

THE DOWNWARD PATH!

Realisation comes to George Raby that he is falling deeper and deeper into the mire. The steps of the downward path have followed one another rapidly enough. Dimly he is aware of the pit on the edge of which he is treading!

At The Cross-Roads!



A Splendid Long Complete
Story of Jimmy Silver & Co.,
of the Fourth, at Rookwood,
featuring George Raby.

By Owen Conquest.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Any Port in a Storm!

RABY of the Fourth came along to the end study with slow and hesitating footsteps.

The nearer he came to that celebrated study the slower became George Raby's progress, until at last, when he had nearly reached the door, he stopped entirely.

It was Friday evening, and the time was the time of prep. In most of the Fourth Form studies the juniors were at work on evening preparation. George Raby should have been in the end study with Jimmy Silver, Lovell, and Newcome, and his thoughts should have been devoted to prep. But with complete disregard of what Mr. Dalton would think in the morning, Raby had dismissed prep from his mind.

He looked worried; and much more serious matters than prep worried him.

For some evenings now Raby had done his prep along the passage, in Oswald's or Conroy's study, giving his own quarters the "go-by." All the Classical Fourth, and the Moderns, too, for that matter, knew that there was trouble in the end study, and that George Raby was not on the old terms with his old pals.

Raby stood outside the study now, with a painful hesitation in his manner and a flush in his cheeks.

"I can't!" he muttered half aloud.

The sound of a voice came from the end study; the powerful voice of Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Rot!"

That was Lovell's emphatic reply to some remark made by either Jimmy Silver or Newcome.

"Lovell, old chap—" That was Jimmy's mild voice.

"Rot!" I tell you Raby went to the races at Rookham on Wednesday with Peele and his lot. He never told us, but I know he went—Muffin knows, and he's told everybody. Nice for this study—a dashed silly ass going around blagging like Peele & Co."

"But—" murmured Newcome.

"Looking down in the month, is he?" said Lovell scornfully. "I dare say he is."

THE POPULAR.—No. 358.

—dare say he's lost money, and that's what's the matter. As for his keeping out of this study, let him keep out, if he can't behave decently. I know I've no use for a fellow who can't play the game decently."

Raby's cheeks were crimson.

Lovell's remarks were not intended for his ears; though Lovell assuredly wouldn't have cared whether Raby heard or not.

George Raby turned and walked quietly back along the passage.

Whatever his intention may have been in approaching his old study, he was not going to carry it out now.

His lips quivered and his look was bitter as he retraced his steps. Peele of the Fourth lounged out of his study and intercepted him.

"Hold on a minute, Raby!"

"Oh, don't bother!" snapped Raby.

He was not feeling amiable towards Peele. Peele had caused all the trouble. What the thump had the fellow asked him to join the party to the races for, knowing very well that it was not in his line? Why the thump, too, had he been fool enough to go, just because Peele asked him? Raby could have kicked himself; but he felt much more like kicking Peele.

"Keep your wool on, old infant," said Cyril Peele smoothly. "I've been wantin' to speak to you—"

"The want's all on your side."

"Dash it all, old fellow, you were pally enough the other day—"

"Oh, give us a rest!" said Raby ungraciously. "I'm sorry I ever went with you—I was a fool to go, and a black-guard, too. Not that it's Lovell's business to sit up in judgment; confound his cheek!"

"Well, you did go," said Peele philosophically. "Can't see much harm in it myself."

"There wouldn't have been much harm, only—"

"Worrying about the bet you made?" smiled Peele.

"I oughtn't to have done it," muttered Raby "and that's not all."

"I know! Towny lent you a quid, and you undertook to square by Saturday, and you can't do it."

"What about it?" snapped Raby.

"My dear chap, lots! Towny's lost all his tin, and naturally he wants his money. But you needn't worry. If you can't borrow a quid of your old friends—"

Raby shifted uncomfortably. He guessed that Peele had had an eye on his hesitating progress along the Fourth Form passage, and had guessed his half-formed intention—which he had not carried out.

"You've got other friends," said Peele cheerily. "What's a quid? I'll lend you one with pleasure."

Raby started.

"You will, Peele?"

"Certainly! Or I'll give you a chance to make two or three."

"Make them?" repeated Raby blankly.

"That's the idea. Step into my study."

In sheer wonder, George Raby stepped into Study No. 1. Gower and Lattrey, Peele's study-mates, were there, and they nodded very civilly to Raby. It was rather a catch for that shady study to get a member of Jimmy Silver's select circle to step in.

Peele closed the door.

There was no sign of prep in the study. Peele & Co. were apparently "chancing it" with Mr. Dalton in the morning.

"Well, what's the idea, Peele?" asked Raby restlessly. "You're talking in riddles, so far as I can see. How can I make any money?"

Peele laughed and threw a pack of cards on the table.

"It's not a cert—it's a chance," he said. "Join us in a little game, old chap."

"I won't!"

"Please yourself, of course," said Peele carelessly, but with a very keen eye on the junior whom he believed now he was succeeding in getting into his toils. "But why not? You really ought to square Towny to-morrow if you can. It isn't every chap who'd play you on your word, as I'm willing to do, for the sake of friendship."

"I've no money to play—"

"Your word's good enough for this study."

Raby hesitated.

He wished himself anywhere but in Study No. 1—but the worry of this debt to Cecil Townsend was a weight on his mind. He had played the fool once and landed himself in this scrape. Why not play the fool again, and perhaps get out of it? As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. And Lovell's loud condemnation rang in his ears and spurred him on to further recklessness. Lovell declared that he couldn't play the game decently. Well, if that was what Lovell thought of him, he would justify Lovell's opinion.

Peele & Co. sat down, and Peele shuffled the cards. After a long hesitation Raby dropped into a seat.

A minute more, and he was playing banker with the shadiest set in the Lower School of Rookwood; and, rather to his surprise, winning money!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Sock for Uncle James!

JIMMY SILVER rose from the table in the end study with a wrinkled brow. He had finished his prep, and for once Uncle James of Rookwood had not been very careful with his prep. Work had been interrupted a dozen times by outbreaks of conversation—the topic, Raby. Every member of the Fistical Four felt keenly the split that had occurred in the famous Co., and it worried Uncle James. Newcome agreed with Uncle James, while Lovell held the view that it was up to the end study to wait for the repentant prodigal to return of his own accord. Lovell apparently considered that the sackcloth and ashes could not be left out of the picture.

"This has gone on long enough," Jimmy Silver remarked. "I'm going to speak to Raby."

"You'll find him blagging with Peele or Smythe, or some of that lot!" said Lovell sarcastically.

"Oh, rot!" said Newcome. "We don't want a split! You run along and make Raby come back, Jimmy, while I finish my prep."

"We don't want him here while he's thick with Peele!" said Arthur Edward Lovell stubbornly.

"I don't believe he's thick with Peele," said Jimmy. "He did act the goat—there's no denying that. But Peele roped him in because he was at loggerheads with us, I think. That's how he came to go to the races on Wednesday."

"He shouldn't have gone!"

"I know he shouldn't. But, dash it all, we're not spotless angels in this study, anyhow!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"You silly owl!" roared Lovell.

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"Anyhow, there's been trouble enough, and I'm going to put it straight to Raby—by-gones are going to be by-gones!"

Jimmy Silver quitted the study, and Lovell granted emphatically.

Heedless of Arthur Edward's lofty disapproval, Jimmy went along the Fourth Form passage in search of Raby. He found Mornington and Erroll at their study door, and asked them, but they hadn't seen Raby. Tubby Muffin was loafing in the passage, and even Tubby Muffin didn't know where Raby was. So Jimmy went down to the Common-room to look for him, and drew the Common-room blank.

He was scouting along the passage

when he saw Tubby Muffin again. The fat Classical came up with a grin.

"I know where he is," he announced.

"Well, where?"

"In Peele's study."

Jimmy Silver frowned.

"Sure?" he asked rather crossly.

"Heard his voice," said Tubby, with a fat chuckle. "He was saying: 'Your deal, Gower.' Plain as anything."

Reginald Muffin quite jumped at the expression that came over the face of the captain of the Fourth. Without staying to thank the fat Classical for his information, Jimmy Silver strode away.

It was deeply annoying to Jimmy for Lovell's prediction to be verified in this way. It was still more distressing if Raby really was engaged in a study gamble with Peele & Co.

Jimmy was a patient fellow; but if George Raby had definitely taken a turn for the bad, Jimmy's patience would have its limits. Although not so emphatic on the subject as Arthur Edward Lovell, Jimmy most decidedly had "no use" for a gambler as a pal.

He hoped to find that Tubby Muffin's information was unfounded, in which case he mentally promised Muffin a record kicking. But that faint hope was soon dashed to the ground.

He knocked at the door of the first study and turned the handle, but the door did not open. It was locked inside.

"Hallo! Who's there?" called out Peele. "Can't let you in, whoever you are—hard at work!"

Jimmy knocked again savagely.

"Can't you clear off when a chap's sportin' his oak?" called out Gower indignantly.

"Open this door, confound you!"

"My hat! It's Silver!" That was Lattrey's voice. "Anyhow, we're not going to let him in."

"Let him in!" said Raby, his face flushed, but his eyes gleaming. "If he's come here for me, let him in, and be blowed to him! I'll let Lovell see whether I'm a baby to be watched and ordered about!"

Peele smiled a smile of satisfaction. George Raby was in the mood that Peele wanted to see him in.

He unlocked the door and opened it. Jimmy Silver, with a flushed face, stepped into the doorway. A glance showed him the cards and the money on the table, Raby sitting with cards in his hand.

Raby looked at him, with a cool smile.

Their eyes met.

"So that's it, is it?" said Jimmy gruffly.

"That's it!" said Raby defiantly.

Jimmy Silver breathed hard. He was angry, and he was indignant.

"I've been looking for you!" he said.

"Anybody appointed you my keeper, by any chance?" asked Raby, with a curl of the lip.

"I never expected to find—this!"

"You never know what to expect, do you?" said Raby.

"Look here—"

"Give us a rest!" said Raby. "Go and tell it all to Lovell and Newcome! It won't bore them so much!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled Gower.

Peele & Co. were enjoying that little conversation immensely. It was sheer joy to them to hear Uncle James of Rookwood talked to like this, especially by one of his own best chums.

"Raby"—Jimmy controlled his temper with difficulty—"Raby, come out of this!"

Raby set his lips.

"I'll stay as long as I like!" he answered.

"Very well," said Jimmy Silver.

He turned on his heel and walked away. His brow was dark when he came into the end study again. Lovell and Newcome, the prep finished, were chatting, and they both looked at Jimmy Silver inquiringly as he entered.

"He's not with you?" said Newcome.

"He's gambling with those cads in the first study!" said Jimmy Silver tartly.

"My hat!"

"I've left him to it! If he wants to come back to this study, let him come—I sha'n't go after him again!"

And Jimmy Silver said no more on the subject. But he meant all that he had said!

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Peele's Little Game!

"GOOD riddance!" said Peele, as he locked the door after the captain of the Fourth.

"Your deal, Raby!" remarked Gower.

Raby toyed with the cards.

Jimmy Silver's accusing face had moved him to defiance; but as soon as his old chum was gone Raby's feelings changed.

Somehow or other, after Jimmy's frank, honest face, his surroundings seemed to have become dingy and sordid. Lattrey's mean features, Gower's greedy face, Peele's air of dingy blackguardism had never struck him so plainly and so painfully before. He made a move to rise from his chair.

"Not chuckin' it?" said Peele.

"I—I think I've had enough."

"Dash it all, don't let those fellows sermonise you!" said Peele. "Why shouldn't you do as you like?"

"They're not your dashed masters!"

said Lattrey.

"I've had enough," said Raby almost sullenly.

"You've been winning!" said Lattrey, with a sneer.

Raby's face became scarlet.

"Shut up, Lattrey!" exclaimed Peele hastily. "What does that matter? If Raby's tired, let him chuck it! You'll give us our revenge another time, old man?"

"Oh, yes! Of—of course!" stammered Raby.

"I—I say, I've won something. I don't want to keep it—"

"What rot! Keep your winnings!"

"I—I don't want—"

"I didn't mean anythin'," said Lattrey more civilly, taking his cue from Peele. "You can't hand the money back. We're not kids playin' for cherry-stones!"

"Another time, old man!" said Peele cordially.

George Raby, with a shaking hand, gathered up his winnings. He had won a pound at banker, and when the game was changed to nap he had won another pound. He did not want the money—he had the feeling that it did not belong to him—but he remembered his debt to Townsend. His luck at least enabled him to settle that debt, and he believed it was his luck that had made him a winner.

He nodded to the three shady young rascals and left the study.

Peele smiled when he was gone, and lighted a cigarette.

"Our win!" he remarked.

"I don't see it," said Lattrey sullenly. "You let him play for paper, and let him skin two quids off us. I don't see it!"

"I found the money," said Peele tartly.

"I know you did. But it's a sheer waste!"

"It's a sprat to catch a whale," said Peele coolly. "Raby will be worth more than a dozen times two pounds to us by the end of the term. He's not in funds now, but he has a good allowance and gets good tips from home. He will pay his footin' in this study, never fear!"

He laughed, and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"And it's not only that," he continued; "but it's one up against Jimmy Silver—sanctimonious Uncle James! Did you see his face when he saw Raby here? That was worth the money!"

"It was worth a guinea a box!" grinned Gower. "I suppose you know best, Peele. Anyhow, it was your money. Now that silly fool's gone, let's have a real game!"

And the shady trio settled down to nap on their own.

Meanwhile, Raby walked away from the study, feeling far from happy. However, he was glad to be able to drop into Townsend's study. Townsend greeted him with an amiable nod.

"Hallo, old top! Trot in! Put on a tag."

"Thanks; no!"

"Lots in the box!" said Towny cheerily. "Good ones, too!"

"Jolly good!" said Topham.

Raby shook his head.

"I've just dropped in to square the little bit I owe you from Wednesday, Towny," he said.

"Good man!"

Raby laid twenty-five shillings on the table. Cecil Townsend swept it up carelessly enough.

"Thanks!" he drawled. "It will come in useful—our little flutter on the races the other day landed me quite stony! Sit down and have a little smoke, old bean!"

"No, thanks!"

Raby hastily quitted the study.

It was time—more than time—to think of prep now, and Raby thought of it. He did not intend to go to the end study—he had barred off that study. The looks of condemnation he expected if he entered were more than enough to keep him away from his old quarters.

He looked into Study No. 3, which belonged to the Colonial Co. Van Ryn and Pons had gone down, but Conroy was still there.

"Mind if I bother you again?" asked Raby.

"Not a bit, old tulip! Trot in!" said the Australian junior cheerily. "You left your books here, too. I'm just finished!"

Raby came in and drew a chair to the table. Conroy rose to his feet; but he paused as he was about to leave the study, and fixed his eyes rather curiously on Raby.

"Excuse my butting in!" said the Cornstalk, in his direct way. "You're rather out with your old pals. I believe?"

"Yes," muttered Raby, without looking up.

"No bizney of mine, of course!" said Conroy. "But I'm sorry to see it! No good asking who's to blame; it's always the other chap! But do let me give you a tip, Raby. There's fellows who're glad to put a spoke in Jimmy Silver's wheel—no end pleased to see trouble in that study! Don't let some cad pull your leg to amuse himself!"

Without waiting for a reply, Conroy left the study.

"What rot!" muttered Raby uneasily. But it was some time before he could fix his attention on his books. The Cornstalk's words remained in his mind. THE POPULAR.—No. 358.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. In the Toils!

THERE was trouble for George Raby in the Form-room on the following morning.

Mr. Dalton, the master of the Fourth, was a hard worker himself; and he expected his pupils to work. According to Mr. Dalton, that was what they came to Rookwood for, a view that was very unpopular among Peele and his set.

Raby had only dabbled at his prep the previous evening, and he was too worried and troubled to put much thought into lessons, anyhow.

His construe that morning was worthy of Tubby Muffin at his worst. And Mr. Dalton, who had mercy on Tubby's stupidity, had no mercy to waste on what he regarded as carelessness or slacking.

So there were sharp words in the Form-room, and Raby listened to them with burning cheeks, and he received an imposition to keep him busy in the afternoon.

After dinner, when the other fellows were going down to football, George Raby had to go into the Form-room to write out two hundred lines of Virgil.

Lovell observed him with a curl of the lip.

"That's what comes of blagging away with blackguards, instead of sticking to work!" Lovell remarked oracularly to Jimmy and Newcome.

Which was indubitably true.

Raby ground out his lines, and took them to Mr. Dalton, and then "mooched" out into the quadrangle by himself.

He was feeling dispirited and out of sorts.

Conroy's friendly words had opened his unsuspicious eyes a little.

He could not help realising that he had been as wax in the hands of a fellow more cunning than himself. Well he knew of Cyril Peele's enmity towards the end study, and he knew it was a personal triumph to Peele to be able to detach one of Jimmy Silver's chums in this way.

Raby had rather looked on Peele as more or less of a good-natured sort of blackguard. He wondered now whether Peele's game was deeper than he had supposed.

Anyhow, one thing was certain—that he was getting drawn deeper and deeper into Peele's own peculiar pursuits.

It had started with a careless half-crown on a football match. It had continued with a visit to the races and betting with a bookmaker there. It had concluded—if it had concluded—with barefaced gambling in Peele's study—a study that was avoided by every decent fellow at Rookwood.

The steps on the downward path had followed one another rapidly enough. Raby hardly knew how it had all come about. But it had come about. And there was, in point of fact, nothing vicious in Raby's nature—only a happy-go-lucky carelessness of which a cunning schemer had taken advantage.

Was Peele a schemer to that extent? Raby did not think so. But whether he was or not, there was no doubt that he, George Raby, was rapidly on the way towards getting a reputation in the Lower School as "juicy" as Cyril Peele's own.

Walking rather aimlessly under the old beeches, Raby made up his mind that it had got to stop.

He wouldn't—he couldn't—make overtures to his old friends for a reconciliation. But he wasn't going to turn out a shady blackguard like Peele—he was sure of that! It was time he took him-

self in hand, and he was going to start at once.

He was not sorry to see Peele strolling towards him under the beeches. He did not want to quarrel with the fellow—possibly, he meant well. But he was going to make it plain that he wasn't Peele's sort, and didn't want to be. And he welcomed the opportunity for a plain talk.

Peele greeted him with great cordiality.

"Finished your rotten lines, old bean?"

Raby nodded.

"Good! Jolly parky out here!" said Peele, with a shiver. "Let's get into the study. We've got a good fire goin', and we're bakin' chestnuts."

Raby hesitated. Certainly there was no harm in baking chestnuts on a winter's afternoon.

It was said of old that he who hesitates is lost. Peele slipped his arm in Raby's, and led him away.

Lattrey and Gower were in the study, in cheery mood. The chestnuts were duly baked and disposed of.

Gower took a pack of cards from a drawer, and shuffled them carelessly.

"Anybody say nap?" he asked.

"Nap!" said Lattrey. "Must do somethin' to kill time!"

"I think I'll get out," said Raby.

"Oh, don't run away!" urged Peele.

"Four's ever so much better than three at nap! Don't leave us in the lurch!"

"You don't want me to play for paper," said Raby weakly.

"All the same to us! We know your word's as good as your bond!" said Lattrey.

That was true enough. The young rascals knew that if Raby lost to them in I O U'S, he would redeem the paper sooner or later. And this afternoon the dingy trio were out to win. Raby's winnings of the evening before had been to encourage him, and plunge him more deeply into the toils. Now the time had come for real business.

"The fact is, I'd rather not play," said Raby, remembering the good resolutions he had made under the beeches only half an hour ago.

"Oh, don't be unsociable!" said Gower.

"Just a round or two," said Peele. "You owe us our revenge, you know."

Raby drew a deep breath. All that was easy going in his nature was against his resolution; but, fortunately, his resolution held good. Dimly he was aware of the pit on the edge of which he was treading. He hated to refuse these fellows, beaming on him with friendly cordiality—which he did not guess then was barely skin deep. But his mind was made up.

"I won't play," he said decidedly. "I'm—I'm not criticising you fellows. You can do as you like, of course. But I've made up my mind never to play cards for money."

Peele looked at him keenly. Lattrey openly sneered. Gower yawned.

"So I'll clear," said Raby awkwardly. "Sorry, you know!"

He moved towards the door.

"Hold on!" said Peele in a quiet, cutting voice. It was time for Peele to show his hand if his victim was not to escape. "I mentioned that you owed us our revenge, Raby, old man."

"I—I don't see—"

"You won money from us last night," said Gower sulkily. "You ought to give a fellow a chance."

"Every sportsman who wins gives the other chap his revenge," said Lattrey.

"You know that!"

Raby stood still.

There was justice in what the young rascals were saying—of a sort. Certainly it was not sporting to win and refuse to play again.

It seemed to poor Raby that he was in a kind of net from which there was no escape. It was not any blackguardly instincts that urged him to remain with these young rogues now, but his sense of fair play as a sportsman.

"Come on! Don't be a ninny!" said Gower with a laugh. "Uncle James can't see you now, you know."

But that taunt had ceased to move Raby.

"Look here!" he said haltingly. "I don't want to play! I—I offered not to take the money I won yesterday—"

"You took it," said Peele dryly.

"I—I know I did!—If—if I had it now I'd hand it back!" said Raby.

"We don't want that!"

"Dash it all, be a sportsman, and give us our revenge!" said Gower. "That's all we want."

"I—I suppose you're entitled to that," muttered Raby, as he moved back towards the table.

"That's right!" said Lattrey.

Raby sank rather heavily into a chair. He would have given almost anything to be outside the study. Peele began to deal the cards.

There was a step in the passage outside, and Peele stopped suddenly, and the dingy trio listened. There was always the possible danger of a suspicious prefect looking into the junior studies on a half-holiday.

The cards were suddenly whipped out of sight. But the footstep passed on.

"All serene!" said Gower.

Raby had a sick feeling.

The sudden sense of guilt, of shame, at the thought that it might be a prefect, and the thought of the disgrace and punishment that would follow discovery, filled him with loathing of the scene.

He rose to his feet.

"It's all right, I tell you!" said Gower, looking at him. "Nobody's comin'. Sit down!"

Raby set his lips.

"I'm not playing!" he said. "I'll never step inside this study again! You fellows would chuck it if you had any sense. Anyhow, I'm chucking it. So long!"

He walked to the door and threw it open. There was no mistaking his fixed intention this time. Cyril Peele sprang to his feet, his face furious.

"You're goin' to give us our revenge!" he snarled.

"I'm not going to gamble!"

"You rotten outsider—"

"You've got our money in your pocket, and you won't play—"

Raby's face blazed. He ran a trembling hand through his pocket. Fifteen shillings remained of his winnings of the night before. He flung the money on the table.

"I'll get the rest!" he exclaimed. "I'll pay you up, and I'm done with you, you dirty set of loafers!"

And Raby tramped out of the study, and slammed the door behind him. He left Peele & Co. blinking at one another. Something had certainly gone very much awry with Peele's little schemes.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Just Like Jimmy!

"JIMMY SILVER!"

"Hallo!"

Jimmy Silver was on the football-ground, with a fatherly eye on the junior practice that was going on. Lovell and Newcome were with him. George Raby came up to the three quite suddenly. He took no heed of

Lovell or Newcome; his eyes were fixed on Jimmy Silver, and he spoke to the captain of the Fourth.

Lovell and Newcome exchanged a glance. Raby's face was white, and his eyes were burning. Something was wrong. But even Arthur Edward Lovell, though not overburdened with tact, as a rule, realised that it was a time when the least said was the soonest mended.

"Lend me twenty-five bob, Jimmy!"

It was a rather startling request. The Co. knew what must be the cause of Raby's sudden need of money—they could not fail to know the cause. And their views on gambling were pretty well known.

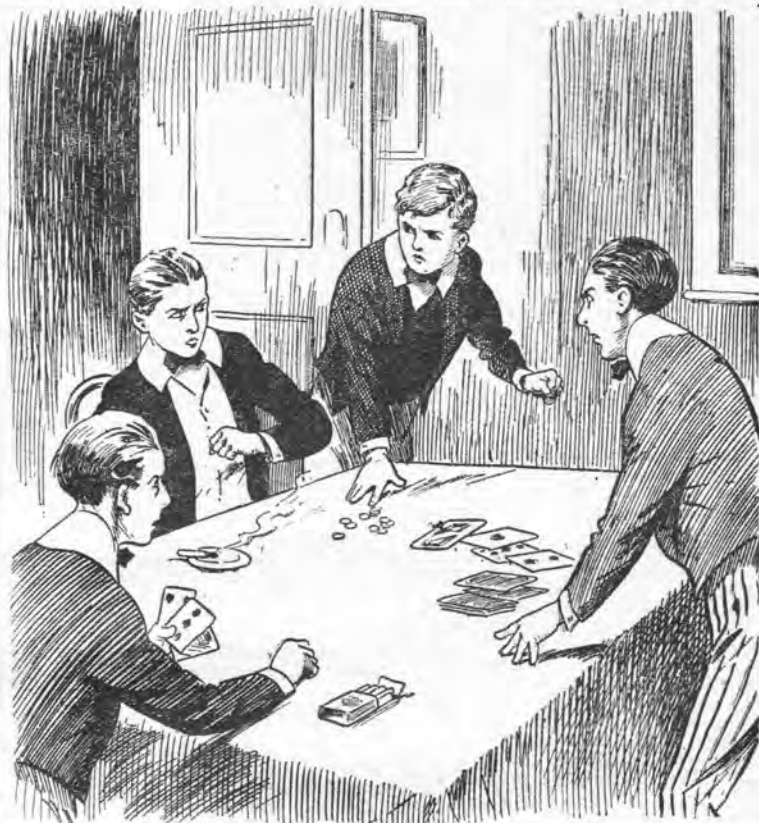
trembling with excitement. It needed only one loud scoff from Lovell, only a refusal from Jimmy Silver, to send him back to the dingy study he had escaped from—back to the miserable, dingy viciousness he had tried to throw off.

But Uncle James of Rookwood did not fail him. For an instant Jimmy's eyes met Lovell's in an unspoken warning. Jimmy did not fully understand, but he knew that it was no time for hesitation, no time for sermonising—no time for anything but loyal, unquestioning friendship.

"I haven't got it in my football clobber, old chap," he said with a smile.

"Come along with me. All serene!"

"Jimmy, old man— The fierceness



THE TURNING POINT! Raby's face was blazing. He ran a trembling hand through his pocket. Fifteen shillings remained of the winnings of the previous night. He flung the money on the table. "I'll get the rest!" he exclaimed. "I'll pay you up, and I'm done with you, you dirty set of loafers!" (See chapter 4.)

But Jimmy Silver was not undeserving of the title of Uncle James of Rookwood. Jimmy's tact was a great gift.

"Certainly, old fellow!" he answered, just as if there had never been any trouble in the end study, and just as if Raby had merely asked him for the loan of a penknife.

Raby had a catch in his breath.

He was in a rotten scrape—he knew that. The shadiest crowd at Rookwood had called him an "outsider" and a "welsker," and he had the choice of two alternatives—to pay back the money he had won from Peele & Co., or to play them at their game and give them their revenge. And Raby's mind was savagely made up that if his old pals failed him in this, his hour of need, he would throw them, and all they stood for, to the winds, and throw in his lot with Peele & Co.

He was in a desperate mood, almost

faded out of Raby's face. "Jimmy, I—I—"

"All serene, old chap! Hand me my coat, Lovell!"

Jimmy threw on his coat and muffler, and walked off the football ground with Raby. Lovell and Newcome looked after them, and then at one another. Then, without speaking, they returned to the footer.

Not a word was spoken by Jimmy Silver or Raby as they walked to the School House. In the end study Jimmy Silver unlocked his desk, and took out of it twenty-five shillings in silver.

"Jimmy—" muttered Raby in a choked voice.

"There you are, old top!" said Jimmy Silver cheerily. "There's another ten bob, if you want it!"

(Continued on page 26.)

THE POPULAR.—No. 358.

hoped it would be Yellow Hand. If Yellow Hand were riding at the head, then he was a certain gift to death.

At the ring of the shot there came a chorus of exclamations from the braves, some of whom half reined in their horses, and caused not a little confusion amongst the others by doing so.

Buffalo Bill lay still.

Not yet was it time for him to do more. Later he might find his chance. Now he watched, and knew that the Redskins were peering into the darkness, seeking to locate where that fatal shot had come from.

Then Red Hawk ripped out a command, and the whole band was sweeping down on nearby Three Crossings. Even if that shot had aroused the people they would stand but little chance, for they would be surprised—and surprise in these affairs was always the element that promised success and often gave it.

Buffalo Bill still lay quiet. He was quite content. He had seen a rider, though he did not know it was California Joe, go into the night—had seen him come back at a terrific pace—and he knew that his warning had been acted upon and also confirmed, and that California Joe was going in with the news that the warning was a real one.

"Them Redskins don't catch Three Crossings asleep!" he grunted, as he saw the swaying, bobbing band of braves charging down upon the devoted settlement. "I'd give a lot to know of Kansas King's amongst them Injuns; but I reckon he'll be lookin' "

AT THE CROSS-ROADS!

(Continued from page 5.)

"This is enough. C-o-come along the passage, will you, Jimmy?"

"Any old thing!"

Wondering a little, Jimmy Silver walked down the Fourth Form passage with his chum. George Raby turned the handle of the door of the first study and flung it wide open.

Peale & Co. started up and stared round. Raby strode in. Some coins were dropped on the study table.

"There you are, you rotters!" said Raby, between his teeth. "There's your dirty money! Now call me again what you called me ten minutes ago, and I'll wade in and smash you up—all three of you!"

Raby waited a few moments for an answer. As none was forthcoming, he turned and tramped out of the study.

Jimmy slipped a hand through his arm.

"Come and get into your footer rig," said Jimmy.

They came on the footer ground, and in a few minutes more Raby was in the practice game, with a lighter heart than he had known for many days, and a brighter face. The cool, keen air, the clean, wholesome game, the cheery, healthy faces—never had Raby enjoyed a game of football as he enjoyed that unimportant practice game.

THE END.

(Next week there will be another splendid long complete story of Jimmy Silver & Co., the chums of Rookwood, entitled: "TUBBY MUFFIN'S PRIZE!" By Owen Conquest. This story is full of humorous incidents in which Tubby Muffin, the fat boy of the Fourth, takes the most prominent part.)

THE POPULAR.—No. 358.

after his own skin just now. It sure wouldn't be healthy for a white man to see him with them!"

Came the moment when Red Hawk's war-band entered Three Crossings.

And Three Crossings was ready. Watchful eyes had seen the stealthy scouts, and when they had disappeared into the darkness again Wild Bill and his fellows emerged from their concealment. Wild Bill had heard Cody's shot, and could not understand what it meant. At first he had intended to go out to meet the Indians, then had decided that the better thing was to maintain quietness and lull them into believing that the shot had not been heard, and that Three Crossings was not ready—not aroused to the danger that was coming upon them.

But when the head of the war-party entered Three Crossings, Bill Hickok touched the arm of the man next to him, that man touched the arm of the man beside him, and the silent, but pregnant, signal went through the company. And a volley of rifle-fire ripped the air—flashes of light from barrels spouted viciously—Redskins and horses went down like ninepins, and the Indians behind that foremost file crashed into them and made confusion worse confounded.

No need for any command from Bill Hickok. His men pumped bullets into the struggling mass for all they were worth. They did not attempt to charge. Here was much more effective method of doing destruction, and brave after brave stopped the death missiles.

But other braves there were who had recovered from the shock of surprise and disappointment, and now they were firing at the palefaces; while yet others, extricating themselves from the confusion, were sweeping out and about, intent upon taking the defenders in the rear.

"Back about, byes, some o' yew!" shouted Wild Bill, who knew the manoeuvre. "Give 'em Hades! All of it!"

There were brave men indeed, however, amongst those braves, and the lust of blood was upon them. They surged to the attack—were driven back—surged again, and yet again were held off. Not without having done some execution amongst the thin ranks of the defenders. Tom Clark heard a choking gasp from the man beside him, and, glancing round, saw him topple over as though he were a weary man drooping to sleep. It was sleep—the last sleep of a gallant fighter.

Tom Clark drew a line on a Redskin charging down.

"That pays my pardner's death, Redskin!" he shouted, as the man dropped from his horse, which, careering forward, would doubtless have trampled on some of the defenders had not California Joe, on the other side of Tom, pumped a bullet into it and brought it down.

"Pity 't kill hosses, son," he said. "stead of Injuns! They're wuth somethin', an' sure Injuns ain't! I—" He broke off, to bring down another Redskin, as the charging Indians broke and swung their horses round for away.

But the fight was by no means over. There was worse to come—or what would have been worse had it not been that the shacks were emptied of their human beings.

Out on the plain presently, during a lull, Tom Clark saw a sudden upglare of light. He knew what that meant even as he saw it.

"Th' old game!" he said.

"Ay, th' old game, son!" agreed California Joe. "They'll come in with torches, and try an' fling 'em into th' shacks. Th' old game, sure!"

With hideous yells, the Redskins came charging up again, not massed, but spread well out. And behind each man on a horse was one running on foot, ready to snatch the burning brand if perchance the rider was killed.

Into Three Crossings—reckless of the swift fire thrown at them. Here and there an Indian succeeded in hurling his blazing torch into a shack, and before ever the attack was beaten off flames were emerging from them, where bedding and clothes had caught fire.

"Can't hope to put them out!" growled Wild Bill. "Thet's what them Redskin 'ud like. Then they'd be in agen. Hey, what's thet?"

Shouts, yells, gunfire were coming from 'way back at the lock-up. And, swinging round, Tom Clark realised that a party of the Redskins had managed to creep up unseen and were attacking the guard there. Others, riding like the wind, and bearing torches, were coming up to their support.

"More men back theer!" yelled Wild Bill; and Tom Clark was amongst the fellows who charged down towards the lock-up.

(The fight is by means over, as Tom Clark is soon to find out. Do not miss next week's long thrilling instalment of this powerful romance of the Wild West.)

SCHOOLBOY VERSUS RUSTLERS!

(Continued from page 22.)

blazed away with his revolver. The bullets chipped and rang on the rocky walls, without even reaching the rustlers; but the footsteps stopped.

Once on the open hillside they tossed aside the disguising black sacks. Lord St. Austells drew nearer to his young companion.

"And you are Frank Richards?" he asked. "But what can you possibly be doing here alone in these wild mountains a hundred miles from your home?"

Frank bit his lip.

Lord St. Austells gave him a quick, searching look; but he nodded, and asked no further questions.

And without further words they started down the rocky hillside, plunging through thickets and tangled rocks and boulders, and the dawn was glittering on the Cascade Mountains by the time they found the trail to Gold Brick Camp.

Weary and footsore, Frank Richards and his companion limped into Gold Brick under the blaze of a noonday sun. Before they sought rest their story was told to the sheriff of Gold Brick, and in a short time a dozen armed men were riding for the retreat of the Black Sack Gang. They found the retreat, but the rustlers had fled in time. The rascals were still free; and Frank Richards, ere he looked his last on the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, was destined to see the Black Sacks again.

THE END.

("HOLDING HIS OWN") is the title of next Tuesday's stirring long complete story of Frank Richards, the homeless schoolboy of the Backwoods.)