

Gunner Saves The Situation

By OWEN CONQUEST

The Rookwood Paper-chase!

"ME!" said Gunner.

Gunner of the Fourth Form at Rookwood spoke emphatically, as well as ungrammatically.

Peter Gunner was not particular about grammar, but he was very particular about having his claims considered on all subjects and all occasions, in season and out of season.

But Gunner's remark, emphatic as it was, passed unheeded.

"Lovell's one," said Jimmy Silver. "And the other——"

"Me!" repeated Gunner.

A crowd of the Fourth were in the changing-room, and Jimmy Silver was making the final arrangements for a paper-chase. There were to be two hares, and the rest of the Fourth were to be the pack. Jimmy Silver had already selected Lovell, and was about to pick out the other "hare" when Gunner butted in.

"Now, who's the other?" went on Jimmy Silver, apparently deaf.

"Me!"

For the third time Gunner butted in.

"I suppose you mean 'I,'" remarked Raby, with sarcasm.

Gunner shook his head.

Gunner was as blind to sarcasm as he was to grammar.

"No, I don't mean you, Raby. I mean me!" he said.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't see anything to cackle at in that," said Gunner. "You'd better pick me out, Silver. You want a fellow who can run, and you want a fellow with a little intelligence."

"That suits you," remarked Mornington. "You've got a little intelligence—a very little."

And there was another chuckle in the changing-room.

Gunner did not heed.

"I'm the man you want," he said. "It isn't merely running that's needed in a hare—Lovell can do that almost as well as I can, and I admit it——"

"Only 'almost'!" snorted Lovell.

"Yes. But you want a fellow with some sense of strategy, and so on," said Gunner. "I'll undertake

to give you something to think about in following my trail across country. No sticking to the beaten track for me."

Jimmy Silver hesitated.

He was a good-natured fellow, and very tolerant of Gunner, who, of course, could not help being an ass.

"Make up your mind, old man," said Gunner encouragingly. "Don't leave your best man out of everything, you know."

"Anybody object?" asked Jimmy Silver resignedly, with a glance round.

"Oh, give him his head!" said Raby. "Lovell will give us a good run after Gunner's caught."

"I shan't be caught!" snorted Gunner.

"Do you mind, Lovell?" asked Jimmy.

Arthur Edward Lovell hesitated a moment or two. Really, Gunner was not the companion he would have chosen for the run. But Lovell was a good-natured fellow, and he nodded at last.

"All serene," he said.



"Those fields belong to Mr. Barker, fat-head!"

"That's settled, then," said Jimmy Silver. "Try not to be caught in the first hundred yards, Gunner."

Gunner snorted.

"And don't trespass anywhere," added Jimmy Silver. "There was a row last time you trespassed on Barker's land; old Barker doesn't like fellows crossing his fields."

Another snort from Gunner.

"Blow old Barker," he answered.

"Blow him as hard as you like, but don't trespass on his land," said Jimmy Silver. "We don't want him coming up to Rookwood to make complaints. Now then, get hold of your bags, and clear."

There were two bags of "scent" all ready, and Lovell and Gunner picked them up and slung them on.

Then the whole crowd of juniors turned out of the changing-room and went down to the gates.

Gunner Going Strong!

"**B**UCK up, Lovell!"

"Buck up, yourself!"

"Now, look here, Lovell——"

"Cheese it!"

The two hares trotted side by side through the wood, dropping the trail of torn paper lightly as they went. Already Lovell repented of his good nature in accepting Gunner as his comrade on the run.

They came out of the wood, Lovell ahead and Gunner labouring on his track, and turned into the tow-path along the River Roke.

"Better cut across these fields and go over the plank bridge farther on," said Gunner.

"Those fields belong to Mr. Barker, fathead. And can't you see the board up: 'Trespassers will be prosecuted'?"

"Blow the board!"

Gunner clambered over a fence and dropped into the field. Lovell halted and gave him a glare of exasperation. Mr. Barker was a farmer who was supposed to have a cross and crusty temper, but who, perhaps, had some reason for supposing that his crops were of more importance than schoolboy paper-chases.

"Come back, you thumping ass!" roared Lovell. "You can't go across Barker's fields."

Gunner laughed scoffingly.

"If you're afraid of old Barker you can hook it, and I'll carry on alone. I'm not afraid of any Barker that ever barked!"

"Who's afraid?" bawled Lovell wrathfully.

"Looks as if you are! If you're not, come on."

Gunner trotted across the field, dropping the scent as he trotted. Lovell breathed hard and deep. Gunner was leaving the paper trail for the pack to follow, and Lovell could scarcely take another direction, leaving another trail. Neither did he want to remain where he was, to be caught by the oncoming pack.

He choked down his wrath and clambered over the fence and followed Gunner.

Leaving a trail of trampling and torn paper through Mr. Barker's winter oats, the hares ran on towards a plank bridge which crossed a little stream, a tributary of the Roke.

Leaning against a tree near the bridge was a burly man, in gaiters, with a whip under his arm. He had a plump, red face, which grew redder and redder with wrath as he saw the two Rookwood juniors ploughing towards him through his winter oats.

The two hares had not yet observed Mr. Barker, but *he* had observed *them*, and he did not seem to be pleased.

The burly form detached itself from the tree and stepped out in the path of the two juniors. Mr. Barker's whip was no longer under his arm; it was in his hand, and he was gripping it hard. Gunner slackened down at the sight of this lion in the path.

"Now you've done it!" gasped Lovell.

"Can't be helped. We can't turn back now."

"Can we go on, fathead, with Barker in the way?" shrieked Lovell.

"Yes. Up-end him."

"Wha-a-at?"

"Are you going to be caught, ass? Back me up, and we'll jolly soon shift Barker."

"Oh, crumbs!"

Peter Gunner rushed on, charging straight at the burly farmer. Lovell gazed after him spellbound for a second. Then he followed. He could not refuse to back up his comrade.

Crash!

Mr. Barker most decidedly had not expected that charge. He had fully expected that the schoolboys would seek to dodge him, and that he would rush after them, laying on his whip. Instead of which, Peter Gunner cannoned into him like a battering-ram, and Mr. Barker went sprawling.

Gunner reeled from the shock.

"Buck up!" he panted.

Lovell raced up and crossed the plank bridge like a flash. Gunner was darting after him when the sprawling farmer clutched at his ankle and brought him down. Gunner landed with a heavy bump.

"Now, you young rascal!" gasped Mr. Barker.

Arthur Edward Lovell looked back from the farther side of the stream. He beheld the interesting sight of Peter Gunner wriggling in the grasp of Mr. Barker, trying to escape, with about as much chance of escaping as if he had been in the grip of an octopus. Gunner was a burly fellow for his age, but he was an infant in the grasp of the big farmer.

Wriggling and struggling and kicking, Gunner was led away across the field by Mr. Barker, Lovell staring after him.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Lovell.

Far in the distance he could see the bobbing heads of the pack. Mr. Barker and his prisoner

disappeared behind a fringe of willows. Lovell shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, if ever a silly ass asked for it, Gunner did!" he murmured. "Lucky I got through!"

And Arthur Edward Lovell took up the run again, scattering scent behind him as he ran, and taking the shortest possible cut off Mr. Barker's land. He had had enough of Mr. Barker. It seemed probable that Gunner would have too much.

Rough on Mr. Barker!

"THE chump!"

"The ass!"

"The duffer!"

"Bother him!"

The pack had arrived at the fence bordering Mr. Barker's field. Across the fence lay the scent, and Jimmy Silver & Co. halted, and told one another what they thought of Gunner.

It was Gunner, they were sure of that; Lovell would never have taken that route willingly.

"My fault!" said Jimmy Silver ruefully. "I might have known that that silly owl would put his foot into it somehow. And I warned him specially not to trespass on Barker's land."

"Your fault, old man," agreed Putty of the Fourth. "You always were a bit of an ass, as I've told you before. But we're going on, Barker or no Barker; we're not going to be beaten."

Jimmy Silver vaulted over the fence and took up the trail again. Right through Mr. Barker's winter

oats ran the scent of torn paper and on the scent trooped the Rookwood juniors.

The scent led on to the plank bridge over the field stream, and the pack ran hard to reach that point. They wanted to get clear of Barker's land, if they could, without meeting Mr. Barker. In the distance the farmhouse could be seen, half hidden by a fringe of willows, and all the juniors had the corner of an eye in that direction as they pelted across the field.

"Cave!" exclaimed Mornington suddenly.

"Look out!"

"There's jolly old Barker!"

Of the disaster that had happened to the hares, of the capture of Gunner, the pack knew nothing so far—they had been too far out of sight at the time to know anything about that.

"Put it on!" gasped Jimmy Silver. "If he cuts us off from the bridge we shall be in a hole."

"Go it!" panted Raby.

The juniors fairly flew.

But Mr. Barker succeeded in cutting them off from the bridge, and he interposed his bulky figure between them and the plank that crossed the stream and shook his whip at them.

"Go back!" he roared.

The juniors slackened down, panting. The angry farmer brandished his whip.

"Get off my land! Do you hear?"

"Excuse us, sir," said Jimmy Silver in his silkiest



Jimmy Silver and the other juniors slackened down, panting, and faced the angry farmer. "Get off my land, do you hear?" snarled Mr. Barker, brandishing his whip.

tone. "It's a paper-chase, and if you wouldn't mind letting us pass, sir, we'd be ever so much obliged!"

Mr. Barker wasted no more time in words. He came at the juniors flourishing his whip, with the evident intention of driving them before him like a flock of sheep.

Jimmy Silver set his lips.

"We're not going back!" he rapped out. "Look here, Mr. Barker—we'll pay for any damage done. That's a fair offer!"

It was a fair offer, but Mr. Barker was not in a reasonable mood.

The pack scattered and ran, but they ran onwards, towards the bridge. The farmer kept pace with them, lashing furiously at all within his reach, in a towering rage. A whip-lash curling round bare legs was painful—very painful indeed. Wild yells rang across the field as the pack dodged and twisted and ran.

One by one they sprinted across the plank.

"Thank goodness we're out of that!" gasped Newcome.

"Are we out of it?" chuckled Mornington. "I fancy we shall see the Barker man at Rookwood over this."

"Come on! Can't be helped now," said Jimmy Silver. "Keep smiling."

And the pack went on.

A Narrow Squeak for Gunner!

CHEEK!"

Thus spoke Peter Gunner. Gunner was thrilling with indignation.

His present quarters were a shed belonging to Mr. Barker's farm buildings. Mr. Barker, with a ruthless disregard of the liberty of the subject, and of the extreme importance of Gunner's liberty in particular, had marched Peter into that shed and locked him in.

Gunner tramped about the shed in burning indignation. He was locked up—locked up like some tramp caught pilfering, to wait for the police. It was intolerable.

Gunner's wits were neither active nor bright. But necessity is the mother of invention. Gunner's eyes turned at last on the roof of the shed—attracted perhaps by a ray of wintry sunlight that peeped in through a hole in the thatch.

The roof was four feet above his head. But the rough timbers of the wall gave handhold and foothold, and Gunner clambered breathlessly out on the sloping roof, and rolled off and sprawled on the ground.

"Ow!"

He picked himself up.

He was quite near the farm buildings and it behooved him to get farther away from them as soon as possible. Gunner glanced round him, and saw a gate at a distance, beyond that a meadow, on the farther

side of which was a lane. That was his shortest cut to safety and freedom, and Gunner started for the gate at a run.

"Hallo, there! Stop!"

He was seen.

Gunner did not even turn his head. He raced on and reached the gate, and dragged at it. It was padlocked.

But a padlocked gate was not likely to stop Gunner. He clambered over it desperately.

"Stop! Bull! Bull!"

Gunner rolled over the gate into the meadow. He picked himself up again, and stared back at a farmhand, who was gesticulating and shouting.

"Silly ass! murmured Gunner. "What the thump does he mean, bull? Is he calling me a bull? Must be potty!"

And he streaked across the wide meadow towards the lane. A high hedge separated the meadow from the lane, and there was no sign of a gate; but Gunner was confident of forcing a way through the hedge somehow.

Gunner looked back again as he ran, and saw the farmhand at the gate he had left, still gesticulating wildly, though he gave no sign of following Gunner into the meadow. He was still shouting, but the wind carried away his voice.

"Oh, sorry, kid!" gasped Gunner suddenly.

As he was running hard, while he was looking back, he had nearly fallen over a child that was playing in the meadow. He stopped just in time as the little girl gave a startled shriek. Gunner halted breathlessly.

"Sorry, kid! Don't howl; you know you're not hurt," he said encouragingly.

Gunner was a good-hearted fellow, and he would not have hurt a child for worlds.

The little girl seemed about five years old. She fixed big, blue, startled eyes, that looked like saucers, upon Gunner. She was seated in the grass, with a ragged "teddy bear" in her arms. She really had some cause for alarm, as Gunner had very nearly trodden on her.

"Don't cry, kid!" said Gunner. "Look here, you oughtn't to be sitting in the grass—it's damp! You run home to your mother—see?"

And he kindly picked up the little girl and set her upon her feet.

Gunner's intentions were good, but the child was alarmed, and she proceeded to howl at the top of her voice. And then suddenly, above the screaming of the child, there came a deep, alarming sound, and Gunner spun round, with his heart thumping.

From a muddy hollow in the meadow, where there was a pond, a terrific figure had emerged, and Gunner knew now, as his heart thumped against his ribs, what the farmhand had meant by shouting "Bull!" and why the gate had been padlocked. Mr. Barker's prize bull—a gigantic animal that looked



Gunner seized the little girl in his arms and ran for his life as the infuriated bull bore down on him.

elephantine in its proportions, with wicked, savage eyes—was glaring at Gunner scarcely twenty yards away.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Gunner.

The bull lowered its head in anger and pawed the ground.

The child screamed with fear.

Gunner was an ass—there was no doubt about that. All Rookwood was agreed that he was every kind of an ass. But perhaps Gunner's heart made up for the deficiencies of his head. The bull was already upon him, lashing his stumpy tail, his eyes gleaming with malice.

Gunner had ample time to sprint to safety himself. But it did not even occur to him to go alone. He seized the little girl in his arms and ran.

The child kicked and struggled and screamed. One little hand dug into Gunner's eye, and the other tore at his hair.

Behind Gunner, as he ran with his struggling, tugging burden, sounded the awful bellow of the bull. There was a heavy thudding of hoofs on the damp grass of the meadow.

Gunner took a flashing glance over his shoulder. Right on his track came the gigantic animal, with head lowered.

That glance spurred Gunner on to a terrific effort. He fairly flew over the grass, with the child in his arms. Thudding hoofs sounded behind him. On Mr. Barker's farm never fewer than two sturdy men at a time dealt with that gigantic, savage animal.

Gunner tore on frantically. In the corner of the field he at last sighted a gate that gave on to the lane.

A woman's frightened face was looking over it. Gunner raced desperately for the gate.

"Quick!" he panted, holding up the child into the woman's arms; and the little girl was taken from him over the gate.

The thudding hoofs were almost upon him.

Gunner made a desperate spring.

He clutched the top bar and rolled over into the lane, and the next second the strong gate shook and creaked and groaned under the impact of a charging head.

Gunner rolled dazedly on the ground.

"Oh, my hat!"

He staggered to his feet. On the other side of the gate the bull was parading up and down, bellowing and lashing.

But Gunner was safe now; the gate was too strong for the savage brute. He gasped and panted, winded to the wide, and feeling as if his breath would never come back. The woman was holding the child in her arms, soothing its frightened shrieking.

"I say, if you know where that kid lives, you might take her home," said Gunner, when he had recovered his breath a little.

The woman nodded. She was too busy with the frightened child to speak.

"All serene, then!" said Gunner.

Gunner watched the woman start off down the lane. He was a long way from Rookwood and there wasn't a run left in him. And what was more to the point, when he *did* get back trouble with a capital T would be waiting!

A Painful Reception for Gunner!

TA-RA-RA-RA-RA!

The bugle rang out as the quarry was sighted on the Rookwood road.

"Only Lovell!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Where's that ass, Gunner, then? We haven't seen him on the road."

"Goodness knows."

Arthur Edward Lovell looked back and grinned breathlessly. It had been a long and a hard run, but it was near the finish now; the gates of Rookwood were in sight. The pack had thinned out. Behind him, on the road, he could see Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome, Morny and Oswald and Conroy, and two or three more strung out behind.

The rest of the pack had tailed off, run out, and were making their way homeward by various ways.

"Put it on!" said Morny.

Lovell was putting it on, determined not to be caught in the last lap. Almost at the end of his tether, but still resolute, Arthur Edward pounded on to the school gates. After him, faster and faster, came the pack, tailing off, however, in the final rush. Oswald dropped behind, and Newcome, and then others, till only Jimmy Silver and Mornington were keeping pace with the hare, and they were not gaining.

Jimmy forged ahead at last, putting on a spurt, and had the chase lasted three minutes longer Arthur Edward Lovell would have felt the tap on his shoulder. But the school gates were quite close now, and the school gates were "home". With a final burst Lovell rushed into the old gateway and staggered breathlessly against the ancient stone pillar, and turned a breathless grin on Jimmy Silver.

"Done you!" he gasped.

"Just!" said Jimmy cheerily.

"Jolly good run!" said Lovell, as he towelled a crimson face. "That ass Gunner nearly mucked it up, of course! Did you fellows have any trouble with the Barker bird?"

"Didn't we?" grinned Mornington.

"What did you go across his land for?" demanded Conroy.

"That ass, Gunner——"

"Well, we guessed that!" said Jimmy Silver. "But what became of Gunner? You dropped him somewhere."

Lovell chuckled.

"Barker got him. Last I saw of him Barker was marching him off by the collar towards his farmhouse."

"That's torn it!"

And then, all of a sudden, Gunner dawned on them.

He came plodding up the lane, and the juniors

stared at him in deep and intense relief. Never had they been so glad to see Gunner. Indeed, nobody could remember ever having been glad to see him before. But undoubtedly all the fellows were glad to see him now.

"Good grief! Here he is!" exclaimed Mornington. "He's got away somehow. The Head won't have to do the giddy ambassador stunt."

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver fervently.

Gunner came tramping up.

"Well, fathead," said Jimmy Silver grimly, "what's happened to you?"

"That man was frightfully cheeky!" said Gunner.

"Locked me in a shed! I fancy he was going to keep me till I was sent for! Cheek, you know!"

"But you got away?" asked Jimmy.

Gunner sniffed.

"Of course I did! I burst a hole through the roof of the shed and cleared. Jolly nearly got gored by a bull, too, crossing a field. But it's all right. Did you catch Lovell?"

"Not quite."

"Well, I suppose you wouldn't have," assented Gunner. "Lovell wasn't much good without me to give him a lead; but, of course, you fellows are a lot of duds!"

Gunner tramped away to the changing-room.

"That man Barker was cheeky—locking a chap up in a shed," said Gunner. "My idea is that he ought to be given a lesson. Who's game to come back with me and duck him in his own pond?"

"Oh, my hat! That's your idea, is it?" gasped Jimmy Silver. "Come on. Put his head under a tap."

"Here, I say——" spluttered Gunner.

Gunner struggled desperately. But many vengeful hands were upon him, and the tap played on his head and his face, and he streamed with water. Then he was bumped down on the floor of the changing room, where he sat in a breathless state, trying to get his second wind.

"That's a sample, you crass ass!" said Jimmy Silver, grimly.

And Gunner was left to gasp.

A Surprise for Rookwood!

YOU'RE for it, you fellows!"

Tubby Muffin made that observation quite cheerily as the juniors were on their way to Hall for roll-call. Tubby had tailed off in the first fifty yards of the paper-chase, and had been nowhere near the Barker territory. So he could afford to be cheerful about it.

"What do you mean, fatty?" growled Lovell.

"Barker's come."

"Oh!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. were not in high spirits as they went into Hall. Mr. Barker, apparently, had

arrived at Rookwood, and they could guess why he had come.

Mr. Dalton was taking the roll. Just as the Fourth Form master had finished calling the names, the upper door opened, and the Head entered the Hall with a burly, red-faced man at his side.

"I have been informed by Mr. Barker," said the Head, going straight to the point, "that a number of boys belonging to Rookwood trespassed on his land this afternoon—engaged, as I understand, upon a paper-chase, in spite of my very strict prohibition. All boys concerned in the matter will stand forward."

"Come on, you chaps!" grunted Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy led the way, and almost all the Classical Fourth followed. With dismal faces the crowd of delinquents stood before the headmaster and the red-faced gentleman beside him.

Mr. Barker ran his eyes over the group. He pointed to Gunner.

"That's the boy!" he said. "I don't know his name, but that's him."

"Gunner!"

"Yes, sir!" murmured Peter.

"Stand forward!"

Gunner stood forward.

What followed made the Rookwooders blink.

Mr. Barker stepped towards Gunner, and for a second the juniors supposed that he was going to take the matter of punishment into his own burly hands.

Instead of which, Mr. Barker grasped Gunner by the hand—to Gunner's absolute astonishment—and shook hands with him, with a vigorous grip.

"Young gentleman," said Mr. Barker, with emotion in his voice, "you came on my land today without permission. Come on it as often as you like; and any time you care to look in at the farm, lad, you'll find me and my missus and my little girl glad to see you. I'm proud of you, my boy—proud to shake you by the hand."

And Mr. Barker fairly wrung Gunner's hand with a grip that nearly made Gunner yelp.

Gunner stared at him blankly.

"But—but what have I done, sir?"

"Has—has—has Gunner done anything, sir?" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"Then he hasn't told you!" exclaimed Mr. Barker. "You don't know that he saved my little girl from my prize bull?"

"Wha-a-at!"

"She'd got into the field, through some hole in the hedge, with her teddy-bear," said Mr. Barker. "Nobody saw her; she'd got away somehow without being noticed. And there she was, in the field with the bull—my prize bull, that I never go near myself without another man with me.

"What would have happened if this young



To everyone's amazement, Mr. Barker suddenly shook Gunner's hand. "I'm proud of you, my boy!" he said.

gentleman hadn't cut across that field in getting away from the shed I don't dare to think. Her mother was looking for her in the lane, and had just caught sight of her across the gate as——" Mr. Barker's powerful voice shook. He gave Gunner another grip that made him wriggle. "My wife saw it all, sir, and my man Bill, though he was too far away to help. You could have got away easy without my little girl, and you nearly got yourself killed to save her. Master Gunner, I'm your servant for life, and your schoolfellows here should be proud of you!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Gunner. "Is that it? That was nothing, sir; I'd forgotten that."

"I shan't forget it in a hurry, young man," said Mr. Barker.

And he wrung Gunner's hand once more, and left the Hall with the Head, who was smiling genially—not at all the expression Jimmy Silver & Co. had expected him to wear on this occasion.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"Gunner—great Scott!" stuttered Arthur Edward Lovell. "That ass, Gunner! That chump, Gunner! And Gunner——"

"Three cheers for Gunner!" called out Bulkeley of the Sixth.

"Hip-hip hurrah!"

The old Hall of Rookwood rang with it. And then Gunner, still in a state of astonishment, found himself collared by his Form-fellows and carried shoulder-high out of Hall.