

The Vanished Schoolboys!

By Owen
Conquest.



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THE SCHOOLBOYS' OWN
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You can read
the **ADVENTURES**
of **JIMMY SILVER & Co**
the cheery chums of
ROOKWOOD

"Laughter, thrill,
sport & drama!"



IN
The
BOYS'
FRIEND
EVERY MONDAY

2d

The VANISHED SCHOOLBOYS!



A Powerful Mystery Story of JIMMY SILVER & Co. at Rookwood.

By OWEN CONQUEST.

CHAPTER I.

A Very Near Relation!

"**C**UT!" The Fistical Four, of the Fourth Form at Rookwood, uttered that expressive monosyllable together, in a sort of chorus.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were at tea in the end study—supplies were short, and cash was shorter.

Therefore, when Tubby Muffin put his podgy face in at the doorway they greeted him as aforesaid.

"Hook it!" added Lovell, with emphasis.

Tubby Muffin did not "hook" it; he rolled in.

"Bank!" said Raby.

"Disappear!" commanded Newcome.

But Tubby only grinned.

"I haven't come to tea!" he said disdainfully. "I know you've only got bread and some mouldy old sardines. I say, I want you fellows to back me up to-morrow, when he comes."

"He!" repeated Jimmy Silver. "What he?"

"Haven't you heard?" said Tubby.

"Chap named Langton."

"New boy?"

"He, he! No, an old boy. He's coming to-morrow," said Tubby Muffin, "and my idea is to give him a reception."

The Fistical Four stared at Tubby.

"Relation of yours?" asked Raby.

"Oh, no; never heard of the chap before!"

"Then what on earth do you want to give him a reception for?" demanded Jimmy Silver.

"That's my idea, you know. I think he ought to have a reception, and I'm prepared to take the lead, and make a speech—a neat little speech," said Tubby.

"You know I'm a bit of an orator——"

"Oh, my hat!"

"And on such an occasion a fellow with a rather commanding presence is required to be master of the ceremonies," said Tubby, drawing his podgy figure to its full

height—which was not very much. "You agree to that?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't see what you fellows are cackling at. Considering what Captain Langton has been through, I think we ought to show him what Rookwood thinks of him. It's a great occasion."

"Captain Langton!" repeated Arthur Edward Lovell.

"That's the chap."

"I've got some relations named Langton," said Lovell. "Distant relations—never seen them."

"Oh, I don't suppose this chap is a relation of yours!" said Tubby Muffin.

"He's awfully decent—"

"What!" ejaculated Lovell, while his chums chuckled.

"Quite a nob, I hear," said Tubby.

Lovell looked round for something to throw at Reginald Muffin. That cheery youth rattled on:

"He's a first-rate chap, you know—lost his right arm in the Great War. Hard lines on a young fellow, don't you think so?"

"Jolly hard lines!" said Jimmy Silver.

"And he's an old Rookwood boy," said Tubby. "If you fellows kept your eye on the Roll of Honour downstairs you'd have seen his name there. He was reported killed; but he seems to have got off with the loss of his arm. He's coming here to stay."

"What the dickens is an Old Boy coming here to stay for?" asked Newcome.

"The Head's given him a job," explained Tubby. "Being an old Rookwooder, it seems that he got into communication with the Head. Excepting his pension, whatever it is, he hasn't a leg to stand on. He's going to coach the seniors at footer—football coach, you know."

"Good old Head!" said Jimmy Silver. "But how the blump do you know all this, Tubby? I suppose the Head hasn't consulted you about it?"

"He might have done worse," answered Tubby. "But, as a matter of fact, he hasn't."

"How do you know anything about Captain Langton?"

"I happened to hear the Head speaking to Mr. Bostles," explained Tubby. "He was in old Bostles' study, and I was coming in with my lines. But it ain't a

secret; lots of the fellows know that Captain Langton is coming to stay here. You fellows are behind the times; you never know anything."

"Perhaps our ears are not quite so long as yours," granted Lovell.

"Well, he's coming to-morrow," resumed Tubby. "Now, that chap fought the Germans, and he's lost his arm, and been wounded in the chivvy—quite spoils his good looks, I heard the Head say—he was a good-looking chap once. Now, that chap's a hero, ain't he?"

"What's his front name?" asked Lovell, who was looking very thoughtful.

"Basil!"

"My hat! That's my relation, ment!" said Lovell, with some excitement. "Basil Langton isn't a common name. Besides, if it's the chap whose name is in the Rookwood Roll of Honour, that's the man!"

Arthur Edward Lovell rose immediately in the estimation of his chums.

"Look here, what regiment is your blessed relation in?" asked Tubby Muffin, apparently grudging Lovell the honour.

"Lancashire Rifles."

"Well, that's his regiment right enough," admitted Tubby. "Fancy your being a relation like that, Lovell! Looking at you, who'd have thought it?"

"Whiz!"

A cushion hurtled across the way, and caught Tubby Muffin just under his fat chin.

The surprised Tubby sprang backwards, and sat down in the doorway with a bump that shook the study furniture.

"Yooop!" he gasped.

"Now wag your chin again, and I'll let you have the teapot!" roared Lovell.

"Yarcooh!"

Tubby wriggled out of the doorway, and vanished down the passage. The cushion was quite enough for him, and he had no desire whatever for the teapot.

"I don't see what you silly asses are cackling at," said Arthur Edward Lovell gruffly. "I'll scalp that fat pig if he rolls in here again! Look here, that chap Langton's my relation right enough. I told you fellows, when we found his name in the Roll of Honour long ago."

"I remember," said Jimmy Silver. "You said you'd never met him."

"No; we never knew the people," said

Lovell. "They're only a distant connection, and I believe they lived in the North. It was a sort of cousinship between our grandfathers, I believe!"

"My-hat! That's distant enough!"

"Well, after all it's not so jolly distant," said Lovell, who seemed to have a desire to make the relationship a little nearer now. "It's a blood-relationship, anyway. My grandfather was the son of Langton's grandfather's aunt, or cousin, or something. I remember hearing my father mention the name once or twice at home, and that's why it struck me when I saw it in the Roll of Honour. I remember my father said something about looking up that branch of the family, and that he believed Basil Langton was an orphan. I believe he's a good sort."

"You'd better give him a reception instead of 'Tubby,'" said Jimmy Silver, with a snarl.

Lovell snarled.

"If that fat idiot plays the goat when my relation comes I'll squash him!" he said. "I shall certainly speak to Langton when he comes. Chap ought to know his own cousin."

"Cousin!" repeated Jimmy.

"Well, relation," amended Lovell. "Sort of cousin, you know."

Jimmy and Baby and Newcome grinned. Lovell's relationship to the distinguished visitor was getting closer and closer as he talked.

"Sort of cousin, I repeat!" said Lovell firmly. "I suppose I can't keep on referring to a chap as the grandson of my grandfather's aunt, can I? I think it was as near as that—or nearly. Sort of second cousin—in fact, cousin!"

"I can see that he will be your long-lost brother by the time he gets to Rookwood!" grinned Jimmy Silver.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, rats!" answered Lovell. "He's a splendid chap, and I'm proud of him, and if he finds it a worry to have only one up, I'll be jolly glad to fetch and carry for him, if he wants me to. So there!"

"And so say all of us!" said Jimmy Silver cordially. "And as he's your brother

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cousin!" roared Lovell.

"I mean cousin—we'll make no end of

a fuss of him—if he'll let us. We'll have him to tea in the study, if you like, and save up the sardines——"

"A high tea?" suggested Baby. "It will be a thumping high tea if we save up the sardines."

"I dare say my cousin will come to tea in the study if I ask him," said Lovell loftily. "Being my near relation—— Oh, don't cackle! I say, I'm going to tell the fellows about this. They'll be interested to hear about my cousin."

And Arthur Edward Lovell left the study in high feather, leaving his loyal chums to finish the sardines and bread, which they did to the last crumb.

CHAPTER 2. Rebusted Clory!

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL was looking very pleased with himself that evening and the next morning.

Most of the Rookwood fellows, having heard of the forthcoming visit of Captain Langton, discussed him and his coming with considerable interest.

A man who had been through the Great War, and had lost an arm, was certain to be popular at Rookwood.

The fact that he was an old Rookwooder, and had been a footballer of distinction, added to the interest with which he was regarded.

It was very agreeable for Lovell to be able to remark in an offhand way, when Captain Langton was mentioned, "A relation of mine, you know."

It was undoubtedly a distinction.

Indeed, as soon as it was generally known that Captain Langton was a relation of Lovell's, Arthur Edward was called upon to tell all he knew about him, even Bulkeley of the Sixth asking him about the gallant captain.

But Lovell had little to tell.

Langton was a distant connection, and the relationship was so distant that the Lovells and the Langtons were not personally acquainted; but he believed that the captain was an orphan, and had lived somewhere in the North since the war.

That was all Lovell could say with certainty about his distinguished relation, and certainly it did not amount to much.

But Lovell was very emphatic upon the point that it was a blood relationship, and not merely a connection by marriage.

During the morning Lovell was thinking a good deal about his military relation, and after dinner he confided the result of his reflections to his cousin:

"I ought to meet my cousin at the station," said Lovell.

"Your what? Got a relation coming here?" asked Baby.

"Captain Langton!" said Lovell, frowning.

"Oh, I forgot? Yes, quite so!"

"Look here, Baby—"

"You can't meet him at the station," said Jimmy Silver. "You've got to turn up for classics, like the rest of us, old bird!"

"I think Bottles ought to let me off under the cires. Do you think I could ask him?"

"Well, you could ask him," said Jimmy Silver, emphasising the word "ask."

"He ought to play up," said Lovell warmly. "Tain't every day that you get a relation here who's lost an arm in the war. He would be pleased to see me, I know."

"He doesn't know you, does he?"

"Of course he doesn't, see, as I don't know him!"

"Well, in that case he might be pleased to see you," conceded Jimmy.

"Look here, you funny idiot!" roared Lovell. "I wasn't asking for any of your rotten jokes. Isn't he bound to be glad to find a relation here? It will really make it like a sort of home-coming."

"Phew!"

"Well, I'm going to ask Bottles," said Lovell. "I was thinking of asking him to let you fellows come with me."

"Ask him, by all means! There's a chance," said Baby. "If we can get off lessons we'll meet your brother with pleasure—I mean, your uncle—that is, your cousin—I mean, your grandfather's aunt's cousin's uncle's nephew."

"Oh, rats!" snorted Lovell.

"I wonder if Sergeant Kettle remembers the chap?" said Newcome. "The sergeant's been here for dog's ages, and he ought to remember an Old Boy, who isn't so very old. I believe the captain isn't much over thirty-five."

"Good egg! Let's ask him!" said Jimmy Silver.

And the Fistical Four walked into the school shop, which Sergeant Kettle kept in the ground-floor of the ancient clock-tower of Rookwood.

Sergeant Kettle smiled as soon as Captain Langton was mentioned. It was evident that he had been asked questions on that subject already.

"Yes, I remember him," said the sergeant, with a nod. "Remember him well, Master Silver. 'Fino, tall young feller he was. I was 'ere when he came, and when he left. He was in the Second Form when I first saw him. Cheeky little beggar too! No end of pluck, too!"

The sergeant was clearly an admirer of the former Rookwooder.

"What was he like?" asked Lovell.

"Good-looking," said the sergeant. "I hear his looks have been spoiled by his wound in the face, more's the pity. He was always a berylar for fighting. When he was in the Fourth Form I remember his fight with Johnson of the Fifth. I saw it from my window." The sergeant grinned at the recollection. "Then there was the time he got lost in the abbey vaults—"

"Did he?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver, with great interest.

"He went exploring the vaults, and the boy who was with him shut him in for a joke," said the sergeant.

"Rotten joke!" granted Lovell. "I don't call that a joke. He might have been scared to death!"

"He wasn't scared; he tried to find another way out, and got lost," said Sergeant Kettle. "He was lost for twenty-four hours. And Baumann owned up that he had shut him up, getting frightened, and he was hunted for and found. Not a bit scared, either, though he'd been in the dark all the time."

"Good man!" said Jimmy Silver. "Was was Baumann? Sounds like a German name."

"That was afore the war, of course," said Sergeant Kettle. "We didn't think as much about German names in them days. That Baumann was a bad egg. He ended up by being expelled from the school. He took to gambling, and stole from a Form-master's desk. A bad egg, if you like. I

heard that he went quite to the bad afterwards, but he was never seen at Rookwood again."

"Nice sort of chap to have been at Rookwood!" grunted Lovell. "But about Basil Langton. Was he great at games?"

"I should say so!" answered the sergeant. "Good at football, good at cricket, good at rowing and swimming. Fine fellow, if you like, in every way!"

"He's a relation of mine," said Lovell earnestly.

"Then you ought to be proud of him, Master Lovell!" said Mr. Kettle.

The sergeant went on with reminiscences of Basil Langton, who seemed to have filled a good space of the horizon when he was a Rookwooder.

When the chums of the Fourth left the tuckshop Lovell headed for Mr. Bootles' study.

Mr. Bootles was not there, however, and Lovell did not see him till the Fourth Form turned up for afternoon classes.

Lovell rose in his place before lessons commenced to prefer his request.

Mr. Bootles blinked at him over his glasses.

"What is it, Lovell?"

"If you please, sir, I should like to be excused lessons this afternoon."

"Lovell!"

"I'd like to meet Captain Langton at the station, sir. He's a relation of mine," said Lovell hastily.

"Indeed! I was not aware that Captain Langton had a relative in the school," said Mr. Bootles.

"He's my cousin, sir—I mean second cousin—that is to say, a sort of second cousin—"

"Indeed! However, Lovell, you will remain where you are. Dr. Chisholm is going to meet Captain Langton at the station, and I doubt very much whether he would care for your company!" said Mr. Bootles dryly.

"Oh!" said Lovell. And he sat down.

That finished it for Lovell. He realized that a Fourth-former was not wanted on the scene when the majestic Head of Rookwood himself was to be there.

Arthur Edward Lovell's first thought when he emerged from the Form-room was of his distinguished relation.

It was certain that the captain had

arrived some time ago, and most of the fellows were anxious to see him if he was on view, so to speak.

As the Fictical Four came out of the School House they spotted the distinguished Old Boy—for evidently it was the Old Boy.

The Head was walking in the quadrangle with a gentleman whose right arm was represented by an empty sleeve.

The Fictical Four looked at him with interest—indeed, their gaze was as near a stare as politeness would allow.

The one-armed gentleman was somewhat thick-set, and looked physically strong. He was in civilian clothes.

His face was traversed by two deep scars, which gave it a strange aspect, and certainly did not improve it so far as beauty went.

But the scars of battle ranked higher than good looks in the estimation of the Rookwood juniors.

The juniors were interested and impressed, but perhaps a little vaguely disappointed.

The one-armed gentleman was not exactly the upstanding, stalwart figure they had imagined.

But they were determined to be pleased with him, as was natural; and they would not admit that, even in their thoughts, that he fell short of what they had expected.

Captain Langton was walking with the Head, apparently viewing none more his boyhood's haunts with great interest.

CHAPTER 2. Not Wanted!

TAP!

"Come in!"

Arthur Edward Lovell opened the door and entered.

It was after tea, and Lovell had found an opportunity to introduce himself to the captain.

Captain Langton had been assigned two rooms in the School House—a bed-room and a private sitting-room.

The latter was a very pleasant apartment, with a little balcony outside the window, with iron steps leading down, amid clusters of ancient ivy, into a secluded corner of the quadrangle.

It was at the door of the latter room that Lovell tapped, rather timidly.

He entered in response to the captain's "Come in!" his face colouring a little.

Somehow, the captain had not the frank, soldierly bearing the juniors had expected him to have, and though Lovell had seen him several times that day, he had not felt encouraged to speak to him.

Indeed, but for the fact that he had told all Rockwood that Captain Langton was related to him, it is probable that Lovell would not have claimed acquaintance at all.

It was, perhaps, owing to the scars on his face; but, in spite of himself, Lovell felt that the captain had a forbidding look.

But, after all his talk, and—to be candid—his "swank," on the subject of his relationship, Lovell had no choice left, and he was bound to present himself to the captain as a relation.

After all, he argued in his mind, Basil Langton could not fail to be pleased to find a relation in the school; and, at all events, there was no reason why he should be displeased.

So Lovell presented himself in the captain's quarters, though with a secret feeling of uneasy timidity.

Captain Langton was seated by the window, smoking a cigarette, and looking over a newspaper.

He glanced inquiringly at Lovell, plainly surprised to see a junior schoolboy presenting himself there.

"Well?" he said.

"I—I've come in—" stammered Lovell, much discouraged by the cold, chilling expression on the captain's scarred face.

"You have a message for me?"

"N-no."

"Then what do you want?"

Lovell's colour deepened.

At that moment he fervently wished that he had not known that Basil Langton was his relation, and had never spoken of him in the school.

But, as matters stood, he was in for it, and he had to go on.

"I—I thought I'd come, sir," he stammered. "I'm a relation of yours, sir, and—and I thought you'd like to know. Excuse me!"

Captain Langton started.

"A relation of mine!" he exclaimed, in a loud, sharp voice, which showed how startled he was by the information.

"Yes, Captain Langton."

"What is your name?"

"Lovell—Arthur Edward Lovell."

The captain drew a deep breath.

"Oh! Not Langton?" he said, as if involuntarily.

"No, Lovell. You've heard of your relations, the Lovells?" said the junior.

There was an instant's pause.

"Naturally," was the captain's reply, when he spoke. "So you see Arthur Edward Lovell, and you claim to be related to me."

It was not a pleasant way of putting it, and it made Lovell feel more and more uncomfortable.

When he had first thought of telling the captain of his relationship, he had supposed that he would be met in a cheery, friendly way; but there was certainly nothing cheery or friendly about the captain just then.

His looks told, as plainly as words could have done, that he was not in the least gratified by the discovery that he had a relative in the Fourth Form at Rockwood.

Lovell wished himself well out of the room, and he stood with a flushed face, in great discomfort.

"What is the precise relationship between us, then?" asked the captain, as the confused junior did not speak.

"Sort of cousin," stammered Lovell.

"Have you ever seen me before?"

"Oh, no!"

Again the captain drew a deep breath.

"It's only a distant relationship, sir," said Lovell. "I believe my grandfather was cousin in your grandfather or grandmother, or something like that!"

"Oh!" said the captain. "Something like that?"

"Yes."

"And you call that a relationship?"

"I—I—"

"Your father, perhaps, has told you to make acquaintance with me?" asked the captain, eyeing Lovell narrowly.

"My father doesn't even know you're here," said Lovell. "I dare say he would have told me to speak to you. I've heard him speak of you at home, and he was saying once that he would like to meet you."

"Indeed!"

Lovell stood silent.

He wondered whether it would do to fessie at that point. He would have given a week's pocket-money to be out of the room.

"And you have come here to tell me you are my relation, because of the remote connection you refer to?" said the captain coldly.

"Yes, I—I thought—"

"Such a distant connection does not constitute relationship in my opinion," said the captain. "As for meeting your father, I am not conscious of the slightest desire to do anything of the kind. Neither have I any wish to claim you as a relative, Arthur Edward Lovell, if that is your name. In fact, to be frank, I look upon your conduct as rank impertinence!"

His face turned as crimson as a beetroot.

"You needn't!" he blurted out. "I—I thought you'd like to know, that's all. I don't see why you should be ratty. I don't want to claim you as a relation! Why should I? I'm sorry I came here!"

"Shut the door after you."

Lovell walked out of the room, his face on fire, and closed the door after him, with more force than was actually necessary.

A little winding staircase led from the landing outside down into the big staircase, and on to the lower stairs several juniors were waiting.

They looked very curiously at Lovell's crimson face as he came down.

"Well, was your merry cousin glad to see you?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"He's not my cousin."

"What?"

"It's only a distant relationship—second or third or fourth cousin, at the very nearest," said Lovell.

Jimmy stared at him.

"My ball! It's further off than it was yesterday, then," he said. "He was jolly nearly your twin brother yesterday!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Lovell irritably.

"Haven't you got on with him?" asked Marnington.

"How could a chap get on with an ill-mannered cad like that?" demanded Lovell.

"A—a what?"

"What are you calling him?" exclaimed Raby.

"I call him an ill-mannered cad!" said Lovell, breathing hard. "That's what he is—a rotten, mean cad! He treated me like—like—just as if I was a pushing sort of bouncer, trying to claim acquaintance with him for some purpose of my own. I only wanted to speak in a friendly way, and he treated me like that. Why couldn't he be civil?"

"Wasn't he civil?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver, in wonder.

"No, he wasn't."

"Well, I don't see why he couldn't be civil," remarked Marnington. "Perhaps his old wounds are bothering him, though. Old soldiers sometimes get a bit rusty for that reason."

"It's not that!" snapped Lovell. "For some reason he's ratty at finding that he's got a relation here; why, I don't know. He doesn't want to have anything to do with me. As if I want to have anything to do with him, the cad! He can go and eat coke."

And Lovell marched off, in great wrath and indignation.

Jimmy Silver & Co. could not help wondering.

There was no reason, so far as they could see, why the captain should be displeased at finding that he had a relative at Rookwood.

Poor Lovell had been bitterly wounded, all the more because his rebuff, owing to his own indignant remarks, became generally known, and some of the juniors chuckled over it as a good joke.

But it was agreed that the captain had been, to say the least, extremely ungracious, and that, added to many other little circumstances during the next few days, had the effect of making Rookwood much less popular with the Rookwooders than they had expected he would be.

CHAPTER 2 Caught!

"IT'S odd!" said Bulkeley.

"More than odd I call it!" said Knowles. "Jolly queer, in my opinion."

Jimmy Silver was sitting on a bench

under the beeches, when the voices came to his ears—those of Knowles, the Modern prefect, and Bulkeley, captain of Rookwood.

He had not heard the two Sixth-Formers approaching, the fallen leaves deadening their footsteps.

Jimmy was "mugging up" Virgil, his acquaintance with P. Virgilius Maro having failed to come up to Mr. Bootles' requirements that day.

He did not look round, but went on with "Virgil," not being in the least interested in words not intended for his ears.

But he started a little as Knowles spoke again.

"He's come here as football coach, but if over there was a man not well up in footer, it's he. He can't coach for toffee."

"Must make allowances," said Bulkeley. "After all, he was a long time in the Army, and may have forgotten his old skill."

"Looks to me as if he never knew much of the game."

"Well, he must have. He was a great footballer when he was here, and captained the Rookwood team a good many times."

"He's forgotten all he knew, then. Jolly odd the Head taking him on as football coach for the Upper School; and jolly odd his accepting the post, under the circumstances. I tell you he's no good."

"He had a big reputation once."

"That's what I can't understand. Judging from appearances, I should say he had always been a lumberer at the game."

The two seniors passed on, and their voices went beyond Jimmy Silver's hearing.

Jimmy laid his back on his knee.

This was not the first hint he had heard on the subject, though it was the first time he had heard Bulkeley's opinion.

It was strange enough that a man who had come to the school as football coach should impress the Rookwood seniors as being anything but an expert at the game.

Langton of the Sixth, in the old days, had been one of Rookwood's crack players, as Sergeant Kettle remembered very well, and often said.

That was not the only curious circumstance about Basil Langton.

Jimmy Silver had noticed that Sergeant Kettle, who had looked forward very keenly to seeing Captain Langton, had lost all his enthusiasm on the subject.

The sergeant never mentioned Langton now, unless he was questioned, and then his answers were short and dry.

It was pretty clear that Langton had frozen off the sergeant, as he had frozen off Arthur Edward Lovell.

Why the man should be so coldly ungracious to persons who were prepared to like and respect him was a mystery. With the juniors Captain Langton had little or nothing to do; but most of the juniors had remarked by this time that they did not like him.

And it was a perplexity to all of them that that cold, forbidding man was the same man who had gone through a career of gallantry at the Front.

Certainly the Rookwooders were very disappointed in Basil Langton.

Jimmy was thinking over that perplexing matter, instead of "Virgil," when Lovell and Ruby and Newcome joined him under the beeches.

"Finished?" asked Lovell.

"Well, no," admitted Jimmy.

"Chuck it. all the same; you've had time," said Arthur Edward. "If we're going to explore the vaults before tea, we've got to get a move on. I've got the lantern."

"Well, I ought to dig into this rot a bit more," said Jimmy, rising and slipping his book in his pocket as he spoke. "But I'll risk it with Bootles. Come on, my infants."

The Fistical Four sauntered away in the direction of the abbey ruins, which, although enclosed within the school walls, were at a considerable distance from the school buildings.

It was a half-holiday, and as there was nothing special on that afternoon, the chiefs of the Fourth had planned to explore the ruins.

Although, as a matter of fact, the vaults under the old abbey were out of bounds, adventurous fellows often ventured into them, to explore their dusky recesses.

It was not a very safe amusement, for the ruins were in a very "rocky" condition, and the vaults were so extensive that it was quite possible to lose one's way in them.

and they had not been used for any purpose within the memory of man.

A legend, well-known to the Rookwooders told that there existed, or had once existed, a secret passage between the abbey vaults and the more ancient part of the School House, dating from the time when all Rookwood had been a monastic establishment.

Generations of schoolboys had explored the subterranean recesses in search of that secret passage; but if it had ever been found the discoverer had kept his knowledge to himself.

There was a legend, too, that the old monks of Rookwood had concealed a treasure somewhere in those dusky depths, and every new boy at Rookwood, sooner or later, was certain to have a look for that treasure.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were joined by Mornington and Erroll and Oswald, as they walked to the abbey ruins.

The seven juniors entered the dismantled abbey, of which little remained but the massive walls and fragments of old windows and stone stairs.

They had been in the vaults before, many a time, and they descended at once the stone steps which led to the door giving admittance to them.

That door was of a modern construction, and had been placed there to keep enterprising schoolboys from risking their necks in the dusky recesses.

It was supposed to be kept locked, but, as a matter of fact, it was generally unfastened, left so by the latest explorer.

It was not necessary, therefore, for the party to abstract the key from Mark's lodge, where it hung on a well-known nail.

The door was ajar, and Jimmy Silver opened it wide.

"Light up!" he said.

Lovell lighted the lantern.

"Grough! Bessily chilly in here!" said Newcome, with a shiver.

"Oh, never mind that," said Jimmy Silver cheerfully, "I've got a compass here; I got it on purpose. This time we're going to have a really good try for that secret passage."

"If there is one," said Erroll, with a smile.

"Well, the yarn is that there is," said

Jimmy, "and if there is, it must lie to the east, as these ruins are west of the School House. There's so many blessed vaults branching off, that it's not easy to keep the direction; but with the compass we can manage it. 'This way!'"

With Lovell holding up the lantern, and Jimmy Silver the compass, the explorers set off.

Dark and forbidding enough the damp old stone vaults looked, and in spite of themselves the juniors felt silent as they advanced into the depths.

Jimmy Silver's bright idea of bringing a compass proved very useful, so far as keeping the right direction went.

The vaults certainly extended a good deal in the direction of the School House, and Jimmy judged that they were half-way in that ancient building, when he was brought up against a solid wall of stone.

Mornington burst into a chuckle.

"That rather stuns us," he remarked, "unless there's a giddy secret door. Knock your knapper against the wall, Jimmy, and see if it opens."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, it's possible," said Jimmy, surveying the great blocks of stone of which the wall was formed. "One of those dashed blocks might move, if we had the secret."

"Jolly cold here," remarked Newcome possibly as a hint that he had had enough exploring for the afternoon.

"Hallo! Here comes somebody else!" exclaimed Oswald.

There was a footstep in the dark vaults behind them.

"Tubby Muffin, I'll bet my hat!" grinned Lovell. "He thinks we've come down here for a secret feed, and he's after us!" He hastily extinguished the lantern. "Give him a fright. When I groan, you all groan, and he'll think it's the ghost of Rookwood."

There was a soft chuckle among the juniors, and they waited in silence for the footsteps to come nearer.

The chorus of groans was about to break forth, when a sharp voice rang and echoed through the vaults.

"Who is there?"

The juniors started, in utter astonishment.

For the voice from the darkness was the voice of Captain Langton!

CHAPTER 5.

Called Over the Coals!

"L ANGTON!" stuttered Jimmy Silver.

"My hat!"

"What the thump is he doing here?" muttered Lovell.

"What are you?" The captain's voice was sharp and angry. "You had a light—I saw it! I am quite aware that you are there."

Lovell scratched a match and relighted the lantern.

The juniors did not think of playing ghost now that they knew the identity of the new-comer.

Captain Langton advanced into the radius of the light.

His scarred face was stern and angry.

He gave the surprised juniors an angry stare.

"What are you doing here?" he exclaimed.

"Exploring the vaults," answered Jimmy Silver.

"Are not these vaults placed out of bounds by order of the Head?"

Jimmy was silent.

It was the fact, but that was no business of Captain Langton's.

"How dare you come here?"

Lovell gave his "cousin"—of whom he was not proud now—a glare.

"I suppose we needn't ask your permission!" he blurted out.

"What?"

"It's nothing to do with you," said Lovell independently. "We're not under your orders!"

"Not in the least" said Mornington coolly. "May I suggest, sir, with all respect, that you should mind your own business?"

The captain's eyes glittered.

"Leave these vaults at once!" he rapped out harshly.

"Rats!" said Lovell.

"I shall report this to the Head!" said the captain, between his teeth.

"Report and be hanged!" said Lovell recklessly.

Captain Langton turned away, and his heavy footsteps rang down the vaults as he strode off into the darkness.

The juniors looked at one another.

"Do you think he will report us?" asked Oswald uneasily.

"Jolly certain is, I think," said Lovell dryly. "He's as mad as a batter with me, at least. I don't care!"

"It means a licking."

"Let it!"

"What the thump was the man doin' here?" said Mornington, in wonder. "He can't have a taste for exploring the vaults, surely?"

"He was shut up here once when he was a kid at Rookwood, according to old Kettle," said Jimmy. "That might make him let us alone, I should think. I suppose the place was out of bounds in his time."

Lovell gave a snort.

"Oh, he spotted us coming here, and came after us to bowl us out!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "He's no right to report us to the Head; it's not his business. It's sneaking, just the same as if one of the fellows did it."

"Better get out," said Erroll. "We don't want to be here if the Head sends a prefect to look for us."

Jimmy Silver nodded, and the explorers, in rather an uneasy frame of mind, returned to the upper regions.

Captain Langton was not in sight when they emerged from the vaults, and they surmised that he had gone directly to the Head.

As they came away from the abbey they met Bulkeley, on the sixth, evidently looking for them.

"Oh, here you are!" said Bulkeley.

"Here we are, dear boy," answered Mornington.

"You're all to go to the Head at once," said Bulkeley. "You've been reported for going down into the abbey vaults."

"That rotter Langton—what?"

"Don't speak of Captain Langton like that, Lovell. Give me the key!"

"Haven't any key," answered Jimmy Silver. "The door was open, Bulkeley."

"I'll speak to Mack about it, then," said Bulkeley. "He ought to keep that key in a safe place."

The captain of Rookwood turned off in the direction of the porter's lodge, while Jimmy Silver & Co. headed for the School House.

"That means that old Mack is goin' to have a wigg'n' for not lookin' after the key," grunted Mornington. "He'll look

after it in future, and there won't be any more exploring for us."

Lovell clenched his hands.

"If we get into a row with the Head I'll make that man Langton sit up for it some-how!" he said, between his teeth. "He's no right to interfere with us!"

In rather cheerless spirits the seven juniors presented themselves in the Head's study.

Dr. Chisholm looked at them sternly as they came in. A cane lay near at hand upon his writing-table.

The juniors could guess that it was placed there ready for use, and they prepared for the ordeal.

"It appears that you have been exploring the vaults under the alms-house," said the Head severely.

Silence!

"Captain Langton has reported to me that he found you there," said the Head.

"It wasn't his business!" muttered Lovell resentfully.

"What! You know very well that boys are prohibited from entering the vaults for their safety's sake; and Captain Langton was alarmed for your safety when he saw you enter," said the Head. "He acted very properly in reporting the matter to me. You, Lovell, it appears, were guilty of personal rudeness and impertinence to Captain Langton."

"I told him to mind his own business."

"That is enough. All of you," said the Head, "will be detained on Saturday afternoon, as a punishment. You, Lovell, I shall punish more severely, as a warning to be more careful in what you say to a distinguished and gallant gentleman, who has brought honour upon his old school."

He picked up the cane.

"Hold out your hand, Lovell!"

Swish, swish!

The Head made a gesture of dismissal, and the juniors fled from the study.

In the corridor without, Arthur Edward Lovell squeezed his aching hand in silent fury.

"I'll make the cad sorry for it!" he muttered.

"No good being ratty, Lovell," said Errol, in his quiet way. "I dare say the captain thought he was doing his duty as he looked at it."

"Rot! He's an interfering cad!"

Lovell strode away to the end study, his thumbs following him.

The Fistical Four were not feeling happy. Detention on Saturday afternoon was rather serious, especially for Jimmy Silver, who was junior football captain.

As Jimmy remarked, it would play the dickens with the trial match he had arranged for that afternoon.

It could not be helped, however, and the unhappy victims had to make the best of it.

"Keep smiling!" said Jimmy Silver, at last. "Let's have tea. Feel very bad now, Lovell, old chap?"

Lovell's eyes gleamed.

"I don't mind the licking," he said. "I can stand a licking. I'm not made of putty, I suppose. But that cad—that sneak——" Lovell choked.

"Oh, let him rip!" said Jimmy Silver.

"He don't get on with us. He don't seem to remember Rookwood ways, in fact, but he's a good sort in his own way. He had a splendid record in the War, from what we heard."

"I don't believe it," said Lovell.

"What?"

"A man who'd been a good soldier wouldn't be such a cad," said Arthur Edward obstinately. "I've never spoken to a soldier, officer or private, who wasn't a decent chap. This man isn't a decent chap, or he wouldn't act as he's done. I don't believe a word about his record at the Front. It's spoof, somehow. That man never was a good soldier."

"Oh, rot!" said Jimmy Silver uneasily.

Somehow Lovell's words found an echo in his breast in spite of his reply.

CHAPTER 6.

Missing!

JIMMY SILVER awoke suddenly.

It was a late hour, and the Classical Fourth had long been in their dormitory.

Jimmy had dozed rather uneasily, for he was aware that Lovell had some scheme in his head for "getting even" with the interfering captain.

Jimmy resented Langton's interference and officiousness bitterly enough, but he wanted the matter to drop. He felt that

no good could come of carrying on a feud with the man.

Perhaps his view was partly dictated by the fact that it was Lovell who had had the licking. Arthur Edward, naturally, was not in such a placable mood.

Jimmy Silver sat up in bed, blinking round him in the darkness.

Someone was moving in the dormitory, and the sound had awakened Jimmy Silver from his uneasy slumber.

"Is that you, Lovell?" he called out in a low voice.

There was a grunt.

"Yes."

"What are you up to?"

"Nothing for you to worry about," came Lovell's voice from the darkness. "I'm going down, that's all. I'm going to call on the captain, if you want to know."

"He'll be gone to bed by this time, old chap."

"I know that; that's why I'm going," said Lovell coolly. "I'm jolly well going to swamp his napper with ink!"

"Lovell!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver, utterly aghast. "You are! You'll get a flogging."

"Bosh!"

"Look here, Lovell——"

There was no reply, but there was a sound of the door closing softly.

Arthur Edward Lovell was gone.

Jimmy Silver sat in bed, troubled and uneasy.

With Lovell in that reckless and obstinate mood he knew that it was useless to attempt to reason with him, even if he followed him to the captain's room.

He waited in great anxiety for his chum to return.

He heard two strokes from the clock tower, and realised how late it was.

It was cold sitting up in bed, and Jimmy laid down at last and pulled the bedclothes over him.

Lovell had not returned when Jimmy fell into a doze, from which he glided into slumber.

He awoke again as the clock was striking three.

"You there, Lovell?" he asked drowsily.

There was no reply, and Jimmy concluded that Lovell had returned while he dozed, and was in bed and asleep.

He soon fell asleep himself again, and did not reopen his eyes till the rising-bell was clanging out over Hookwood School.

Clang, clang!

Jimmy Silver sat in bed and yawned.

He remembered at once Lovell's expedition of the night, and glanced towards his chum's bed.

"Lovell——" he began, and then he stopped in sheer astonishment.

Lovell was not there!

Jimmy Silver gazed in blank amazement at the empty bed, of which the blankets were thrown back, evidently as Lovell had left them the previous night.

"My only hat!" he ejaculated.

"Hallo! Whose's Lovell?" exclaimed Raby. "Gone down already!"

"He's not come back!" muttered Jimmy Silver.

"What!"

"The nifer ass went down in the night, about two o'clock," said Jimmy Silver. "He can't have come back."

"Great pip!"

"Spotted out of the dorm by a merry pre-fect," said Mornington. "That's queer, though. They ought to have brought him back."

"Locked in the punishment-room, perhaps," said Oswald.

"It's jolly odd!" said Jimmy.

Jimmy Silver dressed himself very quickly to go down.

In the hall downstairs he found Mr. Bootles in conversation with Mr. Bohun, both the masters looking grave.

Mr. Bootles signed to the junior to approach.

"Silver, is any boy absent from your dormitory?" he asked.

"What, sir?"

"The hall window was found open this morning by the housemaid," said Mr. Bootles. "It appears clear that it was opened from the inside, and left so. Someone has gone out, and apparently not returned, as the window remained open. It is extraordinary."

"Good heavens!" muttered Jimmy.

He almost staggered.

Lovell had told him that he was going to Captain Langton's room to punish the captain for his interference.

Apparently he had changed his intentions, and had left the School House.

It was a mystery.

"Do you know anything of this, Silver?" exclaimed Mr. Bootles, noting the disturbance in Jimmy's face. "Has any member of the Fourth Form gone out?"

Jimmy hesitated.

But Lovell's absence could not fail to be discovered ere long, as he realised.

"Lovell isn't in the dorm, sir," he said at last.

"Lovell is missing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. I shall inform the Head at once."

At the Fourth-Form table that morning one place was empty.

Arthur Edward Lovell had not returned, and all Rookwood, from the captain of the school to the smallest lad, was wondering and perplexed.

Where was Lovell?

The Fourth Form went into lessons that morning without Lovell.

After lessons it became known that the Head had telephoned to Lovell's home, supposing that the boy had run away from school, and that he had been informed that nothing was known of Lovell at his home.

Jimmy Silver was feeling stunned.

Why should Lovell run away from Rookwood? And if he had, where could he go but home? What did it mean?

Rookwood School throbbled with excitement.

The disappearance of Lovell of the Fourth was the one topic.

And when in the afternoon Lovell's father was seen to arrive at Rookwood the excitement increased.

Where was Lovell?

From the moment he had left the Classical Fourth dormitory the junior had vanished from human ken, without leaving a trace behind.

Jimmy Silver & Co., with pale and troubled faces, tried to think it out, till their heads whirled. The mystery staggered them.

Lovell of the Fourth had vanished from all who knew him as if he had disappeared into thin air. Rookwood School, from end to end, buzzed with the question, to which no answer could be found: "Where was Lovell?"

CHAPTER 7.

Missing!

"SILVER!"

"Yes, Bulkeley!"

Jimmy Silver did not answer in his usual cheery tones. His face was darkly overcast.

His chums, Raby and Newcome, were looking as glum as Jimmy Silver himself.

Bulkeley, the captain of Rookwood School, looked at them rather curiously as he came up.

"You're wanted, Silver," he said. "Raby and Newcome, too. Head's study."

The three chums of the fourth looked eager for a moment.

"News of Lovell?" they asked, all speaking together.

Bulkeley shook his head.

"No. Lovell's father is with the Head, that's all. I think you're going to be asked about young Lovell, and you'd better tell the Head all you know about it. I suppose you know it's a serious matter for a fellow to run away from school," added Bulkeley rather grimly.

"Lovell hasn't run away from Rookwood, Bulkeley," said Jimmy Silver.

"Eh! You know he's gone."

"He hasn't run away," said Jimmy firmly. "I don't know what's become of him, Bulkeley, but I'm certain he never left Rookwood on his own accord. Why should he?"

"I don't know why he should," said the Sixth-Former. "But it's pretty clear that he has, and as you three are his chums, it's probable that you know something about it. I fancy the Head thinks so. You'd better not keep anything back."

"We've nothing to keep back," said Raby.

"Well, cut along!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. moved off towards the School House glumly.

Arthur Edward Lovell was their best chum, and his disappearance from the school troubled them greatly, as well as amazed them.

What had become of Lovell was a mystery, and the only explanation seemed to be that he had run away from school; but that his chums did not believe for a moment.

They could, however, offer no alternative theory, for they were quite at sea.

The mystery of his disappearance simply beat them.

"Hallo, there's Langton!" muttered Raby, as a thick-set man, with the right sleeve of his coat hanging empty by his side, came along the path.

Captain Langton paused as he saw the three juniors.

"What's this I hear about a boy having left the school last night," he asked—"a boy named Lovell?"

The chums did not answer him.
"Has anything been heard of him?" asked the captain.

"No!" said Jimmy curly.
"It seems that he got out of a window last night, from what I hear."

"He didn't!" snapped Raby.
The captain looked at Raby fixedly, his scarred face taking up a particularly intent expression.

"He did not!" he repeated.
"No!"

"You know what has become of him, then?"

"No, I don't!"
"Isn't it pretty clear that he has run away from school?"

"We don't believe that."
The captain smiled, though, perhaps owing to the scar that disfigured his face, his smile was not a very pleasant one.

"But if the lad has not run away, what has become of him?" he asked.

"Nobody knows."
"You do not suppose he has vanished into thin air?" asked the captain basteringly.

"We don't know what's become of him," said Jimmy Silver gruffly. "But there's no reason why he should run away from school. He wouldn't have done such a thing; and, anyway, he wouldn't have kept it secret from us. Come on, you fellows; the Head wants us!"

The Fourth-Formers walked on, and the captain, changing his direction, walked with them towards the House.

"I am very sorry that this has happened," he said. "You probably know that Lovell claimed some sort of a distant relationship with me."

"He didn't claim it; he merely mentioned the fact," said Jimmy Silver. "And after you showed that you didn't want to be considered as a relation, he said nothing more about it."

The one armed gentleman set his lips for a moment.

But his voice was quite agreeable as he went on:

"You have no idea what has become of Lovell then?"

"None at all."

"I suppose you are anxious about him?"

"Of course."

"He may come back!" suggested Captain Langton.

"I don't believe he went away."

"But if he has not gone away, he must be at Rookwood still!" exclaimed the captain. "In that case, where is he?"

"It beats me," said Jimmy Silver. "I can't understand it at all."

"Unless he's been kidnapped," said Raby.

The captain started.
"Kidnapped!" he repeated.

"That's the only way I can account for it."

"What nonsense!"
The juniors made no reply to that.

They entered the School House, leaving Captain Langton standing by the steps, rubbing his chin thoughtfully with his left hand.

"I don't believe he cares a twopenny rap about poor old Lovell!" growled Raby, as they went down the big corridor towards the Head's study. "It's partly his fault this has happened, too; though I suppose he doesn't know that."

"I suppose we shall have to tell the Head!" said Jimmy Silver uneasily.

"Now Lovell's gone, we can't keep it dark that he went down from the dorm to play a trick on Langton."

"Better tell everything, I think," said Newcome. "It can't hurt Lovell now, and we can't very well keep anything dark."

Jimmy tapped at the Head's door.

Dr. Chisholm's deep voice bade them enter, and the chums of the Fourth entered the Head's study.

CHAPTER 5.

Before the Head!

DR. CHISHOLM was looking very grave and stern.

A glance at his severe face was sufficient to show that he took a very serious view of the strange occurrence.

and that he laid the blame upon the absent junior.

Mr. Lovell, who was with the Head, was looking pale and distressed.

"You sent for us, sir?" said Jimmy Silver.

Mr. Lovell gave the juniors a kindly nod. He was well acquainted with the three.

"I sent for you, Silver," answered the Head. "I desire to question you, in the presence of Mr. Lovell. You three boys, I understand, were on terms of close friendship with Lovell."

"Yes, sir."

"Did he ever speak to you in a way to suggest that he contemplated leaving the school?"

"Never, sir!"

"Had you any idea that he intended to do so?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then his departure came as a surprise to you?" asked the Head, scanning the faces of the three juniors intently.

"A very great surprise and shock, sir."

The Head pursed his lips.

"You have no knowledge where he is gone?"

"None at all."

"Did you miss him before the morning? He appears to have left the dormitory some time during the night."

Jimmy Silver & Co. looked at one another, and hesitated. Dr. Chisholm knitted his brow and hesitated.

"Come, I see you know something of the matter!" he exclaimed sharply. "You will have the goodness to tell me all you know. You are surely aware, too, that Mr. Lovell is exceedingly anxious about his son."

"I am sure you will give us any assistance in your power, my boys," said Mr. Lovell kindly.

"Certainly we will!" said Jimmy Silver. "We know nothing whatever about what has become of poor Lovell. I happen to know at what time he left the dormitory, that is all."

"Proceed!" said the Head.

"I woke up about two in the morning and heard him," said Jimmy Silver.

"You were aware, then, that he was going to leave Rookwood, and you did not interfere?" examined the Head sternly.

"Nothing of the sort, sir! I am quite

certain that he never intended to leave Rookwood! He went down for quite a different thing."

"You knew why he went?"

"Yes, sir."

"And his reason?"

"It—it was a joke," faltered Jimmy Silver.

"A what? Oh, a practical joke. Is that it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you mean to say that Lovell left the dormitory in the middle of the night for some folly in connection with your disputes with the Modern juniors?" the Head exclaimed.

"It wasn't that, sir. It was—was—was—"

"Well?"

"Captain Langton, sir," said Jimmy at last.

"Captain Langton," repeated the Head in angry amazement. "Lovell intended to play some trick on Captain Langton?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bless my soul!" murmured Mr. Lovell.

"And for what?" thundered the Head. "What flimsy excuse, Silver, had Lovell for planning to perpetrate such a trick?"

"It was Captain Langton's fault!" said Ruby sturdily.

"Silence, Ruby. I am questioning Silver! Explain the matter at once, Silver, if there is the remotest excuse to be offered for Lovell's conduct!"

Jimmy flushed a little; his own anger was rising.

Lovell's disappearance and the possibility that he was in trouble or danger, made the Head's anger seem quite out of place to Lovell's chums, at least.

"Please tell us all, Silver," said Mr. Lovell gently.

"I will, sir, certainly! Yesterday afternoon we went exploring in the old abbey vaults, and Captain Langton followed us there, and reported us to the Head. Of course it was wrong, as the vaults are out of bounds; but we thought it wasn't Captain Langton's business to interfere. Lovell told him so, and he was careful for speaking plainly to Langton."

"He was careful for giving impertinence to Captain Langton!" snarled the Head.

"Is that all?"

"That is all, sir."

"It tells us very little," said Mr. Lovell, with a sigh. "You are certain, Silver, that my son was actually intending to play this trick on Captain Langton, and that it was not his intention to leave the house?"

"Absolutely certain, Mr. Lovell!"

"Then why did he not return to the dormitory?"

"I can't guess, sir."

"The matter is clear enough to me," said the Head harshly. "It appears to me probable that Lovell, finding Silver awake, satisfied him with that story, while his real intention was to leave the school, for reasons of his own, which I do not pretend to understand."

"I'm sure not, sir," said Jimmy Silver.

"Do you imagine, Silver, that Lovell disappeared somewhere between the Fourth Form dormitory and the Oak Room—Captain Langton's room?"

"I—I can't make it out, sir."

"A window was found open this morning, Mr. Lovell, which could only have been opened from the inside. Does not that make the matter clear?"

"It certainly appears to do so," said Mr. Lovell. "Yet if my son has run away from school, why has he not returned to his home?"

"Probably he is aware that you would send him back to Hookwood to receive the punishment he had merited," said the Head dryly. "I have no doubt—no doubt whatever—that you will hear from him shortly."

"I sincerely hope so," said the old gentleman, with a sigh.

"But, sir—" began Jimmy Silver.

"Have you anything to suggest, Silver?"

"Lovell wasn't fully dressed when he left the dorm, sir," said Jimmy. "He left his collar and tie and his waistcoat. I've found his esp. too. If he was going to leave the school, would he do it without a collar on, and bareheaded?"

"Bless my soul!" said the Head. "It really looks as if the boy was a little out of his senses when he left. I suppose, Mr. Lovell, that you have never observed any tendency to—to irresponsible conduct in your son?"

"Most decidedly not, sir!" answered Mr. Lovell faintly.

The Head gave utterance to a sound which, in any less excited personage, would have been described as a grunt.

It was evident that the whole affair angered and exasperated him.

To his mind it represented itself chiefly as a disagreeable interruption of the calm and even tenor of his way.

"Perhaps Captain Langton could let in some light upon the matter," said Mr. Lovell, after a pause. "My son may have carried out his intention of visiting his quarters, and in that case Captain Langton will be the best person to have seen him."

"Captain Langton would certainly have mentioned the matter to me," said the Head impatiently. "However, I will send for him. Silver, kindly bid Captain Langton, and request him to step here. You boys may remain for the present."

"Yes, sir."

Jimmy Silver left the study, and there was a grim silence while he was gone, broken only by the Head drumming impatiently upon his desk.

CHAPTER 2.

Hard Doubts!

CAPTAIN LANGTON entered the study in a few minutes, followed by Jimmy Silver. Jimmy had found him outside the School House.

"Pray excuse me for troubling you, Langton," said the Head.

"I am always at your service, sir."

The captain did not appear to observe Mr. Lovell's presence.

Jimmy Silver & Co. could see that he had no desire to claim the relationship of which Arthur Edward Lovell had spoken.

But the Head proceeded to introduce him to the visitor, a ceremony indispensable under the circumstances.

Mr. Lovell then shook hands with the captain very warmly, regarding him with some interest.

"It is a great pleasure to me to meet you, Captain Langton," he said. "Although we have never met, we are, I believe, distantly connected."

"Your son said something of the kind, Mr. Lovell, when I arrived here," said the captain dryly. "The connection, if it exists, is very distant, I believe."

"Oh, decidedly distant!" said Mr. Lovell, chilled by the captain's manner. And he

sat down again, without making any further reference to that matter.

Captain Langton looked inquiringly at the Head.

Dr. Chisholm had been about to make some polite remarks on the subject of the relationship which had transpired, but the captain's dry manner checked it.

It was clear enough that Basil Langton did not want his distant connection with the Lovells to ripen into acquaintance.

"Please sit down, Langton!" said the Head. "I am afraid you will be surprised by what I am going to say. You heard of the disappearance of Mr. Lovell's son last night?"

"I have heard it spoken of, sir."

"It appears, according to Silver, that Lovell bitterly resented what he was pleased to consider your interference with him yesterday."

"I am sorry," said the captain. "Knowing, from my old experience here, of the dangers of the abbey vaults, I felt bound to see that the reckless boys did not risk themselves in such a place."

"Quite so; you acted quite rightly, and I thank you for it!" said the Head. "The boy Lovell took a different view; and it seems that he was meditating some disrespectful trick upon you."

"Indeed!"

"Silver informs me that Lovell left the dormitory last night, to visit your room, and play some trick upon you."

The captain raised his brows.

"This is news to me," he said.

"Mr. Lovell thinks he may have carried out his intention, and that you may have seen something of him. Did he come to the Oak Room?"

Captain Langton shook his head.

"I am sure not," he said. "Certainly I am a very sound sleeper; but if he came I was quite unaware of it."

"He did not, at all events, play the trick he contemplated?"

"No. I should have laid the matter before you, sir, if anything of the kind had happened, naturally."

"Then you did not see or hear anything of my son during the night?" asked Mr. Lovell.

"Nothing."

The old gentleman looked disappointed.

"That is all, Captain Langton," said the

Head. "I am sure you will excuse us for having troubled you."

"Not at all, sir," said the captain. And he left the study.

Dr. Chisholm glanced at the juniors.

"You have nothing more to tell me?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"You maintain that you know nothing of Lovell's intention of leaving the school?"

"Nothing at all, sir."

"Very well; you may go."

Jimmy Silver & Co. left the study with downcast faces.

A crowd of the Classical Fourth met them at the end of the passage—Mornington, Erroll, Cenroy, Oswald, and half a dozen more.

"Any news?" they asked, all together.

Jimmy Silver shook his head.

"I suppose Lovell's pater's out up?" remarked Mornington.

"He looks it!" said Baby.

"But what the thump's become of Lovell?" exclaimed Oswald.

Jimmy Silver shook his head again, hopelessly; he gave that problem up.

"Why should he run away?" said Townsend, the out of the Fourth. "Has he been backin' geo-gees, and got landed?"

Jimmy gave Townsend an angry look.

"Lovell wasn't your sort!" he snapped. "Nothing of the kind!"

"Looks as if the chap went off his rocker!" remarked Peele. "That's the only way of accountin' for it!"

"That's it!" chimed in Gower. "He's gone potty, and gone wanderin'."

"Rot!" growled Jimmy Silver.

But, as a matter of fact, that surmise worried the three chums a little.

"If Lovell had deliberately left Rockwood, hatless and partly dressed, certainly he could not have been quite in his right senses."

And if he had not left Rockwood, where was he?

Was it possible that he had gone, as Gower expressed it, "potty," and that he was wandering somewhere at that very moment, incapable of taking care of himself?

It was an unerring thought.

A little later the station cab bore Mr. Lovell away, and Jimmy's heart was heavy, as he said goodbye to Lovell's father—

noted how distressed and harassed he looked.

Mr. Lovell had had no choice about assenting to the Head's belief that his son had run away from school; and his intention now was to have inquiries made for the missing boy.

Jimmy Silver, Ruby, and Newcome watched the cab roll away from the gates, and then they went to their study to tea.

A surprise awaited them when they entered the end study.

It was not empty.

Captain Langton was seated in the arm-chair, smoking a cigarette, and he studied pensively at the surprised juniors as they stopped and looked at him.

CHAPTER 10.

A Friend in Need:

JIMMY SILVER & Co. waited for the captain to speak.

He removed the cigarette with his left hand, and the action drew their attention to the empty sleeve on his other side, and unconsciously they softened a little.

In spite of their vague dislike of the man, they remembered what he must have been through, and they tried to feel cordial.

"Surprised to see me here—what?" asked the captain, with a smile.

"Yes, a little," said Jimmy.

"Excuse me walking in. I came here to speak to you, and decided to wait," said the captain. "If you're going to have tea, don't mind me. I'm afraid, my boys, that I've got on the wrong side of you, somehow, since I came here. I'm sorry for that!"

The juniors felt more cordial. There was a frankness in the captain's manner that appealed to them.

"About that affair of the vaults yesterday," continued the captain. "You blamed me for reporting you. Now, when I was a boy at Rookwood, I was lost in those vaults once, and might have died there; and when I found young fellows like you taking the risk, I was disturbed—perhaps angry. It was no business of mine, as you told me, but I was thinking of your safety. Do me the credit to believe that."

"Of course, sir," said Jimmy Silver,

quite disarmed now. "We've heard from the sergeant how you were shut up in the vaults once, sir, by a chap named Baummann."

"Oh! Is Baummann still remembered here?" asked the captain, looking at him curiously.

"Sergeant Kettle remembers him, and I suppose the Head does," said Jimmy. "Of course, that was years and years before our time here."

"Well, it's a fact. That fellow Baummann shut me in the vaults, and I was lost there a day and a night," said the captain. "It was an experience I haven't forgotten yet. I was alarmed for you when I saw you venturing into such a place. That's why I chipped in. I'm sorry it seems to have made you dislike me."

"Oh, no, sir!" said Jimmy. "It's all right. We were rather rusty at the time, that's all."

"All screws, sir!" said Newcome.

"Never mind it!" said Ruby.

The three juniors were quite cordial now.

There was no reason why so lofty a personage as Captain Langton should take the trouble to explain himself to them, so far as they could see, unless it was from sheer good-nature and right feeling; and they gave him the credit accordingly.

"And," resumed the captain, "the fact is, I was rather hard hit out there in Flanders, and wounds like mine leave their scars behind—they trouble a man occasionally, and don't improve his temper. It's rotten; but there it is. If I spoke sharply yesterday, it's all about it."

"The Fourth-Formers were quite won."

"If—if you haven't had your tea yet, sir—" said Jimmy diffidently.

The captain smiled.

"Tea in the study?" he said. "Begad, quite like old times, when I was a youngster here like yourself. Do you know that this was my study?"

"Was it?" said Jimmy, greatly interested.

"Yes. Baummann was my study-mate, not that we were friends. I had rather a prejudice against people of German descent even in those days, though we never dreamed of war then. You can give me a cup of tea, if you like, I'd help you, begad, if I had my fin to help you with!"

Good feeling was quite established by this time.

the clime of the Fourth prepared tea, while Captain Langton smoked cigarettes—the usual.

He joined them at the table, when tea was ready, in the most genial way.

"Now, about Lovell!" he said presently. "I know you three youngsters are worried about him."

"Naturally, sir."

"Quite so. I find there is a general impression that he must have been frightened, and wandered away without being accountable. Do you think so?"

"Some of the fellows think so," admitted Jimmy reluctantly.

"But you don't?"

"No. We know him too well for that."

"What is your theory, then?" asked the captain. "What has become of him?"

"It's too deep for me, sir."

"You can't think of anything that can be done?"

"Oh, yes, rather!" said Jimmy at once.

"We're going to find him somehow."

"Leaving Rookwood to look for him, do you mean?"

"No; we can't leave the school."

"But where are you going to look for him, then?" asked the captain, with an air of perplexity. "Let me hear what you think. I have a good deal of time on my hands here, as you know; and if there is anything I can do to help, I shall spare no trouble to help the poor lad."

"Well, we can't think what's happened, sir," said Jimmy slowly. "But we don't believe Lovell was light-headed, or anything of that kind. If he was going to run away, he wouldn't have gone partly dressed, and without even his cap. Yet he's gone. The only explanation is that he was taken away by force."

"Kidnapped?"

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"Who should kidnap him?"

"I don't know. But it's the only explanation. He may have run into a burglar when he went down last night, for all we know, or—or anything may have happened. It beats us, I admit that. But—"

"It wouldn't be easy for a kidnapper—admitting that theory—to get the boy out of the school," remarked the captain. "The gates were locked. Lifting a boy over the school wall into the road, when anybody might have passed—my dear lad, it sounds steep, doesn't it?"

"It sounds impossible," said Baby.

"Then what do you surmise, Silver?"

Jimmy hesitated.

"He had no hesitation in confiding to the captain, so far as that went, but the vague idea at the back of his mind seemed so wild that he hardly cared to put it into words."

"I see you have some idea," said Captain Langton, lighting a fresh cigarette as he finished his tea.

"Well, suppose he isn't gone away from Rookwood at all?" said Jimmy Silver at last.

The captain started.

"Surely you don't think he's hiding somewhere about the school!" he exclaimed.

"No, no! But—"

"Not hiding—hidden!" said Baby quietly.

"Come," said the captain, laughing. "this is sicker than ever! Where could he be hidden?"

"I know it sounds wild," said Jimmy. "But—but we simply don't know what's happened, and so we must think that anything may have happened. There are no end of nooks and crannies about Rookwood—the old clock-tower and the school vaults, and the vaults under the almsy. If—if—"

He did not finish.

At the back of his mind and the minds of his chums lurked an almost nameless fear that Lovell had fallen into some terrible danger in the dark hours of the night, and that perhaps it was a lifeless body that was hidden in some deep and dark recess.

The juniors would not admit that terrible thought into their minds in so many words, but it lurked at the back of their thoughts, so to speak, and gave its colouring to their surmises upon the subject.

"What do you think of doing, then?" asked the captain.

"Searching for him," said Jimmy Silver.

"About Rookwood?"

"Yes."

"The vaults are out of bounds. I am afraid," said the captain, "that I have in a manner forced your confidence, for I cannot help guessing now that you intend to explore the almsy vaults again. But you must not do so without permission; and, if you like, I will ask your headmaster's permission for you. I am so re-

he will grant it if I offer to accompany you in searching the vaults."

"Thank you very much," said Jimmy gratefully. "We meant to do it, but it would have meant a row if we'd been seen there. If you can get us permission—"

"Quite easily," said the captain, rising; "and I am very glad to be of service to you, dear boys. I hope our little disagreement of yesterday is quite forgotten now."

"Oh, quite, sir," said the three together at once.

"I will speak to Dr Chisholm at once, and you'll find me in the quadrangle in ten minutes' time," said the captain.

"Thank you, sir."

Captain Langton left the study.

The three juniors looked at one another.

"He's a jolly good fellow," said Jimmy Silver. "We were a bit rough on him, I think, you chaps."

"One of the best," said Newcome heartily. "And he'll be jolly useful, helping us to look for Lovell."

"Yes, rather!" agreed Raby.

The three chums were feeling in better spirits when they went out to join the captain in the quadrangle.

Captain Langton greeted them with a smile and a nod.

"I've spoken to the Head," he said. "I am afraid he is a little annoyed by the suggestion that Lovell may be still somewhere about Rookwood, but he has consented to let the vaults be searched, on condition that I accompany you. I am ready."

"We're over so much obliged, sir," said Jimmy gratefully.

"Not at all. I see you have a lantern, so let's start."

And the one-armed gentleman and the three juniors started for the abbey ruins.

CHAPTER 11.

Three on the Track!

JIMMY SILVER & Co. were late beginning their prep that evening.

They came in to it tired and dusty. In company with the captain they had spent long hours in the old vaults under the abbey, searching.

It was with little hope that they had begun the search, if any, and what faint hope there was had now died away.

In those long hours they had explored every recess of the abbey vaults, and they had found nothing.

They had scarcely expected to find anything, but it was a disappointment, all the same.

The three chums worked at their prep in a desultory fashion that evening.

They could not put their minds into their work, and, indeed, that day Mr Bootles had to be very forbearing with them.

The mystery of Lovell's fate haunted them, and was never absent from their minds.

It was understood that Mr. Lovell was to telegraph to the school at once, if he received news of his son, but no news had come as yet.

Fellows of the Fourth dropped in to chat over the mystery with Lovell's chums. Even Smythe of the Shell came along to express his sympathy.

But it was a sad evening to the three.

They left their prep unfinished, and after their callers had gone they sat round the table discussing the matter wearily.

Raby had been silent for some time while Jimmy and Newcome were speaking. But he broke in suddenly:

"There's one thing we haven't thought of, you fellows."

"What's that, kid?" asked Jimmy.

"Lovell went down last night to ink the captain in his room. He told you so when you woke up."

"That's so."

"He must have had the ink with him," said Raby—"in fact, I remember seeing him put something under his bed last night, and I suppose it must have been what he had ready for Langton."

"Very likely."

"Well, he took it down with him," said Raby. "What happened after that nobody knows. The open window looks as if he went out; but—but it may mean that somebody had come in—some burglar, perhaps—and Lovell met him. Well, if old Lovell was collared, isn't it jolly likely that he split the ink he was carrying? It was a can I saw him shove under his bed; and if he dropped that can there would be no

end of a much. What about looking for traces of it all the way from the door to the Oak Room—Langton's room?"

"The maids would have seen it and cleared it up," said Newcome.

"H'm! Yes," admitted Raby. "But some sign must be left, all the same. And if we find a trace of it we'll question them downstairs."

"Well, it's something to do, anyway," said Jimmy Silver. "I'll get my flash-lamp; there's no lights in the upper passages now since the order about saving gas, you know. There'll be nobody about up there, and we may as well do some scouting."

The hope, however faint, of finding some trace of their chum after his departure from the dormitory excited Jimmy Silver & Co. a little.

Jimmy put his electric flash-lamp in his pocket, and they left the study.

It wanted yet half an hour or more to bed-time, and there was no one on the upper staircases, which were in darkness.

From the dormitory corridor two or three passages and several steps led to the somewhat secluded corner of the building where the Oak Room was situated, in which Captain Langton had taken up his quarters. Starting from the dormitory the three juniors went along the well-swept passage, where they did not expect to discover any traces.

They began a keen scrutiny, however, as they turned into a little, winding passage leading to an old oaken staircase, seldom used, and seldom visited by the broom of the housemaid.

It was one of the oldest parts of the ancient, rambling building.

Jimmy Silver kept the light on the stairs as they descended the oaken staircase, where Lovell must have passed the previous night on his way to Captain Langton's room.

"Look here!" muttered Raby.

Jimmy flashed the light on the blind beside the narrow stairs.

A dry smudge of ink showed there.

It had waited the dust and dried there, and it was evidently left by an ink hand, which had caught at the rail for guidance in the darkness.

These hints thrilled as they looked at it.

For the stain was not old; that was evident at a glance. And they knew that it had been made by their chum not twenty-four hours earlier.

"He got some of the ink on his hands, of course!" muttered Raby. "We know now that he came as far as this."

With great excitement now the juniors pressed on.

They scanned the stairs, the rail, and the wall for further traces, and at the bottom of the little stair they found a smudge on the wall.

Quietly, but with beating hearts, they turned into the lower passage, which led into the wide corridor where the Oak Room was situated.

Near the end of the passage a dot of ink was found close to the wall—a thick dot that was not quite dry.

Thence they turned into the big corridor, upon which seven or eight rooms opened.

One of the doors belonged to the captain's room.

The others, as the juniors knew, were unoccupied. There were a good many rooms in the old School House that were tenanted.

The corridor was dimly lit, and there was no light under the door of Captain Langton's room.

As far as this Lovell had evidently come the previous night. Whatever had happened to him had happened close to Captain Langton's quarters.

And this much proved that he had not left the house of his own accord. For why should he have come so far if his intention was merely to go down and let himself out by the hall window—which he could have done easily by the main staircase?

With beating hearts the three juniors moved on down the corridor towards the door of the Oak Room—the captain's sitting-room.

Jimmy Silver flashed the light over the door.

Then he uttered a faint exclamation:

"Look!"

It was easy to imagine how Lovell, carrying the can of ink in the dark, had stained his hands with the liquid, and with the wet ink on his hands he had naturally left traces behind him.

The door-handle was brightly polished.

If there had been any ink trace upon it, it had been cleaned off by the housemaid.

But on the oaken door itself, near the handle, was a slight smudge of black ink. On the dark old oak it was almost imperceptible, and it was no wonder that it had escaped the housemaid's eyes.

It would have escaped Jimmy Silver's eyes, too, but for the fact that he was looking for it with the keenness of a hawk.

The light of the flash-lamp gleamed on the smudge on the oak, and the juniors caught their breath as they looked at it.

Lovell, the previous night, had plainly come as far as the captain's room, and had turned the handle of the door.

That much they knew now as certainly as if they had watched him.

"He was here!" muttered Jimmy, under his breath.

"He had to pass through this room to get to the captain's bed-room, where Langton was," whispered Raby. "The bed-room has no door on the corridor, you know. Lovell had to go through the sitting-room—this room."

"And he came as far as this door!" muttered Newcombe.

The juniors stood still.

On that very spot where they were standing Lovell must have stood the previous night in the darkness, and there, whatever happened to him must have happened—there, with his hand on the captain's door.

"We ought to tell Captain Langton this," said Jimmy Silver, after some thought. "He's been helping us in the search, and we trust him. He may be able to make some suggestion. I'm sure he'd like to know what we've found out so far."

"That's right enough."

"He's not in his room," said Jimmy. "There's no light. We can't go into his quarters without his permission. Let's go and look for him."

"Hold on, though! He may be in his bed-room. Let's knock."

"Right!"

Jimmy Silver tapped at the door of the Oak Room.

There was no response from within. Jimmy knocked again, and as there was

no reply he turned the handle of the door to open it and glance into the sitting-room.

From the open door he could have seen whether there was a light under the communication door of the captain's bed-room.

But, to his surprise, the door did not open to his touch.

"My hat! It's locked!"

CHAPTER 12.

Mysterious!

"LOCKED!" repeated Raby and Newcombe, in a breath.

"Locked!" said Jimmy.

The three juniors stared at the door, and at one another, in surprise. Why the captain should lock the door of his sitting-room was not easy to guess.

He could not have retired for the night at that early hour, and even had he done so there was no reason why he should lock the door of the outer room, even if he locked the bed-room door.

If he was absent from his quarters, it was still more inexplicable why he should lock the door on leaving and take away the key. It was impossible that he could suppose there were thieves in the school.

The latter theory, indeed, was inadmissible, for Jimmy Silver, turning the light on the keyhole, discerned the key there inside the room.

It had been unusual, but the end of the key was quite easy to see. The door was locked on the inside, proof that Captain Langton was in his quarters.

"He's there!" said Jimmy.

"Blessed if I know what he's locked the door for!" said Newcombe. "Even if he'd gone to bed, a soldier isn't likely to be nervous. What the dickens should he lock the door for?"

"There's no light in this room," said Jimmy. "He must be in his bed-room. Shall we knock again?"

"May as well."

Knock!

Jimmy Silver gave quite a smothering knock upon the dark oaken panels.

It was more than loud enough to be heard in the inner room.

The captain should certainly have heard it, unless he was gone to bed and fast asleep, which was scarcely possible before five o'clock in the evening.

But there came no answer, and the juniors waited in vain for any sound of footsteps in the Oak Room.

"They looked at one another in astonishment.

"He can't be deaf all of a sudden," said Raby.

"May have fallen asleep."

"Hold on," said Jimmy. "I'll see whether there's a light in the bed-room."

He put his lamp into his pocket, and hurried along the corridor to the big bay window at the end.

From there the window of the captain's bed-room could be seen, and it would be easy to see whether there was a light in the room.

Jimmy Silver looked out of the big window, and in the starlight he could see the balcony outside the Oak Room, with the French-windows; and, farther on, the window of the captain's bed-room.

All was dark.

There was not a glimmer of light to be seen at either window.

Greatly puzzled, Jimmy Silver returned to his chums.

"Blessed if I understand it!" he said.

"There's no light. If the captain's there he must be there in the dark!"

"He must be there, as this door is locked on the inside."

"Right! What the thump is he in the dark for? He may have fallen asleep in his chair, but it must have been dark when he came up. He dines with the Head, you know, at seven, and it gets dark early now."

"It beats me!" said Newcome. "He can't be ill, I suppose? His old wound, you know—he may have fainted, or something."

Jimmy Silver looked concerned.

The state of affairs was so curious that some such supposition seemed to be the only possible explanation.

"It's possible," he said. "I can't help feeling uneasy, and if he should be ill—locked in there—"

"Better speak to somebody," said Raby.

"We'll speak to Mr. Bootles," said

Jimmy Silver decidedly. "If he's ill, he can't be left. He may have fainted on the floor. Come on!"

The three juniors left the door of the Oak Room, and hurried down the corridor towards the lower staircase.

But Raby paused.

"Hold on," he said. "One of us had better stay. If he's in a fit or something he may call out."

Jimmy nodded.

"Yes, you cut back," he said. "If you hear him, call out through the keyhole, and tell him we're gone for Bootles. There's no doubt that there's something wrong with him."

Raby turned to the door of the Oak Room, while his chums ran downstairs to find Mr. Bootles.

Raby waited in the unlighted passage, outside the door, listening painfully for any sound from within which might indicate that the captain was there in the throes of some seizure.

All his former dislike of the captain, founded chiefly upon Lovell's unlucky trouble with him, had vanished long ago; he was anxious and concerned for the unarmed man.

He realised that the terrible injuries the captain had received must have left their trace upon him, though he had recovered, and it was quite possible that the unhappy man lay helpless in a seizure.

Suddenly, to his surprise, there was a footstep within.

A glimmer of light came from the keyhole.

Raby rubbed his eyes.

The gas in the room had been lighted: there was no electric light in that part of Rookwood.

Raby, almost dazed, heard someone moving about in the room, and a low, tuneful sound from within—someone humming a careless tune.

That certainly did not sound like illness.

He tapped at the door.

"Hallo!" came from within. "Who's that?"

The key clicked, and the door opened.

Framed in the light, Captain Langton stood there, presenting his usual aspect, and staring out at the startled junior, startled himself.

CHAPTER 13.

What Has Happened?

"MR. BOOTLES!"

Jimmy Silver and Arthur Newcome spoke together, breathlessly.

In their hurry they had entered the Form-master's study without knocking; and Mr. Bootles, laying down his book, blinked at them severely over his spectacles.

"Silent! Noneone!" rumbled Mr. Bootles. "What does this mean?"

"We're afraid Captain Langton is ill, sir."

"What?"

Mr. Bootles blinked at them in surprise.

"That's it, sir," said Newcome, breathlessly. "We've been to his room to speak to him, sir—"

"And the door was locked on the inside, sir," said Jimmy Silver. "There was no light in either room, and he didn't answer our knock."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Bootles.

"As—as I believe he still suffers from his old wounds, sir, we thought he might be ill, in a fit or something," said Jimmy Silver. "We thought we'd better tell you, sir."

Mr. Bootles rose to his feet.

"Quite so," he assented. "You have done rightly, my boys. You are sure there was no light in the rooms?"

"I looked at both windows, sir, from the corridor."

"And you knuckled loudly enough to be heard in the inner room?"

"Quite, sir!"

"The captain may merely have fallen asleep in his chair," said Mr. Bootles.

"I don't see how it can be so, sir," said Jimmy. "It must have been dark when he went up, after dining with the Head, and he would have lighted the gas. So if he fell asleep in his chair the gas would be still burning."

"That is very true; and very cute of you, Silver, to think of it," said Mr. Bootles approvingly.

"Besides, sir, if he was only asleep, our knocking at the door would certainly have wakened him up."

"I will proceed to the apartment at once," said Mr. Bootles. "I must obtain

a lamp; I think the upper passages are unlighted—"

"My flash-lamp, sir!" said the captain of the Fourth, holding it out.

"Thank you, Silver; that will do," said Mr. Bootles, taking the lamp. "You may accompany me, my boys."

The master of the Fourth left his study with a look of concern upon his kind face, and the two juniors followed him upstairs.

In a few minutes they reached the door of the Oak Room, but to the surprise of Jimmy Silver and Newcome, Raby was no longer there.

"What are you looking for?" asked Mr. Bootles, as the two juniors stared up and down the passage in surprise.

"We left Raby here, sir," said Jimmy Silver. "He was to listen if Captain Langton called out."

"Apparently he did not trouble to wait," said Mr. Bootles dryly. "Why, bless my soul, there is a light in the room, Silver! What nonsense have you been telling me?"

Jimmy Silver stared at the dim streak of light which he now observed under the door.

"Oh!" he said.

Mr. Bootles made a gesture of irritation. It was plain that he now believed that he had been brought upstairs on a fool's errand.

He raised his hand and tapped at the door of the Oak Room.

"Come in!" called out a cheery voice within.

Mr. Bootles opened the door.

Captain Langton was seated at the table in the oak-paneled sitting-room.

He rose to his feet, with a look of surprise, as he saw Mr. Bootles, with the two startled juniors behind him.

"Pray come in, Mr. Bootles!" he said cordially. "Take a seat, my dear sir."

"Please excuse me, Captain Langton," said the Form-master. "But I came up here on account of what these two boys told me. They fancied you were ill."

"Ill!" exclaimed the captain.

He glanced past the Form-master at the two juniors in the doorway.

Jimmy and Newcome coloured.

It was only too evident that Basil Langton was not ill, and that their alarm had been groundless.

"You thought I was ill, my boys!" said

the captain, with a good-natured smile. "What put that idea into your heads, may I ask?"

"We—we thought——" stammered Jimmy. "We—we came here to speak to you, sir, but couldn't make you hear, and there was no light in either room."

"You must be mistaken about that, Silver!" snapped Mr. Bootles.

"No, no; the boy is quite right!" said the captain smiling. "I felt very tired when I came up after dinner, and decided to have a nap. So I turned out the gas and laid on the bed for a while. I must have slept very soundly, if the boys tried to make me hear, for I certainly did not hear them."

Jimmy and Newcome looked—and left—very sheepish.

That simple explanation, which accounted for everything, made them realise how they had put their foot in it; and they were conscious, too, that Mr. Bootles was very irritated.

"Oh!" gasped Jimmy.

"I suppose that is why Master Ruby was standing outside my door!" said the captain, laughing. "I came back into this room when I woke up and lighted the gas, and heard someone knocking, and when I opened the door your young friend was standing there, staring at me."

"How absurd!" exclaimed Mr. Bootles.

"I fear that I spoke rather sharply to Ruby," said the captain. "Finding him there, with apparently nothing to say, I could not help suspecting that he had come here to play some trick, such as Master Lovell intended to play upon me last night."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver. "Nothing of the sort, sir! We only thought you were ill, and we were a bit alarmed."

"I am very much obliged to you, then," said Captain Langton, still smiling. "You will excuse those boys, Mr. Bootles. I am sure. They meant well, as you see."

"They have acted very absurdly, and disturbed you," said Mr. Bootles. "However, nothing more shall be said about the matter. Good-night, Captain Langton!"

"Good-night, Mr. Bootles; and good-night to you, my lads!" said the captain kindly. "Tell Ruby I am sorry I was a little abrupt with him when I found him at my door."

"Yes, sir! Good-night!" said the juniors.

"Go to your dormitory!" said Mr. Bootles, as they left the Oak Room. "It is your bedtime. And kindly do not act in such a ridiculous manner again."

Mr. Bootles went downstairs, and Jimmy Silver and Newcome hurried away by the little oaken staircase to the dormitory passage, where they met the Classical Fourth coming up to bed.

The chums went into the Fourth-Form dormitory with the rest, looking about them for Raby.

Raby was not in the dormitory, however, neither was he with the crowd of juniors that poured in.

"Seen Raby, anybody?" called out Jimmy Silver.

"Not since I was in your study," said Mornington.

Bulkeley of the Sixth came in.

"Now, then, turn in!" he said. "All here?" He glanced over the crowd of juniors. "Hallo, Raby's not here?"

"He hasn't come up yet," said Oswald.

"By gad! I'll warn him!"

Bulkeley hurried out, frowning.

The juniors waited, discussing the absence of Raby, in great wonder. It was very unusual—in fact, unknown—for a junior to fail to appear at bedtime.

The minutes passed, and Raby did not come up, and Bulkeley did not return.

The dormitory door opened at last, but it was not Bulkeley who came in—it was Mr. Bootles, with a troubled and perplexed face.

"Silver," he said quietly, "do you know where Raby is?"

"No, sir."

"Or you, Newcome?"

"No, sir," said Newcome, his face paling.

"You have not seen him since Captain Langton sent him away from his room?" asked Mr. Bootles.

"No, sir!" said the two juniors together, and their voices were husky now. A nameless dread was tugging at their hearts.

"I will put your light out," said Mr. Bootles in a low voice. "Go to sleep, my boys."

"But Raby, sir!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver, starting up in bed.

"It is very strange, Silver, but there can be nothing to be alarmed about," said

Mr. Bootles. "You are forbidden to leave the dormitory, any of you."

"But, sir—"

"Raby cannot be found!"

Mr. Bootles retired, leaving the dormitory in darkness, and Jimmy Silver with a chill at his heart.

CHAPTER II.

Under the Shadow!

"SILVER!"

Mr. Bootles, the master of the Fourth Form at Rookwood, spoke in a gentle tone.

Jimmy Silver did not reply.

The Classical Fourth were in the Form-room, and it was Jimmy's turn to construe; but Jimmy was thinking of anything but Latin just then.

His usually sunny face was deeply overcast.

His chum Newcome looked glum, too.

The two juniors were giving no attention to lesson; they couldn't!

They were thinking of their chums, Lovell and Raby, whose mysterious disappearance from Rookwood had caused a sensation in the school.

"Silver!"

Mornington nudged the captain of the Fourth, and Jimmy looked up, his face reddening.

"Yes, sir?" he stammered.

Mr. Bootles blinked at him very kindly over his spectacles.

The Form-master was aware of the loyal friendship that united the Physical Four, and he sympathised with Jimmy Silver's evident distress.

"I am afraid your attention is wandering, Silver," said Mr. Bootles.

"I—I can't help it, sir!" stammered Jimmy. "I—I can't help thinking about—about—" His voice faltered.

"I understand," said Mr. Bootles gently. "If you choose, Silver, you and Newcome may leave the Form-room for the morning."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" said Jimmy, in great relief. And Arthur Newcome echoed his words.

Form work just then seemed a horror to the two juniors in their distress of mind.

Gladly enough they quitted the Form-

room, leaving the rest of the Classical Fourth to grand Latin.

There was a cheery autumn sunshine in the old quadrangle of Rookwood, and the chums were glad to get into the open air.

Save for themselves, and one other the quadrangle was deserted.

The other was a man with a scarred face, and an empty sleeve (hanging by his side, who was pacing under the beeches amid the fallen leaves.

"There's Captain Langton, Jimmy," said Newcome. "May as well speak to him now. I don't know whether he knows what's happened to Raby—whether he knows he's missing as well as Lovell, I mean. He was very friendly in helping us to look for poor old Lovell."

Jimmy Silver nodded.

"He would help us if he could," he said. "But it's not much good looking for Raby, kid. He's nowhere near Rookwood. Newcome, old chap, what can have become of him and of Lovell?"

"Goodness knows!" muttered Newcome.

The mystery of the juniors' disappearance oppressed the two chums like a weight upon their minds and their hearts.

They had had little sleep the previous night, since they had learned of George Raby's disappearance, following that of Arthur Edward Lovell.

The two juniors moved towards the beeches, where the captain was pacing to and fro smoking a cigarette.

The grim scars on the captain's face gave him a forbidding look; but Jimmy Silver had found him very kind and helpful when the search for Lovell was going on, and they felt kindly towards Basil Langton.

The captain had his back towards them, and did not observe them.

The two Fourth-Formers had nearly reached the beeches when, looking past the trees towards the gates, they observed a stranger who had just entered, and was speaking to Mack the porter.

Captain Langton observed the men at the same moment, and stopped in his pacing, his back still to the juniors, and stared towards the gates.

The juniors could not see his face, but his sudden stop, and something in his attitude, showed that he was keenly interested in the man who had just come in from the road.

The stranger was a short, fat man,

dressed in tweeds, with a bowler-hat and a leg walking-stick.

He had a rather podgy face, and a straggling moustache, and shifty eyes of an uncertain colour. He looked as commonplace an individual as the clowns of the Fourth had ever seen.

"I wonder who that is!" remarked Newcome. "Captain Langton seems to know him, from the way he's staring at him."

"Looks like it," said Jimmy indifferently. "Never mind him. We want to speak to Langton."

But Jimmy Silver did not have an opportunity of speaking to Captain Langton just then.

The captain, after a long, hard stare at the stranger at the gates, turned sharply, and strode away towards the School House.

He passed within a few paces of the surprised juniors, and gave them a short nod, but did not stop to speak, even to bid them good-morning.

He walked with a hurried stride towards the House, and disappeared in at the big doorway.

Jimmy Silver had opened his lips to speak as the captain was passing; but Basil Langton was gone before he could utter a word.

Jimmy looked at Newcome, who returned his glance in surprise.

"My hat!" said Newcome. "What the dickens—"

"That's a man he doesn't want to meet," said Jimmy, with a slight smile. "The chap looks as if he might be a collector of bills. Perhaps he's got a little account for the captain."

The podgy man had left the porter at the gate now, and was starting across the quadrangle.

Jimmy Silver and Newcome had halted on the path, and the stranger eyed them as he came up, and stopped.

"Good-morning!" he said pleasantly.

"Good-morning, sir!" said the two juniors politely.

"Not at lessons this morning—eh?" said the podgy gentleman, his shifty eyes twinkling at the juniors.

"No," answered Jimmy, without adding any explanation of the circumstance. He did not see that it concerned the podgy stranger in any way.

"And so this is Rookwood?" went on the podgy man, in a chatty way.

"Yes, this is Rookwood," answered Jimmy.

"Fine place!" said the stranger, with a glance of his shifty eyes over the green quad and the grey old buildings. "Historic, and all that—what?"

"Yes," said Jimmy, smiling.

"I dare say that building's a hundred years old," remarked the podgy gentleman, with a nod towards the old School House.

"Nearer six," answered Newcome, with some pride.

Classicals at Rookwood were very proud of the antiquity of the school.

They assumed lofty airs on that account towards the fellows on the Modern side, in Mr. Manders' House; Mr. Manders' House being anything but ancient, like the Modern side generally.

"Very interesting—very! Charming old place! I dare say you young gentlemen come in contact with quite a crowd of Old Boys, coming down for one thing or another."

"Sometimes."

"Yes, yes; of course! In fact, I dare say you'd see any Old Boy who happened to drop in around the place."

"Very likely."

"Friend of mine was here some years back," said the podgy gentleman genially.

"Name of Baumann. I dare say you've seen that young gentleman here at times?"

"Baumann?" repeated Jimmy Silver.

"There was a fellow of that name here once. He was the chap who shut up Langton in the abbey vaults, when they were juniors here. Years before our time."

"Oh, yes! But no doubt he comes down sometimes with the old Old Boys—what?"

"Never seen him!" said Jimmy.

"He's never been to Rookwood in our time, so far as I know," added Newcome.

"Perhaps you mightn't have heard the name, but might have seen him all the same," remarked the podgy gentleman.

"Great friend of mine—very! Man like that to look at."

To the astonishment of the juniors the podgy gentleman whipped a photograph from his pocket and held it up for them to see, his shifty eyes watching their faces keenly the while.

They looked at the photograph.

It was that of a man about thirty-five, with a somewhat heavy face, and rather unprepossessing features.

"You know that face—what?"

"No," said Jimmy, looking at it more closely. "There seems something about it a bit familiar—about the eyes, I think. But I've never seen the man that I know of."

"Is that Baumann?" asked Newcome.

"That's him; that's my friend Baumann. The fact is, I've lost trace of him, and thought I might get news of him here," exclaimed the podgy gentleman. "I'm calling on the Head for that reason—that very reason. You young gentlemen don't think you've seen a man like that about the place—ah?"

"Sorry, no."

"It's a pity—very. Never mind. Good-morning to you, young gentlemen!"

The visitor slipped the photograph back into his pocket and started for the House.

"Well, my hat!" said Newcome. "That's a queer fish. Blessed if I know what to make of him! What are you thinking out, Jimmy?"

Jimmy Silver's face was deeply thoughtful.

"It's jolly queer," he said—"jolly queer! That man's after Baumann, who used to be here; and he's not a friend of his, either. Looks to me like a plain-clothes detective, Newcome. He was pumping us, as plain as anything. He sprung that phony one suddenly, to see in our faces whether we knew it."

"A detective after an old Rookwood chap?" said Newcome, with a stare.

"Well, Baumann was a Rookwooder; but it's a German name, and I dare say he was no class," said Jimmy. "Sergeant Kettle remembers him, and don't think much of him. And that trick we've heard he played on Langton—shutting him up in the abbey vaults—was a dirty trick. Anyway, that fat fellow was pumping us, though he was wise enough to think we didn't see it. Let's go and see Langton now."

And Jimmy Silver and Newcome went into the House and made their way to the captain's quarters.

CHAPTER 15.

The Veil of Mystery!

"COME in!"

Captain Langton's voice called out cheerily as Jimmy Silver tapped at the door of the Oak Room.

The captain was stretched upon a sofa

under the window, and he gave the juniors a friendly nod as they entered.

"Not at lessons?" he smiled.

"Mr. Bontles has let us off for this morning, sir," answered Jimmy Silver.

"We—we're a bit worried."

"I understand. Sit down! Very kind of you to give me a look-in."

"We were going to speak to you in the quad; but—"

"I had a sudden twinge," said the captain, with a nod towards his empty sleeve. "I always get it when the weather's damp. I shall have to lay up for a bit, I'm afraid."

The juniors were sympathetic at once.

They understood now why the captain had come indoors so suddenly.

Jimmy felt a twinge of remorse as he remembered his idea that the captain had been avoiding the podgy stranger.

"Nothing to speak of, of course," said Captain Langton, making light of the matter. "But the loss of a limb makes itself felt, you know—you get bad twinges in the bad weather. But never mind that. You have something to say to me."

"You were kind enough to help us in looking for poor old Lovell, sir—"

"Yes; you had an idea that the poor lad might still be about Rookwood somewhere," said the captain, with a smile. "I think we made a pretty thorough search of the place."

"Yes; I've had to give up that idea," said Jimmy. "But—but now Raby—"

The captain became very grave.

"I heard this morning that Raby has gone away suddenly," he said. "It is very extraordinary."

"I—I suppose he's gone away!" admitted Jimmy Silver. "But I can't understand it."

"Have his people heard?"

"The Head's telephoned, but his people have heard nothing of him—none as Lovell's," said Newcome.

"It's very odd. Why should the boy go?" said the captain. "From what I saw of him I should have thought he was happy here."

"He never went of his own accord, sir," said Jimmy. "I can't even guess what may have happened, but there's been foul play of some sort."

Newcome nodded assent.

"That's rather a queer idea," said Captain Langton thoughtfully. "What could

have happened to Raby within the walls of the School House?"

"The same that happened to Lovell," said Jimmy.

"And that——"

"I don't know," confessed Jimmy. "It leaves me—beats me hollow! It makes me feel that my head's turning round. But there's been foul play of some sort, and we're going to get to the bottom of it somehow!"

Jimmy went on to explain what the ink-stains had revealed of Lovell's movements on the night of his disappearance.

"That's why we think there's been foul play," he concluded. "And we're not resting till we've found out everything."

Jimmy's eyes gleamed as he spoke, and his jaw squared.

Amazed and perplexed as he was, there was no doubt of Jimmy Silver's determination to probe the mystery, and discover what had become of his missing chums.

"I wish you every success!" said Captain Langton cordially. "Any assistance I can render I shall be only too happy to give. I've got to lie up here to-day, and I shall think the matter over as hard as I can, and if anything occurs to me, I'll send you a message to come here."

"You're very kind, sir," said Jimmy gratefully.

"Not at all. I can feel for your distress, my lad," said the captain. "There is very little I would not do to help you. Might I ask you to take a message to the Head for me, to inform him that I do not feel quite well enough to come down to lunch to-day?"

"Certainly, sir!"

The two juniors left the Oak Room, Captain Langton taking up a book.

Their faces were clouded as they went downstairs.

Captain Langton had been so kind in giving them help before, that they had had a vague hope that he might have some suggestion to make, but evidently he was at as great a loss as themselves.

They proceeded to the Sixth Form room to take the captain's message to Dr. Chisholm, and in the corridor they encountered Tupper, the page, with a broad grin on his face.

He was coming away from the Sixth Form room.

"Is the Head there, Tupper?" asked Jimmy.

Tupper's grin widened.

"No, Master Silver, he ain't! I've just took in a gentleman's card to 'im, and he's gone to his study," said Tupper. "He was waxy, sir! He don't like being interrupted when he's on Greek and such, he don't!" Tupper chuckled. "But I 'ad to take the card in, seeing as the gent was very pressing, and him a detective, too."

"Oh!" said Jimmy, remembering the podgy gentleman. "How do you know he was a detective, Tuppy?"

"Wasn't it in print on the card?" grinned Tupper. "'Mr. Brown, Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard.' That there means a detective, don't it?"

"Oh!"

"And the 'Ead was waxy!" grinned Tupper. "Oh, what a waxy!"

And Tupper went his way to the regions below, evidently with the intention of confiding to his friends there what a "was" the Head was in.

Jimmy Silver and Newcome proceeded to the Head's study, and Jimmy tapped, receiving a very sharp "Come in!" in response.

He opened the door a little timidly.

When the Head was in a "wax," it was always advisable to give him as wide a berth as possible, but in this case Jimmy Silver had no choice, as he had the captain's message to deliver.

The podgy gentleman was in the study, and his shifty eyes rested on the junior as the Head glanced sharply at Jimmy Silver.

"Well?" rapped Dr. Chisholm.

Jimmy delivered Captain Langton's message about lunch.

"Very well!"

And Jimmy retired from the study, glad to go.

Dr. Chisholm's face was set, and it was only too evident that Tupper was right about the reverend gentleman being "in a wax."

Jimmy and Newcome walked out into the quadrangle, where they discussed, for the fiftieth time, the mystery that puzzled and worried them, without coming any nearer a solution.

Lovell and Raby had disappeared from human ken as completely as if they had melted into thin air, and their chums were utterly baffled and mystified.

CHAPTER 15.

Wanted!

MR. BROWN'S shifty eyes stole back to the Head as the door closed after Jimmy Silver.

The Head was very calm and self-restrained, but the "wax" was quite apparent to the podgy gentleman's shifty eyes.

"Now, sir, you were saying——" said the Head abruptly.

"Sorry to be taking up your time like this—very!" said Mr. Brown cheerfully.

"Duty, sir! If you can give me any information——"

"If I can give you any information to assist you in vindicating the law, it is my duty to do so however unpleasant it may be," said Dr. Chisholm. "For that purpose, my time is at your disposal. I only beg you to be as brief as possible."

"Quite so, sir! To come to the point, there was a lad named Baumann at this school some years back."

"That is so."

"Not a lad of good character, I understand?"

"A lad of very bad character, sir," said the Head sharply. "He was compelled to leave Rookwood when his character became known to me. In short, he was expelled from the school for gambling and theft."

"Then I take it that he has never visited the school since?"

"Certainly not!"

"No old friends here, I instance——"

"Most decidedly not."

"Not to your knowledge, of course, sir," said Mr. Brown. "Quite so! You cannot tell me, therefore, where to put my finger on Mr. Baumann?"

"I have not the faintest knowledge of his movements since he left Rookwood more than fifteen years ago. I heard something to the effect that he had gone to the bad, but I never knew the facts."

"The facts are simple enough, sir," said Mr. Brown. "Baumann did go to the bad—he became a hanger-on at races, a tout and welsher, and after that he served a sentence for forgery, and after that, sir, a sentence for manufacturing counterfeit banknotes."

The Head shuddered.

It was bitter enough to him to learn that a fellow who had once been at

Rookwood School had had such a record in later life.

"This is news to me, Mr. Brown," he said in a low voice. "I am shocked—very much shocked! However, I do not see——"

"Mr. Baumann had served his second sentence when the war broke out," said Mr. Brown. "He came very near serving another over a matter of trading with the enemy, though perhaps he did not regard the Germans as enemies, being of German descent himself. But he was still a free man when conscription was instituted, and he was taken into the Army."

"Hardly a profitable transaction for the Army, I should think," said the Head dryly.

"Quite so!" assented Mr. Brown. "His military record was a bad one. His earliest exploit was to steal an officer's cheque-book, and pass false cheques upon tradespeople. He was at the Front when that was discovered, and he would have been dealt with in the usual way, but in an attack during the Somme fighting he was wounded. From that time it was not easy to trace him, but I have ascertained that he was sent home with a batch of wounded, put in hospital, and deserted from there. That is Mr. Baumann's record, sir."

"A disgraceful record!" said the Head.

"Very!" assented Mr. Brown.

"Still, I do not quite see your object——"

"I will explain, sir. Although Baumann has not been heard of since, his work has been heard of. I have mentioned that he was sentenced once for counterfeiting banknotes. Lately, sir, there has been a flood of unnumbered paper money—banknotes and currency notes—and experts have recognized the undoubted hand of Mr. Baumann. He is at work again. Where, is a mystery; but he is at work, and turning out hundreds of pounds in excellent forgeries, which pass muster almost everywhere."

"Shocking! But——"

"I have twice had the pleasure of arresting Mr. Baumann," resumed the podgy gentleman. "I am looking forward to that pleasure a third time. In short, I am on the case, sir. That is why I am here."

Dr. Chisholm raised his eyebrows.

"Surely, Mr. Brown, you have no expectation whatever of finding that this

unmitigated rascal has kept up his connection with his old school?" he exclaimed. "Really, sir—"

"Not at all; but in the absence of any clue, a man must not neglect the slightest chances, sir. Baumann certainly was here in his schooldays, and he must have acquaintances among Rookwood men of his time. My object is to inquire whether you, sir, have heard anything of the man."

"Nothing whatever."

"Whether he has been seen in this neighbourhood—"

"I am certain that he has not."

"And whether you can give me the names of some Rookwood men of his time, who may possibly know something of his later movements."

"I fear that I can give you no assistance there, sir."

Mr. Brown coughed.

It was plain to see that the Head was shocked and annoyed by the whole story, and only wished to hear the last of Mr. Baumann, and to see the last of Mr. Brown himself at the earliest possible moment.

Mr. Brown could understand that perfectly, but he had no intention of gratifying the Head on that point. Business came first.

"Quite so, sir," said Mr. Brown. "But a singular circumstance is, that the man has certainly been in this direction."

"Is it possible?"

"Banknotes and currency notes of the undoubted Baumann brand have been passed in certain places during the last week," said Mr. Brown calmly, "all at a distance from Rookwood. But—here is the singular circumstance—they have been traced in towns lying, as it were, in a circle round the school. The nearest is Lantham, in the west—ten or twelve miles away, I think."

"That is hardly sufficient to connect the rascal with Rookwood in any way."

"Quite so; but the notes have been traced to a town fifteen miles east—and, again, in distant towns north and south," said Mr. Brown. "The inference is that the man is working from some centre, and goes as far as possible afield to pass the products of his secret press; a very natural proceeding—very! The singular circumstance is that, tracing his movements on the map by means of the discovered counterfeits,

I find that the centre of his field of operations is Rookwood School."

"Bless my soul!"

"Not this building precisely, of course," said Mr. Brown, with an agreeable smile. "I mean, of course, this vicinity. Judging by the distribution of counterfeit notes within the past week, the rascal certainly has his headquarters within easy distance of this school—his old school, sir. That fact, taken in connection with the fact that he was formerly at Rookwood, has brought me here. He must be known by sight to several persons, at least here, and he may have been seen."

"I have heard nothing of it," said the Head, looking very distressed. "If he dared to present himself here I should, of course, immediately hand him over to the police."

"Naturally. But, under the circumstances, my work will naturally lie in this neighbourhood," said Mr. Brown. "I trust that you have no objection to my looking about me here—that you will, in fact, allow me the freedom of the place."

Dr. Chisholm pursed his lips.

"You will please yourself," he said. "It appears to me useless to look about you here, but you will do your duty. I am aware that you have the power to insist—"

"Oh, sir!" murmured Mr. Brown deprecatingly.

"In any case, I should certainly not place any impediment in your way. I will give instructions for you to come and go as you please."

"Thank you very much, sir."

"I have left the Sixth Form to see you."

"I will detain you no longer, sir," said Mr. Brown, rising, and taking his bowler hat. "I am very much obliged to you—very!"

And the podgy gentleman cheerfully took his departure, leaving the Head biting his lip.

Far with all Mr. Brown's politeness, it was quite clear to the Head that he fully expected to pick up some clue to the man he was seeking near Rookwood School, if not in the school itself.

Dr. Chisholm was very thoughtful as he returned to the Form-room, and the Sixth Form of Rookwood had the pleasure that morning of discovering for themselves that their headmaster was in a "wax."

CHAPTER 17.

Mr. Brown is Busy!

"HALLO, there's that beggar Brown!" exclaimed Newcome suddenly. "He's still here."

After leaving the two chums had walked into Little Quad, feeling rather "down" and not in a humour for the company of the other fellows.

In Little Quad they sighted the podgy gentleman in tweeds, with his bowler hat pushed back on his bullet head, and his big walking-stick under his arm.

Mr. Brown was strolling round, his shifty little eyes very bright, apparently taking stock of his surroundings.

He smiled and nodded as he saw the juniors, and came towards them.

"Splendid old place, young gentleman!" he said. "Quite a treat for me to be permitted to inspect such an historic place! I've been enjoying a little conversation with the school sergeant. Fine old specimen of the British soldier—what? And he remembers my old friend Baumann, who was here years before your time—long ago, very. Knew his photograph at once. Fine old character!"

"So you've been pumping the sergeant, as you were pumping me!" said Jimmy Silver deliberately.

Mr. Brown started.

"Pip-pip-pumping!" he stammered.

"Yes. I don't know whether it's struck you, Mr. Brown, that anybody could see a mile off that you are a detective!" said Jimmy.

Mr. Brown stood quite still, blinking at him.

"You—you think—" he mumbled.

"I don't think—I know! Your card was seen, for one thing. And anybody could see it too!" said Jimmy coolly. "Anybody could see that you belonged in the police, Mr. Brown. You've got it all over you!"

"Well, my word!" said Mr. Brown, evidently taken aback.

The two juniors walked on, grinning; Jimmy feeling that he had repaid Mr. Brown for his attempt at pumping.

The podgy gentleman blinked after them for a moment or two, and then hurried to "crack" them.

Very sharp of you, young gentleman—" said Mr. Brown amiably. "The end of the matter is, it's not a secret, my

young friend, and I never had any idea of concealing the fact that I belong to the police. As you are so sharp, you have no doubt guessed that I want to find Mr. Baumann for professional reasons."

"Naturally!"

"You don't happen to know anything that would be of any use to me?" said Mr. Brown persuasively.

"I don't know that I should tell you if I did," said Jimmy Silver coolly. "It's not my business to act the informer. But I don't know anything about Baumann, and that's the fact. I don't believe he's ever been to Rookwood since he left over fifteen years ago."

"Nobody here who remembers him, excepting the masters and the school sergeant," murmured Mr. Brown.

"Captain Langton does," said Newcome. "Baumann shut him up in the abbey vaults once, when they were boys here together."

"Captain Langton!" repeated the detective. "A visitor to the school?"

"Old soldier, disabled!" said Newcome. "He's come here as football coach. He lost his arm in the war."

"Poor gentleman!" said Mr. Brown. "Splendid man, though! Splendid! And he knew Master Baumann when he was here. Friend of his, perhaps?"

"No fear!" said Jimmy Silver, smiling. "They were study-mates, but not friends. Baumann was a bad lot, and Langton is one of the best."

"Yes, he was a bad lot," said Mr. Brown, shaking his head. "I learn that he used to break bounds here at night and consort with low characters. A bad lot, very!"

Mr. Brown had evidently pumped Sergeant Kettle to some effect.

"And he used to get in and out of the school in a very cunning way," went on Mr. Brown. "Nobody quite knew how he did it, and it was never found out. Mr. Kettle says. Very extraordinary—very! And he shut up a boy in the vaults, did he? What vaults?"

"They're under the old abbey, in the school grounds."

"I wonder whether you young gentlemen would care to show them to an interested stranger?" said Mr. Brown, with a smile. "I should take it as an act of kindness."

"Out of bounds for us."



To the astonishment of the juniors the padgy gentleman whipped out a photograph from his pocket and held it up for them to see, his shifty eyes watching their faces keenly the while. Jimmy Silver and Newcome looked at the photograph. It was that of a man about thirty-five with a somewhat heavy face, and rather unprepossessing features. (See page 27.)

"But I have your headmaster's leave to go where I like. With me—"

"Oh, all right!" said Jimmy Silver. He did not care whether he showed the stranger round or not; but time was hanging heavy on his hands, and he assented. "You'll want a lantern."

"I have a little pocket-lamp," smiled Mr. Brown.

"That will do, then. This way!"

Jimmy and Newcome led the way to the old abbey, their companion chatting all the time with inexhaustible cheerfulness.

"You'll have to ask the porter for the key," said Newcome. "The vaults are kept locked."

Mr. Brown stopped at Mack's lodge, and the porter, who had received his instructions from the Head, handed him the key without question, but with a very curious look.

A few minutes more, and the door of the abbey vaults was unlocked, and Mr. Brown entered, flash-lamp in hand, followed by the juniors.

Mr. Brown's curiosity and interest were unlimited.

He explored the long series of vaults, and went back to the School House.

After dinner, curious to see whether Mr. Brown was still exploring, they visited the abbey ruins; but the door at the bottom of the steps was locked.

"He's gone!" said Newcome.

The two juniors sauntered away, and near the gates old Mack called to them.

"Is the gentleman done with that there key?" he demanded. "I've got the 'Ead's orders to be careful with that there key."

"Hasn't he given it to you back?" asked Jimmy, in surprise.

"I ain't seen him."

"Well the vaults are locked up," said Jimmy Silver. "He must have gone off with the key in his pocket."

"Careless man!" said old Mack emphatically.

And, having delivered that opinion of the gentleman from Scotland Yard, old Mack retired, grunting, to his lodge.

Mr. Brown, apparently, had gone out, as he was not seen about Roskwood School that afternoon.

It was clear on locking-up time when he tapped at the door of old Mack's lodge, and the porter opened it early.

Mr. Brown held out the key of the vaults with an apologetic look.

"Walked off with it in my pocket," said Mr. Brown. "Careless of me—very! But here it is, Mr. Mack, and thanks to you!"

"Lucky as you 'aven't lost it!" said Mack, with a grunt. "I've 'ad trouble enough with that key, what with the young gits borryin' of it without asking leave, to risk their blessed necks exploring the vaults, and so forth. And if a man asks for that key, he's bound to carry it off in his pocket and forget it, and make a man worrit! They can't ever remember to bring it back!"

Mack was crusty; but Mr. Brown only smiled in a genial way.

"They!" he repeated. "You don't mean that some other visitor borrowed your key, Mr. Mack, and forgot to bring it back? That would be a queer coincidence!"

"Well, it was so!" snapped Mack. "Twice it's 'appened, and I 'ope that no body won't want that blessed key any more!"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Brown, his shifty eyes brighter than ever. "What a very curious coincidence, Mr. Mack—very!"

Grunt!

"You don't remember the other man who borrowed the key, did you say?"

Mack stared.

"Course I didn't say anything of the kind!" he answered. "I s'pose I remember, when it only 'appened last week."

"I see! You lent it to a friend with a taste for exploration."

"I lent it to a gentleman what's staying 'ere," grunted Mack. "And a very nice gentleman, too, if you ask me. I ain't grumblin', am I?"

"Why, certainly not! The Head has several visitors staying here now, I believe."

"Not that I knows an," answered Mack. "There ain't nobody but Captain Langton, that I'm aware of."

"Oh, I see! A splendid man, sir, Captain Langton!" said Mr. Brown. "Disabled in his country's service—an old Roob-wooder, too! Very natural for him to borrow your key, and revisit some of his boyhood's haunts—very!"

"Well I ain't much of a taste for slugs and spiders myself," said old Mack.

"And the captain forgot to return you the key, just as I did!" smiled Mr. Brown.

"Quite a coincidence. Shell-shock, perhaps; too memory."

"Nothing of the sort. He just forgot, same as you did. Now, if you're not wanting anything else, sir, I'll just shut them gates."

"Quite so—quite so! Good-evening, Mr Mack!"

Mr. Brown, with his stick under his arm, walked away in the gathering dusk, and the gates clanged behind him.

The shiny eyes were glittering.

His hand slid into his pocket and felt a key there—a key that was an exact reproduction of the key he had "forgotten" to return to Mr. Mack before he went out, and which Mr. Brown had had made at a locksmith's that afternoon at Lantham.

It was for that purpose that he had "forgotten" to return the vault key, though old Mack was far from suspecting it.

"Curious!" murmured Mr. Brown, as he walked on in the dusk. "Odd—very! Used to know Baumann—study-mates—him! Forgot to return the key, just as I did. For the same reason? I wonder!"

Mr. Brown was deep in thought as he walked to his inn at Coombe.

And it was his intention, the next day, to make the acquaintance of Captain Langton at Rookwood.

CHAPTER 18.

Jimmy Silver's Suggestion!

JIMMY SILVER and Newcome had gone into the Form-room with the rest of the Fourth that afternoon.

They did their best there; and Mr. Bootles, who understood their worried frame of mind, was very easy with them.

That day there had been telegraphing to and fro between Rookwood School and Raby's home, the missing junior's father being very anxious about his son, but unable to come to the school, being detained by important work.

But he could have done nothing if he had come.

The Head's belief was that Raby had left Rookwood to join Lovell, the two having planned the escapade between them; and the Head's feelings on the subject were of worry and anger.

There seemed no other explanation of the absence of the two juniors.

He clung to his belief that there had been foul play; but when he tried to think out what it had been, and how, he was completely floored.

The chums were glad when lessons were over, and after tea they ventured to call upon Captain Langton again, in the Oak Room.

He seemed pleased to see the juniors.

"You—you haven't thought of—of anything, sir?" said Jimmy, who had been nourishing a vague hope that the captain might have "thought it out," as he had promised, with some result.

"I'm afraid not," said Captain Langton.

"He would have told us, at least, sir," said Newcome, with conviction.

"I mentioned this to the Head, and he thought it probable," remarked the captain. "It is merely an idea, of course. You see, there is no possibility of foul play in the matter, as it seems to me."

"I feel sure of it, sir," said Jimmy Silver. "I'll find out yet somehow. I was going to ask your advice—"

"Go ahead, my boy!"

"There is a detective chap hanging around Rookwood," said Jimmy. "I was wondering whether I could speak to him about it."

The captain's scarred face was very grave.

"I should advise not," he said. "You see, your headmaster is convinced that foul play is impossible—and I must say I agree with him. If he thought so far a moment he would, of course, call in the police. As he has not done so, you could scarcely do so on your own responsibility."

"No, I—I suppose not," said Jimmy reluctantly.

His face fell. He had felt encouraged at the idea of getting the opinion of a professional detective.

But evidently the captain was right. Dr. Chisholm certainly would have disapproved very strongly of the juniors taking measures he had not seen fit to take himself.

"I advised you before," went on the captain, "not to mention in the school your theory of foul play. It would make the Head very angry."

"We haven't spoken of it among the fellows, sir."

"That is right! It could do no good, and might do harm. We can work on that theory ourselves, without confiding it to the others."

The two juniors nodded, feeling rather flattered at being put, in this way, on a footing of equality with the captain.

Captain Langton asked a few careless questions regarding Mr. Brown, and the juniors told him all they knew of that gentleman, and rose to go.

Jimmy Silver's glance was wandering round the old, dark, oak-panelled walls of the room, and the captain noted it.

His eyes rested very sharply on Jimmy's face.

"What are you thinking of now, Silver?" he asked.

Jimmy coloured.

"Only—only a thought that came into my head!" he said, stammering. "It—it's rot, of course."

"But what was it?" smiled the captain.

"Well, we know that Lovell got as far as this room that night," said Jimmy. "I—I was wondering if—it—"

"Well, it—"

"There's an old story that there's a secret passage in the School House running from the house to the abbey vaults," said Jimmy Silver, his flush deepening, for he realised what a wild idea it was that had come into his head. "I—I was wondering—whether—if Lovell had foul play, it must have been somebody—some stranger—who collared him. How could he have got in?"

"The answer to that, I'm afraid, is that nobody got in," said the captain, smiling.

"Yes, but—but if somebody knew the secret passage—"

"Which is not even known to exist for certain?"

"Well, yes," Jimmy was crimson under the captain's amused smile. "But suppose it existed—suppose it was in this very room; and Lovell got as far as this, we know—"

Captain Langton burst into a hearty laugh, and Jimmy broke off confused.

"I—I know it sounds rail!" he confessed.

"My dear lad, you are letting worry prey on your mind," said the captain kindly. "But I will tell you what. Come up here this evening, and we will make a complete examination of the room together. Who knows but what those old oak panels may cover up some secret!" He smiled. "It will amuse me for the evening, at all events. Don't mention it to anyone, however, or I am afraid we

shall be thought three—ahem!—to be plain—three silly asses!"

"You're very good, sir," said Jimmy gratefully. "It's a shame to bother you and take up your time like this; but you're so kind—"

"Not at all, my dear boy. Goodness knows I would do anything in my power," said the captain. "Now I must get ready to dine with the Head, and after that I will come back here. If you come here, say, at nine—"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"But remember it's our little secret!" said Captain Langton, laughing.

"Yes, of course, sir!"

Jimmy Silver and Newcome left the Oak Room.

Newcome grinned a little as they made their way to the end study in the Fourth.

"You are piling it on a bit, Jimmy," he said. "The captain looked as if he thought you were a bit barmy."

"Well, I knew the idea's rot," said Jimmy. "But—but, you see, there simply isn't anything to take hold of; and there's a millionth part of a chance—"

"It's jolly good of the captain to take it seriously," said Newcome. "He's a good-natured chap. Let's get our prep done early."

And the two juniors sat down to prep in the end study.

CHAPTER 19.

The Mystery Deepens!

"FAG!" Cartlow of the Sixth was calling, in a very unpleasant tone of voice.

Jimmy Silver and Arthur Newcome were about to turn into the corridor leading to the Oak Room when the prefect spotted them.

"Back up!" whispered Jimmy.

The Fourth-Formers had no desire to tag for the bully of the Sixth just then.

But Cartlow had seen them, and called to Jimmy to stop.

"Silver! Stop at once! You heard call, you young rascal!"

Cartlow was striding after them, the two juniors stopped.

"Look here, Cartlow, we can't now!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver irritably. "You can find somebody else!"

Carthew gave him a scowl.

"I've found you!" he answered. "Somebody has been playing tricks in my study. You are guilty, likely as not!"

"I've not been there!" growled Jimmy.

"I've got something else to think of."

"Well, my armchair's full of gum, and it's got to be cleaned!" said Carthew.

"Out along to my study, Silver!"

"Look here—"

"Are you going?" inquired Carthew unpleasantly. He had an ashplant under his arm, and he let it slide down into his hand.

Jimmy set his lips.

It was impossible to refuse to obey the prefect, especially when the prefect was within reach, and Jimmy made up his mind to the inevitable.

"Cut along, Newcome!" he whispered. "Tell the captain I'm kept away, and I'll come on and join you as soon as I can."

"Right-ho!"

"What are you whispering about?" demanded Carthew, in his most bullying tone. "If you don't get a move on, Jimmy Silver, I'll help you along!"

"I'm coming!" growled Jimmy.

"You'd better!"

Jimmy Silver accompanied Carthew to his study, leaving Newcome to make his way alone to the Oak Room.

Carthew grinned as he shepherded in the reluctant junior, and turned on the light.

"Now wipe it!" he said. If you haven't got it done in a quarter of an hour, look out!"

"Be-er!" was Jimmy's reply, not very intelligible, but expressive of the state of his feelings.

He set to work on the gummy armchair, a piece of handiwork that was due to the misplaced humour of Flynn of the Fourth.

Carthew sat on the corner of the table watching him, with his ashplant ready in case it should be wanted.

But Jimmy worked hard at the cleaning process.

He was anxious to get it finished, and to join Newcome with the captain in the Oak Room.

The armchair was cleaned at last, and Jimmy Silver was warm and a little breathless, and considerably gummy himself.

"That's better!" said Carthew approvingly. "You'll think twice before you gum my armchair again, my pippin! You can get out."

Jimmy Silver got out gladly enough.

He hurried down the passage to the staircase, to go upstairs and join his chum, but he paused as he saw Captain Lauriston standing in the lower hall in conversation with Mr. Bootles.

Evidently the captain was not in the room.

David Langton, a school boy, and gave the junior a warning look.

"You did not get away from the quarters, my boy?" he said.

"I was kept in the study by the prefect."

"Did you?" said the captain, looking at him.

He made a sign to the junior to follow him.

Mr. Bootles, who was standing near the door, and the captain and the junior.

Jimmy Silver, after waiting for two or three minutes, and then he went to the Oak Room to find Newcome.

To his surprise the room was in darkness when he opened the door.

"You here, Newcome?" he called out.

There was no reply from the shadowed room.

It was unlikely that Newcome would be there in the dark, and Jimmy Silver turned away, supposing that his chum had got tired of waiting for the captain to come up.

As the captain might come up any minute now, however, he hurried to the end study, expecting to find Newcome there.

The end study was dark and empty, however, and Jimmy Silver went down to the Common-room.

He glanced over the crowd of fellows there, but Arthur Newcome was not among them.

"Any of you fellows seen Newcome?" he called out.

"He was with us in your study twenty minutes ago," said Mornington. "Haven't seen him since."

There was a squeak from Tommy Muffin.

"Newcome! I say, Silver, has Newcome bolted, too?"

Jimmy Silver gave a violent start.

The blood rushed to his heart, and his face became so white that two or three fellows stepped towards him in alarm.

For the first time it came into Jimmy Silver's mind that something had happened to Newcome.

The bare thought of it that his chum had gone the mysterious way of the others—that some unknown and unseen hand had clutched him from all who knew him—struck Jimmy like a blow.

Erroll caught his arm.

"Jimmy! Are you ill?" he exclaimed.

"What's the matter?"

Jimmy panted.

"Newcome! I—I left him when Carthew called me! I—I haven't seen him since! Where is he? Where's Newcome?"

"Good heavens!" muttered Mornington. "You don't mean to say—"

"He must be somewhere about!" exclaimed Oswald. "Let's look for the chap! Back up, Jimmy, old man!"

There was a rush of the juniors from the Common-room.

The Fourth-Form studies were visited at once, and then the other junior studies.

Other rooms, passages, every recess and cranny, was searched for Arthur Newcome, but searched in vain.

As the discovery was made, beyond doubt, that Newcome was missing, there was a buzz of excitement among the juniors. It spread from the Fourth to the Shell and the Third.

Two or three fellows cut over to Mr. Manders' house, and came back to report that Newcome had not been seen on the Modern side that evening.

He was not there; he was not in the School House; he was not in the quad.

Where was he?

Jimmy Silver pressed his hands to his throbbing temples and groaned aloud. Where was Newcome? Where were his other chums? What horrible thing had happened to them?

A hand fell on his shoulder.

"Silver!"

It was Mr. Beedles.

Jimmy looked up with a haggard face, from which every vestige of colour had fled.

"Silver! What has happened? What is all this noise and excitement?"

"Newcome!" groaned Jimmy Silver.

"Has something happened to Newcome?"

"He—he's missing, sir!"

"What?"

"Missing!" Jimmy Silver's voice broke. "He's gone—gone like the others. Newcome's disappeared, sir!"

"Bless my soul!" said the astounded Mr. Beedles. "Is—is it possible! You—you have looked for him—?"

"We've searched everywhere, sir!" said Conroy.

"He's gone!" said Mornington in a hushed voice.

Jimmy Silver choked back a sob.

"Come with me to the Head, Silver," said Mr. Beedles. "This is a matter for the police, I think. Come with me!"

Jimmy Silver followed him, dumb with misery.

The juniors were left in a buzz of amazement and alarm, some of the fellows still keeping up the search for the missing junior.

But search was vain. As Lovell had vanished, as Raby had vanished, so Arthur Newcome had vanished from the eyes of those that knew him.

CHAPTER 20.

Mr. Brown Meets the Captain

DR. CHISHOLM, the Head of Rookwood School, frowned slightly at Mr. Brown, of Scotland Yard, who was shown into his study.

Mr. Brown was not a person grata there. Every reminder of Baumann, who had brought disgrace on his old school, was intensely annoying to Dr. Chisholm, who had the honour and good name of Rookwood very much at heart.

The Head had to admit that Mr. Brown was doing his duty, but that did not make his presence any the more welcome.

Mr. Brown saluted the Head civilly, apparently unaware of the contraction of the old gentleman's brows.

"You must excuse me for troubling you once more, Dr. Chisholm," said the podgy gentleman, as he took the seat the Head indicated by a gesture.

"Not at all, if your duty calls you here!"

said the Head tartly. "Why, what is it now? You have already informed me of your object here. I am quite assured that you have found no trace whatever of Baumann in connection with this school. It is preposterous to imagine that anyone here could have the local knowledge of such a person."

"Quite so, quite so!" said Mr. Brown soothingly. "I have had some talk, at different times, with some of the boys of this school while staying in the neighbourhood. I have also talked with the local police-inspector. It appears that three boys have disappeared from Rookwood."

"I must remark, Mr. Brown, that that matter does not come within your province."

Mr. Brown did not appear to be affected by that very plain snub.

"Quite so," he said. "It is, however, a very remarkable occurrence."

"A very annoying occurrence!" said the Head. "The three juniors have run away from the school, and have been so unfeeling as to fail to notify even their parents of their whereabouts."

"You do not suspect foul play?"

"Certainly not!"

Mr. Brown pursed his plump lips.

"Really, sir," exclaimed the Head, in deep annoyance, "I trust you do not assume any connection between the disappearance of these juniors and the presence in the vicinity of the man you are in search of?"

"It is at least singular that their disappearance should have taken place at this precise time, Dr. Chisholm."

"Doubtless they will be heard of soon."

"But if not—"

"I am assured of it!" said the Head in a tone of finality.

There was a pause.

"If you have any business with me, Mr. Brown—"

"Certainly, sir! To come to the point, I desire to call upon Captain Langton, who, I understand, is engaged as football coach at this school."

"You are naturally at liberty to do so at any time you please. There is no necessity whatever for consulting me on the matter."

"Unfortunately, Captain Langton has declined to see me, on the plea of ill-health."

"I am aware that the captain is troubled with his old wounds," said the Head. "He

has asked to be excused from his duties for some days. If he is too unwell to see you, Mr. Brown, I cannot help you."

"It is very important for me to see him, however."

"Indeed!"

"It appears," explained Mr. Brown, "that Captain Langton, when at Rookwood, was the study-mate of Baumann, who on one occasion shut him up in the old abbey vaults. I should like to consult with him."

"It is utterly impossible that he can know anything of Baumann."

"Nevertheless, I should like to speak with him; and perhaps a word from you, sir, would induce him to grant me a few minutes," said the detective.

Dr. Chisholm controlled his impatience. "I will send him a message, asking him whether he feels well enough to-day to receive you," he said.

"Thank you; that is what I should like."

Dr. Chisholm touched the bell, wrote a short note, and handed it to Tupper, the page, when he came in.

There was a grim silence in the Head's study while Tupper was gone with the note.

The page came back at last.

"Captain Langton will be glad to see Mr. Brown in his room, if the gentleman will step there," was the message brought by Tupper.

Mr. Brown rose.

"Kindly show this gentleman to Captain Langton's room, Tupper."

The detective bowed to the Head and followed Tupper.

Dr. Chisholm was left in a mood of annoyed thoughtfulness.

The detective's presence near the school troubled him and annoyed him, and he was a little surprised at Basil Langton's refusal to see the man.

The captain was supposed to be troubled with his old wound, but he was well enough to lunch and dine with the Head and to walk in the garden, so there hardly seemed sufficient reason to refuse to see Mr. Brown on the score of ill-health.

The Head could not help suspecting that Langton's motive had rather been a desire to avoid a disagreeable interview, which he felt that he could avoid no longer when the message came from the Head personally.

Mr. Brown followed Tupper to the captain's quarters, and was shown into the

Oak Room, a handsome old panelled room in the oldest part of Rookwood, which was Langton's sitting-room.

Captain Langton was seated at a table.

He rose politely as the detective entered.

Mr. Brown's light, shifty eyes scanned his face, deeply scarred by wounds, which gave the captain a rather forbidding expression.

"Please sit down, Mr. Brown," said the captain. "I am sorry I have not been able to see you before; but, to be quite candid, I do not quite see why you wished to call upon me."

"You have doubtless heard from Dr. Chisholm of my mission here, Captain Langton?"

"The Head has mentioned the matter to me."

"I am in search of Baumann, the forger and coiners, a former Rookwood boy," said Mr. Brown. "I have arrested him twice in the course of his criminal career, and hope to do so a third time."

"I certainly wish you every success. The man appears to be a thorough rascal, and has brought disgrace on his old school," said the captain.

"You know him very well when you were a boy, I believe?"

"Very well indeed; he was my study-mate."

"And friend?"

"Not at all. I disliked the fellow—most Rookwooders did, I believe. He was a rascal even in those days."

"After leaving Rookwood, doubtless you met him once or twice?"

"Never, sir."

"You were in the Leamshire Regiment during the War, I believe, Captain Langton?"

"Precisely."

"Baumann was taken under the Military Service Act, and served in the Leamshires. He was shot, I understand, in leaving the lines in the direction of the German trenches, very probably with the intention of deserting. You did not hear of this while you were in the War?"

"I do not remember to have done so."

"Then you did not come in contact with the man in Flanders?"

"Not to my recollection."

"Or in England since?"

"No."

"Then you can give me no information whatever respecting the man?"

"I am sorry, no. I should be glad to do so if it were in my power."

"Then I can only apologise for having troubled you," said Mr. Brown, rising with a disappointed look.

"Not at all."

Mr. Brown took his leave, with a thoughtful wrinkle in his brow.

Captain Langton, left alone, breathed hard, a strange and harassed expression on his scarred face.

He rose, and crossed to a cabinet, from which he took a bottle and a glass, and half filled the glass with brandy, which he drank almost at a draught.

Apparently the captain felt the need of a powerful pick-me-up after his interview with the gentleman from Scotland Yard.

CHAPTER 21.

Jimmy Silver Makes up His Mind:

"HALLO! The captain's about again!" remarked Mornington.

Jimmy Silver glanced round.

Jimmy was in the squad with Eryell and Mornington, after lessons, when Captain Langton was seen coming down from the house towards the gates.

He gave the juniors a kindly nod as he passed, and they capped him.

The captain disappeared out of the gates. Mornington looked rather grim.

"What do you think of that chap, Jimmy?" he asked suddenly.

"Blest if I quite know," said Jimmy Silver. "I didn't like him at first, and Lovell was down on him. Afterwards he was so kind in helping me search for Lovell; but—"

"The man's supposed to be a footer coach, but he can't play footer! Then look what a fury he was in that day he met us in the vaults!" said Mornington. "I may as well say out plain that I don't like him and don't trust him."

Jimmy Silver was silent.

A distrust of the captain was growing in his own breast, he hardly knew why.

There were many little circumstances that tended to shake his faith in Basil Langton.

The rage he had shown in the abbey vaults was one.

And there were other things—trifles, perhaps; but they had caused a vague and haunting suspicion to grow up in Jimmy

mind—a strange suspicion that he hardly acknowledged to himself.

Lovell had disliked the captain, and he had disappeared at night, when he had come down to the captain's room with a can of ink, to play a trick on the way he disliked.

Lovell's chums had traced him to the door of the Oak Room, but beyond that point there was no trace.

Ruby had been the second to disappear, and he had last been heard of near the Oak Room.

Then had come Newcome's disappearance, and the last person who had spoken to him was Captain Langton.

The captain had shown Jimmy every sympathy, had discussed the mysterious affair with him, and lent his help in every way.

But he had made Jimmy promise not to mention his suspicion of kidnapping in the school, persuading him that they would work together, and that it was better not to talk.

Jimmy had never been satisfied as to the reason for so much secrecy, but he had submitted to the captain's judgment.

More and more it was borne in upon his mind that it was at the Oak Room, or near it, that his chums had mysteriously vanished, one by one, and within a few days of the captain's coming to Rookwood.

The suspicion, half formed in his mind, seemed absurd, ridiculous; but since he had formed a more correct opinion of the captain's true character, it was growing.

Yet what possible motive could Captain Langton have for hurting any junior school-boy of Rookwood?

That was an unanswerable question; but, then, the whole affair was utterly mysterious and inexplicable.

Mornington looked at Jimmy's sombre face with a slight smile; the captain of the Fourth was plunged in a deep reverie, and had forgotten his companions.

"Penny for them!" said Morny suddenly.

Jimmy Silver started.

"What? Eh?" he ejaculated.

Mornington grinned.

"Working out something in maths in your head?" he asked.

"No! I was thinking——"

"About Lovell?"

"Yes."

"I was going to make a suggestion," said Mornington. "What about that man Brown, Jimmy?"

"Brown?" repeated Jimmy Silver.

"Yes! he's a detective, and he's playing the fool round here at present, looking for a man who's probably a hundred miles away. But suppose you ask him about what's happened to Lovell and the rest. He might be interested in it, as a detective, and take the matter up."

"I—I thought of that."

"Well, why not speak to him? Easy enough to see him. And you didn't have a hand in bumping him over to-day, you know," added Morny, with a grin.

"I—I can't——"

"I don't see why not," said Erroll. "He's civil enough, and would give you a hearing. He might let in some light on the matter. I think it's a good idea of Morny's, Jimmy."

"The Head would be waxy. He's convinced that my pals have run away from school of their own accord."

"Needn't tell the Head," said Morny.

"No, but——"

"But what?" asked Mornington seriously. "Out with it! You've got some other reason."

"Well, I've agreed not to speak to Mr. Brown about it," confessed Jimmy, at last. "Captain Langton thought it inadvisable. But I think you're right, Morny; and I'm going to tell Langton that I've changed my mind."

"I don't see why Langton should care one way or the other," said Erroll, in surprise.

"He thought it would make the Head waxy."

"Pure kindness on his part!" said Mornington.

"I suppose so."

"Rate!" said Morny. "Look here, Jimmy. I don't trust Captain Langton. If it were possible to suspect him of having any reason for getting rid of the chaps, I should think he had a hand in it."

Jimmy started.

"You, too?" he exclaimed.

"Oh! So that idea's crossed your mind!" said Morny.

"It—it came into my head; but, of course, it's absurd," said Jimmy. "There were some things——"

"What things?"

"I—I undertook not to mention them," said Jimmy, colouring. "The captain thought it best. But I'm going to see him to-day, and tell him I'm going my own way to work; and then, if you fellows care to

hear, I'll tell you all I know, from beginning to end."

"I think that's a good idea," said Erroll. "Captain Langton seems too jolly fond of keeping secrets about nothing! If he could have any possible motive——" Erroll paused.

"But he hasn't," said Jimmy. "Why should he care whether Lovell was at Rookwood or anywhere else?"

"No; it's impossible, of course."

"There is another thing," said Mornington deliberately. "I'm jolly well going to keep an eye on you, Jimmy Silver! As I was saying to Kit before lessons, your three pals have disappeared one after another, and it may be you next!"

"Oh, rot, Morny!" said Jimmy Silver uneasily.

"Rot or not, we're going to keep a watch on you," said Morny. "If there's any funny game going on, it's up to us to keep our eyes open. I'll bet there's something jolly fishy about Langton, anyway."

Jimmy Silver walked away, his brows knitted in thought.

Impossible as it seemed that Langton could be in any way responsible for the disappearance of his chums, in the total absence of any motive, Jimmy could not drive the haunting uneasiness from his mind.

He had determined, at last, to tell the captain that he had decided to go his own way to work, and to take Morny and Erroll into his confidence, and then to seek the advice of Mr. Brown.

He felt that he was bound to tell the captain first, and so end the arrangement they had made.

After that, he would be free to do as he thought best.

The decision he had come to relieved Jimmy's mind a little, and he went down to Little Side to join in the football practice with a much more cheerful face than he had shown of late days.

CHAPTER 22. Startling News!

B UZZZZZZ!

Dr. Chisholm turned from his desk, and took up the telephone-receiver, as the bell buzzed in his study.

"Hallo—"

"Hallo?" A voice he did not know came over the wires. "Is that Rookwood School?"

"Yes; Dr. Chisholm is speaking."

"Oh! It is you, sir?"

"Yes. What is wanted?"

"Don't you know my voice, sir?"

"I do not recognise it," said the Head.

The voice on the wires was very faint, and it was scarcely possible to recognise the tones even if the Head had known them well.

"I've caught a bit of a cold, sir," went on the faint voice. "I'm Lovell of the Fourth, sir."

"What!"

The Head nearly dropped the receiver in his astonishment.

"Baby and Newcome are here with me, sir."

"Bless my soul!"

"I hope you will excuse us, sir, for having left Rookwood without permission."

"Where are you speaking from, Lovell?"

"Leitham, sir."

"You hear me, Lovell? You are to return to Rookwood at once! Do you hear me?" snapped the Head.

"We cannot, sir!" came back the faint voice. "I've rung you up, sir, so that you can tell our people that we are well. I'm afraid they have been anxious about us."

"They have been very anxious. Love and your conduct has been utterly unfeeling and reprehensible!"

"Oh, sir!"

"It has been utterly heartless. Love! You have been absent for days, and have not written a line. You are to return to school immediately. Do you hear?"

No reply, but a whirr on the telephone.

"Lovell!"

Silence!

"Lovell! Answer me!"

It was only too clear that the speaker at the other end had rung off, and the Head jammed the receiver on the bed with an angry frown.

He was glad that he had received communication.

It bore out what he had always believed was the explanation of the joint disappearance, and it relieved his mind.

But he was more angry with the juniors than before.

After a few minutes' reflection, he

up the receiver again, and called up the police-station at Lantham.

The inspector in charge listened to his explanation, and promised to do as he requested, which was to find three school-boys who had run away from Rookwood and were at large somewhere in the little country town.

Having taken that step, the Head had little doubt that he would see the three culprits brought back to Rookwood that evening; and he proceeded to despatch wires to their homes, assuring their parents of their safety.

Mr. Bootles, the master of the Fourth, was then summoned to the study, and informed of what had passed.

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Bootles. "It is as we supposed then, sir."

"There is no doubt about it," said the Head. "Kindly see that the school is informed, Mr. Bootles, so that all surmises upon the subject may be set at rest."

"Immediately, sir!"

Ten minutes later all Rookwood knew that Lovell & Co. had been heard from.

Tubby Muffin brought the news to the end study, where Jimmy Silver was sitting down to tea with Mornington and Erroll, who were a good deal in his study since the chums had gone.

Tubby's fat face was ablaze with excitement as he burst in.

"Jimmy!" he gasped.

"Hallo! How did you know there was a cake here?" asked Mornington.

Tubby Muffin disdained to reply to that question.

"Jimmy! They're found!" he spluttered.

"What?"

"Lovell — Ruby — Newcome — found!" trilled Tubby Muffin, greatly pleased at the sensation he was making in the end study.

Jimmy Silver bounded to his feet.

To Tubby's surprise and indignation, Jimmy seized him by one fat shoulder, and shook him forcibly.

"Now what do you mean, you fat duffer!" he exclaimed.

"Yaroooh!"

"Tell me what you mean, you fat duffer!" roared Jimmy Silver.

"Gooah! Stop sh-sh-shaking me!" begged Tubby. "How can I speak when you're shock-shock-shaking me! Yoooh!"

"Only one of Tubby's yams," growled Mornington.

"Tain't!" yelled Tubby breathlessly. "They're at Lantham—and Lovell's telephoned to the Head to tell his people—and they're going to be brought back to-night! Mr. Bootles says so—he's announced it! There!"

"My hat!" ejaculated Mornington.

Jimmy stood dumbfounded.

His vague suspicions crumbled away at that startling information.

"I—I can't believe it!" he stammered.

"It's official!" grinned Tubby. "Didn't I say so all along? I told you so, Jimmy. You can't deny that I told you so!"

"That's what makes it rather incredible," grinned Mornington.

"Rats!" snorted Tubby, and he rolled away to impart his sensational news to all the other fellows who had not yet heard it.

Jimmy Silver was left almost dumbfounded. If this was true— And could it be otherwise? He waited that evening in feverish anxiety.

That evening he had determined to see the captain and inform him of his intentions. But he was not thinking of the captain now.

After prep, Jimmy Silver hurried downstairs to learn whether there was anything new. But if Lovell & Co. were coming, they had not yet come.

And Jimmy, in his anxiety, made his way to the Head's study.

CHAPTER 22.

Black Suspicions!

MR. BOOTLES was leaving the Head's study as Jimmy Silver arrived there.

The Form-master looked troubled and puzzled. He stopped, and glanced inquiringly at the captain of the Fourth.

"What do you want here, Silver?" he asked.

"Is there any news, sir?"

"Only what has already been stated," said Mr. Bootles.

"But is it certain that my friends are at Lantham, sir?" asked Jimmy anxiously.

"Undoubtedly, since Lovell telephoned to Dr. Chisholm from that town, Silver."

"But, sir, by this time—"

"You have no cause for anxiety, Silver," said the master of the Fourth kindly. "It is certainly very singular that the boys have not been found. Inquiries have been made at Lantham by the police, at the Head's request, but they have just telephoned that no trace has yet been found of Lovell, Baby, or Newcome."

Jimmy breathed hard.

"Doubtless after telephoning to the Head, Lovell realised that he had given a clue to his whereabouts, and they left Lantham immediately, before they could be looked for there. You may set your mind at rest, Silver; there is no cause whatever for anxiety."

And Mr. Bootles, with a kind nod, rustled away down the corridor.

Jimmy remained where he was.

He had only half believed the startling news, and now, it appeared, Lovell & Co. had not been found at Lantham, after all.

His half belief was dissolved on the spot.

He summoned all his courage to beard the lion in his den, as it were, and knocked at the Head's door.

"Come in!"

Dr. Chisholm raised his eyebrows as the Fourth-Former entered.

Jimmy faltered a little as he approached his headmaster's writing-table. The doctor's look was not encouraging.

"Well, Silver?" said the Head coldly.

"I—I came here, sir, to—to ask you—"

"Kindly come to the point at once."

"About Lovell, sir," stammered Jimmy.

"They—they say that he telephoned from Lantham—"

"That is correct."

"But he hasn't been found there, after all, sir."

The Head compressed his lips, and his eyes had a steady look. Jimmy could see how bitterly angry he was.

"The boys seem to have quitted Lantham," said Dr. Chisholm. "That is all, Silver; there is no ground for anxiety. You may go."

"But, sir—but— Is it certain, sir, that it was Lovell telephoned to you?"

"What?"

Jimmy backed away a pace. But he stuck to his guns.

"Anybody could telephone, sir," he stammered. "Is it certain that it was Lovell who spoke to you?"

The Head's frown became almost terrifying.

Jimmy, in his worry and anxiety, was rather over-stepping the line; it was not for a junior to challenge his headmaster.

"I have already said that it was Lovell, Silver."

"But did you recognise his voice, sir?" persisted Jimmy, astonished at his own temerity, but keeping to the point.

"I did not recognise Lovell's voice, Silver, owing to the distance, but it was undoubtedly Lovell who was speaking to me. He gave his name."

"But, sir, if Lovell had been kidnapped—"

"What utter nonsense are you talking, Silver?"

"If he has been kidnapped, sir——"

"Silver, you appear to be taking leave of your senses! I forbid you to make such a childish and ridiculous suggestion! Leave my study!"

"But, sir——"

"Go!" thundered the Head.

There was nothing more for Jimmy Silver to say after that, and he retreated from the Head's study.

But there was a glint in his eyes, and his lips were set.

He had learned what he wished to learn.

Lovell's voice had not been recognised on the telephone, and there was no proof that it was Arthur Edward Lovell who had been speaking.

Dr. Chisholm's preconceived belief had been so firmly fixed in his mind that he had taken the matter for granted, and had no doubts; but Jimmy Silver was not in such an unsuspicious frame of mind.

Mornington and Erroll were waiting for him at the corner of the passage, and Jimmy stopped as he came up.

"No news?" asked Erroll.

Jimmy gritted his teeth.

"I've found out that the Head did not recognise Lovell's voice on the telephone," he answered. "He took it for granted that it was Lovell who was speaking."

"You don't think it was?"

"I know it was not!" said Jimmy, between his teeth. "I know that they never left Rookwood of their own accord without telling me a word. They wouldn't! I know it—I'm certain! They would have let me know, at least; they'd know how anxious I've been. It wasn't Lovell who telephoned. Lovell's not at liberty!"

Mornington whistled softly.

"You think——" he began.

"Suppose some villain has kidnapped them!" muttered Jimmy. "It's the only explanation. Well, then, it would pay him to make people believe they'd run away from school."

"Captain Langton seems to have been the first to suggest that!" said Valentine Mornington in a significant tone.

"I know!"

"And now this telephone message, supposed to come from Lovell, confirms it," said Mornington.

Jimmy gave him a startled look.

"And," continued Mornington quietly, in a low voice, "the telephone call comes when Captain Langton is out of gates."

"Morny!"

"The first time he's been out of gates since that detective fellow was hanging round the school. I saw him go!"

"Mornington!"

"And the Head didn't recognize the voice on the 'phone! I'd like to ask him whether it sounded anything like Langton's," said Mornington deliberately.

Jimmy Silver caught his breath.

"Morny!" he muttered. "There's no motive—no possible motive——"

"I know; that's what beats me! But if there were a motive——"

"But there isn't—there isn't!"

"Not so far as we can see," said Mornington evenly. "But there's no motive for anybody to have made away with the fellows, so far as we can see, and yet you believe they've been made away with."

Jimmy Silver was quite pale.

"It can't be!" he muttered. "I—I——" He clenched his hands. "But I'm going to find out! I'm going to speak to the detective to-morrow, and ask his advice—tell him all, and ask him what he thinks. I'm going to Captain Langton now to tell him what I'm going to do."

Jimmy Silver stood away.

His mind was made up.

Mornington glanced at his chums as the captain of the Fourth disappeared up the staircase.

"You remember our little scheme, Kit——"

"What do you mean, Morny?"

"Don't you remember we arranged to keep a watch on Jimmy Silver in case anything happened to him like his chums?"

Kit rolled smiled.

"Morny, old man, he's gone to see Captain Langton in the Oak Room. Nothing can happen to him there."

"I'm going to wait for him on the staircase," said Mornington calmly. "I've said that I'm going to keep him under my eye, and I'm going to do it, my infant. You please yourself."

"I'll come with you, of course, Morny."

"Waste of time, if you like; but there's nothin' like bein' thorough, you know," said Mornington, with a grin.

The two chums went up the big staircase, and stopped at a landing window, whence they could see the door of the Oak Room.

They were just in time to see Jimmy Silver enter at that door and close it after him.

CHAPTER 24.

FACE TO FACE!

CAPTAIN LANGTON was smoking a cigar in the Oak Room, and he had a book on his knee, which he tossed aside as Jimmy Silver knocked and entered.

His scared face had a genial smile as he nodded to the junior.

"I am glad to see you, Silver," he said.

"Close the door, my boy, and come to the fire."

Jimmy came in, his face clearing unobtrusively.

Strange, vague, and dark suspicions had found lodgment in his mind, but they faded at the captain's genial manner and kind smile. But his purpose remained unchanged.

"Well, my boy, it appears that there is news of your friends at last!" he remarked, glancing at Jimmy Silver's face.

"You have heard of it, sir?"

"Mr. Bootle told me all about it." The captain smiled. "You remember, Silver, I hinted that my belief was something like this—that the young scamps had run away. You did not agree with me."

"No," said Jimmy.

"But you are convinced now?" said the captain, with a laugh.

Jimmy Silver shook his head.

"What? Not yet?" exclaimed the captain. "I think you are probably the only person in Rookwood who doubts it now, Silver."

"I do not believe that it was Lovell who

telephoned, sir," said Jimmy Silver quietly.

Captain Langton started.

"Is it possible?" he exclaimed. "But the Head—"

"I know the Head thinks so."

"But surely he should know?"

"He did not recognise Lovell's voice on the telephone."

"And how do you know that, Silver?"

"I asked him."

"By gad! You have a good deal of nerve for a junior in the Fourth Form!" said the captain, smiling. "When I was a junior here I should scarcely have ventured to question my headmaster."

Jimmy Silver coloured.

"I was too anxious to think of that, sir," he answered.

"But if it was not Lovell who telephoned, why should anyone else do so and use his name, Silver?"

Jimmy drew a deep breath.

"I believe they've been kidnapped, sir—Lovell and Raby and Newcome. I've told you so. Well, then, in that case, it was the kidnapper who telephoned to lead us all on a false scent."

"By gad!"

"It's possible, at least," said Jimmy.

Captain Langton nodded slowly, his eyes gleaming a little.

"It is possible, I suppose," he said. "You do not appear to be led on a false scent very easily, Silver."

Jimmy looked quickly at the captain. It seemed to him that there was a peculiar tone of irony in the man's voice as he spoke.

He met Langton's eyes, and the glint in them startled him a little.

Jimmy felt his heart beating.

Why he could hardly say, but a feeling of uneasiness came over him, almost amounting to fear.

"We must talk this over, Silver," said the captain seriously. "You know that I am heart and soul with you in probing this curious affair to the bottom. By the by, call your friends in."

"My friends?" repeated Jimmy.

"They are waiting for you in the passage, are they not?"

"Oh, no! I came here alone."

"Very well!"

The captain, who was standing, was between Jimmy Silver and the door, as the junior sat by the fire.

He went on speaking, with the same advance smile on his scarred face.

"You are a very keen lad, Silver—as keen as I supposed you to be at first acquaintance. For instance, the way you traced Lovell's movements on the night he disappeared was sharp indeed. You traced him to the very door of this room."

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"And then your suggestion that the legend of a secret passage might be well founded, and that it might exist behind the old panels of this room—that quite startled me."

"Did it, sir?"

"Oh, Aish! I am sure that if you had spoken as freely, say to Mr. Brown, the plump gentleman from Scotland Yard, he would have been very interested."

"I am thinking of doing so, Captain Langton," said Jimmy, getting it out at last.

The Fourth-Former was feeling a growing desire for the interview to end; the Oak Room seemed to be stifling him.

"But our agreement!" said the captain, with a smile. "Did we not arrange to keep our suspicions dark, and to work ourselves at searching for your friends?"

"It has led to nothing, sir."

"That is true," said the captain, with a nod.

"Don't think me ungrateful, sir," said Jimmy, a little remorsefully. "You have been very kind. But I think it would be wise of me to ask Mr. Brown's advice. He is an experienced detective, and he may be able to advise me."

"You have made up your mind to this, Silver?"

"I—I think so, sir."

"So you are here to tell me before carrying out your intention!" said the captain, laughing.

"I—I thought I ought to do so, sir, after what we had arranged."

"Quite so; which means that you have not confided to Mr. Brown so far?"

"I told you I would not, sir," said Jimmy quietly.

"And you are a fellow of your word. But now you intend to seek Mr. Brown's advice?"

"I think I ought to."

"Undoubtedly it is the wisest step you could take, under the circumstances," said the captain smilingly. "It would have been wise to take it before, as a matter of fact."

"But you said—"

"Certainly, it was I who prevented you," murmured the captain. "But as the matter

stands now, I certainly advise you to confide the whole affair to Mr. Brown at the earliest opportunity."

Again there was a strange infection of mockery in the captain's tone that made Jimmy start.

"I—I'm glad you agree with me, sir," he said, and he rose from his chair.

"Undoubtedly."

Captain Langton moved carefully towards the door, and bent over the handle. There was a sharp click.

Jimmy Silver gave a jump.

Captain Langton had looked the door. Jimmy Silver started forward, his heart beating almost to suffocation.

The captain turned back, a smile hovering on his lips.

"I will show you my discovery, my lad," he said. "I have locked the door in case anyone should enter."

"Your—your—discovery!" stammered Jimmy Silver.

"You remember your suggestion that the secret passage might exist in this very room, behind one of these old panels?"

"Yes."

"I have found it," said the captain, with a smile. "You may see it before you go, Silver, and you are at liberty to add that to the other circumstances you will confide to Mr. Brown."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jimmy breathlessly.

Again he was ashamed of his suspicion, and of the vague fear that had thrilled him when he heard the key turn in the lock.

Captain Langton stepped to the dark oak panels of the wall, and felt over them with his hand, the junior watching him intently. Click!

It was a faint, almost inaudible sound, as the captain's finger touched a hidden spring, and one of the great panels flew back into the wall.

A dark orifice was disclosed, at the bottom of which the light from the room glimmered upon a narrow stone stair.

"Look!" said the captain.

Jimmy Silver breathlessly approached the opening.

"Let us explore it together, my boy," said the captain, with a pause in his voice that struck Jimmy Silver strangely, almost eerily.

The junior spun round from the opening.

His suspicious had been justified, so far as his mind went: but instinct is stronger than reason.

Not for worlds would Jimmy Silver at that moment have ventured into those dark, tomb-like depths with Basil Langton alone.

The captain's eyes met his, gleaming.

For a moment they looked at one another, black suspicion and fear growing in the junior's face, masking malice in the other's.

It was as if a mask had dropped from the face of Basil Langton, so terrible and threatening was his look.

Jimmy did not speak. He could not. But his heart was sick within him, for a moment he knew all.

He knew—the road in that terrible passage plainly as if words had been spoken. He knew, he felt, that it was the other hidden door that his outraged shame had resulted from human sight—that the secret that had dragged them from the light of day was the hand of the man before him.

The silence was terrible while it lasted.

That moment seemed to age him. To Jimmy Silver, while he fought with the fear that was gathering in his heart, and nerved himself to meet his danger—he did not know his danger now.

He moved—it was to make a spring for the door.

But even as he sprang the captain's hand closed on his shoulder, and swung him back.

"Not so fast!" Basil Langton's voice was low, hissing through his lips, and his eyes burned at the junior. "Not so fast, my boy!"

"Let me go!" panted Jimmy.

The captain laughed—a low, soft laugh—as his grasp closed more savagely on the junior's shoulder.

Hardly knowing what he did, Jimmy Silver struck at him, and strove to wrench himself free.

It was man against boy, but the man was one-armed, and Jimmy Silver was strong and courageous.

He fought for his liberty, panting.

But as he closed with the captain, a shudder of horror ran through him as a second arm was thrown about him, enclosing him in a deadly grasp.

The surprise, the horror of it, of feeling himself grasped with two arms by a man he had believed one-armed, almost overcame the junior.

The empty sleeve was still hanging, but from under the coat had come that second arm, strong and snowy, and the almost fainting junior understood that the empty sleeve was a cheat, a lie, and that he was

in a powerful grasp from which there was no escape.

His lips opened for a cry; but a strong hand was clapped over his mouth, choking it back ere it could be uttered.

He was as an infant in the muscular grasp of the ruffian; helpless, though he still struggled to resist.

Still struggling, he was dragged from the floor and borne through the secret opening in the paneled wall.

Click!

The naked panel closed; the wall presented the same appearance as before.

But it had closed on Jimmy Silver of the Fourth Form, borne away helpless into the tomb-like depths that hid his kidnapped chums—in the merciless grasp of the kidnapper.

* * * * *

Half-past nine!

Mornington and Erroll were still waiting by the landing window.

"Bed-time, Morny," said Erroll at last. "We've got to get to the dorm."

"Jimmy's not come."

"He'll come to the dorm."

Mornington reluctantly nodded assent, and the two juniors hurried to the dormitory of the Classical Fourth. There they expected Jimmy Silver to follow.

But Jimmy Silver did not come.

And that night the whisper ran through Rookwood that another junior had disappeared—that Jimmy Silver was not to be found.

Missing!

CHAPTER 25.

"IMPOSSIBLE!"

Dr. Chisholm, the Head of Rookwood, rapped out the word angrily.

Mr. Bootles coughed.

"I regret to say, sir—"

The Head rose from his chair, his brows knitted. Mr. Bootles coughed again apologetically. He could not help being the bearer of unpleasant tidings.

Dr. Chisholm fixed his eyes upon the master of the Fourth.

"You say that Silver, of your Form, cannot be found, Mr. Bootles?"

"Quite so, sir!"

"He is not in the dormitory with his Form?"

"No."

"Has he been searched for?"

"Everywhere."

"It is extraordinary!" exclaimed the Head, biting his lips. "He has, of course, left the school without permission, as his three friends have already done. It is unpardonable!"

Another cough from Mr. Bootles.

"Two boys of the Fourth, sir, have made a statement to me," he began. "They are Mornington and Erroll."

"Have they any knowledge of this affair?" snapped the Head.

"So they say, sir."

"Admit them at once, then!"

Mr. Bootles turned to the door, and made a sign to the two juniors, who were waiting in the corridor.

Mornington and Erroll entered the Head's study.

Dr. Chisholm glanced at them sharply.

"What do you know of Silver's actions?" he asked. "Were you aware that he intended to run away from school?"

"We know that he has not run away from school, sir," said Mornington quietly.

"What?"

"Something has happened to him, sir," said Erroll.

"An accident, do you mean—within the walls of Rookwood?" exclaimed the Head, in astonishment. "If so, where is he?"

"We last saw him enter the Oak Room—Captain Langton's sitting-room, sir."

"Indeed! When was that?"

"About half an hour before bed-time."

"And after that?"

"Nothing after that, sir," said Mornington. "He never came out of the Oak Room!"

"Do you mean to say that all this disturbance is about nothing, and that Silver has visited Captain Langton, and simply forgotten bedtime?"

"No, sir."

"Silver is not there now," interposed Mr. Bootles. "After Mornington told me this, I called on the captain at once, and found him alone."

"Then what does Mornington mean?" exclaimed the Head tightly.

"Explain to Dr. Chisholm, Mornington."

"Certainly, sir. Since Silver's chums disappeared, sir—Lewell and Ruby and Newcome, one after another—we've been keeping an eye on Jimmy," said Mornington. "I had a suspicion that something might

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happen to Jimmy Silver, too, and we hardly ever let him out of our sight."

"Indeed!" said the Head, in surprise,

"When I went to call on Captain Langton in the Oak Room this evening, we went as far as the landing window and waited for him," said Mornington. "He couldn't have left the Oak Room without our seeing him. He never left it. We cut off to the dorm at half-past nine, expecting Jimmy to turn up there before lights out. But he never came."

"Undoubtedly he left the Oak Room after you left your post," said the Head.

"Then what became of him, sir?"

"He has left Rockwood, I suppose. His friends had already run away, and he has gone to join them!" exclaimed the Head angrily.

"He hasn't run away in this weather, without his cap or his coat," said Valentine Mornington.

The Head started.

"What do you mean to imply, Mornington? That Silver is still in Captain Langton's quarters, although Mr. Bootles says he is not there? Are you out of your senses?"

"I think Captain Langton might be able to explain, sir."

"Nonsense! However, I will see Captain Langton," said the Head testily. "I believe he was on friendly terms with this boy, and he may have some suspicion of his intentions."

The Head, evidently in a very irritated mood, left his study hastily.

Mr. Bootles coughed.

"You may go to your dormitory, my boys," he said mildly.

"Yes, sir."

Mornington and Erroll left the study, but they did not go to the dormitory of the Classical Fourth.

They followed Dr. Chisholm to the Oak Room.

Quite unconscious of the fact that the two juniors were at his heels, Dr. Chisholm tapped at the door of the Oak Room, and entered.

Captain Langton was in his dressing-gown, the right sleeve of which hung empty at his side.

Apparently the captain had been going to bed when he was disturbed by Dr. Chisholm's visit.

"Pray excuse this intrusion, Langton. Your fellow!" said the Head.

"Not at all, sir! You are disturbed about Silver's peculiar conduct, I suppose?"

"Exactly. Two boys state that he was in this room up to bed-time."

Captain Langton nodded.

There was a thoughtful expression upon his scarred face, and he looked very concerned.

"Silver certainly called on me this evening, sir," he answered. "I had made friends with the boy. That, I suppose, was his reason for confiding certain circumstances to me; which, in view of what has happened, I feel bound to tell you of. He confessed to me that his friends, Lovell and Italy and Newcome, have run away from Rockwood."

"I suspected as much," said the Head. "And Silver actually confessed this?"

"Yes; and admitted that it was arranged that he should join them. I earnestly dissuaded him," continued the captain. "I thought I had succeeded. When he left me he promised not to carry out his intention, but to write to his friends, and to urge them to return to school. But for that, I should have felt it my duty to come to you at once."

"Quite so. But——"

"I am afraid that Silver has broken his word," said the captain slowly. "Having confided the matter to me, and found that I disapproved strongly, no doubt he guessed that I should warn you of his intentions, and, fearing to be stopped, he has left Rockwood without a moment's delay. But certainly he gave me the impression that he had abandoned his intention."

Dr. Chisholm compressed his lips.

"I understand perfectly," he said. "I do not blame you for relying on the boy's assurance."

Mornington and Erroll were outside the half-open door, and they exchanged a quick glance.

The captain's manner was perfectly natural.

It seemed impossible to suspect the scarred, one-armed man, bearing the signs of honourable wounds received in the War, of treachery and duplicity; but Mornington, at least, was certain in his own mind that Jimmy Silver had never left the Oak Room.

Yet what could have happened?

The question was unanswerable; but

Mornington remained unconvinced. He looked over the oak panels that lined the walls of the Oak Room, and wondered what dark secret they might hide.

Captain Langton made a sudden movement, he perceived the two juniors at the door.

The Head, following his glance, turned his eyes upon them, and frowned angrily.

"Mornington! Erroll! What are you doing here? Go to your dormitory at once."

"But, sir—" began Mornington.

"Go!" thundered the Head.

Mornington set his lips, but Erroll drew him by the arm, and the two juniors departed.

They returned to the dormitory, where the Classical Fourth were in a buzz of excitement.

"Any news of Jimmy?" called out Tubby Muffin.

"No!"

Bulkeley looked in.

"Turn in!" said the captain of Rookwood tersely. "You're a good bit past bed-time now. Enough talk; turn in!"

The juniors turned in, and Bulkeley put out the light and retired.

But it was a long time before the excited discussion ceased in the Fourth Form dormitory and sleep visited the eyes of the juniors.

CHAPTER 25.

In the Hands of the Kidnapper!

"JIMMY!"

"Lovell!"

"You here, too!"

Jimmy Silver, panting for breath, looked round him in the darkness. He was still exhausted by the struggle with the kidnapper.

It seemed like an evil dream to Jimmy Silver.

In the powerful grip of the kidnapper he had been carried down the spiral stone stair, hidden behind the panelled walls of the Oak Room.

His strength was spent, and he was helpless in the iron grip of the ruffian.

He was flung into a vaulted cell below Rookwood School, and the iron grating had

closed on him, the key turned in the padlock.

The dim glimmer of an oil lamp showed through the grating, faintly lighting up the cell.

There was a clink of chains in the shadows.

There, in the obscurity, three forms lay on a heap of sackings, half asleep; but they started up as the grating clanged shut on the new prisoner.

Jimmy Silver recognised his missing chums—Lovell and Baby and Newcome—pale and gaunt from their long confinement in the vault.

One by one the Vistical Four of Rookwood had fallen into the hands of the secret kidnapper; Jimmy Silver was the last.

Jimmy sat on the stone flags, panting.

"You, too!" repeated Baby, with a groan. "Then it's all up!"

"You, too!" muttered Newcome.

Lovell clenched his hands.

The three juniors had never lost the hope that their chum would somehow, sooner or later, help them.

But that faint hope of rescue was dashed to the ground now.

Jimmy Silver had fallen a victim like the rest of the Co.

Jimmy looked at his pale and haggard chums.

They were secured by heavy chains that were fastened to iron girdles round their waists, rusty old fetters left in the cell for many long years unused.

Jimmy was not so secured, however; the kidnapper had departed hastily after flinging him in, and closing the grating on him.

Evidently the rascal was anxious to get back to his room above as quickly as possible, to keep up appearances there if any inquiry was made for the captain of the Fourth Form.

"So you're here, you fellows?" said Jimmy at last.

"It seems like years," muttered Lovell. "We—we hoped that you would get us out of this somehow, Jimmy. And now—"

He broke off with a groan.

"Now I'm landed as well!" said Jimmy Silver grimly.

"And it's all up!" said Baby.

"Keep smiling!" said Jimmy, though without much conviction. "While there's life there's hope."

He rose to his feet, and examined the

grating that closed in the only opening of the vaulted cell.

It was old and rusted, the rust of hundreds of years was thick upon it, but the bars were thick and strong, and defied his strength.

Out of reach, beyond the iron bars, the lamp burned dimly, and beyond was black darkness.

He turned back to his chains, and examined their fetters.

The iron girdles, which in old days had secured unhappy prisoners in those gloomy depths, were locked upon them.

"Well, this is a go!" said Jimmy.

Something like despair was creeping into his own courageous heart, but he tried to keep up a cheerful tone.

"We're done!" muttered Lovell. "Oh, Jimmy, I thought you might somehow get to suspect that villain and keep clear of this."

"I did half suspect him," said Jimmy.

"I—I was caught, though. But—but you could suspect an Army captain of being a kidnapper? And even now I can't make out what his object is."

"I don't believe he's an Army captain at all," said Lovell. "There's more in it than we understand. When he collared me, I found out that he was not one-armed, as he pretended. If Captain Langton of the Leamshire Regiment lost his arm at the War, that man can't be Captain Langton."

"Some swindling impostor," said Raby. "I'm sure of that."

Jimmy Silver nodded.

It seemed the only conclusion.

When the captain had seized him in the Oak Room, Jimmy had made the startling discovery that the empty sleeve was a lie and a cheat; and that the supposed cripple was in possession of all his limbs.

The discovery had almost dazed him.

If the man was not Captain Langton, who and what was he, and what amazing deception was he playing at Rookwood School?

"You found him out first, Lovell," said Jimmy. "Tell me what happened that night when you went down from the dorm to play a trick on him in his room."

Lovell shivered.

"We traced you afterwards as far as the door of the Oak Room," said Jimmy. "But there we were beaten. We couldn't suspect—"

"I suppose you couldn't," said Lovell. "You didn't know what I knew. When I got down to his room I found them dark, and I supposed that he was in bed, and I went into the sitting-room. I thought he was in the next room—the bed-room, of course—and I was going in quietly to pitch the can of ink over him. Then all of a sudden—" He broke off, and shivered again.

"Then?" asked Jimmy.

"All of a sudden there was a click, and I heard somebody in the dark. The next instant the light was turned on—an electric-lamp he had in his hand—and I saw a big panel in the wall wide open, and Captain Langton coming out. He saw me at the same moment. I—I was so stunned that I stood quite still, half thinking I was dreaming. I—I had thought he was asleep in bed, and there he was, coming out of the secret door in the wall. He was as startled as I was, but in a second he jumped on me like a tiger."

Lovell's voice shook.

"Even then," he went on, "I thought I had a chance, as he was one-armed; but I found out fast enough that he had two arms, and he was as strong as a tiger, though he pretended to be wounded. He handled me like a baby. I hadn't a chance even to call for help—not that anyone could have heard me. He dragged me down here, and chained me up like this. I've lived on bread and water since—alone here, till Raby came."

"And you, Raby?" asked Jimmy.

"You remember you left me outside the door of the Oak Room," said Raby. "Captain Langton opened the door suddenly, and asked me what I wanted. I told him we had been thinking he was ill, and he said he was feeling faint, and asked me to step in and help him into his bed-room. I stepped in, and he collared me. That's all."

"When Raby came," said Lovell, "I knew that the villain meant to collar the lot of us. He's playing some game at Rookwood, some deep game, and he was afraid we should spot him. Of course, if he'd let me go, after I'd seen the secret panel open, it would have been all up with his game, whatever it was. And after kidnapping me he was bound to finish with you fellows, for he knew, of course, that you'd never rest till you found me."

"I knew that—too late!" said Raby.

"I said Newcome ruefully. "I was at his room without suspecting anything at all, and as soon as he knew I was there, he seized me, and I was brought down here. I—I was afraid that you might follow me to his room, Jimmy, and follow me home, but you never came."

Jimmy Silver drew a deep breath. "I've had some narrow escapes of this kind," he said. "I can see it now. I understand now. The ruffler kept it up to the finish that he was trying to help me. I know now why he wanted to keep it all dark from Brown, the detective, too. What a fool I've been!"

"You couldn't know," said Lovell.

"I suppose I couldn't. Even now I can't guess what he's at. But it's clear that when he was at Rookwood as a boy he discovered that secret passage which is supposed to exist between the School House and the abbey vaults, and when he came here now as football coach he got the Head to give him the Oak Room as his quarters, because he knew of the secret panel. But why—why? What game is he playing?"

"Goodness knows!"

"He must be an impostor of some kind," said Lovell. "He keeps up appearances well enough, but he's no Army captain."

"But—but he must be an old Rookwooder, as he makes out, or he couldn't know anything about the secret panel in the Oak Room."

"That's true!"

"It beats me!" said Newcome. "Hark!"

"There was a step in the darkness.

"He's coming back!" muttered Jimmy. The eyes of the four juniors were fixed on the grating.

Into the dim radius of light from the lamp stepped a figure they knew well—that of the kidnapper, who was known to all Rookwood as Captain Basil Langton.

He unlocked the grating, and stepped into the cell.

Langton did not speak.

He laid a strong grasp on Jimmy's shoulder—a grasp that was like iron, and showed at once the futility of resistance.

Jimmy was dragged to the nearest stone pillar, to which was attached one of the rusty chains and iron girdles.

The captain of the Fourth struggled, though without hope, as he was dragged to the fetters; but he resisted in vain.

The iron girdle was locked round his

wrist, and he was a prisoner like his chums.

"Oh, you villain!" he muttered.

Captain Langton burst into a laugh.

"All here now!" he said. "You were a little too sharp, Master Silver. But not quite sharp enough, as it turned out. You should not have come and warned me that you intended to speak to the man from Scotland Yard."

"I did not know you were a rascally kidnapper, then!" said Jimmy Silver disdainfully.

"You know it now!" said the captain, unmoved.

"I know more than that—I know that you are an impostor!" said Jimmy savagely. "You are not Basil Langton who was at Rookwood fifteen years ago."

Langton looked at him curiously.

"You think not?" he asked.

"I am sure of it. You are some scoundrel who has borrowed Langton's name!"

"Yet, as you see, I am well acquainted with the place," said the captain mockingly. "Did I not ask the Head to assign the Oak Room to me for my quarters? And, as you see, I knew of this old prison cell, and the fetters that have now come in so useful."

"You must have been at Rookwood," said Jimmy, puzzled. "But I do not believe you are Basil Langton. A man who had been distinguished at the War would not turn out such a villain as you are."

The captain laughed again, but he did not answer.

He left the cell, locking the grating after him, and picked up the lamp, and disappeared in the vaults beyond.

From beyond the stone pillars that hid him from view came the glimmer of light, and low sounds which the juniors could not understand, but which showed that the man was engaged upon work of some kind.

"What is he doing there?" muttered Jimmy.

"I don't know," said Lovell. "Nearly every night he comes down into the vaults, and we hear him at work. It's some kind of hand-machine he's using. Goodness knows what it means. But whatever it is he's doing there is the reason why he came to Rookwood."

"It's something against the law," said Raly, "and he knew this was a safe place, being an old Rookwooder, and knowing the secret of the vaults. We should never have known anything about it but for

Lovell happening to find him coming out of the secret door that night."

"And no one but us will ever know!" muttered Newcome.

"We can't be kept here for ever!" said Jimmy.

"What's to prevent him from keeping us here as long as he likes?"

Jimmy was silent.

But he broke the silence at last, speaking in a low whisper.

"There's a chance for us, you fellows! Listen to me—I must whisper! Morry and Erroll may guess—"

"Why should they?"

"Morry had an idea that what had happened to you fellows, might happen to me," whispered Jimmy. "He set out to keep an eye on me. He may know—He knew I was coming to the Oak Room this evening to see the captain, and he may know."

"Oh!" muttered Lovell.

"I don't know whether he was keeping it up, and whether he may have followed me there," said Jimmy. "But he may have. Anyway, he knew I was there, and he may guess."

"You knew I went there, but you never guessed," said Lovell.

Jimmy was silent again.

The thread of hope was a slight one, but he would not part with it; it was the only glimmer of light in the darkness.

The juniors threw themselves upon the sacking wearily.

It was an hour later that the kidnapper came back, and placed the lamp by the grating, and disappeared.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were sleeping uneasily in the vaulted cell.

CHAPTER 27.

Mornington's Decision!

MORNING dawned upon Rookwood School.

There was only one topic that morning among the Rookwood fellows, and that was the disappearance of Jimmy Silver.

Every fellow at Rookwood, on the Classical and the Modern side, was talking of it.

Not that there was any mystery about it.

Captain Langton's statement to the Head

was known to the school, and there was no doubt on the subject.

It was already generally believed that Lovell and Raby and Newcome had run away from school; and some of the fellows had suspected that Jimmy Silver was in the scheme, and intended to join his chums as soon as the coast was clear.

Now he had done so, and that was all there was about it.

But there were two fellows in the Classical Fourth who did not share the general opinion, though they said nothing about it.

Mornington and Erroll were not satisfied.

They went into class with the rest of the Fourth that morning, but they were certainly not thinking much about the valuable instructions imparted by Mr. Bootles in the Form-room.

The two chums were glad when lessons were over, and they were free to think out the problem that weighed on them.

Mornington drew Erroll away, as the Fourth-Formers streamed out after morning lessons.

They retired to a quiet corner of Little Quad, while most of the other fellows went down to the foster ground.

"You fellows slacking!" Conroy called after them.

"Yas," said Mornington.

"You'll be wanted for the Bagshot match, you know; somebody's got to take Jimmy Silver's place."

"Perhaps Jimmy will be back in time for the Bagshot match," answered Mornington.

"Not likely," said the Cornstalk junior, laughing.

"You never can tell!" answered Mornington.

"Well, I'm sticking to footer," said Conroy, and he joined the others on the way to Little Side.

Mornington and Erroll sat down on a bench under the leafless trees in Little Quad, and Morry's face became very serious.

"This is up to us, Erroll," he said.

Kit Erroll nodded.

"I think it is, Morry."

"You see, I was right about Jimmy disappearing after his pals," went on Mornington. "We oughtn't to have let him out of our sight."

"I couldn't follow him into Captain Langlo's room."

"But that was where he disappeared," Erroll said.

Lovell knitted his brows.

"It looks like it," he said. "But—but it's impossible, Morry. How could he disappear there? Why should Captain Langlo harm him?"

"I don't know! But he has!"

"Murry?"

"There's more in that fellow than meets the eye," said Mornington quietly. "Look at it, Kit! He came back here as an old Rookwooder, covered with glory at the War, and everybody was prepared to like him and admire him. Lovell found he was a distant relation, and claimed him at once, and he gave Lovell the marble eye directly. He acted badly towards Lovell, too. My belief is that he didn't want any fellow with a right to step into his quarters."

"But he made friends with Lovell's pals afterwards."

"Only after Lovell disappeared. If he had a hand in that he would naturally want to know what they thought of it, and what measures they were taking to look for him."

"That's so. But—"

"Think of it, Kit! Lovell's friends have

disappeared, one by one, and each of them was somewhere about the Oak Room when he vanished."

"I know what it looks like, Morry! But what possible object—"

"That beats me!" confessed Mornington. "Unless the man's mad, I can't guess what it means."

"It's no good suggesting it to the Head, Morry."

"I know that," said Mornington. "And we can't do anything alone. But we're going to take professional advice."

Erroll started.

"Brown!" said Mornington tersely.

"Brown the detective is still at Coombe, and he's hanging about the school every day. He's looking for that man, Bauman, the counterfeiter, who used to be at Rookwood when he was a boy. Like his clerk to be hunting for him here, but never mind that now. He's a Scotland Yard detective, and he must have some sense. My idea is to go to him, make him listen to the whole story, and tell him what we suspect. He can't refuse to hear us."

"I'm afraid the Head will be rattled if he hears of it."

"I know he will, but I'm willing to risk that, for the sake of the fellows who've been kidnapped—if they've been kidnapped,

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If it turns out that they have really run away from school, we shall look a pair of asses for our pains, I know that. But—"

"I think you're right, Morny. Let's go to Brown; it can't do much harm, even if it doesn't do any good."

"Good!" said Morny, rising. "Come on, then, and let's lose no time."

That decision having been reached, Mornington and his chum started for the gates at once.

The two juniors walked on till they reached Combe, and there, in the veranda of the Combe Arms, one of the first persons they saw was Mr. Brown of Scotland Yard, reading a newspaper.

"That's our man!" said Mornington.

CHAPTER XX.

An Astonishing Discovery!

MR. BROWN looked rather grumpy at Mornington as the two juniors joined him on the veranda of the village inn.

"Excuse us, sir," said Mornington. "Can you spare us a few minutes? We've something to tell you."

Mr. Brown's podgy face cleared at once.

"Certainly!" he said. "If you have any knowledge of Baumann—"

"Oh, bother Baumann!"

"What?"

"I—I mean, it's not about Baumann," said Mornington hastily. "Quite a different matter. We believe there has been kidnapping—"

"Come into my room," said the detective briefly.

Mr. Brown's room opened on the veranda. The juniors followed him in, and the detective motioned them to be seated.

"Now," he said, "I have heard some talk from Rookwood boys, and I am aware that three juniors have left the school under somewhat peculiar circumstances. I have offered the Head my services in the matter, but he appears to believe that the boys have run away."

"All the school believes that—or nearly all."

"But you do not?" asked the detective sharply.

"No."

"You believe the three boys—"

"Four!" said Mornington. "Jimmy Silver disappeared last night."

The detective gave a start.

"Is it possible? And you believe—"

"I believe they've been kidnapped," said Mornington.

"And why?"

"I can't guess," said Morny frankly.

"You, being a detective, may be able to see light when it's all dark to me."

Mr. Brown smiled.

That tribute was not displeasing to the podgy gentleman from Scotland Yard.

"Possibly," he assented. "I may say that the affair has interested me. You suspect, then, that your friends may have made some discovery which endangered a certain person, and that he has secured their silence by kidnapping them."

"I suppose it would be something like that."

"Baumann!" exclaimed Errol suddenly. "Morny, what if that man is really in this neighbourhood, as Mr. Brown supposes—Jimmy Silver may have fallen foul of him!"

"Tush, old chap!" said Mornington. "Jimmy Silver & Co. disappeared at Rookwood, and Baumann isn't at the school, wherever he may be."

The detective's eyes glistened for a moment.

"Whom do you suspect?" he asked.

It was evident that Mr. Brown took a very deep interest in what Mornington had to tell him.

Dr. Chishelm would have angrily pooh-pooled the matter at once, for the scholarly old gentleman did not see eye to eye with a Scotland Yard detective.

"Captain Langton!" answered Mornington at once.

"What?"

"You've seen the man," said Morny.

"You called on him—"

"I did, with some difficulty," said Mr. Brown. "Owing to ill-health he was unable to see visitors, but I called on him at last."

"He doesn't look much like a chap in ill-health," said Morny. "I shouldn't wonder if he was not specially keen to meet a detective."

Mr. Brown smiled.

Perhaps that thought had already been somewhere in the back of his mind.

"But Captain Langton is a man with a very honourable record," he said. "I understand that he was formerly at Rookwood, that he had a distinguished career in the Leinster Regiment, and he lost his right arm at the war in the fighting on the Somme, when his face received the scars he bears now. Surely such a man is above suspicion."

"I know!" said Morny. "I know! But—"

"Tell me what you think, my boy."

"Well, Captain Langton has two rooms at Rookwood. One of them, his sitting-room, is called the Oak Room, because the walls are panelled in old oak."

"That is where I saw him," assented Mr. Brown.

"That room had been disused for years, but it was specially prepared for Captain Langton," went on Mornington. "He must have asked the Head specially to let him have it, for all that trouble to be taken."

"Why should he wish for that room specially?"

"Well—" Morny hesitated. "There's an old story at Rookwood of a secret passage from the School House to the abbey vaults. When that fellow Baumann was at the school he used to get in and out without anybody knowing how he came and went, and some of the fellows think he knew of the secret passage, since there's been a lot of talk about him, you know. Well, Langton was Baumann's study-mate when they were both at Rookwood, a dozen or fifteen years ago. If Baumann knew of the secret passage he may have told his study-mate."

Mr. Brown looked very curiously at Mornington.

"Then you think Captain Langton knows of a secret passage, of which the opening is in the Oak Room?"

"I—I know it sounds thick," said Morny falteringly. "But—Lovell first, and then Raby, then Newcome, now Jimmy Silver, vanished—in the Oak Room or near it!"

"Is that so?"

"Lovell had gone there one night to play a trick on the captain," said Morny. "He never came back. Raby was last seen outside the door of that room. The last that was known of Newcome was that he had gone into the room."

"Oh!"

"Since then we've been looking after Jimmy, and last night we waited for him outside the room when he called on the captain. He never came out!"

"By gad!"

Mornington went on to explain fully, and Mr. Brown listened with the keenest interest, putting in a question here and there, till he knew all that Morny knew, and perhaps a little more.

He was silent when the junior had finished.

"I know it sounds thick," said Mornington, encouraged by the detective's evident interest. "It looks, from what I've said, as if Langton came to Rookwood and specially got hold of the Oak Room because he knew of the secret passage there, for the purpose of kidnapping the Fistical Four one after another. Unless he's mad, it can't be so, I know. But he may be mad, for all I know."

"Or suppose," said Mr. Brown—"suppose he were carrying on some nefarious scheme of some kind, and Lovell happened to make a discovery by coming into his quarters unexpectedly at night?"

Morny brightened.

"Yes, that's so," he said. "But—but what could he be doing that Lovell mightn't see?"

Mr. Brown did not answer that question.

"In that case the secret passage was ready to his hand," he remarked. "And he may have chosen that room because his secret occupation—granted he had one—required to be carried on in a secret place. Lovell's disappearance would then be followed up by that of his friends, because they were anxiously hunting for him, and making endless surmises as to what had become of him, and might have hit upon something like the truth in time."

Morny gave Errol a triumphant glance.

"Just what I thought!" he exclaimed.

"You are a very keen lad, Master Mornington," said Mr. Brown, with a smile. "I am glad you came to me this morning. You have rendered me assistance beyond what you can possibly have thought of."

"I don't quite see that, sir," said Morny, puzzled. "I wanted you to help us

find Jimmy Silver. I don't see how I've assisted you."

"You will see shortly, no doubt Captain Langton!" The detective spoke the name slowly and thoughtfully. "Right arm missing, face badly scarred. Old Rookwooder. H'm! Fool!" Mr. Brown was apparently addressing that uncomplimentary epithet to himself.

"Remain here!" said the detective suddenly.

There was a telephone in Mr. Brown's room, and he crossed to it and took up the receiver.

The detective spoke rapidly into the transmitter when he was put through. His words did not all reach the juniors' ears.

But suddenly they came out loud and sharp.

"Killed!"

And then—

"Let there be no mistake. Captain Basil Langton, Leamshire Regiment, was killed in a motor accident!"

A tense pause.

"Thank you!"

The detective put up the receiver and turned to the juniors.

"Mr. Brown! Captain Langton!"

"Captain Langton was accidentally killed in a motor accident six months ago," said Mr. Brown.

"Good heavens! Then—then that man at Rookwood?"

"Evidently an imposter!" smiled Mr. Brown. "Being an old Rookwooder himself, he adopted Captain Langton's name, knowing somehow all about the unfortunate accident. And the scars on his face enabled him to pass muster, as poor Langton, if he had received such wounds, would not have been recognizable."

"But—but"—Mornington stammered—"he must be an old Rookwooder, or he wouldn't know all he knows."

"Quite so."

"And—and as he's been wounded he must have been a soldier."

"He was wounded in attempting to escape to the German lines, to join the enemy," said Mr. Brown coolly.

"You—you know—" stammered Eroll.

"I know now." Mr. Brown smiled.

"Poor Langton was known to have lost his right arm, which is why the imposter

keeps an empty sleeve. I suspect very strongly that he will be found to have two arms, my boy. By gad, you young fellows have done me a service! I've got my man!"

"Your man?" stammered Mornington.

"I will come back to Rookwood with you," said Mr. Brown. "I have only to call at the police-station for two or three constables. Cheer up, my boys! In a very short time now, I think, you will see your missing friends."

CHAPTER 29.

Brought to Book!

"REALLY, sir—" exclaimed Dr. Chisholm warmly.

Mr. Brown, plump and podgy and smiling, opened the door of the Oak Room without a knock and stepped in.

The Head was in the captain's sitting-room, chatting with Langton. He had called on Basil Langton to accompany him down to lunch.

He rose from his chair with an indignant frown as Mr. Brown came in unasked and unannounced.

Captain Langton also rose, his sharp eyes on the detective.

"Really, sir—"

"Please excuse me, Dr. Chisholm," said Mr. Brown calmly. "I have called on rather important business with your guest."

"That is no excuse for this intrusion!" exclaimed the Head.

"I am afraid the business could not be deferred," said Mr. Brown, with a smile. "I am sure you will admit it when I explain. You are aware, sir, that I have been for some time in this neighbourhood, under the belief that Baumann, the forger and counterfeiter, was somewhere in the vicinity of Rookwood."

"What of that now?"

Captain Langton's brows came together in a knitted frow.

He moved, as it were carelessly, from his chair along the panelled wall, and stood with his back leaning against a tall panel.

Mr. Brown did not appear to note it.

"I have already asked Captain Langton if he could give me any information

regarding Baumann, who was his study-mate at this school many years ago," Mr. Brown continued.

"I have replied that I was sorry I could not, Mr. Brown," remarked the captain.

"That is very curious," said Mr. Brown, with a curious smile. "I have reason to believe that Baumann's career is not quite unknown to you."

"Really, sir—"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the Head emphatically.

"Baumann, after leaving prison, was taken into the Army under the Conscription Acts," said Mr. Brown. "He was shot down while leaving the trenches with the obvious intention of deserting to the Germans—being of German descent himself. His injuries were chiefly in the face, and it appears now that they rendered him so unrecognisable that I have talked with him face to face without knowing him."

The captain's left hand had disappeared behind him, as if feeling over the panel behind his back.

"Baumann, once at Rookwood, seemed to have made some discoveries while he was a boy here," resumed Mr. Brown, still addressing the amazed Head. "Is it not a fact that he was expelled from this school, sir, for certain actions, such as breaking bounds at night, gambling in low resorts—"

"That is true. But I do not see—"

"And it was a matter of conjecture how he contrived to enter and leave the school on so many occasions and for so long a period without being detected?"

"Quite so. But—"

"It never occurred to you that he had by chance discovered the secret passage which was supposed to exist between the School House and the abbey ruins?"

"Certainly I never thought of any such nonsense!"

"Yet it was true, sir."

"What?"

"For which reason," pursued Mr. Brown calmly, "he came back to Rookwood, as a safe refuge, under an assumed name, to carry on his work of counterfeiting banknotes in the recesses of the hidden vaults, to which only he knew the mode of ingress."

"Are you joking, sir?"

"Not at all. He assumed for that purpose the name of a man who was killed in an accident, who had once been his study-mate at Rookwood—in whose name he came here unsuspected. The disfigurement of his face made the deception easy. And it was easy, too, to effect the loss of an arm by wearing an empty sleeve."

"Are you mad?" exclaimed the Head loudly.

Click!

Dr. Chisholm spun round.

The panel had opened, and the Head was just in time to see Captain Langton disappear through the wall.

He stood transfixed.

The detective sprang forward, and his foot was in the opening in a moment. But the captain had vanished down the spiral staircase hidden in the thickness of the ancient wall.

"Good heavens!" stuttered the Head.

"Have you any further doubts, sir?" smiled Mr. Brown.

Dr. Chisholm passed his hand over his brow.

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"I cannot have," he said. "What does this mean? This—this man is—is Baumann, calling himself Captain Langton?"

"Exactly!"

"And you have allowed him to escape you?" gasped the Head.

"Not quite!" smiled Mr. Brown. "The abbey vaults, of which he knows the secret, are guarded. The moment he emerges he will be seized. I saw to that precaution, sir, before I came here. Now he has kindly revealed the secret entrance to the vaults from this side, so shall have no difficulty in finding the juniors whom he has kidnapped."

"What?" stammered the Head, amazed by that statement as much as by Mr. Brown's astuteness.

"That, however, can wait—first I must see to my prisoner."

Mr. Brown called in a constable from the corridor, and posted him on guard at the secret panel in case the desperate rascal should double back. The posh gentleman from Scotland Yard was leaving nothing to chance.

Then he turned out of the Oak Room and down the stairs, the amazed Head following him like a man in a dream.

Half Rookwood was gathered round a startling group—two constables, who had by the arms a handcuffed prisoner, whom they were bringing to the House.

It was the man who had been known at Rookwood as Basil Langton.

His scarred face was white and tense, his eyes gleaming with rage and hatred.

Mr. Brown smiled as his eyes fell upon the exposed cheat.

"You've got him!" he said, with satisfaction.

"Yes, sir," said one of the officers. "He came out of the door in the abbey vaults and ran fairly into our arms. He unlocked the door from the inside."

"Quite so!" Mr. Brown rubbed his fat hands, making no attempt to conceal his satisfaction.

"But what does this mean?" exclaimed Bulkeley of the Sixth house. "What is Captain Langton treated like this for?"

Mr. Brown did not heed. His shifty eyes were fixed upon the sullen, desperate face of the prisoner.

"Baumann, I arrest you in the name of the law!" he said. "I warn you that

whatever you say will be taken down, and may be used in evidence against you."

Baumann—to give him his own name—burst into a bitter, sardonic laugh.

"The game's up!" he said. "But how did you find it out, hang you? I thought I was safe here—safe and sound in this quiet corner! Hang you!"

"Take him away!" said Mr. Brown.

"Baumann!" repeated a dozen voices.

"Is that man Baumann?" stammered Bulkeley.

"Just so!" smiled Mr. Brown. "Baumann, once of Rookwood, afterwards of several of his Majesty's prisons, deserter from the Army, and, in fact, a pretty thorough scoundrel—kidnapping among the rest. Captain Langton lost his life in an accident, and that rascal assumed his name. And now, if some of you care to come with me, I will show you where to find Silver and the other boys who have been missing."

"What?"

CHAPTER 30.

At Last!

"HARK!"

Jimmy Silver uttered the word. In the dim vault the captain of the Fourth hurried to the grating, his chains clanking as he moved.

And from the darkness came the sound of a voice—a voice that sent a thrill to the hearts of the kidnapped juniors.

For it was not the voice of the kidnapper—the only voice they had expected to hear in those gloomy depths.

It was the voice of Valentine Mornington of the Fourth Form.

"This way, Errol! There's a light!"

"Morny!" roared Lovell.

"Morny!" shouted the four together, in joyous amazement.

Morny's voice came ringing back from the shadows.

"Jimmy Silver! Where are you, Jimmy?"

"Here!"

"This way!"

Into the radius of the lamplight came Mornington and Errol, breathless and excited.

The Fistical Four stared at them through the iron grate, scarcely able to believe their eyes.

"Morny!" panted Jimmy Silver.

Mornington grinned through the grating.

"Here we are, old bird! How goes it?"

"And you're all here?" exclaimed Erroll.

"All of us!" said Newcome. "Oh, by gum, it does us good to see you fellows here!"

"It's like a dream," said Raby. "I'd given up hope! But what's happened? How did you find us?"

Mornington was shaking the iron grating, but he could not open it.

"We shall have to wait till we get the key," he said. "That villain will have it about him, and he's bagged—bagged as safe as houses!"

And Morny explained to the amazed prisoners what had happened.

"He's not Captain Langton at all; he's that beast Baumann!" he said. "Langton was killed in an accident, and that rotter borrowed his name to come here—his face being disfigured made it all safe. Even Brown talked with him without guessing who he was, though he has arrested him twice. The Head never had the slightest suspicion. Nobody might ever have had, if Lovell hadn't blundered into his hands and been kidnapped, and if the rotter hadn't thought to make all safe by bagging Lovell's pals after him."

"My bat!" said Lovell. "And now he's—"

"Now he's scudded off by the secret panel," grinned Mornington. "There's a way out in the abbey vaults, of course, and there's two bobbies waiting there for him—in fact, they've got him before this."

"I don't think I've ever been so jolly glad to see anybody!" said Jimmy Silver, with a deep breath. "Good old Morny! If you hadn't gone to the detective—"

"But I did!" chuckled Mornington.

Clunk, clank! Clunk, clank!

The chains rattled and rang as the Fustical Four executed a war-dance in their cell in the exuberance of their delight.

A light gleamed, and there were voices and footsteps.

The podgy gentleman from Scotland Yard came on to the grating, with Bulkeley and

Neville and a crowd of other fellows at his heels.

There were exclamations on all sides as the Fustical Four were seen behind the grating.

"Good-morning, Mr. Brown!" sang out Lovell.

Mr. Brown grinned.

"We'll soon have you out of that!" he said.

He produced a bunch of rusty keys which he had taken from the handcuffed rascal above.

Mr. Brown unlocked the fetters one by one.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were free again at last.

It seemed almost like a happy dream to Jimmy—and more especially so to Lovell & Co., who had been so much longer in the hands of the ruthless kidnapper.

Mr. Brown left the cell, evidently to make investigations in the hidden vaults, of which the existence had not been previously known at Rookwood, save to Baumann in his schooldays—the result, probably, of an accidental discovery.

The former Rookwooder had remembered that discovery in later years, and undoubtedly it had been the cause of his coming to Rookwood, under an assumed name.

In the next vault was found the handiwork of the counterfeiter—the dies and stamps and other appliances with which he had produced the forged notes.

In addition, bundles of notes, ready to be passed as soon as opportunity came—opportunity that would never come now.

That was the work upon which Lovell & Co. had so often heard the kidnapper engaged, and which had so puzzled them.

But while Mr. Brown, in a state of simmering satisfaction, was taking possession of the counterfeiter's outfit, and making his notes, Jimmy Silver & Co. were conducted to the upper air by the crowd of delighted Rookwooders.

Dr. Chisholm met them when they emerged into the Oak Room.

The Head shook them by the hand, and welcomed them in a voice that trembled with emotion.

The juniors had never seen the good old Head so deeply moved.

And after that the Fistical Four were given a tremendous ovation when they reappeared among their schoolfellows.

* * * * *

The mystery of Rookwood was a mystery no longer.

The Fistical Four were restored to their friends, and that evening there was a tremendous celebration in the end study, which overflowed into the passage—Moderns as well as Classics coming in crowds.

Meanwhile, "Captain Langton," alias Baumann, was in the hands of the law, and not likely to escape them again for a good ten years to come.

Mr. Brown had departed in a mood of supreme satisfaction.

He had bagged his man, and he admitted that he owed his success in part to Jimmy Silver & Co., and especially Mornington.

The Fistical Four felt the effects of their imprisonment for some days; but they soon pulled round, and they were quite fit again by the time the Bagshot match came round.

By that time the kidnapping and the imprisonment in the secret vault seemed like an evil dream of the past to the chums of the Fourth. But they were never likely to forget that it was mainly due to Mornington that they had recovered their freedom, and that the Kidnapper had been brought to book.



OUR MAGAZINE CORNER.**WESTMINSTER SCHOOL.**

One of London's Great Public Schools.

Westminster School first came into existence in 1371, when it was known as St. Peter's College, Westminster. The school was refounded by King Henry VIII, and again by Queen Elizabeth in the year 1569. It has always possessed many privileges, and has worthily maintained its proud traditions during its long and glorious history. It is situated in Little Dean's Yard, near the western entrance to the Abbey. It has about 200 scholars, admitted from 11 to 14. Forty of these are King's Scholars, the rest being Town boys. The latter pay a fee of thirty guineas a year; full board is thirty-five guineas; twenty-four guineas half board. The school has twelve exhibitions worth £25 to £30 per annum. There are many other scholarships.

Pancake Day!

Every Shrove Tuesday the famous festival of the flaky pancake is celebrated at Westminster School in right royal style. No jollier scene could be imagined, for we have a real bit of Old England. The pancake is tossed, and the lucky scholar who nets the dainty gets not merely the pancake—perhaps a trifle dusty—but a guinea into the bargain. This very old ceremony of throwing the pancake belongs to the ancient times of merry-making, when as a prelude to the sterner days of Lent there was a regular spirit of jollification abroad. It is a cheery sight with the white-capped cooks, the crowds of Westminster fellows, the numerous guests, and excitement everywhere. The pancakes are hot, and so is the enthusiasm. It would hardly seem like Shrove-tide without this time-honoured celebration at Westminster School, with all the fun of a festivity which has survived so many centuries.

Sporting Annals!

It would be altogether the wrong thing to say that Westminster has looked on at sport. It has always been a most active participant. The records of the old school contain mention of many triumphs. Its cricker and footer elevens have a lot to their credit; in fives, tennis, and other sports Westminster School has ever been in the van.

That Latin Play!

Privileged visitors to the school at Christmas-time see the famous Westminster Latin Play. The piece is usually chosen from Terence or Plautus, and it is unique. Everybody has heard of this annual performance. The newspapers give long extracts, not of the play itself, but of the prologues and epilogues. These are typical and topical, and deal in the most amusing and at the same time the most instructive way possible, with subjects which are being discussed by everybody. Cæsar's language is pretty wonderful, but you get a better understanding of its elasticity when you hear the clever Westminster players getting off new Latinised words as glib as anything, and telling each other strange facts about football, sporting champions, politics, the Underground Railway, with crowds more familiar topics. You would not think a Latin epilogue could mean such a rare lot. At Westminster they handle the ancient tongue with a skill almost beyond belief. The Latin Play always goes with a bang, and the cheery Thespians deserve the laurels which come to them. They just show what can be done with the bygone language; it can lead itself to jokes, and all sorts of smart allusions. Styles in dress do not escape, and Oxford trousers come in for criticism.

The Great Schoolroom.

Here in the old days the cowed monks snatched a little sleep, for Westminster School forms part of an ancient monastery. The old dormitory is a splendid apartment. But Westminster is full of architectural treats. There is a history hatch which would make an antiquary envious, and some of the venerable staircases are full of interest with their reminders of the past.

Ancient Days!

Westminster School carries on with the tradition of Westminster. There was always something being done there in the way of learning and culture. King Offa built a monastery at Westminster. The site chosen was called Thorney. It was an island formed

by two outlets of the Tyburn River, a cross ditch, and the Thames. Canals could not keep the sea back, but he could do a lot of useful things. He proved this by his patronage of Westminster. The town was improved; a road was made linking it with the village of Charing, which stood between Westminster and Charing Cross. The old records show how it was that Paddington, which was an uninhabited wilderness, became associated with Westminster.

To the Glory of the School!

Visitors to the famous school must not miss the Memorial Window in the Great School to the 220 Old Westminsters who fell in the war.

Bad Times for Busby!

Every history of Westminster contains much mention of the celebrated headmaster, Dr. Busby. There is no doubt he was a great personality, and as with all strong characters he had his enemies. The second master, Edward Bagshaw, was one of these. Bagshaw tried to supplant his chief. He soon found that he had bitten off more than was reasonable, and his backers failed him. In the result Edward Bagshaw was "removed out of his place for his insolence." And that was the end of Mr. Bagshaw. But many bring to it that Dr. Busby did not spare the rod enough. He must have had keen ideas about discipline.

A Rhyme of the Time!

Somebody perpetrated the following verse when Dr. Friend was appointed to the headmastership of Westminster:

"Ye sons of Westminster who still retain,
Your ancient memory of Busby's awful reign,
Forget at length your fears—your panic end—
The monarch of the place is now a Friend."

This quatrain was certainly one in the eye to the great Dr. Busby, and some there are who feel it was not deserved.

Some Old Records!

Westminster was, so to speak, a convent school; its standard of education was as high as any going in the past—as now. Royal favour apart, Westminster always had the best men as headmasters. You realise the working of this by looking through any dictionary or biography. It is the most usual thing to see the words "educated at Westminster" in the case of leading men. You find it in the case of soldiers who have played the big parts in the wars; also of scientists, literary giants, artists, and dramatists.

Ben Jonson!

This famous playwright was sent to Westminster by William Camden. Camden was then

second master. Camden, of course, had a most varied career, full of ups and downs, but his biggest success was his spell of office as Head of Westminster School. He was made for the job, for he knew life, and though a deep scholar, he was a man well versed in the ways of the world. There was precious little Camden did not understand. In his day fortune had a trick of clobbering rather more often than frowning, but Dr. Camden reached port, despite the quick withdrawals of favour on the part of the highly-placed ones. How much he did for old Ben Jonson cannot be set down. Anyway, the hard-working dramatist and poet owed a lot to his patron. Nobody can rob a man of good education, and Ben Jonson, thanks to his training, as well as his natural genius, was in his line first class without a doubt. Not a playbill which has not got some mention of him and his versatility!

A Proud Saying!

It was said of Camden that he "never made suit to any man." He refused a knighthood, anyway. There is no reward of the kind big enough for some men. Camden was a master, of his time, as well as of the great school which has borne the burden and the heat of a legion of days.

A Glimpse of the Past!

It is inspiring to read through the history of Westminster School. It has been turning out good men and true, equipped for the battle since the earliest years. The Westminster fellow has a thousand reasons for being proud of his school. It sent him out to face the world armed with the best sort of knowledge, and with the power to assess the truth of things, and to meet difficulties with prudence and pluck. There is plenty of Latinity, but also every attention to modern needs. And a dash of Latin ensures a real insight into the significance of the language. There are those who say that the Latin scholar never speaks his own language wrong. He knows the roots of the words, and consequently does not get off the track.

Special Privileges!

Westminster scholars have extra privileges as regards the Houses of Parliament, and many other advantages, for numerous Westminster boys.

The Designer of St. Paul's.

Christopher Wren was a Westminster boy. Other famous men who studied here were Ben Jonson, Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India, and Dryden, the poet. Camden was headmaster in Wren's time.

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