom, and smiled. He had a grave, serious face, but a very pleasant smile, which lighted it up.

"You seem in pain, my boy," he remarked, pleasantly.

"So would you be, if you'd had six on the bags!" grunted Tom.

"Eh! What? Oh! Yes, no doubt!" agreed Mr. Brown. "But—perhaps it may comfort you to hear some good news. It has come through that the Russians are advancing on Berlin."

"Hurray!" roared the juniors. And Tom, for a moment, forgot to wriggle, as he cheered with the rest.

"It can't last much longer now," remarked Harry Vernon. "Might get the news any day now that they've conked out."

"Hurray!"

"I say, chaps, think they'll de-ration jam when it's over?" asked Plum, eagerly. "I mean to say, it's been pretty tough—a fellow's almost forgotten the taste of a jam-tart. When we get peace——"

"Peace, to have any real meaning, must mean jam-tarts!" said Carboy, solemnly.

"Exactly!" agreed Plum, unsuspectingly. "You're talking sense for once, Carboy. Mind, I'd go without jam for a hundred years to beat the Germans. Still, when we've beaten them——"

"Trust Churchill!" said Harry Vernon. "He wouldn't forget a thing like that, Plum! He must know it's important."

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

"Well, you can snigger," said Plum, warmly. "But a fellow likes a jam-tart—I know I do. And when we've beaten the Huns——"

"Cave! Here comes the Old Bean."

Mr. Rapstraw appeared in view. He was walking slowly under the old Sparshott beeches, his hands clasped behind his back, a wrinkle of thought in his wrinkled brow.

"Oh, rot!" growled Plum. "We are beating the Huns,

ain't we? You're an ass, Carboy. Rapstraw must be as glad that we're beating the Huns as anybody else. He's rather a cough-drop: but he must want to see the Huns licked, as we all do."

"Well, I suppose he must!" admitted Carboy. "But it doesn't seem to improve his temper, all the same."

"That's rot!" declared Plum. "I'll jolly well go and tell him what Mr. Brown's just told us. You'll see."

And Plum marched off directly towards his Form-master. The juniors watched him, curiously. Strange as it was, puzzling as it was, there was no doubt that good news from the fighting fronts never had the exhilarating effect on Mr. Rapstraw that it had on everybody else at Sparshott. It was a fact, an inexplicable fact, that every new victory seemed to make him more disgruntled than before. All the Fourth knew it—they had reason to know it, in their Form room. Only Plum persisted in not seeing what everybody else could see.

Mr. Brown, lingering by the fountain, watched Plum also, as curiously as the juniors. He, too, seemed interested to see how Mr. Rapstraw would react to the latest good news.

"Excuse me, sir," said Plum. Mr. Rapstraw came to a halt, and his pin-points of eyes, under his bushy grey brows, fixed on Plum, not pleasantly.

"Well?" he snapped.

"I thought you'd like to hear the good news, sir!" said Plum. "Jolly good news from Germany, sir."

"Good news," repeated Mr. Rapstraw.

"Yes, sir! The Russians are in Berlin!" said Plum, cheerfully. That was rather an exaggeration of what Mr. Brown had told: it was coming, but it had not quite come yet. Plum anticipated, as it were. "Fancy that, sir—very likely they'll get Hitler—anyhow they'll squash the beastly Huns, sir, and—Yaroooh!"

Plum staggered. Why Mr. Rapstraw smacked his head, Plum could not begin to guess. But he knew that Mr. Rapstraw did. He smacked it hard: and Plum staggered and roared.

"Looks as if the Old Bean likes the good news!" chuckled Carboy.

"Yow-ow-ow-ow!" roared Plum, clasping his head. "Look here, sir, wharrer you smacking my head for, I'd like to know. I only told you they were taking Berlin from the filthy Huns——"

Plum jumped back just in time to escape another smack.

"Oh, scissors!" he stuttered. "Look here—what—oh, my hat!" Plum stuttered, and blinked dizzily at his Form-master.

"Go to my study, and wait for me there, Tumpton!" rapped Mr. Rapstraw. "I will not allow you to talk such nonsense. Go."

Plum, in a bemused state of bewilderment, went. Mr. Rapstraw gave the staring crowd of juniors a dark glance, and walked on. Harry Vernon and Co. looked at one another with deep feelings. Mr. Brown looked after Mr. Rapstraw, as he went: and the expression on Mr. Brown's face was very curious indeed.

* * *

"FORGET it!" said Tom Rake.

"Wash it right out!" said Harry Vernon.

Plum's only answer was a gloomy look.

Plum was brooding. It was quite unlike Plum to brood. Generally Plum was a cheery fellow, as cheery as a cricket. He hardly ever remembered offences. It was not in his sunny nature to owe a grudge. But——

There was a limit. It was twenty-four hours since Rapstraw had smacked Plum's head in the quad. The sun had gone down on Plum's wrath, and had risen on it again. Plum was still wrathful.

His friends were wrathful, too, if it came to that. But Plum, only too evidently, was thinking deep thoughts of vengeance, and that rather alarmed his friends. For you couldn't get back at a beak. You simply couldn't! Rapstraw, no doubt, deserved something lingering with boiling oil in it. All the Sparshott Fourth would have agreed on that. Nevertheless, a beak, like an obstinate horse, had to be given his head. Plum couldn't do a thing. But Plum was the only fellow who couldn't or wouldn't realise that he couldn't do a thing.

"Forget it," urged the captain of the Fourth. "Rapstraw's a brute. He's an unpatriotic brute. But—forget it, old chap."

He smacked my head!" said Plum.

"Yes, but——"

"I'm going to get back at him."

"Can't be done, old fellow!" said Tom, soothingly.

"Can't it?" said Plum. "You'll see! Rapstraw's always down on me. He's been down on me ever since that night in the old Keep, and you fellows know it. I've not said anything more about that—the Head told me not to. But you fellows know——"

"He's a cranky old sole," said Tom. "But we shan't have to stand him much longer, Plum. He'll go when the old staff come back."

"I'll give him something to remember me by, when he goes!" said Plum, darkly. "I wouldn't mind if it was anything else—but he smacked my head for telling him the Huns were getting it in the neck. Unpatriotic beast! Everybody else in the school rejoicing, and that old swob scowling away like a demon in a panto! I'll teach him to smack my head."

"He doesn't need it—he can do it all right!" suggested Tom.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" howled Plum. "This isn't funny! You wait till you hear what's happened in his study."

"What going to happen in his study?"

"That's telling!" answered Plum, mysteriously. "Perhaps his study's going to be shipped! Perhaps it isn't! Perhaps he's going to find his armchair full of gum, and ink, and soot. Perhaps he isn't! Perhaps he's going to find his study looking as if a hurricane had struck it! Perhaps not."

"Plum, old man——"

"Yah!" said Plum, elegantly. And he walked away, thus putting a stop to the anxious expostulations of his devoted chums.

Vernon and Rake could only hope that Plum's sunny nature would supervene, and that he would forget it. But Plum's sunny nature seemed at a discount now. Never before had Plum brooded over a wrong and planned vengeance. Now he did! Rapstraw was going to have it! Plum was going to give it to him. That was fixed in Plum's mind—as fixed and immutable as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

And so it came to pass, after class that day, that when Mr. Rapstraw went to Common-Room, for tea with the other masters, Plum Tumpton was loitering by the corner of the passage and watched him go. And when he was quite, quite sure that the Old Bean was safe in Common-Room, Plum tiptoed to the door of Rapstraw's study, opened it and stepped inside.

Breathing rather quickly, Plum shut the door after him. The Old Bean was safe for half an hour. In half an hour a vengeful fellow could put in a lot of work—with time to escape afterwards. Plum, picturing the state in which the Old Bean was going to find his study when he returned after tea, grinned—a vengeful grin. Rapstraw was going to learn that he couldn't smack fellows' heads with impunity—just for giving him good news that any patriotic person would have been glad to hear. Standing in the middle of Mr. Rapstraw's study, Plum looked round him, considering where to begin.

And, as he stood considering, there came a light footstep in the passage, approaching the door.

Plum gave a jump. It was just his luck, if the Old Bean had come back for something—just his rotten luck!

If Rapstraw caught him there—

Plum had plenty of pluck; but he shivered at the thought. But there was no escape—if that was the Old Bean coming back. Rapstraw's study was not on the ground floor—there was a long drop from the window—it was useless to think of the window. Plum cast a desperate glance round him, thinking of a hiding-place. If Rapstraw had come back for something he had forgotten, he would stay only a minute or so—it was his tea-time in Common-Room. Plum had only to keep out of sight for that minute or so—if he could!

Was it Rapstraw coming? Perhaps not—but Plum could not afford to take chances. In the corner of the study was a tall screen, standing across the corner. Plum did not stop to think. There was no time for thinking—neither was thinking much in Plum's line. Before those footsteps stopped at the door, Plum had backed behind the screen in the corner—and as the door opened, he stood there, suppressing his panting breath.

He heard the door open and shut. So it was Rapstraw—nobody else was likely to walk into the study as if it belonged to him. Deeply thankful was Plum that he was out of sight. Rapstraw's temper of late had been so acid, indeed so vitriolic, that he would smack a fellow's head for nothing—and what was he likely to do if he discovered an intended ragger in his study? Plum hoped from the bottom of his heart that the Old Bean would not look behind that screen. But really that was not likely—if Plum kept quiet. And Eustace Percival Tumpton was keeping as quiet as a mouse with the cat at hand.

Behind the screen, Plum could see nothing of the man. But he could hear. He heard him moving about, in a very soft and quiet way. The Old Bean was often stealthy—but it seemed odd that he should take the trouble to step softly in his own study.

Plum was not, perhaps, very bright. But he was bright enough to realise that this was odd: and he began to wonder whether it was Rapstraw after all, or perhaps some ragger like himself—who, of course, would need to move cautiously. Some other man in the Fourth might have had the bright idea of "shipping" Rapstraw's study!

As the soft, stealthy movements continued, Plum felt almost sure of it. He was going to know. No need to keep as quiet as a mouse behind a screen in the corner if it was only some other ragger in Rapstraw's study.

Very cautiously Plum peered round a corner of the screen.

The next moment he very nearly betrayed himself in his astonishment. His eyes popped at the back of a man stooping before Rapstraw's desk—a desk with many drawers, which Plum knew were always kept carefully locked. But some of those drawers were open now.

It was not Rapstraw. It was not a schoolboy ragger. Plum had only a back view of him, but he knew him at once. It was Mr. Brown!

Plum fairly goggled at Mr. Brown's bent back.

Had Mr. Brown looked round he must have seen Plum. But he did not look round. Obviously he had not the faintest suspicion that anyone was in the study with him. It dawned on Plum that Mr. Brown must have seen Rapstraw in Common Room—and so knew, just as Plum did, that the form-master was safe off the scene. He had come there, in Rapstraw's absence, just as Plum had done—but why?

An architectural gentleman of early middle age could hardly be suspected of ragging. It looked more like burglary to Plum. For Mr. Brown, stooping before that desk, was opening one

drawer after another—though every one had a good patent lock in it and Rapstraw was very careful with his keys. Mr. Brown was picking locks!

Dazed, Plum drew back into cover.

He could not begin to understand it. Mr. Brown was taking papers from those locked drawers, glancing through them and replacing them. Was that serious-faced middle-aged gentleman merely an inquisitive Paul Pry? Or what did it mean?

A low mumuring voice reached his ear.

“Not much doubt now!”

Mr. Brown was murmuring to himself. It seemed that he had finished with Rapstraw’s desk; he was standing motionless; for some moments Plum might have fancied himself alone in the study.

Then he heard another movement. It was the creak of a chair as a man sank into it. It put the finishing touch to Plum’s amazement. He did not need to look—he knew, by his ears, that Mr. Brown had sat down in the Old Bean’s armchair. His strange and mysterious investigation in Rapstraw’s study was at an end—and now he was sitting in Rapstraw’s armchair, apparently taking a rest. Was he waiting for the Old Bean?

“Oh, crumbs!” breathed Plum.

The Old Bean might come any minute now. The half-hour was up. Plum had not done any ragging—the study was still unshipped. There was no time for any ragging now—even if Brown went. Plum did not want to be caught in the act by the returning Old Bean.

Plum was getting desperate.

If Brown stayed on he could not escape unseen. Dared he venture to let Brown learn that he was there? He could realise that Mr. Brown would be intensely annoyed to discover that he had been observed. He might smack Plum’s head, just like Rapstraw. He might report him to the Old Bean. On the whole, it was safer to hug cover.

But that meant remaining there till the Old Bean came back. And then—— Plum was still revolving the problem in worried thought when the door opened and Mr. Rapstraw walked into the study. That put paid to Plum’s doubts—he huddled quietly in the corner behind the screen and held his breath.

* * *

MR. RAPSTRAW came in and closed the door behind him before he observed the man sitting in his armchair by the fireplace. Then he stared at the quiet Mr. Brown, plainly astonished to see him in the study.

“What——” he began.

Mr. Brown rose to his feet.

“I have waited for you a few minutes, Mr. Rapstraw,” he said. “There is a little matter I desire to discuss with you.”

“I cannot imagine what it is,” snapped Mr. Rapstraw. “I am not concerned with your business in this school, Mr. Brown. I take no interest whatever in architecture, and know nothing of building.”

“That is not the matter I desire to discuss.”

“Then what is it?” asked Mr. Rapstraw. “I can give you a few minutes, Mr. Brown, but really——”

“I am afraid I shall require more than a few minutes” came Mr. Brown’s quiet voice. “The matter is important, Mr. Rapstraw. Perhaps I had better, to begin with, introduce myself.”

“I fail to understand you. I have already made your acquaintance, Mr. Brown, so far as I desire to make it!” said Mr. Rapstraw, harshly. “And I will say plainly that I resent the liberty you have taken in entering my study and remaining in it without my knowledge.”

"My name is Hardwood."

"What?"

Behind the screen in the corner Plum Tumpton barely suppressed a gasp. He wondered whether he was dreaming.

Hardwood! Plum remembered that name—remembered it on the radio as the name of the Scotland Yard Detective-Inspector who had "run in" a German spy a week or two ago. Hardwood! Plum rubbed his eyes to make sure that he was awake.

The effect of that name was even more startling upon Mr. Rapstraw than it was upon Plum. The master of the Sparshott Fourth almost staggered, and his eyes fairly bulged under his bushy grey brows.

"What? Hardwood! Did you say Hardwood?" he stut-tered.

"Apparently you have heard the name," said Mr. Brown.

Rapstraw recovered himself.

"I have certainly heard it—at least, I have seen it in the newspapers," he answered. "I think I saw a report——"

"Exactly!"

"Something in connection with Scotland Yard, I think."

"Detective-Inspector," said Mr. Brown.

"I quite fail to understand this," said Mr. Rapstraw. "If your statement is correct, it appears that you have come to Sparshott under an assumed name. You will hardly expect me not to acquaint Dr. Oliphant with this fact."

"Dr. Oliphant is already aware of it, Mr. Rapstraw. Sometimes," explained Mr. Brown, "it is necessary for a detective to conceal his identity. In such a matter, as for example, tracing an enemy spy."

"A—a spy?"

"A little more than a week ago," said Mr. Brown, "a German agent was arrested by me in the vicinity of Parsley Aero-drome, a few miles from here. There was little, or rather, no doubt that he had an accomplice somewhere in the vicinity."

"Indeed," said Mr. Rapstraw, "this is very interesting, Mr. Brown—or Hardwood—or whatever your name is——"

"I thought you would find it so!" assented Mr. Brown.

"But I fail to see how it concerns me," said Mr. Rapstraw, his pin-points of eyes fixed on the calm face of Mr. Brown. "And my time is of value——"

"Quite! But you must give me time to explain," said the man from Scotland Yard urbanely. "While this case was in my hands I received a most unexpected and welcome clue."

"A—a clue?"

"A very strange and unexpected one," said Mr. Brown. "It seems that a boy of this school, venturing out at night to visit an old ruin attached to the school, encountered a man whom he took to be a German——"

"Nonsense!"

"In the circumstances the tale, strange as it was, did not seem nonsense to me," said Mr. Brown unmoved. "Unexpected, surprising—very surprising but far from nonsense in the circumstances."

"So you came here, under an assumed name, to investigate this cock-and-bull story of a crack-brained schoolboy?" asked Mr. Rapstraw.

Behind the screen Plum grinned.

He wondered what the Fourth Form fellows would say when they heard about this! They would hardly make out any longer that he had dreamed that startling encounter in the old Keep! Even the Old Bean would have to admit that there was something in it—with a Scotland Yard Detective-Inspector on the spot looking into it!

Plum began to feel glad that he was parked behind that screen in Rapstraw's study. He was beginning to enjoy this!

"The boy you mention," went on Mr. Rapstraw, "is in my form—the most stupid and obtuse boy at Sparshott School. He fell and hurt his head and that, added to his natural stupidity, resulted in this cock-and-bull story. I supposed that the absurd matter was forgotten, as I have heard nothing of it for some time. I had indeed forgotten it. Such utter nonsense——"

"Hardly that," said Mr. Brown. "Certainly it was a strange and startling thought that an enemy spy might have found concealment in such an unlikely place as a public school. It seemed almost impossible."

"Quite impossible!" said Mr. Rapstraw.

"I came to ascertain whether it was possible," said Mr. Brown. "I made observations here—and inquired further afield. I was prepared to investigate the history of every man at this school who had become an inmate since the beginning of the war."

Mr. Rapstraw laughed.

"That would apply to practically all the staff," he said. "Most of us are old hands who have taken the places of younger men in the Forces."

"Quite!"

"So you have been looking out all our records?" asked Mr. Rapstraw, in a tone of sarcastic banter.

"Every one has been investigated and reported to me," said Mr. Brown. "All but one are above suspicion."

"Then there is one——"

"One only that admits of doubt," said Mr. Brown. "That is why I am speaking to you at the present moment, sir."

"Indeed!"

"I will explain. I have learned that Mr. Denham Rapstraw, a very old master of Sparshott School, left England in 1938."

Plum wondered again whether he was dreaming. He waited for Rapstraw's reply—but no reply came. The Old Bean was staring at Mr. Brown in frozen silence.

"A relative of this old gentleman was traced," resumed Mr. Brown, "and from him it was learned that, to the best of his belief, Mr. Denham Rapstraw was still in Australia, where he went before the war."

"Oh!"

"Naturally this interested me very much in a gentleman here who was called Mr. Rapstraw—supposed to be an old former master in the school," said Mr. Brown, "and I was still more interested to observe that this Mr. Rapstraw was so far from sharing the general rejoicing at the defeat of Germany that he showed great irritation at the mere mention of British victories."

Plum heard a sound of gritting teeth.

"For all of which reasons," resumed the quiet voice, "I have taken the liberty of investigating the contents of the drawers of your desk, Mr. Rapstraw——"

"Wha-at!"

"I have examined certain papers that seem to require some explanation. And I have seen a loaded automatic—a very singular object to be found in the possession of a form master in a public school."

Plum heard a snarl like that of a savage animal.

"You might not be telling me all this so coolly if the automatic were in my hand!" hissed Mr. Rapstraw.

"Precisely! It is safe in the drawer, however," said Mr. Brown. "I will now come to the point, sir! My suspicion of you amounts practically to certainty; but if there is a doubt, you will get the benefit of it. If Denham Rapstraw is in Australia

all this time, you have assumed his name, forged his papers, received the head master's request to resume a mastership here, and come here as Denham Rapstraw—when you are nothing of the kind. In that case I have no doubt that you are the man the German agent came to this vicinity to meet—that the old Norman Keep, at night, is the meeting place—and that it was you into whom that foolish boy blundered, when, in the surprise of the moment, you uttered an ejaculation in your own native language—German."

Plum blinked behind the screen.

Was that it? He listened with all his ears for the Old Bean's reply. But no reply came and the detective's quiet voice went on.

"In that case you are in disguise—a very clever and masterly disguise. So good a disguise that I cannot penetrate it. You look a man over sixty. You act the part to perfection. If you are the man I think, you certainly are not half that age. I shall now put the matter to the test."

"In what way?" came a hiss.

"By ascertaining whether your grey hair is a wig, and whether your bushy grey eyebrows are merely stuck on," said Mr. Brown calmly. "Have you any objection?"

There was a long pause.

Then the answer came, softly:

"Yes! I object—and I think I shall make my objection good! You are a very clever man, Inspector Hardwood. But you overlooked one point."

"And that?"

"That, while you found my automatic in my desk, I might have another in my pocket! Stand still—and silent! One word above a whisper and I will blow out your brains where you stand."

Plum Tumpton almost staggered. He stared round the edge of the screen. Within a few feet of him the Old Bean stood—a levelled automatic in his hand, aimed at the startled face of the Detective-Inspector. Over the levelled weapon the spy's eyes gleamed like cold steel.

Plum stared—transfixed.

"Very clever," snarled the man who had been known for whole terms at Sparshott School as Mr. Rapstraw. "But not quite clever enough. Be silent—or I shall risk a shot. But for the shot being heard, you would be a dead man now. But I must have time! Silence, you dog—or death!"

There was deep silence in the study.

"Not quite clever enough for a German trained under the Gestapo!" sneered the man with the automatic. "Not quite! I shall stun you and leave you here—while I go. There are other places and other disguises and I have always been prepared. A word a movement and I will risk alarming the school with a shot and you will be a dead man."

It was then that Plum came to himself and acted! The tall screen went over with a crash—crashing right on the man with the automatic.

With a startled howl the man staggered and fell, the screen toppling over him. The automatic was still in his hand—but he had no chance to use it. Detective-Inspector Hardwood was quick on the uptake. No doubt he was as surprised as the spy by Plum's sudden and unexpected apparition. But even as the screen crashed, he bounded forward the deadly weapon was kicked from the spy's hand and the inspector's powerful grip was on him.

There was a sudden click. It was the click of handcuffs.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Plum.

He stared with goggling eyes at the man who had been

called Rapstraw—writhing, struggling, wrenching at handcuffed wrists, spitting like a cat with fury.

“Oh,” gasped Plum. “Oh, jimmy!”

“What were you doing here?” demanded the inspector, staring at him.

Plum chuckled breathlessly.

“I came here to rag that rotter! Oh, crickey! Some rag and no mistake! What will the fellows say? Oh, my only hat! I say, I jolly well got him with that screen, didn’t I? What?”

“You did.” The Inspector smiled. “And in all probability save my life, my boy,” he added. “And——”

But Plum did not stay to hear more. He fairly bounded out of the study. He tore down the passage. Vernon and Rake, and the rest, had to hear this—and they had to hear it quick! Plum was bursting with it! Breathless, Plum hurricaned into No. 3 study in the Fourth.

“I say—they’ve got him—German spy—Rapstraw—I did it—automatic—I say Brownwood’s Hard—I mean, Hard’s Brownwood——”

“What?” yelled Vernon and Rake.

“I—I mean, Brown’s Hardwood—that’s it—got him—Rapstraw—man who knocked me out that night—I jolly well told you—see? That man Brown—he’s really Hard—I mean, Brownwood—Hardwood—got it?”

Vernon and Rake had not quite got it. Their first impression was that Plum had gone off his rocker. They had never supposed that he had very far to go—and now he had gone! But Plum, spluttering for breath, got it out at last. And soon all Sparshott knew!

* * *

IT was a nine-days’ wonder at Sparshott School.

Fellows could hardly believe it at first.

But they had to believe it when they saw the man they had known as Mr. Rapstraw driven away in a car, handcuffed, with Detective-Inspector Hardwood of Scotland Yard sitting at his side. And if they had wanted more proof, they had it in the string of German curses that the wretch flung back as he went.

A nine-days’ wonder—but Carboy remarked that it was a ninety-days’ wonder, at least, that Plum had been right after all. Even Plum’s loyal chums, Vernon and Rake, agreed to that. Plum had been talking sense all the time—but all the Sparshott Fourth agreed that nobody could have been expected to guess that one!

But Plum did not care.

Plum had been right—it was through Plum that the spy had been nailed—it was Plum first and the rest nowhere. Plum, in these happy days, almost strutted—like the classical gentleman of ancient times; he seemed to strike the stars with his sublime head. Plum was the goods. His name was on every tongue. They were still talking about Plum at Sparshott when the news of the great surrender and the great victory came through, and even that hardly washed out Plum as a topic.

THE END